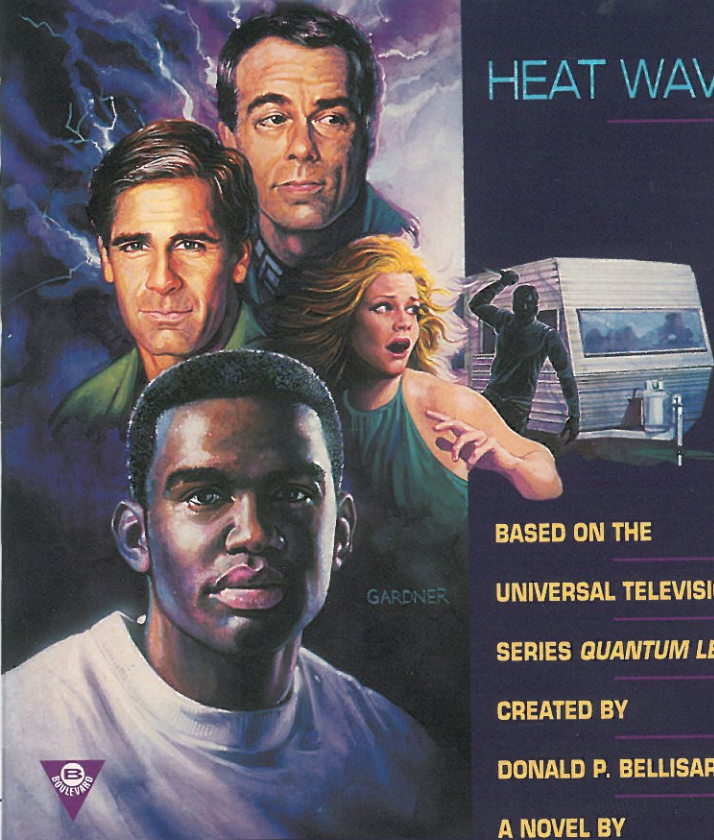


AN ALL-NEW, ORIGINAL NOVEL BASED ON THE CULT TV SERIES!

QUANTUM LEAP

HEAT WAVE



GARDNER

BASED ON THE

UNIVERSAL TELEVISION

SERIES *QUANTUM LEAP*

CREATED BY

DONALD P. BELLISARIO

A NOVEL BY

MELANIE KENT



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QUANTUM LEAP: HEAT WAVE

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CHAPTER

ONE

Carla Sue entered the hot, dirty trailer and sighed. Sweat trickled down her shoulder blades and gathered in the small of her back. She turned and kicked the trailer door shut with her foot. Summer was ending with a bang. For Carla, it was too hot for the end of the summer.

She walked over to the countertop and set down an empty soda bottle and a bloodied, torn cloth she had been holding. Carla reached up and touched her cheek, feeling the large welt forming under her fingertips. She touched her nose gingerly. Wincing, she examined her fingers and was relieved to discover her nose was no longer bleeding.

That fool had drawn all the blinds in the trailer. It was supposed to keep the heat out and the room cool, but it only made the trailer dark and unbearably stuffy. Carla shook her head and walked across the room to open the windows. She paused by the couch and kicked off her dust-covered shoes. Barefoot, she headed toward one of the sealed windows.

She heard the trailer's creaking wooden steps announce a visitor. She turned around and looked up at the clock, which hung crookedly on the far wall. "If that's you, Tom, you'd better be here to apologize and pack."

The door swung out on its hinges. Carla squinted into the bright sunshine. Her shoulders sagged and she brushed a stray hair away from her face. "What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be at work?" Her question was answered by silence. Carla shrugged. "I'm in no mood for small talk, if that's what brought you by. My mind is made up, like I told you two days ago. Nothing's changed as far as I'm concerned." She smacked the dirt off her skirt and noticed that her leg was scratched from the fall she had taken earlier. She turned her back on the caller and headed back to the window.

Carla had just laid her fingers on the sash when the sound of the trailer door closing made her spin around. "I said I don't want to talk." She took a few cautious steps toward the visitor. "I warned you . . ."

The visitor reached out and grabbed Carla's arm, twisting it. "Hey!" Carla protested, trying to scramble out of the grasp. Now both her arms were pinned to her sides and she was being pushed to the floor.

"Get off of me," she shouted. Her back hit the floor and she felt a knee dig into her chest, pinning her down. A gloved hand slapped her face, sending a new cascade of blood flowing from her nose. She tried to work her arms free as she grew more alarmed and terrified by the second. The knee dug deeper into her chest, cutting off her air supply. Carla stopped struggling and looked her attacker in the eyes. She could taste her blood on her lips. She turned her head and tried to spit.

The knee in her chest pulled away and she was able to breathe again. Carla watched as her attacker straddled her in one quick movement. *This old game*, she thought to herself. *Fine, just get this over with and let me be able to walk away.* Her attacker smiled at her and produced a long knife, which had been concealed by his shirt. The tip of the blade

was pointed inches from Carla's bleeding nose.

Carla froze and looked at the knife blade. It was a big knife. The knife plunged down quickly and stabbed through her shoulder. The pain was indescribable. Carla started to scream and the other gloved hand was thrust into her mouth. As one hand covered her mouth, the other pumped up and down, stabbing Carla repeatedly. The blade plunged deep into her chest on the fourth stab. She felt the blade penetrate and she cried out as the knife was withdrawn.

Blood flowed down her blouse. She could feel its wet stickiness as it pooled beneath her.

Carla was dizzy and exhausted. Finally the attacker released her arms as he worked down her torso with the knife. Carla tried to bring her arms up to fight off the blows, but she was too weak. She wanted to roll away, but she couldn't.

The dim light was fading from the room. The sounds she heard seemed to come from far away and she could no longer feel the pain from the knife. Carla tried to call out, to summon help, but all she could muster was a gurgling noise. Her attacker paused, the knife held in midair, dripping with her blood. He studied his victim without guilt or compassion.

Carla knew she was dying. Her blue eyes stared up at the ceiling as her life drained out of her on that hot summer day. The knife attack continued, long after Carla Sue was dead.

Tuesday, August 30, 1955

The hot, blue, electric light popped and swirled all around his body. As quickly as it had begun, the light began to fade. When Sam Beckett's vision cleared, he found himself perched on a narrow ledge. Sam peered cautiously over the edge, down his khaki-covered legs, past his shiny black shoes, to the concrete sidewalk below. He could feel his

hands and fingers now. Sam realized that he was spread-eagled against the side of a brick building. It must be brick, judging by the way it felt digging into his shoulders and back.

The warm summer sun beat down upon him. The clothing he wore felt damp and heavy. Humidity. Sam could feel the heavy, oppressive humidity weighing down on him.

Sam's left hand was splayed out against the building, his fingertips just inches from a window. *A jumper?* Sam thought wildly. *Have I Leaped into someone about to commit suicide?* Sam tried to reach the open window.

Loud voices came drifting out through the window. Someone was arguing. Sam continued reaching for the window frame. He almost had it.

All the effects of the Leap in were gone now. Sam was very aware of his surroundings and the predicament in which he found himself. A small crowd had gathered in the street. They were shading their eyes and craning their necks skyward. Sam took his eyes away from the window he so desperately wanted to reach, and looked down at the crowd.

That's when Sam's childhood fear of heights came flooding back. He had been afraid of heights ever since he was nine years old. He and his older brother had been playing in the barn loft. Sam couldn't remember what happened next, but he was sure it had to do with the height and clinging to a rope for dear life.

Sam caught his breath and closed his eyes, erasing the memory in the barn. He ground his body further into the brick wall. The dizzying effects of vertigo threatened to pitch Sam off the balcony. He broke out in a cold sweat, even though the temperature felt like it was over one hundred degrees. His fingers spread out along the brick, looking for the window's edge.

A boisterous voice jarred his concentration. The voice was off to Sam's right, further down on the ledge. Sam twisted his head away from the open window and carefully opened one eye.

Less than two feet away stood a giant. At least, that's

how the man looked to Sam. He was as tall as he was wide. He was over six feet tall and must have weighed more than 250 pounds. He was dressed in scruffy blue overalls and a grease-smearred T-shirt. Large, powerful arms and thick legs helped him maintain his balance on the narrow ledge. His face was unshaven and he had a large, bloodied gash over his left eyebrow. Blood from the cut had leaked down the man's unshaven face and dripped onto his clothing. The man squinted at Sam. He tipped and swayed on the balcony, but amazingly, he managed to keep his balance.

"Stop. Don't come any closer," he threatened. "I'm aiming to die today. Don't try and stop me."

Sam opened his other eye and felt his jaw sag. He watched in horror, waiting for the hulk to tumble off the balcony to his death.

The man shifted his feet and retained his balance. He curled his lips back and snarled, "You want to die today, too, Sheriff Williams?"

Sheriff! Sam carefully scanned his clothes. He was wearing some kind of a uniform. And maybe that was a gun belt buckled to his waist. *Great*, Sam thought. How was he suppose to talk this guy down when he couldn't even move? Sam swallowed and tipped his head back against the building. He closed his eyes and whispered, "Oh boy."

Sam heard a timid voice calling out from the window.

"Sheriff Williams? Will? Are you all right out there?"

Sam opened his eyes. A young man was leaning out the window, looking up eagerly at Sam. He was waving his hand in the air, trying to get Sam's attention. "Hey, Will, over here." He was a skinny kid between twenty and twenty-five years old. He was dressed in the same type of uniform as Sam. The kid shoved his dark, black hair out of his eyes. He offered his hand to Sam. "I'll help you inside."

Sam forced his arm away from the brick wall. He shuffled his feet along the balcony, inching toward the open window. Sam reached and grabbed the kid's outstretched

arm. He carefully worked his way into the window, where he was pulled safely inside.

Sam was standing in the building's cluttered attic. There were boxes stacked in one corner and some long tables and a few chairs collecting dust next to a wall. The room felt like an oven. Sam staggered over to one of the tables and leaned against it. His knees still hadn't stopped shaking. Behind him voices began to argue.

"You said he'd have him off the ledge in under five minutes, Gene."

The kid who had just hauled Sam inside turned and checked on Sam. He kept his back turned on the older man as he spoke to him. "I know what I said. It's another killer day out there today, Mayor Tilden. Maybe Will got sick from the heat."

Sam straightened up and found himself searching the faces of the kid and the older man. The older man was sweating profusely even though his attire indicated he was dressed for the heat. He wore a short-sleeved shirt and white cotton trousers. Mayor Tilden whipped a blue bandanna out of his back pocket and mopped off his glistening, bald head. His cheeks were flushed and he began to jab the air with his bandanna. "Sick or not, Tom Madison is still out there on that balcony. I hope you and Williams are both aware that he's standing over my brand new '55 convertible, which I've owned less than one week. If he falls, the chances are very good that's he's going to land all over my front seat. I'm warning you, there will be hell to pay if that happens . . . boys."

Gene whirled around. "I'm not a boy. Furthermore, I told you to move that car over thirty minutes ago when Tom first climbed out there," he shot back. "I told you this could happen. It's your own fault if Tom lands in your car."

The mayor raised his chubby arm and pointed his index finger at Gene. "Now you wait one minute, Gene Dupree!"

Sam took a cautious step forward. "Don't shout." His

admonition was either ignored or unheard as both men continued to argue.

“Hey!” Sam yelled, getting the attention of both Mayor Tilden and Gene. “Stop shouting.” Sam headed back toward the window, separating Gene and Mayor Tilden in the process. “We’ve still got to get Tom off the ledge,” Sam said over his shoulder as he leaned out the window.

Gene thumbed his nose at the mayor and walked over by Sam. He knelt down by the window and retrieved something off the floor.

“Are you going to come in now, Tom?” Sam asked. The fresh air was a welcome relief after the inside of the attic.

Gene coughed. “Hey, Will, you know he won’t come in till after you throw it.”

Sam pulled his head back into the attic. “What?”

Gene pulled his hand out of the shadows and offered Sam a big, red, overripe tomato. Gene held the tomato with great care in his hand. “I’m real sorry I was so late, Will,” he began to explain. “But remember how Mr. Phillips said he wouldn’t let us use any more of his produce? And after that last incident with the watermelon, he said he didn’t care what kind of an emergency it was, he wasn’t going to have his profit thrown, lofted, tossed, pitched, flung, hurled, or splattered all over Main Street. The way he chased me out of his store the last time, I didn’t bother going back this time. And when I heard the call over the radio, I tried to get something as fast as I could. I went to Mrs. King’s and got a tomato from her garden. Seems she had a bumper crop of tomatoes and most of them would have wound up in the trash pile. I didn’t think you wanted me to go all the way into Dunsmoore for a melon, did you?” With his free hand Gene tugged on the gun belt slung around his skinny waist. He again offered the tomato to Sam, waiting patiently for Sam to take it. “Did you, Will?”

The mayor laughed at Gene and waved his bandanna at the tomato in the deputy’s hand. “That’s what you brought? You’ve got to be kidding. You think Tom’s going

to come in for that measly little thing?" He swabbed the damp bandanna over his brow.

Gene snarled at Mayor Tilden, "It was the best I could come up with under the present circumstances." He turned to Sam and lost the snarl. "I didn't think I had time to make the trip into Dunsmoore, Will," Gene apologized. "You sounded pretty urgent on the radio."

"Dunsmoore?" Sam said helplessly. He looked at the tomato in Gene's hand. What lunatic place had he Leaped into now?

Gene's shoulders fell. "I can still go. Is that what you want me to do?" he asked with disappointment in his voice.

"He wants you to get that idiot off the balcony," the mayor roared behind Sam's shoulder. "Is that so difficult for you to understand, Deputy Dupree?"

Sam held his hands up. "Both of you, be quiet." He pointed down at the tomato. "Again, just what am I supposed to do with this?"

Gene raised his eyebrows and blinked. "Pardon me, Will?" A thin trail of sweat trickled down the kid's cheek.

"This tomato," Sam said. "What am I supposed to do with it?"

Gene cackled loudly. "Good old Will, always trying to kid around. Trying to lighten the mood." He lifted the tomato up in the air. "You're supposed to throw it. *You* know, Will," Gene prompted in a lower voice, "same stupid routine as the last four times? Seems it's the only way Tom will get off the balcony."

Sam could not believe what he was hearing. "You want me to throw this tomato out this window so that crazy person will come inside?" Sam clenched his hands into fists and looked desperately around the room.

"What's going on in there?" Tom bellowed from outside. "I'm getting hot out here, Sheriff Williams."

Gene leaned out the window and hollered back at Tom. "Will is just taking his time. Don't you worry none. He'll have you off the ledge in a second." Gene stuck his head inside. "Come on, Will. You're the one who started tossing

stuff out the window for Tom. You've done this sort of thing all the other times Tom's been out there. What gives now?"

"All the other times?" Sam repeated in utter disbelief. He swiped at his forehead, which was damp with sweat. "This isn't the first time Tom's been out there?"

"Hell no," Gene hotly answered back. "This is Tom's fifth time. Are you upset 'cause I didn't get you a watermelon? Or is it 'cause I took so long to get here this afternoon? If you're upset with me, just tell me."

"One of you better throw that damn tomato," Mayor Tilden advised. "Tom's going to fall off that ledge and dent my car. I wouldn't want to be in either of your shoes if that happens."

"All right," Sam snapped, his patience gone. Maybe that's all he needed to do in order to Leap out of here. Sam snatched the tomato out of Gene's hand. He squeezed the fruit and a thin trickle of red juice began to run down his fingers and hand.

Gene bit his lower lip as the juice ran down Sam's arm and began to drip off his elbow. "It's really ripe, Will," he muttered. "Did I mention that it was really ripe?"

"Is this how this town treats potential suicide victims? By throwing overripe fruit out windows?" Sam retorted. He squeezed the tomato with his fingers and more juice trickled out.

Gene swallowed and spoke in a small voice. "But Tom's not a suicide threat. I'm sure he'd come in of his own free will once the whiskey wears off. Throwing stuff just gets him inside quicker." Gene also wiped his forehead with his sleeve. "We just never wanted to chance waiting him out. Don't you remember?"

"He's drunk!" Sam sagged against the windowsill.

"Well, of course he's drunk, Williams." Mayor Tilden chided Sam. "He'd never have the nerve to climb out there in the first place if he was sober." He shook his head. "I think you're right for once, Gene Dupree. The heat's got to ol' Will today."

Sam frowned at the men and leaned out the window. "Tom? Tom Madison?"

"About time you got this show on the road, Sheriff Williams," the burly man in the dirty overalls snorted. "I'm gonna jump and kill myself if you don't hurry up. I can't live without my Carla Sue."

"Go ahead, throw it. He's waiting for it," Gene urged Sam in a timid voice.

Sam, with disgust, heaved the tomato out the window, slinging pulp and juice against the windowsill. The crowd below let out a cheer, followed by applause.

Mayor Tilden charged the window, knocking Gene and Sam out of the way. He pressed his fleshy hands on the messy sill and leaned out as far as his protruding stomach would allow. He was straining to see what the crowd was cheering about. He let out a strangled sound as he pushed his body back inside the window. Once inside he began to shout in Sam's ear, "Goddamn it, William Williams! You lobbed that tomato right into my new convertible. It's splattered all over the new upholstery. Is this your idea of a joke?" Mayor Tilden's hands were balled into tight fists, as his face contorted and began to change from a deep shade of red to purple.

Gene Dupree elbowed his way around Sam. "If it's anyone's fault, it's your own, Tilden. I told you to move that car. You shout at Will again and I'll arrest you for interfering with a police investigation."

"I'd like to see you try," the mayor roared as he pushed Gene with his stomach. Tilden acted like Gene was nothing more than a troublesome fly that he could swat away. He stuck a thick finger in Sam's face. "As for you, Williams . . . I'm not through with you yet." He turned on his heel and left the room. He bounded down the staircase to the first floor.

"That was a good shot," Gene whistled and leaned out the window for a better look. "I couldn't have hit that windbag's car."

"I didn't mean to hit the car," Sam started to explain.

“I’ve never heard of a such a stupid, inane, moronic way to . . .”

A shadow crossed the window and Tom Madison leaned in. “I’m ready to come in now, Sheriff Williams and Deputy Dupree.” It took both Sam and Gene to pull Tom inside.

Tom reeked of whiskey and sweat. He leaned into Sam’s face, his stale breath wafting up into Sam’s nose. “The watermelon was a lot better, Sheriff Williams. Bigger squash when it hits the pavement. You did nail the mayor’s car pretty good, so the whole day wasn’t wasted. Maybe next time you—”

“There better not be a next time,” Sam warned.

The mayor came thundering back up the staircase and bolted through the attic’s doorway, waving his chubby fists high in the air. “Judas H. Priest, Will Williams. You’ve ruined my brand new 1955 Ford convertible down there.” He shouted and ranted as he danced around the small room, all his anger directed at Sam. “How am I going to explain that mess to my wife! She’s going to be furious.” He huffed and puffed as he whipped out his wrinkled bandanna and dabbed at his thick neck.

Gene had quietly handcuffed Tom in the corner. “You’d better calm down, Mayor Tilden, or you’re going to give yourself a heart attack. Just tell your wife it was only a tomato.”

The mayor whirled and stormed over to Gene. “A heart attack, my foot! You call my wife up and tell her yourself. She’ll be picking up what’s left of you and feeding it to our dog when she’s through. She’s a woman to be dealt with, mind my words.” Tom snickered and Gene dropped his eyes and looked down at his shoes.

“It could have been Tom Madison in the front seat instead of that tomato,” Sam reminded Tilden. “Tell your wife that when she sees the mess.” So far twenty minutes hadn’t passed in this Leap and Sam didn’t like the mayor or his attitude. “Besides,” Sam reminded him, “my deputy did warn you to move your car.”

Gene raised his head. A small, grateful smile started to spread across his face.

"Hey! It's too hot to stand up here and listen to you all fussing about me and that car." Tom rattled his handcuffs. "Now that I'm under arrest, I'm supposed to be going to jail. I sure don't want to stay up here any longer."

Tom had a point. The air in this room was so thick and heavy you could have sliced it.

"Take him downstairs," Sam ordered Gene. Sam wiped his face with his sleeve and turned to the mayor. "As for the car . . ." Sam patted his shirt pocket and found a small wirebound notepad and pencil. He flipped open the notepad and began to write. "Just let me know how much it costs to clean up your car and I'll see that you get reimbursed for your trouble." He flipped the notebook closed and tucked it back into his pocket. "I'll be downstairs if you need me." Sam followed Gene Dupree and Tom down the stairs.

"I'm watching you, Williams. You'd better believe you're gonna be hearing from me. Yes indeed." Mayor Tilden tried to smooth out his ruffled appearance as he clambered downstairs.

As the group reached the first floor, Sam cleared his throat. "Let's take Tom to the jail and book him." Sam hoped this little town had a jail. "And I want a doctor to look at that cut over his eye."

Gene led Tom outside. "I'll give Doc Adams a call as soon as I can get Tom fingerprinted and booked—again."

Outside, the mayor had found a new audience to perform for and he began to bemoan the state of his upholstery all over again. Sam left the mayor behind as the humidity and heat began pressing down on him from all sides. Sam noticed that Gene's shirt was completely soaked through as it clung to his thin body. Upon closer inspection of his own uniform Sam noted his shirt wasn't in much better shape. Gene loaded Tom in the backseat of the police cruiser and shut the door. "You want a lift back, Will?" he asked.

"Sure," Sam responded automatically. He climbed in

the car with Gene at the wheel and Tom Madison groaning loudly in the backseat. Gene dropped the cruiser into gear and the trio pulled away from the crowd and headed down Main Street.

Sam rode quietly in the big police sedan. Gene whistled and adjusted the rearview mirror to get a better look at Tom. "What happened to your head?" he asked.

"Carla Sue." Tom snorted. "I really made her mad this time. She went and whacked me with a beer bottle."

Gene shook his head as he turned off the short street and headed down a side street. "Tom, you and Carla Sue have got to stop this fighting. Will and I can't go climbing out on the balcony each time you two get into it."

"I haven't seen you out on that balcony yet, Gene Dupree." Tom sat back and smiled. "Only Sheriff Williams climbs out after me."

Sam turned around. "And I don't want to climb out there again, Tom."

Tom nodded. "I know, I know. I broke our promise we made the last time I wanted to get Carla worried about me. It's just she's being so stubborn this time."

Gene stopped the car in front of a squat, brick, single-story building that sat at the end of the street. A crude, weathered sign hung above the front door on two rusted metal chains. It read JAIL.

Sam climbed out and followed Gene and Tom up the stairs and into the building.

The men entered an office area, large enough to contain two desks, a filing cabinet, a long table, and a Coca-Cola machine. Atop the long table sat a log book, phone, and radio dispatch. A small bathroom was tucked away in one corner of the room.

Gene began guiding Tom through the main office area and down a short corridor that led to the jail cells. The jail had two cells, complete with metal bed frames, cloth-covered mattresses, and pillows. Gene undid the handcuffs and opened the cell door for Tom. Tom rubbed his wrists and slipped inside the cell without a struggle. He walked

over to the bed as Gene shut the cell door. The metal bed frame emitted a groan as Tom sat down and put his head in his hands.

"The whiskey's beginning to wear off now. He'll be needing some aspirin soon," Gene said as he returned to the main office area.

"Let's give the doctor a call."

Gene nodded and headed for the phone as Sam wandered over to one of the desks and pulled out a swivel chair. He sank into the chair and listened as Gene talked to the doctor, explaining about the cut and how the afternoon's events had progressed. Gene cupped his hand over the receiver and asked, "Is there anything else, Will?"

"Just make sure the doctor brings a lot of aspirin. Tom's gonna have one heck of a hangover."

Gene smiled and relayed the message back to the doctor. He chuckled and hung up the phone.

Sam had just pulled open the top desk drawer when Gene spoke up.

"It was my fault," Gene said as he walked over to the other desk and sat down, pulling at his shirt collar. "I took too long getting that tomato. You would have had Tom off the balcony in no time flat and it wouldn't have cost the mayor ten bucks. I think Tilden's more upset about the ten dollars he lost than his car, if the truth be known. His wife hardly ever lets him drive it."

"Ten dollars?" A perplexed expression crossed over Sam's features. "You mean . . . a bet?"

"Yeah," Gene sighed, leaning back in the chair. "He bet Russell that you'd get Tom off the balcony in less than five minutes this time." Gene shook his head. "Sorry if I messed that up, Will."

Sam just grunted. He shifted the gun belt around his waist and glanced at the calendar on the desk. A calendar serving as a blotter was opened to August 1955.

"You looked spooked up on that balcony today."

"I wasn't spooked," Sam muttered as he began to plow through the contents of the desk. The office wasn't air-

conditioned and it was very uncomfortable in the small building. The little metal fan sitting on top of the filing cabinet whirled madly away in the corner, its stream of cool air fading long before it reached Sam. A clock ticked away on the far wall. Gene seemed to lose interest in the conversation and opened a file on his desk.

Sam's search yielded no clues as to his whereabouts or identity. In a last-ditch effort he pulled out the sheriff's wallet and checked the driver's license.

William T. Williams was thirty-nine years old. He was six feet, two inches tall, had dark brown hair and brown eyes. Sam memorized Will's home address and upon further inspection discovered he was carrying forty dollars in the wallet. "Dear God, I've Leaped into Andy Griffith," Sam muttered.

"You can say that again." Al Calavicci tucked his oversized cigar into the corner of his mouth and shook his head. He brought the blinking handlink out of his lime-green jacket and studied its small screen. Sam jumped and almost dropped Will's wallet.

"Did you say something to me, Will?" Gene looked up from the file he had been reading.

"No," Sam answered with a wave of his hand. He threw a blistering glare toward Al and hissed under his breath, "I told you not to do that to me!"

Al raised a bushy eyebrow. "Do what?" He shrugged his shoulders and feigned innocence. "Didn't you hear me come through the wall?"

Sam just shook his head. He put the wallet back in his pants pocket and stood up. "I'm going to wash up."

Gene was studying the file. "Okay," he answered absently.

Sam walked past Al and nodded toward the bathroom with his head.

"Not the bathroom again? Come on, Sam, can't we find a different place to talk?"

Sam just kept walking. The minuscule bathroom had a bare bulb with an old-fashioned pull chain. Sam tugged on

the chain and the room was lit with a blinding light. He blinked and shut the door.

Al joined Sam by squeezing through the door. The hologram's right shoulder kept melting back into the door and disappearing. Al looked like a smorgasbord, dressed as he was in a lime-green jacket, an orange shirt, cream-colored suspenders, chocolate-brown pants, and gold shoes. Ziggy's link blinked off and on in his hand, adding its own neon hues of blues, oranges, pinks, yellows, and greens.

"Where have you been!" Sam admonished his friend.

"And hello to you too." The link twittered away in the rear admiral's hand. Al smoothed out his jacket and pretended to ignore the anger in Sam's voice. "I don't want to hear one word," Al warned Sam as Al's elbow disappeared into the porcelain pedestal sink. He pulled his elbow out of the sink. Sam could see the link twitching slightly in his hand.

"What's wrong, Al?" Sam asked, forgetting how badly Al had startled him a few moments before.

Al removed his cigar from his mouth and licked his lips. "I'll tell you what's wrong." Al spoke quietly and diligently. He straightened his back. "For starters, Ziggy just centered me in a graveyard!" He shook the link in his hand, which made it squeal, and he leered at Sam, as if this were all his fault.

"A graveyard?" Sam repeated slowly. He leaned back against the sink, a luxury Al could not experience. "Why would Ziggy center you in a graveyard? She knows how much you hate stuff like that." If you really wanted to rattle Al Calavicci, you just had to mention dead bodies, ghosts, or vampires. Fighter pilot or not, when it comes to the spooky and the supernatural, Al was one part skeptic, three parts terrified.

"No," Al corrected. He stuck his thumb at his chest. "I *despise* graveyards, I don't just hate them." He pointed his thick, smoldering cigar stub at Sam. "That pea-brained, number-crunching, egomaniacal excuse for a computer—which you designed, I might add—is this far from becom-

ing unplugged, permanently.” Al demonstrated with the thumb and first finger of his right hand. The space between them was so narrow a piece of paper would have not fit in it.

“Ziggy’s been known to pull some crazy stunts, but she wouldn’t do that to you on purpose, Al,” Sam pointed out, keeping his voice lowered. “She knows how you feel about that kind of stuff.”

“Ha!” Al cried, stepping forward. His cigar hand sailed through the air. “Well, for your information, she just did. I had to hightail it out of that ghoulish place and walk all over this town looking for you.”

Sam held up his hand. “Just settle down.”

“I am settled down!” Al roared. “You should have seen me five minutes ago.” He shifted his feet and rammed the cigar between his teeth.

“All right, all right,” Sam agreed, not wanting to get into a verbal exchange. “What was happening before you had Ziggy center you here?”

Al rolled his eyes. “Gosh, Sam, I wouldn’t have had a problem if she had centered me *here*.” He pointed at the top of his gold shoes.

“Fine,” Sam agreed. “What was going on before you stepped into the Imaging Chamber?”

Al tipped his head back toward the office area. “Can you talk?”

“Why?” Sam asked skeptically. “Is this going to take long?”

“As a matter of fact, yes it is.” Al tried to pace in the confined space as he launched into his story. He was having a dickens of a time trying not to step into and through the toilet. “First of all, I’ve been on the phone all day with my lawyer, I have two dozen different committee reports sitting on my desk that I need to sign and file, and Verbena has been on my case about some kind of equipment she’s been expecting.” Al snorted to himself and snapped his gold suspenders. “Do I look like a tracking device for a pharmaceutical company?”

Sam folded his arms across his chest. "When you got into the Imaging Chamber . . ."

"Hey, don't rush me," Al warned. "Now where was I . . . oh yeah, Ziggy, that marvelous microchip maniac, can't give me two lines of complete readout regarding this Leap. Gooshie starts fiddling with the only coordinates that Ziggy can come up with and *boom!* before I know what's happening, I find myself standing in the middle of a Stephen King novel." Al batted away a fly that was buzzing around his head. As the persistent fly followed him, Al began to wave his arms in the air. Swat and move, swat and move.

"Wait a minute." Sam leaned forward. "What did you say about Ziggy and the data for this Leap?"

"Just what I said." Al paused and aimed the link at the pesky fly. The link screeched and sent the fly buzzing. "She can't pull up any data on this town during your present time frame and—"

"What do you mean she can't get any data?" Sam pushed off the sink and pressed forward toward Al. "Just what have you been doing for the past two hours?"

"Look," Al warned, "you wanted me to explain how I wound up in that cemetery, so I'm explaining. If you don't like it . . ." He made a face as he stepped back through the wall. "Man, this is a tiny bathroom."

"Forget the bathroom!" Sam winced and lowered his voice. "Please explain to me what took you so long to get here." Sam gestured wildly at the door. "I've Leaped into a sheriff in a little town. That much I know."

Al shrugged. "So you're ahead of the game. Did you know the guy you Leaped into has a wife and two kids?"

"I've got a wife and two kids?"

Al cleared his throat and hooked his free thumb into his suspender. "No. Will has a wife and two kids. Margaret O'Brien Williams is his wife and Rebecca is, of course, his daughter and Tyler is his son. And the reason Ziggy doesn't have any data for you on this Leap is because in 1965 a tornado ripped through this happy little hamlet and the big booming town up the road, . . . um,"—Al had to consult

the link and he yanked it up to his face—"Dunsmoore. Dunsmoore is the county seat. It's got a courthouse and library. Anyway, being the county seat, it houses all the important records for the towns in this county. You know, birth records, land purchases, that sort of thing." Al waved his hand. "When this killer tornado roared through, there was nothing left for the National Archives. Hence, nothing for Ziggy's precious memory chips to absorb. Almost all the records before 1965 were lost. About the only thing Ziggy has access to is"—Al shuddered a bit—"cemetery lists and a few death certificates. Tina is having Ziggy run a cross-check through what's left. We're looking for newspaper articles, almanacs, anything that will give us a written account about the town." He sighed and removed the cigar. "I gotta tell you, Sam, it's really tough trying to nail down 1955 in Brick, Oklahoma, right now."

"But," Sam asked, "without any records how did Ziggy figure out where I was?"

Al jiggled the link in his hand and it squawked. "See, Ziggy had nothing to do with that. Will told us."

"Will?" Sam gravitated toward Al. "The guy I Leaped into? The man back in the Waiting Room?"

"No, Sam," Al replied sarcastically, "Will the night janitor. Of course, Will in the Waiting Room. Do you happen to know another William Williams?" Al shook his head. "Why would anyone give a person a first and last name that sound so similar? It's stupid if you ask me."

"Al."

"I mean it's so confusing. William Williams. That's like Tom Thomas or . . ." Al became lost in thought. "I knew this captain in the Navy that had a name like that. What was it? Bob Bobson or . . . it's right on the tip of my tongue."

"Al."

"What?"

"I don't want to hear about your lieutenant," Sam wearily pleaded.

"Captain, Sam," Al corrected. "I said Captain."

“Whatever. Tell me what Will said.”

Al pulled his shoulders back. “He told us he was from Brick, Oklahoma, and that his name was Will Williams.”

“So he’s awake and he can talk?”

Al laughed. “Well, they can all talk, Sam. Except for that chimp you Leaped into. Most of the time our guests prefer to scream or faint instead of engaging me in conversation. Kind of a nice change.”

Sam leaned back against the sink. “Is Will okay?”

“He’s fine. Once he came around and figured he hadn’t been captured by the Russians or space aliens, he was more than willing to fill us in on his life. That is, what he can remember.”

“And that brings us back to you. And your arrival in the cemetery.” Sam rubbed his chin. “Explain to me again what was happening just prior to Ziggy sending you . . . there.”

“Like I said, things were their usual hectic pace. I had been tied up all day long and we were getting zip with Ziggy when Dr. Beeks finally convinced Will he wasn’t going crazy; he calmed down and began to talk about his family and this town. He remembered that he was the sheriff and was married, but that was about it. Ziggy, in the meanwhile, was scanning newspapers and archive files from another town about fifty miles east of here. The town is called Ashcroft, I think. The only thing Ziggy could pull up regarding this date is something about a murder. The town’s records in Ashcroft are real sketchy in regard to the shining metropolis of Brick.”

“A murder?” Sam sat up and took notice. He burrowed his brow and shook his head. “Ziggy’s got her semantics wrong again. When I Leaped in, I was in the process of stopping a suicide, not a murder.”

“Murder, suicide. It depends how you look at it,” Al commented as he fiddled with the link. He shook his head back and forth, “No, Ziggy’s still insisting it’s a murder.” Al continued to jab at the buttons and wave the link through the air. “That’s two for two today, you bucket of bolts.”

Al gave up and dropped the link to his side. "Only Will Williams could give us any kind of clue where you would be. So when Ziggy came up with nothing"—the link shrieked in protest—"Verbena had Will fill me in on all the details he could recall. Gooshie pieced together a target for Ziggy to aim for and I figured the next person I'd see would be you."

"And the next thing you know," Sam continued, "you're standing in a cemetery." The only sound in the room was the fly buzzing. "Where were you standing exactly?" Sam asked out loud as he thought.

"Aw, Sam," Al complained. "We've been over this already. Just face it, your computer blew it. Big time." He snapped his suspender with his fingers.

"Where were you standing? I want to know the exact spot."

Al squirmed. "I didn't hang around and soak in all the details. It was creepy." Al studied his shoes and Sam patiently waited. "I might have been standing on a grave—but I don't know for sure," Al added quickly.

"What did the headstone say?"

"Come on, Sam. You know I hate stuff like that. I certainly didn't take the time to see whose grave I was standing on. Boy, this is giving me the creeps all over again." He shuddered and drew his arms around him.

"You mean to tell me, Ziggy sends you into a graveyard and you don't even take the time to read the headstone? Surely you read the marker?" Sam tipped his head and waited for Al to reply.

Al looked down at his feet. "I kind of took a fleeting peek at it."

Sam held his breath and counted to ten. He finally asked, "And what did the headstone say, Al?"

"What has this got to do with the price of tea in China?" Al snapped his head up. "It was a headstone. I think it was..." Al turned his head and mumbled something inaudible.

“What was that? I didn’t catch it?” Sam leaned over toward the hologram.

Al shot Sam a searing look. “I don’t know. It was . . . William something.” Al waved his hand over his head. “It might have been William Williams, but I’m not sure.”

“Did you notice the date of death on the tombstone?” A smile was creeping up on the corners of Sam’s mouth.

“It might have been June 5, 1950, but I could’ve been mistaken.” Al started to rock on the balls of his feet again.

Sam smiled broadly. “Ziggy didn’t screw up. She did what you asked her to do, with the limited data she had to work with.”

Al stopped rocking and shook his head back and forth. “Nope. No way. Nohow. What do you mean, ‘Ziggy didn’t screw up’? I think sticking me in the middle of a cemetery is a pretty big mistake. I thought you were dead.”

“I’m touched.” Sam held his hand over his heart. “Al, who did Ziggy center you on?”

Al rolled his eyes, moaned, and pointed at Sam. “You! I told Gooshie to have Ziggy fixed so I would be centered on you.” Al folded his arms across his chest. Now he was growing exasperated. “What’s a matter, Beckett,” he scoffed, “am I going too fast for you?”

“No.” Sam started to laugh. “Not at all.”

“What?” Al demanded. “You’re laughing? I wind up thinking you’ve cashed in on this Leap and you’re sitting there laughing?”

“Listen,” Sam pleaded. “Gooshie centered you on the only William Williams Ziggy had a record of. You said yourself most of the town’s records were destroyed in the tornado.” He held up his finger. “Except for cemetery and death records. The only William Williams Ziggy has a record of must be Will’s father. William Williams the first. Go back and ask Will if he was named after his father. But Al, if I were you, I’d leave out that part about how stupid two similar names sound. Will might take offense at that.”

Al started to say something and then clamped his mouth

shut. He scowled down at the handlink and then up at Sam. "I still say Ziggy screwed up!"

"Uh-huh," Sam commented dryly. "And what were you doing on the phone with your lawyer?"

Al swallowed and scratched his head. "I, um . . . did I say my lawyer? I meant a meeting with . . . um . . . who was that guy?"

"Maybe you can lie like a dog with Tina, but you can't fool me." Sam walked in front of Al and sat down on the toilet. He stretched out his long legs. "What do you need a lawyer for?" Sam's face fell and he gasped. "Oh God, Al! You didn't get married again, did you?"

"Me?" Al exclaimed. "Married? *No!*" Al put his free hand up to his forehead and ran it through his hair. "Hardly." He chuckled at Sam. "Me! Married! No, it's just Maxine."

"Maxine?" Sam blinked and shook his head.

Al was rubbing at his neck, trying to unkink it. "Yeah, you remember Maxine. You know, ex-wife number five?"

"Oh," Sam recalled as his Swiss-cheesed memory clicked. "The last one. I can vaguely remember that you've been married five times. What does Maxine want?"

Al was working his hand down from his neck and had moved on to his shoulder. "I have no idea. She's tucked away in a luxury hotel in Santa Fe. I'm supposed to fly into town tomorrow and meet her."

"But why? You two have been divorced a long time, haven't you?"

Al began to slowly roll his shoulder up and down. "Yeah, it's been a long time. I haven't set eyes on her since I joined the Star Bright Project. Remember, I had just finished up the Eco-Environment Project and I was all set to interview with Weitzman and the Star Bright committee members when she came breezing into town looking for a divorce? I met her at a hotel near the Capitol. All we ever did was fight. She can really pack a punch."

Sam's jaw dropped. "You two physically fought? Al!"

"*Sam!*" Al recoiled at the thought. "You know I would

never strike a female. We had our own unique way of fighting. *She* did the throwing while I did the ducking. Seems she didn't care for some of my comments. I could always get to Maxine with my tongue and she always would get to me with whatever she could heave in my direction." A small smile spread across Al's lips. "Actually, the fighting only put us more in the mood, if you know what I mean. I'd let a zinger fly about her wardrobe or her attitude and bang, she'd start throwing dishes, books, whatever she could lay her hands on. Soon she'd get tired of throwing furniture and we'd start wrestling. Before you'd know it, we were making love before our clothes could hit the floor."

Sam shook his head in disgust. "That's the craziest behavior I've ever heard." Sam wagged a finger in Al's direction. "Is this what you're going to do tomorrow? Destroy a hotel room? Wrestle with your ex-wife?"

"No," Al answered cynically. "Sam, it's been a while since I laid eyes on the woman. I have no idea what she wants. I've just been handed an ultimatum from her lawyer to meet with her, that's all. And I know Maxine. If I don't meet with her in Santa Fe she'll come straight to Stallion's Gate and track me down." Al responded before Sam had a chance to voice his concerns. "But don't worry. I've already made plans to meet her in Santa Fe."

Sam leaned back and folded his arms. "Oh, that's great! And what am I suppose to do? Sit around here and wait till Ziggy comes up with something? Or do I wait till Will gets his memory back?"

"You're not doing so bad," Al pointed out. He started to toy with the link in his hand.

Sam narrowed his eyes. "Let me refresh your memory. So far, I have been on a ledge, three stories high, trying to talk a three-hundred-pound crazy man from splattering his body on top of the mayor's new convertible. I then get chewed out by the very same mayor for lobbing an overripe tomato into his new car."

Al blinked. "A tomato?" Ziggy sounded off in his hand

and he read the link. "You threw a tomato in the mayor's car?"

"You're missing the point, Al." Sam stood up and stretched. "You said yourself that I'm here to stop a murder, right?"

"Solve, stop. Murder, suicide," Al shrugged. "It's all the same thing to Ziggy."

"Okay, I did that. I prevented Tom Madison's death. I changed history"—Sam consulted his watch—"over two and a half hours ago."

Al leaned forward and smoothed out his shirt. "And?"

"And why haven't I Leaped?"

There was a loud knock on the door. "Will?" Gene's concerned voice called out. "Are you okay? You've been in there a long time."

"Yes, I'm fine, Gene." Sam walked over to the sink and turned on the faucet. He rinsed off his sticky hands. "I'll be out in a minute."

Al exhaled from his cigar. The smoke curled up around his head. He tilted the link in his hand and shook it. "I don't know why you haven't Leaped. I'll go back and see what Ziggy has dug up so far." He pressed a button and the Imaging Chamber door opened behind him.

"Good," Sam said as he splashed cold water on his face. "Just don't take all day to come up with something." Al disappeared with a jab at the link. Sam shut off the water and picked up a towel. He dabbed his face off and opened the bathroom door.

Gene had returned to his desk. He tucked away the file he had been reading as Sam came back to his desk.

"I just needed to wash my hands and face," Sam explained.

"Yeah, it sure is hot, isn't it? Hottest summer on record for August, and September is supposed to be just as hot, from what I've heard. Breaking all the records across Oklahoma. We've never had a summer end this hot in Brick before." Gene got up from his desk and made his way to

the old-fashioned Coca-Cola machine sitting in the corner by the bathroom. He fished some money out of his pocket and dropped the coins into the slot. He pulled back the door and took out a bottle. Gene popped the cap on the side of the machine and took a long drink. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and gave Sam a long look. "You sure you're okay, Will? You aren't suffering from heat stroke or anything, are you?" He offered the bottle to Sam. "You seem sort of forgetful today. You might feel better if you had something to drink. You want one?"

"Yes." Before Sam could find some extra change in his pocket, Gene had produced an ice-cold bottle out of the machine. He handed it over to Sam.

"Thank you," Sam said as he tipped the bottle back. He swallowed and began to choke. He pulled the bottle away from his mouth and grimaced. "I forgot how much sugar they put in a regular soda. I usually only drink diet." He set the bottle down on the desk and smacked his mouth, trying to get rid of the sugary taste.

Gene eyed his bottle and his eyes drifted back to Sam. "Diet, Will? I never heard of a diet soda."

"Never mind," Sam said as he picked up the bottle and swallowed another mouthful. The second mouthful wasn't so bad. "So Gene, how big would you say Brick is?"

Gene took his drink back to his desk. "I guess we're still around 750. When I worked on the census in '50 it was about that. I think when Mrs. Watt's baby is born that will bring it to"—he paused and closed his eyes—"753, I think. Why?"

The clock on the wall chimed. Gene looked up at the clock. "Look at the time," he said. He picked up a pencil and tapped his desk. He glanced back at the clock on the wall and then over at Sam. Sam was too busy sorting through the desk to pay much attention to Gene. "Suppose you know what time it is, don't you, Will?"

Sam studied the clock. "I guess, if that clock is correct, it's quarter to six. Why?" Sam asked. "Am I supposed to be somewhere now?"

Gene stopped tapping his pencil. "You know me, Will. I always try to mind my own business and all, but I know how Meg feels when you're late."

Sam cocked his head. "Meg?"

Gene nodded. "Yep." He pointed at the clock. "I know we had a hectic day and all but. . . ." He whistled. "You should have been home almost an hour ago for dinner. And I know you didn't call her. She's going to have a fit when you do get home. You should run along now. I can handle this end. Doc Adams will be over later. I'll be fine," Gene as he kicked his feet up on the desk. "Just let Tom sleep it off, just like always, right?"

"Okay," Sam answered. He noticed a slight drawl to his speech. "Remember to let Doc examine his eye. You know where to reach me if you have any problems?"

"Sure do, but I can tell that it's gonna be a quiet evening. Too hot for anything else." Gene opened his drawer and pulled out a magazine. "I bought the latest comics at the drugstore in Ashcroft. It's perfect for a night like this. Yes, it's going to a long, hot, quiet night." Gene flipped open the latest issue of *Superman* and settled down to read it.

Sam nodded and walked toward the door. He looked back over his shoulder and bid Gene good night.

CHAPTER

TWO

Fortunately for Sam, the town of Brick, Oklahoma, was small and he didn't have too much trouble locating Maple Street, where Will Williams lived. Sam parked the black and white squad car in the gravel driveway and shut off the engine. He sat in the car and studied the house through the windshield.

The house was two stories tall, painted white with dark green trim. It had a large front porch, complete with a porch swing. A large maple tree stood tall in the front yard. No breeze stirred the leaves on the tree.

Sam gulped, climbed out of the car, and headed toward the porch. He had taken his first step leading up to the porch when the screen door flew open. It banged against the side of the house and out ran a small girl. She nearly plowed Sam down as she came flying down the stairs. She wrapped her arms around Sam's waist and squeezed. She pulled back, her eyes twinkling with delight. "You're late, Daddy. And boy, are you in big trouble."

Sam gazed down at the little girl. She looked like she was twelve years old, maybe thirteen. She wore a red-and-white striped T-shirt (slightly soiled) underneath a pair of faded blue overalls. Her feet were adorned with white socks and a pair of red tennis shoes, the laces knotted in double knots. Her chestnut hair was parted in the middle and braided into two plaits that almost touched the middle of her back. She had knocked off a plain red baseball cap on her way out of the house and it landed on the porch steps. Sam figured by the generous sprinkling of freckles across her cheeks, nose, and forehead, she didn't wear the cap much of the time.

"What's wrong, Daddy? Did you forget what I looked like since this morning?" She cocked her head and gave Sam a delightful, funny smirk.

"No," Sam said, somewhat taken aback. He reached down and retrieved her red cap. "I did not forget what you look like. You startled me the way you came flying out of the house."

The girl motioned for Sam to lean down. Sam obliged and she spoke to him in a low voice, "Momma's really mad. She *hates* it when you're late and don't call." She scrunched up her nose and rolled her eyes.

Sam held out his hands. "I couldn't help it," he answered, matching her own soft tone of voice. "Police business."

"Oh," the girl said, smiling widely. "Well, you've got to tell it to her. Mom thinks you should be here for dinner at five sharp no matter what." She twisted her head in the direction of the door, causing her braids to swing out away from her head. When she looked back she beamed, seeing that she had made Sam smile.

"Rebecca Sue Ellen Williams!" A loud piercing voice penetrated through the screen door and out into the front yard.

"Oh no," the girl whispered under her breath. She turned around and folded her arms across her chest, her feet

spread apart. She stood in front of Sam in a stance as if to protect him.

The screen door creaked open and Sam found himself staring up at a woman. The woman came out on the porch and folded her arms across her chest, matching Rebecca's stance. She was very tall and she cut a good figure in her pale blue cotton dress. Her blond hair was curly and it fell in soft waves around her face. Her blue eyes blazed out as she looked at Rebecca and then at Sam. She pursed her red lips into a thin frown and tapped her fingers against her folded arm. "Will Williams!" she scolded. "Where have you been? Supper's been getting cold and I've been worried. You didn't call." Her pumps tapped in time with her drumming fingers.

Sam opened his mouth to respond, but Rebecca beat him to it. "He just got here, Momma. He was on police business." Rebecca held her head high as she announced this.

"Your father had a tongue when he left the house this morning and I'm sure he still has it. He can answer for himself, young lady. As you for, I thought I told you to watch your little brother. Honestly, Rebecca! When are you going to start minding me?"

Rebecca stuck out her chin and scowled at her mother. "Maybe when you stop calling me Rebecca. I hate that name. It's a baby-sounding name. You know I want to be called Becca."

Rebecca's mother's eyes flared from up on the porch and her toe tapping stopped. She took a deep breath and pointed her index finger toward her daughter. "Don't you start getting sassy with me, missy," she warned. "I don't have the patience to put up with you this week. Mind your manners or you'll find yourself grounded."

Becca started to reply but Sam reached down and squeezed her shoulder. "Did I hear you say dinner was getting cold?" he asked.

Becca's mother sighed. She glared at Becca and then slowly turned her attention to Sam. "Yes, stone cold. As

we speak. Come in and get washed up. I'll see if we can't salvage some of the dinner."

"Here, Becca," Sam said as he gave her a push toward the house, "go inside and find your brother." Becca smiled as she waltzed up the front steps, past the watchful eye of her mother. Sam noticed the piercing stares exchanged by mother and daughter as they passed on the porch.

Inside the house Sam found himself in a formal living room with the furniture polished and arranged neatly. A closet was off to Sam's right and a big oversized sofa sat in front of the fireplace. Fresh flowers were arranged in several vases set around the room.

"Go find Tyler and you both get washed up for supper. And, Becca, don't take forever, either." Meg strode into the kitchen past Becca and Sam.

Sam started to follow Meg into the kitchen but Becca grabbed his arm. "Daddy," she warned Sam, "aren't you forgetting something?" Becca shook her head and pulled the gun out of his holster.

"Hey, wait just a . . ." Before Sam could snatch the gun out of Becca's grasp, she had opened it, emptied the chamber, closed the barrel, and handed the empty gun back to Sam.

"Who taught you how to do that?" Sam whispered in surprise. Becca had opened a closet door behind Sam and was pointing to a wooden box on the top shelf. Sam retrieved the box and handed it to Becca. She swiftly opened it and put away the gun and ammunition as Sam unbuckled the holster around his waist. "You and Grandpa did," Becca whispered back. She handed Sam the box, which he replaced on the top shelf, and shut the closet door.

"There's no lock on this door," Sam said as he fiddled with the door knob.

"You're always threatening to put a lock on that old door but you haven't yet." Becca smiled and bounced into the kitchen, with Sam following close behind.

At the stove stirring a large pot was an older, black woman. She wore a crisp, white apron and she didn't turn

around as Sam and Becca came through the doorway. She was watching the pan on the stove, her head bobbing up and down to Becca's mother's constant stream of commentary. A scattering of gray hair dotted her tight head of curls and only her thin, wrinkled arms gave away her age. Becca's mother stood at the sink and she was filling up large glasses of dark iced tea.

Becca maneuvered through the hubbub of the kitchen and opened the back door. "Tyler!" she screamed. "Supper's ready!"

The older woman at the stove shook her head and continued to stir. Becca's mother set the pitcher of iced tea down loudly on the countertop and made an exasperated noise.

Sam couldn't help but chuckle. He could vaguely remember calling his brother and sister in a similarly loud fashion. Of course, he had grown up on a dairy farm. If you had to call someone for dinner and they happened to be in the barn, then you needed a good pair of lungs.

"What are you laughing at?" Becca's mother snapped at Sam. She had begun to set the glasses at the table. "Do you think it's funny that the whole neighborhood can hear your daughter scream like a banshee?"

"I haven't heard that phrase since my mother..." Sam's voice trailed off as he looked into Meg's face. She wasn't smiling.

The woman at the stove clucked her tongue and set the spoon down. "Becca, you go out there and collect your brother for dinner. You haven't been brought up in the woods so don't act like it. Go on now."

Becca didn't argue with the older woman. She nodded and mumbled, "Yes, ma'am," as she went outside.

"Miss Meg, do you want me to set out those biscuits now or are you all going to eat them for breakfast?" The woman reached for an oven mitt and turned around to look at Sam for the first time. Her dark eyes danced as she looked Sam over from head to toe.

"Yes, please set them out, Miss Beulah. I swear, Will,

if this house gets off schedule for one minute, everything's ruined."

Becca came back inside the kitchen dragging her struggling little brother with her. "Come on, Tyler. Get inside for dinner."

Tyler laughed and dragged his feet into the kitchen. The little blond boy was dressed in a red jumper and white shoes. He came wobbling into the kitchen and looked up at Sam. He giggled and waved his small chubby fingers in the air. "Who dat?"

"It's Daddy, you lug-nut," proclaimed Becca. She walked over to the kitchen sink and held her hands under the water. "You're a pain, Tyler."

"Rebecca! Don't talk to your little brother that way," Meg said from the table. She reached down and gathered Tyler up in her arms. "Let's wash our hands now."

Becca threw an annoyed look at her parents as she walked around the other side of the table. "I will never understand why you and Momma decided to have another child." She pulled out a chair and sat down. "All I ever do anymore is watch him. He's always getting into trouble and he's disgusting when he eats. He's the worst two year old in the world."

Meg was drying Tyler's hands at the sink. "And he probably thinks you are the best big sister in the world," Meg chided as she sat Tyler down in his high chair. "You could try and be nicer, Rebecca."

Becca shrugged. "Eleven years seems like a long time to wait for a second child is all I'm saying."

"Becca, you know better than to speak like that at the table in front of your parents." Miss Beulah set a bowl of mashed potatoes on the table. "I know you were raised with better manners than that. And don't give me that little innocent look either. It don't fool me at all."

Becca started to retort but a stern look from Sam stopped her short. "Yes, ma'am," she mumbled as she picked up her fork and began to pick at her food.

The meal was great. Sam helped himself to seconds of

chicken-fried steak, mashed potatoes with gravy, biscuits, and fresh green beans. Meg said the prayer and did most of the talking, while Tyler's antics kept everyone entertained. As the family was finishing up, Miss Beulah began to clear away the dinner dishes.

"Rebecca, why don't you help Miss Beulah with the dishes?" Meg asked.

"Momma, that's not fair. Why do I always have to help with the dishes?" Becca pouted and didn't move from her seat.

"That's a silly question. I don't expect your father to do the dishes. He's been at work all day, unlike some people I know. Now, I have to give your brother a bath, young lady, and I don't have time to sit here and go over all the reasons why you have to help out with the chores." Meg held her ground firmly as she lifted Tyler out of the high chair.

"Don't argue with your mother, Becca," Sam said as he wiped his fingers with his napkin. He saw a look of defeat cross over Becca's face. She seemed to silently accuse Sam of joining sides with the enemy.

"But I can't help tonight," she protested loudly. "I was going to meet Patty and go frog hunting." Becca turned her pleading, deep brown eyes on Sam.

Sam wasn't buying into those deep brown eyes. "First, you help with the dishes. Then we'll see about the frogs." When Becca realized she wasn't going to change his mind, she reluctantly began to gather up the dishes on the table, muttering under her breath. "I always have chores to do. Tyler never has any chores."

Miss Beulah clucked her tongue. "He's only two years old, Becca. You didn't start doing any chores till you were six or seven. Seems like you had a lot of time to do as you pleased." She raised her eyebrows and handed a plate to Becca. "Besides, I like it when you help me."

"Thank you, Becca," Sam said as he gave Becca a pat on her shoulder as she went by. She made a face and clanked the dishes down on the counter.

“Those dishes better not be chipped,” Meg warned as she cradled Tyler on her hip and headed upstairs. Tyler giggled and waved as Meg carried him away.

Miss Beulah poured a tall glass of iced tea and set it down on the table. “There’s your iced tea. You go on and sit a spell on the front porch, Will. Becca and I will have this kitchen cleaned up in no time at all.”

Sam thanked Miss Beulah and took the glass. “Now don’t cause Miss Beulah any grief, Becca.”

“Hrmp!” Becca grunted as she clanked the pots into the sink and turned the faucet on.

Sam walked back through the living room and out onto the front porch. He headed for the porch swing and eased his body into it. The sun was setting and twilight had arrived in Brick. The air was still hot and sticky. He sipped the tea and gently rocked back and forth in the swing. The iced tea had just the right amount of lemon and sugar added. Sam swallowed another refreshing mouthful. He closed his eyes and listened to the noise coming from the kitchen. Muffled voices and the sound of water running in the sink. The crickets sang off in the bushes and if you listened closely, you could hear the frogs calling out to one another. The first star of the evening appeared in the quickly darkening sky. The only breeze Sam felt was the one he made as he rocked back and forth in the swing. He sank lower in the swing and watched as the first lightning bugs began to emerge and blink on and off, on and off.

The screen door slammed open behind him and Becca ran up to Sam and declared, “The dishes are done. Can I go?”

“Hold on there. Where are you going?”

Becca’s face fell. “I’m going frog hunting, Daddy. Boy, are you getting forgetful in your old age. I told you that after dinner,” Becca replied as she skipped down the stairs two at a time.

“Wait a minute,” Sam called out. He came down the steps and grabbed Becca’s shoulder. “It’s getting dark now. Why don’t you skip the frog hunting tonight?”

Becca looked up at Sam and crinkled up her nose and forehead. "Daddy, you can only catch frogs in the dark; that's when they come out. Besides, I've done it lots of times before. I'm just going down by the creek. I'll be with Patty. I'm going to catch the best leaper for the frog-jumping contest," Becca turned away from Sam and stepped out.

"Rebecca Williams."

Becca halted in her tracks. She spun around, her braids flying out. "But Daddy!" she began to protest.

"I think you should stay home tonight."

Becca kicked at the ground with her feet. "Why can't I go?"

"Because . . . I said so." Sam winced. He'd always hated it when his parents used that kind of reasoning with him.

"That's a lousy reason." Becca dug her toes into the ground as if she were getting ready to do battle.

In the back of his mind, Sam recalled that Al insisted he was here to prevent a murder. Since he didn't have any more information to go on, Sam knew he would feel safer if everyone in this family stayed home tonight. Of course, he needed to come with a real good excuse to appease Becca. "How about if I make it up to you? I'll take you to the movies instead?"

Becca stopped kicking and thought this proposal over. "I guess so," she said tentatively.

Sam let out a sigh of relief. "Good."

"But on one condition," Becca announced, looking Sam dead in the eyes. "Just you and me, like we always used to go. I don't want Tyler tagging along. We'd have to see a baby movie if he comes and I'm too old for baby movies. And it would have to be after the Labor Day picnic, too. Momma would kill us if we tried to drive into Dunsmoore on Saturday. We're going to have to wait till after this stupid picnic this weekend."

"Well, those are a lot of conditions, but I think it sounds fair," Sam replied slowly. He flipped the end of Becca's nose with his finger and that made Becca smile.

“Okay,” Becca mumbled as she climbed back up the stairs to the house. “A movie. Just the two of us,” she said over her shoulder.

“Just the two of us,” Sam repeated as he watched her go.

“And no Tyler and no Momma. And we get lots of buttered popcorn.”

“Lots of buttered popcorn.” Sam nodded and smiled. “Sounds like a date, Becca.”

Becca blushed deeply and opened the screen door. “Oh, Daddy. You know girls don’t go on dates with their dads. That’s silly.” Sam watched her enter the house, breezing past Meg as she came to the doorway.

“Will, I’m getting ready to put Tyler down for the night. You want to come up and tuck him in?”

“Sure.” Sam took the porch steps in one easy hop.

Tyler was laughing and giggling as he toddled around the living room. Miss Beulah had her sweater draped over one arm and her purse in the other. She wagged a finger in Tyler’s direction.

“He is a happy child, indeed.” She slipped the purse onto her arm. “Reminds me of you, William. I used to change your diaper and you’d just twitter and chirp like a songbird.” Meg laughed and Sam felt his ears burning. “I’ll be going now, Miss Meg. It would be no trouble at all for me to come in tomorrow on my day off and help you get ready for the picnic. No trouble at all.”

Meg had gathered up Tyler in her arms and was going up the stairs. “Nonsense, Miss Beulah. We can manage around here for one day. I can do the shopping myself. Maybe I can get Becca to help me. Besides, you stayed late tonight. David will be missing you. We’ll see you on Thursday.”

Miss Beulah laughed softly. “As long as David knows where the food is he’ll be fine.” She tucked the sweater around her shoulders. “He’s gonna finish up his requirements at the church’s school this year. Once he passes, then

we can see about applying for that college in Boston next fall."

Meg sighed. "I don't see how you could let David go so far away. All the way up to Boston."

"He's got to go where he will be accepted." Miss Beulah stopped and turned her brown eyes on Sam. She smiled and paused by the door. "I'm so proud of him. Wish your father was still alive, William. He'd just be busting to know that David's going to college, just like your father said he would." She reached out and patted Sam's arm. "You better get some rest, William. You're looking mighty tired around your eyes. Can't have the sheriff looking tired at the biggest picnic of the year, now can we?"

"Yes, ma'am," Sam said cautiously. He cast his eyes down as Miss Beulah headed out the door. He closed the door and headed upstairs after Meg.

Sam passed what he guessed had to be Becca's room, merely by the volume of the record player. He pressed his ear to the door and heard an Elvis Presley tune playing on the turntable. He pulled back from her door and smiled. Sam thought he could hear Becca faintly singing along with the record. Sam heard the giggles and cooing of Tyler and Meg and he moved on.

Meg was just tucking Tyler under the sheets when Sam entered the room. Meg smoothed his hair back and tickled his ribs gently. She noticed Sam standing in the doorway and she got up from the bed. "You sleep tight, little boy. Momma loves you." She planted a kiss on his cheek and stepped back from the bed.

Sam slipped into the bedroom and knelt awkwardly down by Tyler's bed. Tyler looked up into Sam's eyes and reached out to touch Sam's nose.

"You would go for the nose." Sam laughed and took the small hand and held it in his big one. "You sleep tight, Tyler, okay?"

Tyler smiled and laughed. "Who you?" He blinked his eyes and watched Sam's face.

"Tyler Williams!" Meg's voice chided over Sam's

shoulder. "That's your daddy, you silly boy. I don't know what game you're playing tonight, mister, but I don't like it. Stop fooling around and kiss your daddy good night."

Tyler did as he was told. "Nite-nite."

Sam reached over the bed and turned off the light. "You lie still and go to sleep, Tyler."

"Green." Tyler pointed at his own eye, yawned, and turned over. He pulled a yellow bunny up close to his face and snuggled down under the sheets.

Sam pushed up off the floor and found himself looking into Meg's eyes. She tipped his chin up and examined his face very closely. "What's he mean, 'green'? You don't have green eyes."

Sam smiled and batted his eyes at Meg. "Beats me. Do you have a clue?"

"No," Meg sighed as she looked at Sam closely. "I don't. I think this whole family has gone a little crazy lately."

"Well, I wouldn't worry about it." Sam gently pushed Meg out of the bedroom.

Sam listened as Meg talked all the way down the hallway about the preparations that needed to get done in time for the Labor Day picnic on Saturday. She swung open a door and Sam followed her inside.

"I'll never get all those party favors done by Saturday. I should never have said I'd be the game committee chairman and volunteer to cook all those pies for the bake sale. But what was I to do when Lucy and Herb backed out at the last minute? Can you imagine them planning a trip to Houston at this time of year? Anyway, I could really use Rebecca's help tomorrow. Do you think you could speak to her? She is becoming so difficult lately. Not that she was ever an easy child, for me at least. She'd do anything you'd say." Meg undid her earrings and dropped them in a glass dish on the dresser. She then began to struggle to undo her zipper on her dress, reaching over her shoulders and tugging at the material.

Sam stood in the doorway, surveying the room. He

paused and then went over to Meg. He caught her zipper in his fingers and undid it. As soon as he had unzipped her dress, he backpedaled until he ran into the side of the four-poster bed, where he sat down promptly. He cast his eyes on the floor, avoiding Meg as he spoke. "She's your typical teenager, that's all. I hate to tell you this, Meg, but it's going to get worse before it gets better."

"Lord, that's all I need to hear." Meg lowered her voice as she got out of her dress. "Here we are talking about Rebecca and the picnic and I completely forgot to ask how your day was. Since you were late I suspect you were tied up getting that fool white trash off the roof again?"

Sam began to undo his shoes and looked up. "You mean Tom Madison?" He caught Meg standing in her slip and he dropped his head back down.

"Well naturally, Will. Who else has managed to make a complete fool out of you and this town these past three months? In some ways I just wish he'd go ahead and jump. He'd save you a lot of headaches. God knows he wouldn't be missed much."

"That's a terrible thing to say, Meg." Sam stopped unlacing his shoes. "I don't want to see him dead."

"That's not what you said after the last time you climbed up on that roof and hauled him off. After that big production of throwing a watermelon—and I must say, William, I am a little ashamed to have you, as my husband and the sheriff, tossing fruit off the city hall balcony like some high school prankster. I mean, the last time it took you all afternoon to get him to come in. All Tom was waiting for was for Carla to show up." Meg sighed and reached for her hair brush. "Besides, you know as soon as he's sober again he'll go right back to that Carla Sue. They'll be fighting and, mark my words, up on that balcony he'll go, all over again. Then you'll be expected to go up and fetch him. And the whole town will be out in the street watching this whole affair. It's downright silly. And all this trouble over a two-bit, low-life, white trash, good-for-nothing *s-l-u-t* like Carla Sue."

Sam dropped his shoe. "Margaret!"

Meg stopped brushing her hair. "Well, it's the God-honest truth, Will. Carla Sue is a waitress and God only knows what else down at that filthy drinking hole. I've heard stories about that girl that would curl your hair. Tom doesn't know any better. She sure wouldn't miss him one bit if he were to jump. Probably that's just what she wants him to do," she muttered as she pulled her brush through her hair.

"It's not a great idea to be spreading gossip about those two," Sam reminded her as he kicked off his other shoe.

"Will, it's not gossip and you know it." Meg turned toward the mirror and began to fuss with her face. "Those two have caused you more grief and trouble in just the past three months than in all the time you've been sheriff. If it's not Tom on the ledge, then it's a rowdy fight at the Hole involving Carla Sue. Do you remember that last incident? With that sailor, no less." Meg shook her head. "Reminds me of that time that traveling circus came through town . . ."

A flicker of shadow against the hallway wall caught Sam's eye. Sam got up and crept over to the door. He leaned out the doorway and came face to face with Becca, who had been eavesdropping at her parents' open door. Becca's mouth dropped open and she looked as surprised as Sam. She gathered up her nightgown in one quick motion and took off in the direction of her room, her bare feet carrying her quickly and silently down the hall. She ran to her room and shut the door.

"What are you doing?" Meg had paused and found Sam at the door. "Did you hear Tyler?"

"No, I don't think it's Tyler."

Meg walked over to the doorway and stood next to Sam. She looked very pretty, with her hair combed, standing there in her slip. "I'll go check on him on my way back from the bathroom. He's such a light sleeper," she said as she slipped out the door.

Sam thought about Becca's botched eavesdropping at-

tempt as he began to undo his shirt. He crossed back over by the bed and sat down. He finished undressing, folding his uniform over the back of a chair not far from the bed. He pulled back the sheets and climbed in on the far side. He listened to the sounds outside the window. He could hear the booming of thunder far off in the distance. Sam thought about Tom Madison and why he had been Leaped into this little town. Meg still hadn't returned to the bedroom. Sam dozed off about twenty minutes later and drifted into a dreamless sleep.

Wednesday, August 31, 1955

Sam awoke the next morning with the bright, warm sun shining in his face. He brought a hand up to his chin and felt a day's growth of whiskers. He opened his eyes and gazed up into the innocent face of Tyler, who was standing next to the bed. Sam sat up with a jolt and looked around the room. His memory of the Leap began to drift back and Sam brought his wristwatch up to his face. It was ten minutes after six and the sun felt like it was midday as it streamed through the bedroom windows. Sam lowered his arm and looked at Tyler. Tyler's blue eyes sparkled and danced as he watched Sam slowly wake up.

"Morning, Tyler. You're up early." Tyler giggled and handed Sam his yellow bunny. Sam held the raggedy bunny up in the air. "What's its name?" Tyler only smiled and stuck his thumb in his mouth. "Does it have a name?" Sam tried again.

Tyler nodded and pulled his wet thumb out of his mouth. "Bunny."

"Bunny," Sam repeated as he eased his body up on his elbow and got a good look around the room. Meg's side of the bed was empty, the sheets and quilt pulled up to her pillow.

"Pee," Tyler announced suddenly, watching Sam more

intently. Tyler then began to pick up his feet as if he were marching. "Tyler, pee. Pee now."

Sam flung back the covers and juggled the yellow bunny under his arm. "Wait, Tyler. Just a second." Tyler shook his head and grabbed at his pajama bottoms.

"Okay, okay, we're going." Sam groaned as he pulled himself up out of bed, offering his free hand to the little boy. Tyler grabbed his hand and pulled Sam in the direction of the nearest bathroom.

When Sam came down for breakfast, dressed and shaved, he was carrying Tyler on his shoulders. Tyler giggled and laughed, clutching his bunny as they bounced down the stairs.

Sam entered the kitchen as the aroma of bacon, biscuits, and eggs wafted through the air. Meg was dressed smartly in a yellow dress, fussing over a spitting skillet on the stove. She smiled at Sam and Tyler and nodded toward a cup of coffee on the table. She wiped her hands on her apron and took Tyler from Sam's shoulders. She tucked Tyler into his high chair and began to set the eggs and biscuits out on the table. Sam gave her a hand and she sighed a heartfelt thanks. "I have so many things to do between now and Saturday," Meg lamented as she set out a stick of butter and some homemade preserves. She stood back and smiled down at Tyler. "I've made a list up for shopping later this afternoon." She pulled out a chair next to Tyler and reached for a banana. She peeled it and gave a piece to Tyler. "Go ahead and get started on your eggs before they get cold," she scolded Sam. She looked up at the clock and pursed her lips. "Rebecca!" Meg hollered up to the kitchen ceiling. "Get down here before your breakfast gets cold."

Becca's feet thundered down the stairs and dashed past the kitchen doorway. "I don't want any breakfast, Momma," Becca hollered back to her mother as she made a beeline straight to the front door.

Sam cleared his throat and set down his fork. "Becca.

Come in here, please.” The screen door slowly squeaked shut on its hinges and Becca came trudging back to the kitchen. She stood in the kitchen’s doorway avoiding Sam’s gaze.

“What do you mean you’re not going to eat breakfast? Are you getting sick or something?” Meg sounded more annoyed than concerned.

“No. I just don’t want to eat anything,” Becca replied tartly as she studied the floor.

“Rebecca, look people in the eye when you talk to them,” her mother reminded her. “And when are you going to do something about your hair?”

“What about my hair?” Becca challenged. She picked up one of her braids and inspected it closely.

“You haven’t washed your hair in three days, by my estimate,” Meg scolded her daughter. “You could at least comb out those braids of yours. You are going to wash your hair for the picnic, aren’t you?”

“Why?” Becca snapped. “I’m just going to a stupid old picnic. It’s not like I’m going to church or something.” Becca tossed the braid over her shoulder and peeked quickly at Sam.

“If you’re not coming down with something, then you can sit down and eat breakfast with us,” Meg pointed out. “Dirty hair and all.”

Becca started to retort when a warning reproach from Sam stopped her cold. She instead thumped over to the table and reached for a slice of bacon. “I’m eating now. Happy?” she announced between mouthfuls.

“Eat now,” Tyler mimicked in a shrill voice and rammed a piece of banana in his mouth.

Meg sighed and tapped Tyler on the shoulder, “Close your mouth when you chew.” She looked across the table at Rebecca. She was tired of arguing over the table with her oldest child. She reached into her apron and produced some cards. “I’m delighted, Rebecca. Here, I want you to run these recipes over to Mrs. King’s house this morning. She needs them for the picnic on Saturday.”

“That’s clear across town,” Becca whined. “I wasn’t going to that part of town today. And call me Becca—please, Momma?” she added hastily. Meg simply held out the cards. Becca reached for the cards, wiping her hand on her jeans, and stuffed the cards in her pocket.

Sam took a sip of his coffee and set the cup down. “Don’t fret, Becca. I’ll drop you off on my way into work.”

Becca had been avoiding Sam’s gaze all morning long. She quickly shook her head and began to backpedal out of the kitchen. “I’m finished eating now and I can run over to Mrs. King’s house faster than you could drive me,” she insisted.

“Nonsense.” Sam picked up a fork of scrambled eggs. “Just sit down here at the table. I’ll be ready to go in a minute.” Meg threw a strange look in Sam’s direction. Sam just smiled at Meg and took a bite out of a biscuit he had smeared with preserves.

Becca knew when she was defeated. She ignored Sam as best as she could, and yanked out her chair. She flopped down and picked up her fork and began to stab at her eggs. In a moment she realized she was hungry after all and began to eat. She ate until Sam announced he was ready to go. Becca dropped her fork, downed her glass of milk, and bolted up out of the chair.

“Don’t forget those recipes,” her mother called after her. She was trying to wrestle a cup out of Tyler’s grasp. “She’s in a peculiar mood today.”

“I’ll see about having Becca give you a hand with your shopping this afternoon, Meg. I’ll even try and get home early to watch Tyler.” Sam leaned over and ran his fingers through Tyler’s blond curls.

Meg shook her head. “I don’t think Rebecca will ever want to willingly help me with anything. Especially with my shopping for the picnic. You heard how snippy she was this morning.”

Sam smiled. “I think after I speak to her she’ll have a

different frame of mind. I think she'll be glad to help you out this afternoon."

Tyler smashed the remainder of his banana onto the top of his high chair, smearing it around with his hands.

"Tyler Williams!" Meg admonished the boy. Sam wagged his finger at the smiling boy, slipped past Meg, and edged his way out of the kitchen.

Becca was standing next to the police cruiser, kicking the heel of her red tennis shoe into the dirt. "You don't have to drive me, Daddy. I can walk, you know," Becca insisted as Sam approached.

"Well, I need to talk to you about last night," Sam said as he opened the door for Becca.

Becca blinked pure innocence up at Sam as he held the door open for her. "What about last night?"

"You know very well what I mean." Becca climbed in the front seat, her body drooping. Sam walked around to the driver's side. He slid in and adjusted the rearview mirror. Sam turned around to back out and Al's pale face stared back at him, a black fedora pulled low over his eyes. Sam jumped. Becca was kicking the floorboard with her heel and didn't see Sam jump in surprise.

"Hi, Sam." Al twisted in the back seat trying to get comfortable. He looked absolutely wretched. His dark, black eyes peered out from under the rim of the black hat. His face was washed out and very pale (even for Al). He seemed distracted as he looked out the window.

"Don't kick at the floor," Sam said to Becca as he turned around. He readjusted the rearview mirror and backed the car out of the driveway.

Becca decided not to beat around the bush and started off the conversation. "I already know what you're going to say and I just want you to know it won't happen ever again."

"Good," Sam said as he made a left turn and headed toward Main Street. "And I'll tell you why it's never going to happen again." He glanced over his shoulder at Al. Al wasn't paying much attention to the conversation taking

place in front of him. He was sitting hunched over, watching the town of Brick go by. He pulled at his tie and yanked the black fedora lower on his head.

"I learned my lesson last night. I never spied on you or Momma before and that's the honest truth. I just wanted to see if you were gonna talk about Tom Madison." Becca glanced up at Sam with her eyes. It was a look that Sam was sure would melt her father's heart.

"Why would you be interested in Tom Madison anyway?"

Becca shrugged. "'Cause he's the guy who climbs out on the balcony, right? Always saying he's going to jump. That's a lot of excitement for this little town. Everyone is talking about it. I figured who would know more about it than my daddy, the sheriff."

"Whether your mother or I talk about Tom Madison or Thomas Jefferson, you're not to start eavesdropping on another person's conversation. Besides being impolite, it's very wrong. I'm disappointed in you, Becca."

"I know, Daddy, and I'm really sorry. I won't do it ever again. I promise." She paused a moment and fingered the cards in her pocket. "You didn't tell Momma, did you?"

Sam looked down at Becca. "What do you think?"

"You didn't tell her." She looked out the window as Main Street rolled by. "Otherwise, I'd be grounded for life."

Sam kept a straight face as the trio stopped at a flashing red light. "Just because I didn't tell your mother, doesn't mean I'm not going to punish you."

Becca's mouth dropped open and she sat up in the seat. "Punishment?"

"Yes. Becca, eavesdropping on a private conversation is a terrible thing to do."

"Only if you get caught," Al mumbled from the back seat.

Sam bit his lower lip and continued. "So you won't forget the next time—"

"There won't be a next time," Becca protested.

"I know, Becca." Sam pulled through the intersection. "Because after you spend the afternoon helping your mother shop for the Labor Day picnic, I'm sure you'll think twice before eavesdropping again."

"No!" shrieked Becca. She balled her hands into two small fists and punched the seat. "That's not fair. I didn't even hear what you two were talking about. I should have at least heard part of the conversation to receive that kind of a sentence."

Sam put his hand on Becca's shoulder. Becca's bottom lip formed a perfect pout. "I could still make you go shopping with your mother, ground you to your room for a week, *and* tell her everything." Becca's body slumped down in the seat under Sam's hand.

"I hate shopping with Momma," she muttered as she folded her arms across her chest.

Sam pulled the car into a stall in front of the jail. He shut off the engine and jangled the keys in his hand. "It's only for the afternoon, Becca, and your mother could use some help. She is very busy putting together this picnic. I think I'm letting you off easy, to be truthful. You're only going to have to spend an afternoon with her."

Becca rolled her eyes up in her head. "But it could kill me, Daddy. Mark my words. I'll die right there in Parcin's store. All you'll get is a phone call saying that your only daughter is dead. Do you want my death on your conscience the rest of your life?" Becca seemed to shudder in the midday heat.

Sam bit his lower lip to keep from laughing, but Al chuckled good-naturedly from the back seat. "She's gonna be one to watch out for later, Sam."

Sam shook his head, "I don't think it will kill you, Becca."

"Momma hates me, anyway," Becca pointed out. "She'd lock me down in the basement and throw away the key if it wasn't for you."

Sam leaned over in the seat. "Becca, now, you know that's not true. Your mother loves you just as much as she

loves Tyler. You two are just going through a phase right now. My sister and my mother went through the same thing and they managed to live through it."

"She loves Tyler best, then you. I don't think she likes me at all sometimes." Becca began to tick off the items on her fingers. "She's always nagging me about my clothes or my hair or the music I listen to." Becca cranked her head to one side and imitated her mother's voice. "'Why don't you act like a lady instead of a tomboy?' 'Why are you always covered in mud?' Blah, blah, blah." Becca looked out the window and resumed talking in her normal voice. "I'm telling you she *hates* me."

Sam rubbed Becca's shoulder and tried not to laugh. "You know and I know she doesn't hate you. You two just seem to be in each other's hair right now. It will pass, Becca."

Becca shot a quizzical look up at Sam. "Maybe by the time I'm twenty and too old to care." She turned around in the seat. "How come she spends so much time with Tyler?"

"Because he's your little brother and he's only two, Becca. When he gets older he won't need so much of your mother's time and attention. I bet she gave you that much time and attention when you were that age. Probably more, by the look of things. Somebody sure spoiled you rotten."

Becca just shrugged, but let Sam keep his hand on her shoulder. "I'm not spoiled. Are you sure I only have to shop with her this one afternoon? And you won't tell her about last night?"

"That's the deal."

"Okay," Becca sighed. She looked up at Sam and then reached over and put her hand on top of his. "Daddy?" she asked in her sweetest voice.

"Yes?" Sam answered.

Becca cocked her head. "Did Aunt Karen and Grandmother Williams really fight like Momma and me?"

Sam nodded, a serious look on his face. "Ummm... yes, they did."

Becca reached for the door handle. "I still don't think the punishment fits the crime." She climbed out, and before shutting the car door, asked, "What time?"

"Be back at the house at four. And don't be late."

Becca sighed dejectedly and muttered, "Okay, four o'clock." She began to walk toward Main Street.

"And don't forget those recipes," Sam called after her. Becca turned and waved and picked up her pace down the street.

Al zapped himself out of the back seat and waited for Sam. Even though Al could not feel the oppressive humidity pressing down on the town, that still didn't stop the beads of sweat from forming on his upper lip. Al kept swiping at his mouth and pulling at his hat. He was dressed in a black silk suit, with black shoes and a plain white shirt. Even his tie was black. As Al adjusted his hat for the tenth time this morning, Sam noticed his friend's uneasiness. The link twittered in his breast pocket, but Al paid little heed to the noise. His eyes were darting around the surroundings, not focusing on anyone or anything in particular. Dark purple circles were prominently displayed underneath Al's brown eyes.

Sam stretched his shoulders and fidgeted with the gun belt he had tied around his waist that morning. "Quaint little town, isn't it? Does Ziggy have a clue as to why I'm still here?"

Al snapped his attention to Sam and blinked. "Huh? Did you say something, Sam?" He absently wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

"You're really nervous about your meeting with Maxine," Sam pointed out. He looked around, making sure no one was watching him talk and gesture to Al. "You're dressed for a funeral, not a reunion."

"Yeah, and with any luck the funeral will be mine," Al observed dryly, jabbing his thumb into his chest. "I didn't get a wink of sleep last night worrying about this upcoming meeting today. I keep thinking, What could she possibly

want? I started thinking maybe I did something, you know?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know, like maybe I've got a kid I don't know about or something."

"Al, that's ridiculous. I mean, Maxine would have told you about that sort of thing . . . wouldn't she?"

"I don't know anymore, Sam. I tossed and turned all night long. I'm a wreck, Tina's a wreck." Al sighed and looked around at the town again. "You know, I traveled through a lot of small towns just like this when I was with the Navy. Crisscrossed the whole country every which way. You know, these little towns never change, from county to county, from state to state. Same dusty, dinky little Main Streets with a bank on one end and a Dairy Queen at the other." He checked his watch.

"Al, lighten up. You haven't seen Maxine for . . . what, over ten years? She probably just wants to see you again for old times' sake."

"Oh yeah, right!" Al snorted and adjusted his tie. "I make it a habit to call up all my ex-wives if more than a decade passes and I haven't spoken to them." Al held out his hand and groaned as it quivered slightly. "You realize," he said, focusing on Sam, "I'm going to be gone for a few hours."

Sam nodded and began to make his way toward the jail house. "Who's the lucky hologram who'll be taking your place today?"

Al fell in step with Sam, hovering a few inches above the ground. His patent leather shoes were shined to a mirror image. "I guess Gooshie." Al watched Sam roll his eyes and mutter to himself. He ignored Sam and continued. "It's just temporary. I know how much you love these substitutes. I don't anticipate being gone that long, so don't get your shorts in a knot. Just stay out of trouble for a couple of hours, lay low, and everything should be fine."

Sam laughed to himself. He had heard that line before. "What about Ziggy?"

Al shook his head and rubbed at his temples. He pulled the link from his breast pocket. "Nothing yet. She's still digging back through all the records of these neighboring little towns. Without the original town records even simple background checks are next to impossible to run. Ziggy's cross-referencing everything, though, so if she does pull up anything, I'll let you know."

"Like why I'm still here?" Sam added quietly as an afterthought. He had come to the entrance of the jail. He turned and looked at Al, who seemed to be dreading his upcoming meeting more with each minute that passed. Al had removed the fedora and was wiping off his forehead with the hand that held the link. Al took a look around at the town and rotated his shoulders. He replaced the hat on his head and pulled it down. "I'm sure you'll be fine while I'm gone."

"Do I have any other choice?" Now it was Sam's turn to wipe his forehead off with the back of his arm. Dark patches of sweat were appearing under Sam's arms and in the middle of his back.

"Not really," Al told him. He noted how much Sam was sweating. "Um, Ziggy did inform us that this part of the Midwest was in a heat wave during '55. Set records all over the Southwest."

"Now there's a very useful piece of information. Tell Ziggy I said thanks for that. I can tell just by standing here it's close to a hundred degrees and the humidity is..." Sam watched as Al zeroed in on the button on Ziggy's handlink.

"Ninety-two percent. Gotta go, Sam."

"Say hello to Maxine for me."

Al smiled thinly and his finger trembled slightly as it hovered above the blinking light. He pressed the button and vanished. Sam turned and headed into the jail house.

Gene Dupree was sitting as close to the fan as he could get, his shirt soaked under his arms and around the collar. His feet were propped up on the table and the chair he was

sitting in was tipped back on the rear two legs. Gene was reading a comic book with one hand and chewing on a doughnut with the other. The minute Sam came through the door, Gene quickly pulled his feet off the table and brushed the crumbs off his shirt. He wadded the comic book up into a thin tube and stuffed it into his top desk drawer. "Morning, Will," he mumbled as he tried to swallow the remaining bites of the jelly-filled doughnut.

"Morning, Gene. Did you have a quiet night?" Sam asked as he walked over to Gene's desk. "And how's our prisoner this morning?"

Gene was reaching for a cup of coffee to wash down the doughnut. He nodded and took a big gulp of coffee. "He's loud, hung over, and very upset," Gene said, and swallowed the rest of the doughnut. "Same as always."

Sam clucked his tongue and started to head back toward Tom's cell. "Did the doctor come by and look at the cut above his eye?"

"Yes, sir, he sure did." Gene reached for the ring of keys to the cells and got up to follow Sam. "Doc Adams stitched and cleaned the cut up."

Sam arrived at the cell and took a quick inventory of the prisoner. Tom Madison was lying on the metal bed frame; his weight was causing the frame to sag in the middle. He was sound asleep on his back, his mouth open and snoring as loud as a buzz saw. His chest rose and fell with each loud breath. A fly buzzed lazily around his head and Tom would twitch his nose as the fly tried to land on it. The odor rising from the room was a mixture of sweat, urine, and whiskey. Sam still couldn't believe that someone as huge as Tom had crawled out on that ledge above the sidewalk. Gene rattled the keys next to Sam and started to unlock the cell.

Sam held up his hand. "Wait, Gene. I don't want to let him go just yet." Sam still didn't know why he was here. If Ziggy did have her facts wrong then maybe Sam was here to prevent Tom from trying to kill himself again. The thought of having to climb back out on that balcony after

Tom gave Sam a headache. Maybe Tom might feel differently about attempting to plunge off the balcony if he spent a few hours in a hot, humid jail cell thinking things over.

A look of sheer puzzlement crossed Gene's face. He clutched the keys and jingled them a little. "But Will, we always let him sleep it off and then let him go home. You said that he's pretty harmless once the whiskey wears off. He's just going to get angrier if we keep him in here. We always released him before. You know, he never causes any trouble once he's sober."

Sam shook his head. "I want him to stay put today. Let him think about what landed him in this jail cell in the first place."

Gene looked even more confused. "He could stay in here till Christmas and I don't think it would change a thing. He's not a very quiet prisoner, Will. He's gonna give us a lot of trouble unless we let him go." Gene jangled the keys again.

"He stays for now. I want to question him again. I also want the doctor to look him over." Sam started to head back down the hallway and was startled as Gene reached out and grabbed his arm.

"What's going on here, Will? Question him about what?" Gene realized he was gripping Sam's arm and released it. He took a step back. "I'm sorry, Will. I'm just confused. We've never held Tom over before and if the game plan has changed I'd appreciate knowing it." Gene stopped and looked down at his hands.

Sam leaned back against the brick wall and studied his deputy for a minute. "I want him to think about what he did, Gene. A few hours in this cell won't hurt. And after he's had some time to really sober up, then I'll ask him some more questions. This may be different from how we usually treat Tom, but I don't want to go climbing back on that balcony."

"Oh, sure, now I understand," Gene said with a disappointed look on his face. He looked at Tom sleeping in the cell. "Whatever you say, Will. You're the sheriff. You

know best," Gene said as he swept past Sam.

Sam left Tom Madison snoring and returned to the office. Gene was sitting at his desk, sipping his cup of coffee. Sam walked over and checked the log book.

"At least things were quiet last night," Sam noted. The log was empty. The only entry was made early yesterday afternoon.

"Uh-huh," Gene grunted as he set down his coffee. He shifted in his seat and, without looking at Sam, said, "I think it's the heat. Makes people too tired to do anything at all."

Sam cleared his throat, "Look, Gene, so there aren't any hard feelings . . ." At that moment Tom Madison moaned loudly. The moan was followed by a loud, grating metal sound.

Gene rose out of his seat. "Tom's waking up."

Tom moaned again. He then began bellowing at the top of his lungs, "Gene! Gene Dupree! Goddamn it, you come back here and let me out. Gene, are you listening to me? I know you can hear me. Don't you sit out there at your little desk and ignore me. Gene! *Gene!*"

"I'll handle this," Sam said as he headed back down the hallway.

"You're gonna need help," Gene muttered under his breath as he followed Sam.

Tom Madison was sitting up on the metal bed. A white bandage above his eye was the only clean spot on him. Dried blood had run down his face and mixed in with the short stubble on his chin. The hands that rubbed his head were dirty and greasy. Two bloodshot eyes peered out at Sam beneath a mass of dirty, brown hair. Tom flipped the hair back out of his eyes with his dirt-smearred hand. He wasn't wearing any socks and his badly worn shoes hardly covered his feet. Tom scratched his large stomach and squinted at Sam. He tried to get up but couldn't pull himself off the bed. "Sheriff Williams, 'bout time you got here!" Tom bellowed inside the small cell. "You need to get your-

self a new deputy, Sheriff Williams. This one won't let me go home. And I want to go home." Tom belched loudly and held his head.

"My deputy is doing just what I've told him to do. Tom Madison, I have placed you under arrest for attempted suicide. You will remain in custody until you answer some questions. I'm also going to ask for a psychiatric exam from our doctor. Maybe after all that is over, I can let you go home. Do you understand all this?"

Tom blinked and shook his head. He lifted his soiled left hand up to the bandage. "No, I don't, Sheriff Williams. Doc Adams already came and fixed me up. Got stitches and everything. I just want to go home and sleep this off, Sheriff. You tell Gene to open that cell door. I don't need to see the doctor again."

Sam folded his arms across his chest and shook his head. "I need to ask you some questions, Tom," he began.

Tom lowered his hand. "I don't want to answer any questions. Doc Adams stitched me up and . . ." He winced. "Look, I got me a powerful headache. I'm hot and tired and I just want to go home." Tom turned his anger on Gene. "Gene Dupree, don't you stand there like a bump on a log. Open this damn door. I'm too hung over to play games with the sheriff. You tell him I don't want to waste my time sitting in his stinking jail cell. I've got to go home and check on Carla Sue. She'll be worried about me."

Gene stood next to Sam and fingered the keys nervously on his belt buckle. "Sheriff Williams says you've got to stay put," Gene answered woodenly.

Sam looked at Gene. "Go give Doc Adams a call. Have him report over here as soon as he can." Seeing Gene do a double take at that, Sam added, "Is something wrong, Gene?"

Gene cleared his throat. "You want me to call Doc and have him drive all the way over here?" Gene started to fidget in the hallway. "Doc's gonna be mad if he comes all the way back here for nothing, Will."

"Tell him I want him to examine Tom."

“That’s right, Gene,” Tom Madison teased the deputy. “You just keep kissing up to the sheriff. Just liked you kissed up to his daddy. You’re still gonna be a worthless, scrawny nobody, no matter who you kiss up to.” Tom demonstrated by making loud kissing noises.

Gene whirled and clutched the bars with his hands. “You watch your mouth while you’re in this jail. You’re a sorry sap to be bad-mouthing Sheriff Williams. You can’t even keep track of Carla Sue. Bet she had a good afternoon off while you were up on that balcony.”

Tom struggled off the bent bed frame and rose to his full height. He staggered toward Gene, colliding with the metal bars. He started to reach through the bars with his thick hands. When he couldn’t reach Gene through the bars, Tom cut loose with a string of obscenities aimed at the deputy.

Sam pulled Gene away from the cell and gave him a push down the hallway. “Go call the doctor, Gene. And Tom Madison,” Sam informed his prisoner, “you’d better make yourself comfortable. It’s going to be a hot day in here.”

Tom stood still, his upper lip curling into a snarl as he stared Sam down. He then began to inform Sam all about his parentage, in big colorful terms. Sam turned and headed back down the hallway. Tom’s voice continued to boom all the way back to the office.

Gene was on the phone and very agitated. “I don’t know why he wants you to come back. I’m not a mind reader. All he said is, you need to examine Tom again.” Gene rubbed his sweaty neck. “ ’Course I know you’ve got your appointments to keep. Yes, yes . . .” Gene rolled his eyes and watched as Sam sat down behind his desk. “Look, Doc,” Gene interrupted, “Sheriff Williams wants you to come down here and—What? Yes. Fine. Yes, I’ll be sure and tell him. Bye.” Gene slammed down the phone. “Well, he’s coming over, Will.” Gene pulled out his chair and fell into it. “And Doc’s about as thrilled as Tom Madison.”

The arrival of Clarence Adams was marked as he barged into the jail house. Doc Adams (as everyone in Brick called

him) came charging in, black bag in hand and a stethoscope dangling around his neck. He stood in the middle of the office, fanning himself with a large straw hat, his eyes blazing back and forth between Sam and Gene. His white, short-sleeved shirt clung to his hefty body. The wire-rimmed glasses perched on his large nose kept sliding down and the doctor kept pushing them up with his stout fingers. He was at least sixty years old if he was a day. His hair was silvery white and thinning. A loose strand fell down on his forehead and stirred in the breeze he was creating with his hat. The doctor set his bag down on Gene's desk with a loud thump. "What's going on here, Will? I've got my appointments in the morning. You know better than to pull me away from my patients unless it's an emergency—and I don't see an emergency here! I had to reschedule Widow Turnbull's physical examination in order to troop down here. She was mighty put off that I had to scoot her out of my office." He paused and caught his breath. The straw hat whipped through the air, back and forth, back and forth. Doc glared at Sam, waiting for an answer. "Well, Sheriff? What's the emergency?"

"It's not an emergency," Sam began to explain.

Doc Adams took three steps toward Sam. "What do you mean, there's no emergency! If I got pulled out of my practice, then by God, there'd better be an emergency here."

Sam shook his head. "I had Gene call you about Tom Madison."

The doctor blinked and fanned his face, "Oh? Why? Did his stitches come undone? Couldn't you have stopped the bleeding with a rag or something and waited until the afternoon to call me?" He chuckled and turned toward Gene. "Or was that the problem? Tom was leaking blood all over the place and poor Gene was fainting dead away?"

Gene swore under his breath and got up. "Wasn't any such problem with Tom. I can't help it when I see blood. It's bad enough to have the criminals ride me about it; I don't need you goading me too." He threw his arms in the

air. "Will wanted me to call you back here to give Tom an exam and see if he's crazy."

The doctor's hand stopped fanning his face. "What did you say? Did I hear you correctly? I was yanked out of my practice—where, I might add, the temperature is *not* ninety-five degrees—and summoned here to administer an exam for mental illness?"

Sam spoke up. "I wanted you to check Tom out. Mentally and physically."

Doc Adams laughed and pulled a yellowed handkerchief from his pocket. He dabbed at his forehead and shook his head. "An exam?" He replaced the handkerchief and shifted the hat in his hands. "What is Tom doing, Will? Is he swinging from the eaves in his cell? Is he quoting Shakespeare and calling himself Donald Duck?"

"You're not taking this very seriously," Sam said. He got up from his desk and made the doctor retreat a step backwards.

"Of course I'm not taking this seriously, William. I can't believe you're asking me to do this. I think you need the exam, not Tom."

Now it was Sam's turn to get mad. "I had to crawl up on the city hall balcony yesterday and drag Tom in. I think he deserves to be examined simply for that."

"And you think that he's crazy 'cause he lounges on the balcony after a fight with his better half? Needle nuts!" Doc removed his glasses and wiped at his cheeks. "Tom Madison isn't crazy, Will. No more so than you or I. We all know he gets a little carried away from time to time. Especially when he fights with Carla Sue. Now, I admit, Will, Tom has been up to more mischief lately, but I can assure you he's not crazy. He's a little touched in the head, always has been, and that brings out the worst in him when he drinks. He's been up on that same balcony three, maybe four times and never has jumped. He won't either."

"How do you know?" Sam protested. "Are you willing to bet his life on it?"

Doctor Adams just shook his head. "Yes, I would, Will."

Tom Madison's not crazy. But I'm beginning to think you are for dragging me down here." Doc put his hat back on his head and reached into his pants pocket for a nickel. He flipped it at Gene. "Get me a soda, Gene. I'm about to expire in this office arguing with your boss." He turned and wagged a finger in Sam's direction. "Don't tell me you really dragged me down here to look at Tom Madison and decide if he's nuts." The only sound in the room was the clicking and whirling of the fan as it turned back and forth. Even Tom had grown quiet.

Sam's mind was whirling just as fast as that fan. He was trying to decide whether to say anything in Will's defense. This hayseed of a doctor was convinced that Tom Madison was as sane as everyone else in this small town.

Taking Sam's silence as an answer, Doc drawled, "Well, if I'm not needed." He turned and took the bottle of soda Gene offered him. He shook his head and began to make his way back out the door. He had a slight hitch to his walk. The phone rang as Doc was picking up his black bag. "That will no doubt be the Smiths. I'm supposed to treat a heat rash on the missus. See all the trouble you caused me, Will?"

Gene picked up the phone and listened for a second. He stopped and asked the caller to repeat something. He then pulled the phone away from his ear and handed it to Sam. "Caller said something about a murder, Will."

Sam's heart began to race as he picked up the heavy black receiver. "Sheriff's office, Sheriff Williams speaking." Gene and Doc stood by the phone, watching Sam.

The high-pitched voice on the line gasped for breath, as though the person had been running. After a few deep gasps a voice answered. "Sheriff? Sheriff Williams? You've got to come out here. Real quick."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Slow down there." As Sam talked into the phone he pulled the notepad from his pocket and sat down to jot the information down. His fingers froze with the pencil poised above the pad. "You're calling to report . . . a murder?"

Doc Adams forgot about having to leave in such a hurry and moved closer to the desk. He leaned over Sam's shoulder and watched what Sam was writing. "What is your name?" Sam asked the caller.

"It's Clyde. Clyde Snyder. I work at the Hole. Oh, Sheriff, it's awful. I never saw a dead person before." The voice on the other end of the phone began to rise in pitch and intensity.

"Okay, Clyde. Where are you calling from?"

"The old Gulf station just past town."

"And, Clyde, do you know who's been murdered?" Sam sat with his pencil poised frozen in midair.

Clyde had begun to sob at the other end of the line. "Oh, it's Carla Sue, Sheriff. She's dead. All cut up and blood all over the place. It's awful."

"Carla Sue," Sam muttered as he scribbled the name down. Doc leaned over the desk and whistled. "Stay put, I'll be right there." Sam hung up the phone and picked up the notepad. "There's been a murder," he announced quietly. "Carla Sue is what the caller said."

"Dear God," muttered Doc Adams as he threw a sideways glance down toward the cell block. "Well," he said as he pulled at his suspenders, "guess I didn't waste a trip down here after all. You wanna take my car, Sheriff? I just happened to bring the wagon with all the stuff from the morgue. Haven't had a chance to unpack it since that bus accident on 95 last week."

"Fine," Sam murmured.

"I can't go," Gene half whispered as he pulled at his damp shirt. "I do faint at the sight of blood." He dropped his eyes to the floor. "I'll head out there later if I'm needed, but I better stay here for now. I'm sorry, Will."

"Stay then. And, Gene, whatever you do, don't say a word to Tom until I get back."

"Yes, sir," Gene added with a curt nod of his head.

Sam picked up his notepad and started to follow the doctor out the jail's door and into the bright sun.

CHAPTER

THREE

The doctor's wagon was a beat-up old station wagon that had seen better times. It labored down the road in a cloud of smoke, jostling its occupants as the worn-out suspension hit pothole after pothole. Doc drove in silence and Sam was glad. He wasn't in the mood for small talk. Every so often a strong whiff of formaldehyde would drift forward from the back of the station wagon. Finally a deserted gas station came into view.

It was just before eleven o'clock when the station wagon pulled into what was once a Gulf gas station. The wagon chugged up to a pay phone and clanked to a stop. Parked two feet away from the phone sat an old, dusty, red pickup truck. Leaning against the passenger door was a young boy. Even though it was almost a hundred degrees, the young boy had his arms wrapped tightly around his body, his head bowed.

Sam and Doc Adams got out of the car and approached. "Clyde? Clyde Snyder?" Sam called out. A pale face with

two dark, wide eyes looked up and met Sam's eyes. Clyde shook slightly and his eyes kept darting back and forth between the two men. "Are you the one who made the phone call?" Sam prompted.

"Yes, I did," he whispered through his teeth. Sam leaned closer to the boy to hear him. "I'm sorry," Clyde explained as he pulled his arms around his waist, "but I never saw a dead person before."

"I understand, Clyde. Why don't you sit down on the running board and we'll start from the beginning," Sam offered. He pulled out the pencil and flipped the notepad open.

"I just saw her yesterday," Clyde mumbled in a monotone.

Doc Adams pulled out his handkerchief and took off his glasses and began to polish the glass. "Do what the sheriff says, Clyde. Just take a deep breath and tell us what you saw."

Clyde melted down to the truck's running board, his knees giving way. He took a deep breath and tried to control his quavering voice. "Patch sent me to get Carla this morning. She was late coming to work and he figured she just overslept or something." Clyde kept staring at his shoes as he spoke, pausing to remember the details. "She'd overslept before and since she and Tom ain't got no phone I've had to go out and get her before."

"So you went to Carla Sue's house?" Sam repeated as he scribbled in the notepad.

Clyde just nodded his head. "To her trailer, Sheriff. Yes, sir."

Doc Adams replaced his glasses and pocketed the handkerchief. He reached down and patted the shivering boy's shoulder. "I'm going to get my medical bag, son. I'll be right back. You just keep talking to the sheriff."

Sam waited until Doc had left before he continued. "How old are you, Clyde?"

"Just turned sixteen, sir. I've been working at the Hole for over a year."

"Don't rush yourself, Clyde. Just take your time and tell me what you did and what you saw."

"I drove out there just like always. Tom's truck was gone. I figured since Carla Sue and him had that fight in the bar yesterday, he must have gone off somewhere to get drunk. He always gets drunk after they fight."

Sam looked up from his notes. "Tom and Carla had a fight, did they?"

"Yes. Yesterday afternoon at the bar."

"Go on."

"I didn't know anything was wrong, so I just walked up to the door and called out Carla's name."

"You didn't knock?"

"No, sir," Clyde said, dipping his head even further. "She wasn't always alone, if you know what I mean, Sheriff. She hated to be surprised, so I'd always let her know if I was outside." Clyde brushed his cheek and continued to talk. "I didn't get any answer so I went up to the door. See, I figured she just overslept. She does that every now and then."

"Was the door unlocked?" Sam asked. He flipped over another page in the notepad.

Clyde squinted as he looked up at the sky. "Yes. I don't know if they ever locked it. I don't think anyone would want to steal anything of Tom and Carla Sue's. I mean, I don't think anyone would."

"Hmm," Sam said. "So you got to the door . . . ?"

"You know, Sheriff Williams, it's a trailer door that opens out." Clyde demonstrated with his hand as he swung open an imaginary door. "Like I said, it was unlocked, but not opened. I pulled on the knob to open it." Clyde grew very still. "I just thought she had overslept. I was just going to yell, you know. I never thought about going inside and . . ." Clyde put his head in his hands. He shook as a spasm passed through his body. "The smell was the first thing I noticed. It came in a wave. Rotten, like a dead animal. And the air was hot that came out of that trailer. I stepped inside. . . ." His voice trailed off and his shoulders

began to shake. "I can't talk about it, Sheriff. I think I'm gonna be sick if I do."

Doc Adams came back to the red pickup carrying his black bag. He plopped the bag on the hood of the truck, opened it, and produced a shiny flask. "You'll be all right, Clyde. You just need a little bit of my special medicine, son." He offered the flask to Clyde. "This should help take the edge off."

Clyde tipped the flask to his lips and took a long drink. He took another long gulp before Doc could reclaim his flask. "Easy, son, you've still got to answer Sheriff Williams's questions."

Clyde wiped his lips off and nodded. "I feel a little better. Thanks."

Sam sat down on the running board next to Clyde. "What did you see inside the trailer?" he asked in a quiet voice. Clyde studied his feet and just shook his head. A bird squawked in the woods behind the abandoned station. "It's important, Clyde," Sam prompted.

"She was dead," Clyde whispered. "She was on the floor. You had to go inside to see her. The smell was everywhere; it made me sick. And the blood. God, she was covered in blood, her blood." Clyde closed his eyes and drew his knees up to his chin.

Doc Adams motioned with his head. Sam nodded, stood up, and followed the doctor until the pair were out of ear-shot from Clyde.

"He's pretty shaken up, Will. I don't know how much more questioning he's going to stand."

"I know," Sam agreed.

"Poor kid." Doc Adams shook his head. "He's just stumbled across his first murder victim. You remember your first murder victim, Will?"

Sam closed his eyes and lowered his head. A fleeting memory flashed across his eyes. "Yes, I do. She was a beautiful, young, blond, nineteen-year-old German girl. Murderer tried to cover it up to make it look like a drowning."

Doc Adams frowned and scratched at his neck. "I thought it was the Ferguson boy." He studied Sam closely for a moment. "Crazy drunk plowed him down on the way home from school."

Sam quickly tried to cover his tracks. He had been thinking of another Leap. "Oh, you're right, Doc. It was the Ferguson boy," Sam quickly responded before Doc could say anything else. "I feel Clyde stumbled upon the body by accident. I'm going to let him go while we head over to the trailer and have a look around. If he's already been at the scene, there's no telling who else has been there."

"Yeah," Doc Adams agreed. "I'll go fire up the wagon while you send Clyde on his way home."

Sam nodded and made his way back to the pickup truck. He realized with mixed dread that Carla Sue's body would be riding with them on the trip back to town.

The wagon bumped and pitched more ferociously as it turned off the main road onto a dirt road. A big, dusty cloud rose up behind the bumper and mixed with the noxious smoke pouring from the tailpipe as the wagon clanked along the country road. The wagon jarred over a bump, causing the equipment to rattle around in the back.

Doc Adams watched and chuckled to himself as Sam braced for each jolt. "Thought about getting the shocks replaced, but then I thought, I only haul the deceased around in this old heap. I doubt that they pay much attention to the ride."

Sam grunted as another kidney-jarring thump set his teeth on edge. "Seat belts would help, Doc."

Doc laughed. "In a hearse?"

Sam started to argue the point when the wagon veered off to the left and the pair were bumping down a new road. The wagon rumbled past a decrepit-looking house, barely visible through the tall weeds. A broken porch swing hung crookedly on its rusted chains. The porch steps were rotted through and the siding on the house was chipped and warped. A window with a crack that looked like a large

spider web glinted in the sun. The yard was nothing but overgrown weeds and dirt, with some junk scattered helter-skelter. The rusted mailbox read BLYTHE, Sam saw as the station wagon bounced past. The tall weeds swallowed up the view and the house disappeared.

The road became a narrow path. Old tires and rusted car parts lay in and around the path. Doc maneuvered through the debris and came to a stop just before colliding with the corner of the trailer. Sam braced himself for the stop as Doc hit the brakes. Something came loose from the back of the wagon and rolled toward the front seat. The car was engulfed in a cloud of dirt and exhaust that slowly settled around Doc and Sam.

Sam stared at a weather-worn trailer not more than three feet away. It sat dejectedly among the corpses of cars and the flat tires scattered all round. The sun beat down on the rusted tin siding. Nothing moved in the still summer afternoon. Not a bird sang or a bug buzzed. It was all too deadly quiet for Sam.

Doc began to rummage around in the seat behind him. He rattled and banged his equipment together as he gathered it up. Doc talked to himself as he sorted through his things. "Reckon some hankies will come in handy. I always carry a few around with me, just for cases like this. Damn." Doc tried to turn his body around in the front seat. "Will, could you grab that box behind your seat? The trip out here must have jarred it around."

Sam gingerly reached over his seat and felt around till he located a square box. He hauled it up over the seat and set it between Doc and himself.

"Thank you kindly." Doc opened the lid and began removing various items. Sam watched as Doc extracted two pairs of rubber gloves. He offered a pair to Sam.

Doc Adams wasted no time in snapping the gloves on over his hands. "Glad Gene didn't find her," Doc said as he worked the gloves over his fingers, "or else we'd be picking him up and hauling him back too." Doc picked up a handkerchief and offered one to Sam. Doc pushed his

glasses up on his nose and shut the box's lid. "That's enough stuff for the first trip. You ready?" he asked, not looking at Sam, but studying the trailer in front of him.

"Not really," Sam replied truthfully. He was unfolding the handkerchief Doc had just given him.

"I know what you mean. This part of my job I never cared for either." Doc hauled himself out of the car with his arms loaded and began to walk toward the trailer.

Sam found his own feet shuffling toward the trailer, even though his mind and body desperately wanted to be somewhere else. He searched for Al, wishing he was here, for moral support at the very least. Al was worse than it sounded like Gene Dupree was when it came to murders, but Sam would still like to have him nearby. Sam nervously adjusted his gun belt and put the handkerchief up to his nose. He thought he could smell something in the air already, even though he figured it was just his mind playing tricks.

Two rickety, sun-bleached steps led up to the rusted and weathered trailer door. The door was closed, but not shut. Sam figured he could open the door with his shoe. Sam took his first step on the staircase. The wood groaned and creaked underneath his foot. Every hair on Sam's body stood on end and his heart began to race. Just stay calm, he kept telling himself as he stood poised on the steps. Don't panic, it's just a dead body. You've seen lots of them before in medical school. *But never a murdered one*, a small voice in his head answered back.

"You going to stand there all day, Will? Carla Sue ain't going to send us a written invitation to come in, you know."

Sam nodded. He counted silently to three and pried his toe under the door. He swung the door open and waited.

The door banged open against the trailer's side. It hit the side and threatened to swing closed again. The hinges squealed. Slowly the door swung back against the trailer and stopped moving.

The trailer was dark. Slowly the stench that Clyde had

mentioned came rolling out. It poured out the open doorway and jolted the men on the stairs. The smell stung Sam's nose through the cloth. His eyes began to water and he started to cough. Sam turned his head away from the trailer. Doc was coughing too and had taken a few steps away from the trailer's doorway.

The smell was a mixture of musty, damp air and decay. The smell began to sicken Sam and he stepped down from the steps. He rubbed shoulders with Doc and was relieved to see the smell was affecting Doc too.

"It's gonna be bad," Doc wheezed through the wadded up handkerchief in his hand.

Sam coughed and wiped at the tears in his eyes. A new wave rolled out, causing Sam's stomach to pitch. Smashing the handkerchief tightly against his face, Sam was determined not to lose his breakfast in front of Doc.

"The worst of it should be over soon," Doc said through the cloth.

"I hope so," Sam said. He blinked away the last of the tears in his eyes and walked over to the stairs. He stepped up the short staircase and stood in the trailer's doorway.

The trailer was dark and eerie. The shades were pulled down and no lights were visible from the inside. A few insects buzzed loudly just inside the doorway. Sam's right hand automatically became positioned above the butt of his gun as he took the first step into the trailer.

The inside of the trailer wasn't in much better shape than the outside. Most of the furniture was deteriorated and soiled. The carpet was threadbare in a few spots. The shades that were pulled down over the windows were ragged and ripped. A fine layer of dust covered the cluttered coffee table, which sat to the right of the entryway. As Sam's eyes adjusted to the darkness, he could make out two large brown water spots on the yellowed ceiling. A counter top sported a few glass knickknacks, a cloth, and a soda bottle. Water dripped from the faucet in a slow, annoying rhythm.

The air inside the trailer was overwhelming. It was

warm, stale, and rotten. Sweat trickled down Sam's face and neck and ran down his back. The air scarcely moved through the cloth Sam was holding to his face, but he would suffocate before he would pull the handkerchief away. Sam shuffled farther inside, making room for Doc.

Doc Adams was coughing and mumbling behind Sam's back as he pushed his way inside the trailer. He was wheezing up a storm and Sam wondered if the doctor was going to be able to stay in the trailer for any length of time. "It's got to be over a hundred degrees in here," Doc said through the handkerchief. "Gawd, what a mess."

"Are you okay?" Sam asked, turning back toward Doc.

Doc nodded and wheezed, "Let's find the body and get out of here." He pointed toward the couch. "Check over that way. My old eyes haven't adjusted to the dark yet. Yell if you find something."

Sam inched his way toward the couch, being careful not to upset anything in the trailer. He took two steps and just missed stepping on Carla Sue's foot. Sam jumped back and hit the edge of the coffee table with his leg. An empty beer bottle toppled over and clanked on the tabletop. It rolled off the table and fell on the floor.

Carla Sue was tucked away in a corner of the trailer, by one end of the couch. She was lying on her back, fully clothed except for her feet, which were bare. She was wearing a simple, short black skirt and a cotton shirt that was tied at her midriff. Beneath the coffee table were a pair of tattered, dirty brown shoes.

Huge slashes cut through Carla's clothes and had torn into her chest and neck. There were cuts on both her arms. Her right arm lay across her body, her other arm was at her side. Her long blond hair was damp and the ends were covered in her dried blood. Her blue eyes were cloudy and her face was swollen. A large black-and-blue bruise was prominently displayed on her left cheek. Her mouth was open and dried blood had caked over her lips and chin.

"Oh, God," Sam whispered and turned away from the sight.

Doc Adams stood next to Sam, examining the body. He reached out and squeezed Sam's arm. "I know it's bad, Will. If you need to go outside, I'll understand."

"I'll be all right." Sam wiped his forehead with his sleeve. "I just need a minute to get over the shock."

"It's too hot in here!" Doc set down his assortment of tools and boxes. "It feels like we're in an oven. Gonna be tough to get an autopsy with any good results." He pointed toward the back of the trailer. "Why don't you check out the rest of this place? Take your time, William."

"Sure," Sam agreed as he walked away from the body and began to make his way back through the trailer. He walked down the narrow hallway. The heat grew even more unbearable in this narrow space. Then he inspected the bathroom and bedroom at the back of the trailer. Seeing nothing that looked unusual, Sam rejoined Doc.

Doc Adams had spread out a sheet and opened the metal box. He was carefully examining the body, prodding the wounds. Doc was perspiring heavily now and wheezing like an old calliope on its last leg. "This heat is going to play hell with my autopsy. Body's in an advanced state of decay as we speak. See how bloated she is? And look how the blood has pooled underneath her and dried." Doc shook his head in disgust. "Probably pull half of her skin off prying her up off the floor. What a mess. I need some air. How about you, Will?"

Sam nodded and led them back to the front door. Sam clambered down the wooden steps and out into the hot afternoon air. He pulled the handkerchief away from his face and gulped in as much air as his lungs could hold. The hot air felt refreshing, humidity and all, after being inside the trailer. Sam trudged back to the wagon and sagged against the fender. Doc threw his handkerchief on the hood and removed his glasses.

"Well, she's dead, no doubt about that. Murdered with a capital *M*." He scrutinized Sam with care. "You sure you're doing okay, Will? You're about the color of my late wife's white cotton sheets right now."

Sam was gulping in large amounts of air and trying to shake the memory of Carla Sue's body out of his mind. "I'll be okay in a minute. I just have to get my bearings."

Doc just grunted and opened the door of the wagon. He pulled out his black bag and produced the shiny flask. He pried off the lid and offered it to Sam. "Here, Will. This should help you get your bearings." Sam hesitated and Doc offered it to him again. "Oh go on, just the two of us out here and you look like you could really use a shot. We do have to go back inside."

Sam accepted the flask and swallowed a mouthful of the liquor. It seared his throat and jarred his nose. He handed the flask back to Doc and licked his lips.

"There you go," Doc said as he took a drink himself. "You should feel better now." He replaced the top on the flask. "First thing I gotta do is gather up a few samples, then I can bag her and put her in the wagon. Looks like it is just going to be us. We should canvas the inside of the trailer next. The heat and smell will linger, I'm afraid. You can get a few shots while I dust for prints. It might take us most of the day, but I think we can handle it."

Sam nodded. "Yes. No need to call Gene."

"I didn't run across the murder weapon, did you?"

"No, I didn't, Doc. And from the wounds on the body, I'd say we're looking for a knife."

"Yes, a large one, like a butcher's knife." Doc Adams cocked his head and looked at the sun overhead. "We'd better get a move on. If we work together we should have this place done in a couple of hours."

"I should have been here to prevent this," Sam whispered to his shoes.

Doc put the flask away in the black bag. "Don't be so hard on yourself, Will. You can't expect to stop all the crime, even here in this rickety little old town."

Sam looked up at the doctor with a look of resignation on his face. "I just should have known about this, that's all."

"No way you could have, son. You know the kind of

couple Tom and Carla Sue are . . . um, were. She could run with a pretty tough crowd." Doc Adams pushed himself away from the wagon. "I've got some more gloves, and the fingerprint kit is stuffed in the back somewhere. Let's get started on this mess."

Three hours later the trailer was locked up and the remains of Carla Sue's body were gathered in a body bag and tucked in the back of the station wagon. Sam and Doc Adams were riding silently back toward Brick. The sun was setting as Doc's abused wagon pulled into a front parking space at the jail. "I'll know more after I autopsy her tomorrow. Why don't you drop by in the afternoon." Sam just nodded and began to climb out of the car. "What are you going to do about Tom Madison, Will?" Doc asked as Sam shut the door.

Sam leaned into the open window and ran a hand through his damp hair. "I'll question him and keep him locked up for the time being. Right now he's our primary suspect."

Doc grunted and dropped the car into gear. "Take care, and I'll speak with you tomorrow." As the wagon chugged away, Sam climbed up the steps to the jail.

Gene was still at his desk, reading his comic book. He snapped to attention when Sam appeared. "What's happening?" he asked in a hushed voice as Sam sat down wearily at the desk across from him.

"Carla Sue was murdered," Sam said as he rubbed his eyes with his hand. He was tired and sticky.

"She really was? How? Where?" Gene asked eagerly. He caught a pained look from Sam.

"I don't have much information yet. We found her in her trailer. She was stabbed several times. I'll have to fill you in on the details later, Gene. Doc's going to do an autopsy. Have you said anything to Tom?"

Gene had melted back in his chair. "No, I didn't say anything to him. Wow, I can't believe someone murdered Carla Sue. Tom's a suspect, isn't he?"

Sam wearily rose out of the chair. He touched his pocket

with the notepad and headed back toward Tom Madison's cell.

Tom Madison was sitting up on his bed, gently fingering the bandage over his eye. He watched Sam walk to the door of his cell. Tom eased his body off the bed as gracefully as he could and shuffled over to where Sam was standing. "Sheriff Williams," he began in his most apologetic voice, "I know I acted crazy yesterday. What with climbing up on that balcony and all, but acting crazy and *being* crazy are two different things. I just wanna go home now. I'll sign a paper or whatever you want me to do. I'll promise on my mother's grave not to climb on the city hall balcony again. I'll do whatever you want me to do; just let me go home to Carla. I have to apologize to her about . . . everything." Tom reached out and took hold of the bars of his cell.

Sam examined his hands. They were big hands, with thick fingers. Sam scanned down Tom's clothes and stopped when he came across the dried blood on his shirt. "How did you cut your eye?" Sam asked.

"I already told you that."

Sam leaned back against the brick wall. "I can't let you go just yet, Tom. I have to ask you some more questions."

Tom released his hand away from the bars and scowled at Sam. "Sheriff Williams, I've answered all your questions. I've been sitting in this cell all day long. What do you want of me? You've always let me go home before."

Sam paused a moment before he spoke. He looked down at his shoes and then up at Tom's face. He braced himself for the worst. "I just came back from Carla Sue's trailer. Your trailer."

Tom smiled, "How's Carla? Did she ask about me?"

"Tom," Sam began quietly, "I'm sorry to tell you this, but . . . Carla Sue has been murdered."

Tom Madison's smile faded: "What kind of a game is this?" He backed away from the bars and began to shake his head. "You're lying to me, now, Sheriff Williams. Carla's not dead. Why are you lying to me?" Tom contin-

ued to back away from Sam. "She can't be dead."

"I'm sorry, Tom, but I'm not lying to you. I need to know what happened yesterday before you climbed out on the balcony. I need to know what happened to Carla Sue."

"Why are you doing this to me, Sheriff? Why are you telling me these lies?" Tom covered his ears with his hands. He was breathing hard and sweating. "Tell me you're lying, please," Tom murmured, "I don't understand. . . ."

"I'm not lying to you," Sam repeated. "Carla Sue was murdered."

Tom began to weep. He wobbled over to the metal bed and sat down, holding his head in his hands. "No, no, no," he began to moan quietly.

Sam looked down the hall and caught Gene standing in the hallway. Sam motioned to Gene with his hand that he could join them.

Sam removed his notepad and pencil from his pocket. "Tom, I want you to tell me what happened yesterday. What made you climb up on that roof? Why did you kill Carla Sue?"

Tom stopped his moaning and slowly raised his head. "No!" Tom shouted, his eyes blazing at Sam. "I did not kill Carla Sue. How dare you say that to me! I loved her!"

There was a lengthy silence as Tom studied Sam, Sam studied his notepad, and Gene looked nervously back and forth between the two.

Finally Tom began to mumble in a monotone, "I was at the Hole yesterday. I had finished up some chores and I went down to get something to eat and drink. Carla was working. She was trying to ignore me, but I sat at her table and she had to serve me." Tom shifted his weight on the bed. "I tried to get Carla Sue to talk to me. She was still in a snit about a fight we had the night before. She wasn't paying me no mind at all."

"What was it that you two were fighting about?" Sam asked quietly.

Tom rubbed his head. "She wanted to move out. I didn't

want her to. She said she was going to leave me. I said I'd marry her, but she wasn't interested in that. I told her she couldn't leave, I didn't want her to leave, and she threw a fit. Told me she'd be gone by the middle of September and that was that. Told me I could stay in the trailer if I wanted to. I followed her to the Hole to try and talk some sense into her."

"Did you and Carla Sue fight yesterday morning at the Hole?" Sam asked.

Tom nodded. "Sort of." He tapped two fingers to his head. "That's where I got this. She still didn't want to talk to me. Told me to leave. I was getting angrier by the minute. She wasn't even listening to me. I asked her, Where did she think she was going to go? Who would take her in? I said some pretty mean things to her. I didn't mean what I said. She just made me so mad. Anyway, she picked up a beer bottle off her tray and smashed it over my head. Wham! That's how my eye got cut." Tom swallowed. "Can I have some water?"

Gene scrambled down the hallway and came back with a paper cup. He held it tentatively through the bars as Tom shakily rose and took the cup. He drained the cup and set it down on the floor.

"What happened next, Tom?" Sam asked.

Tom shrugged. "My head hurt and I was bleeding pretty bad. Carla just kept ranting and raving. She was very upset and was causing a scene. She kept saying how she wanted a better life. I don't think she was even sorry she had hurt me."

"Did you slap her when she hit you?" Sam asked as he scribbled.

Tom eyed Sam coolly. "No, I never hit her. Ever. Up until this time, she never hit me either. We shouted a lot, but we always made up later. I noticed she was real jumpy and short with me lately. I thought things were okay between us." Tom paused and studied his fingers. "Patch started yelling at Carla. Said I was bleeding all over his bar and it was going to put off his customers from eating. Patch

was real upset. Carla and Patch started a loud argument. Carla acted like she didn't care how Patch felt. I felt pretty stupid, having Carla treat me like she did. Her yelling at me, my head bleeding, and all those people looking at me like I was stupid. I got up and walked out of the bar."

Sam finished writing in his notebook and looked up at Tom Madison. "What happened next?"

"I was mad. I got into my truck and left. I just wanted to get out of there. I drove till I came to a shaded turnoff. I had a bottle in the truck so I sat there and got pretty drunk. Figured I'd cause a commotion and make Carla a little jealous. So I drove into town, climbed out on the balcony, and . . . well, you know the rest, Sheriff Williams."

"So the last time you saw her alive," Sam asked as he scanned over his notes, "was when you left the Hole?"

"Yes. As I was driving away, Patch had pulled her outside. They were still fighting when I drove away." Tom sighed heavily. "I didn't kill Carla Sue. I might have gotten mad at her now and then, but I would never, ever kill her. I loved her, Sheriff. And I always thought she loved me. I thought we'd always be together."

Gene cleared his throat and asked very timidly, "Do you remember seeing anybody else around at the Hole?"

Tom threw Gene a funny look and shook his head. "The Hole was pretty quiet—it was early yet. Seems like there were a couple of the regulars around. Clyde and Miller Parkinson."

"What about outside?" Gene asked. "Anyone hanging around outside?"

"No . . . wait, yes. Yes, I do remember there was a colored boy standing outside, by the soda machine. I didn't pay much attention though. Patch or Carla . . ." Tom's voice trailed off. He inhaled slowly and repeated, "Patch might have seen somebody."

Gene nodded and fell silent. Sam closed his notepad. "I'm going to have to keep you here, Tom, until I can investigate this murder further. I'll have to check out your

story. If you can think of anything else you remember or want to say, then tell it to Deputy Dupree.”

Tom shrugged. “Where is Carla now?” he asked quietly.

“Doc Adams’s place. Doc’s got to do an autopsy. I’m sorry, Tom. Is there anyone we can notify?”

“No.”

“What about you, Tom? Anybody I can call for you?”

“No. Just find her murderer. I didn’t do it.” Tom closed his eyes and hung his head down. “Oh, Carla Sue.”

Sam returned to his desk and took a quick look at the clock. Almost four o’clock. He picked up the phone and dialed zero. A pleasant sounding female answered. “Operator assistance.”

“This is Sheriff Williams. I need to phone my wife, Meg. Could you ring the number for me?”

“Certainly,” the pleasant, but surprised voice answered.

“Are you having trouble with your phone, Sheriff?”

“Yes,” Sam answered, lowering his voice.

“Oh?” the now befuddled voice responded. “One moment, Sheriff, and I’ll connect you.”

Sam waited until the phone connection clicked and the line began to ring. Meg answered on the third ring. Sam explained that he was going to be late. He spared Meg the details, but did say he was working on a murder and not to expect him home by dinnertime. He mentioned that Becca should be coming home at four o’clock to help Meg with her shopping. Meg was surprisingly cooperative. She asked if there was anything she could do, and Sam answered no. He’d be home when he could. He replaced the phone and turned around to see Gene gazing in his direction.

“Let’s get cracking, Gene. We’ve got a murder to solve.”

“Okay,” Gene responded. He tucked the comic book in the top drawer of his desk and pulled out a white notepad.

“I’m going to check out the Hole Tom talked about,” Sam began.

"The Watering Hole," Gene said aloud as he wrote. "The bar on the way to Ashcroft."

Sam flipped open his own notepad. "Do you know anything about that bar, Gene?"

"No," Gene said. "I don't hang out there. Not my type of crowd."

"I'm heading out there now. Why don't you call around and see if Carla was seen around the time that Tom was up on the balcony yesterday? Check with her friends, places she would go after work. If Tom says anything else or if Doc Adams calls, I want you to radio me."

"Yes, sir, I'll call around." Gene laid down the pencil. "You ought to find old Patch, the bartender, in one hell of a mood. Sure you don't want some company? It's early and the regulars shouldn't have arrived in mass yet."

"No, I can take care of it." Sam began to gather up a few items off his desk. "I want you to stay with Tom. You should go back later and talk to him. See if he remembers anything else."

"Sure," Gene acknowledged as Sam headed out the door.

CHAPTER

FOUR

By four fifteen Sam had maneuvered the big black and white patrol car into the dirt parking lot of the Watering Hole. The small bar was set back off the main road. There were only a couple of cars parked outside and it looked like the regular crowd hadn't arrived yet. Sam parked the cruiser in plain sight and got out. He strolled under a sagging awning, past a rusted soda pop machine humming loudly, and had to duck under a large Confederate flag that was draped on the outside. He opened a sagging wooden door and entered the bar.

The sun shone through dirt-caked windows and cast long shadows across the scuff-marked wooden floor. Thick blue smoke hung in the air like fog. A few scuffed-up wooden tables were scattered here and there. Some men were seated at one of the wooden tables, next to a jukebox. A country and western tune spilled out of the box.

A dark, smoke-filled bar area was tucked away in the back. It was just a small space, with hardly enough room

to sit at the bar. The top of the bar was sticky and a film covered the rough wood surface. The cushions of the stools were torn and the padding was spilling out of one barstool. Behind the bar stood a short, thin man with a stained apron and a black patch over one eye. His hair was cropped in a buzz cut. He rubbed his unshaven chin and stopped wiping the bar. He laughed gruffly as Sam approached the bar.

“And just what brings you down here, Sheriff?” the bartender asked with a grin. He was missing a few teeth and his voice sounded raw. The jukebox changed tunes. A Patsy Cline ballad warbled from the tattered speakers.

“I’ve come by to ask you a few questions.” Sam walked over to the bar area but did not sit down.

“You can ask, but I don’t know nothing,” the bartender rasped. He laughed and pointed to his patch. “You know I don’t see too good since I had my eye poked out in that fight back in ’40.”

“Regardless, I want you to tell me what happened here yesterday.”

“Nothing happened yesterday. Or the day before that.” Patch began to wipe the bar again. “Reckon you wasted your time coming here, Sheriff. Unless you want a beer?” A few chuckles drifted out of the shadows from the area next to the jukebox.

“I’ll just ask you a few questions, which you’ll answer, and then I’ll be on my way.” Sam ignored the two men laughing at the table.

Patch shrugged and turned his back on Sam. “Ask all you want, Sheriff. Talk yourself hoarse. I don’t know nothing.”

Sam gritted his teeth and watched the bartender’s back. “Little short on help tonight, aren’t you?”

Patch turned around and raised his eyebrows. “Maybe, maybe not. Heard some strange rumors flying around. Seems we got ourselves a murderer in Brick. Hey, boys,” Patch hollered over Sam’s head, “you hear we might have a murderer running loose?” He turned his one good eye back at Sam. “What have you heard, Sheriff?” He laughed

and picked up a glass and began to wipe it with the same rag he used on the bar.

"I'll ask the questions, Patch. Let's start with Clyde Snyder. Where is he?"

Patch chortled. "Home puking his guts out, last I heard. Seems I sent Clyde off on an errand and the boy stumbled across something mighty grisly. Didn't even make it back to work. Don't worry, I'm docking his pay."

Sam was getting frustrated. He felt the gun weighing heavy on his hip. "Did you see Tom Madison and Carla Sue in here yesterday?"

Patch scratched his chin. "Maybe. Gee you know, come to think of it, I do sorta recall something going on yesterday between those two. A lot of things happen in here, Sheriff, and most of it ain't pretty. I only worry about one thing, my business. Seems to me that things turned out for the better." He leaned closer toward Sam. Sam could smell the alcohol and sweat that hung around him. "That two-bit whore is better off dead, I say. Fighting with Tom Madison all the time. Couldn't wait on tables, messed up all her orders. Hell, she was too busy drumming up business for herself. She flirted with all the men who came within ten feet of her." Patch flung the towel over his shoulder and started to walk away.

"I have more questions—" Sam started.

Patch cranked a hand to his ear. "Whaddya say? Can't hear you over the box. Look, Sheriff, why don't you come back tomorrow? I've got to get ready to tend bar tonight." Patch gave Sam the send-off with a wave of his hand.

The jukebox changed records again and a loud honky-tonk tune began. Something inside of Sam clicked and Sam didn't know if what he did next was a conscious act on his part or on Will's. In one quick, fluid motion he undid the snap on his holster and whipped the pistol out of its harness. He leveled off his arm, drew back the hammer, and aimed dead center at the jukebox. He fired off two shots, silencing the jukebox instantly and sending the Hank Williams record skidding off the turntable.

The gun was loud and startled everyone, including Sam. The jukebox sparked once, twice and then went dark. The men sitting at the table nearby had scrambled for cover. The bar was filled with silence as Sam turned back to face the stunned bartender. He didn't reholster his gun; he left it out in plain sight. "That song was getting on my nerves and so are you, Patch." He said the bartender's name with as much distaste as he could muster.

Patch was recovering from his shock. He snarled at Sam, his one good eye twitching uncontrollably. "That's going to cost you, Williams. You can't come in here and—"

"What do you say, Patch? Let's cut the b.s. and talk about yesterday. You get me angry again and I may just start shooting up more of this hellhole." A chair raked across the bare floor and one of the men fled outside.

Patch looked at Sam's unwavering hand that held the gun. "You're lucky you didn't try this an hour later, or they'd be carrying you out of here in a bag." Patch looked at his ruined jukebox and laid his hands on the counter. He eyed the gun uneasily. "What I've got to say I'm only saying once. Tom and Carla Sue were fighting. And don't ask me what about, 'cause I don't know. She was mad about something when she got to work and then when Tom came in that set her off again. It was lunchtime, I had customers, and she and Tom started yelling. Then she whacks him over the head with a bottle of beer. Damn fools were carrying on like no one else was around. Tom starts bellowing like a moose, bleeding all over the place. I figured if they were aiming on killing each other I wanted them out of my bar.

"Tom stormed out first, bleeding like a stuck pig. That stupid Carla Sue kept running her mouth. I chased her outside and gave her hell about wasting that bottle of beer and messing up my bar. I told her I was going to fire her and she informed me that she was quitting. She began to tell me what a lowlife, filthy person I was. I don't have nobody talking to me that way, especially a woman. I slapped her and I ain't sorry about that either. Kicked her off the lot.

She sulked off down the road with that colored boy. I figured once she cooled off she'd be back. Too many business opportunities for her to just pass up.

"See, nobody talks trash to Patch. You're lucky I can't get to my gun, Sheriff. I figure we'd have a real Old West showdown then." Patch smiled deviously and picked up a glass off the counter and began to wipe it down again. "That boy she left with could have been just another one of her customers. Carla wasn't picky when it came to color or morals. I'm through talking. Get out."

"What was his name, Patch?" Sam asked through clenched teeth.

Patch smiled widely, exposing the gaps in his mouth, and shook his head. "I don't know his name. I ain't on a first-name basis with the nig—"

Sam lifted the gun up, causing Patch to flinch. "Don't use that word in my presence. Ever again," Sam warned.

Patch eyed the gun and swallowed. "You sure got a bee up your bonnet today, Williams. I've never seen you so fired up. Anyway, like I was saying, I ain't on a first-name basis with the . . . coloreds." Patch watched and was relieved to see the gun lowered. "See, if that colored boy did murder Carla Sue, then you're going to have quite a little mess on your hands. I don't care what kind of a person Carla was. If she's been murder by a . . . colored person, then this town's going to treat her like she was a saint. And you're going to have more trouble on your hands than just her murder.

"Rumors are flying, Sheriff. At least half a dozen people saw her leave yesterday with him. Go ask that boy what he did yesterday afternoon. You're on a first-name basis with his mother. Nobody wants to see justice hindered, if you know what I mean. Now get the hell out of my place and don't you ever step foot in it again or I'll blast your head clean off your shoulders. I'm still a good shot, bad eye and all."

Sam lofted the gun. "Don't threaten me, Patch."

Patch thundered at him from behind the dingy bar, "I

haven't even begun to threaten you, Williams. First I'm going to report all this damage and your unruly conduct to Mayor Tilden. He's a regular customer and he'll be upset to discover you've shot up his favorite juke. He'll have a little talk with you."

Sam eased away from the bar, holding the gun out for all to see. He counted one man standing in the shadows. He backed his way out of the bar and into the parking lot. He got to the squad car as fast as he could and gunned the engine. His hands shook as he dropped the car in gear and pulled out of the parking lot. He passed two pickup trucks coming into the parking lot as he made his way out. He floored the pedal and headed back to Brick.

Al limped down the deserted project's corridor to his office. He might have made better time if he wasn't juggling a large moving box in his arms. He arrived at his door and leaned the box against the wall, balancing it with one arm and his body, as his other hand searched through his pants pocket for his security pass. He found the pass at last and inserted it into the slot on his door. The green light on the panel above the doorknob blinked and he turned the knob. The door opened easily and Al wrestled the box back into his arms and entered his office. He shoved the door closed with his elbow and worked the light switch with the same elbow. All the while the box had begun to grow very heavy and awkward in Al's arms. On the third try he got the lights on and limped over to a chair next to his desk. He deposited the box in the chair, where it balanced precariously. Al messed with the box, shifting it this way, turning it that way, until it looked like it wasn't going to topple out of the chair.

On his desk were a few pink telephone messages. Senator Weitzman's office had left two messages for Al, and Dr. Beeks was requesting a meeting with Al in the Waiting Room upon his arrival back at the project. He turned on the computer monitor and checked in with Ziggy. According to Ziggy, Sam was still a sheriff in Oklahoma in 1955.

Her records indicated that she was still searching for more data. Al noted that Ziggy was currently searching through court case files in Mississippi.

Al pulled out his leather chair and sat down. He pulled his wadded, wrinkled silk tie out of his coat pocket and threw it on the desk. He took off his coat with the torn right pocket and laid it across his desk. His shirt sleeves were both unbuttoned and he was missing a button on his right cuff. Bright red lipstick was smeared on his left sleeve. Al reached down and untied the laces on his right shoe. He eased the shoe off his foot and gently pulled off his black sock. Al's big toe was turning a nasty blackish blue. He didn't even dare try to wiggle it. "Great," he muttered.

"Your toe appears to be broken, Admiral Calavicci. Have you had someone confirm my diagnosis yet?" Ziggy's voice gave Al quite a start.

"Ziggy, don't do that! Can't you whistle or beep or . . . something, first?" Al began to replace his sock and then, very carefully, his shoe.

"Of course I can, Admiral. But I thought you were speaking directly to me, since there is no one else in your office."

"Well, I wasn't."

"I can see that not only have you acquired a broken toe from your eight-hour visit with your fifth ex-wife, but you also have lipstick smeared on your right cheek. I hope the meeting went"—Ziggy paused and drew out the next word slowly—"w-e-e-e-l-l-l-l-l."

Al laced up his shoe and hobbled over to the small mirror on the wall. He scowled at his reflection. His clothes were rumpled and askew and he did have lipstick on his cheek. He rubbed his cheek clean with the heel of his hand and began to undo his shirt. The first three buttons were already undone for him. "It's none of your business how my meeting went. What's going on with Sam?"

"Some very interesting developments have taken place in the last eight hours concerning Dr. Beckett's Leap."

Ziggy's inflection seemed to place more emphasis on the words "eight hours" than the rest of the sentence.

Al stopped unbuttoning his shirt. "What do you mean there's been developments? What's happening?"

"Which development do you want me to elaborate on, Admiral? The murder Dr. Beckett is currently investigating or the incident with the jukebox? I find them both very interesting. Each one says something different in regard to human behavior."

"*Murder!*" Al hobbled over to his desk and sat down, his shirttails flying behind him. He began to jab at the keys. "Nobody said anything about Sam being involved in a murder!"

"Yes. Dr. Beckett was also involved in a shooting."

Al stopped typing and looked up at the ceiling. He addressed Ziggy in this way when he wasn't arguing with the link. "A shooting! Sam was involved in a shooting?"

"Yes, Admiral Calavicci. Dr. Beckett shot a jukebox."

Al punched a key on the keyboard and looked at his screen. "I don't have anything on here about a murder or a shooting." Al grew annoyed and hit the keys with a renewed vengeance. "Ziggy, why can't I find Gooshie's report?"

"Because Gooshie didn't file a report." Ziggy could be absolutely maddening with her truncated responses at times.

"Why didn't Gooshie file a report? It's standard procedure. I have to file reports when I observe." Al was starting to lose his temper.

"Gooshie was never in the Imaging Chamber to observe. That is why there is no report filed."

Al sat back in his chair and looked like the wind was just knocked out of him. "But Gooshie was supposed to take my place today. Didn't I make that clear at the staff meeting yesterday?"

"Perfectly clear, Admiral. It was Dr. Beeks who made the decision this morning not to submit Gooshie to the side effects of the Imaging Chamber and thus, not to have Gooshie observe." Ziggy was almost singing her way

through the explanation, which infuriated Al all the more.

Al pushed his chair away from the desk and began to hurriedly button up his shirt. He barked up at the ceiling, "Where's Verbena now?"

"In the Waiting Room, awaiting your return from Santa Fe."

Al clicked off the monitor on his desk and stuffed his shirttails into his trousers. "I swear, I leave this place for a couple hours and the bottom falls out."

"You were gone for eight point two five hours today, not two," Ziggy corrected the admiral. "Taking into account the current situation of the Leap, I think Dr. Beeks did an admirable job in overseeing the project while you were gone. I have a few suggestions I'd like to offer her so the next time will go even smoother."

Al glanced up at the ceiling with disgust. "Can it, Ziggy. Do something useful and get me a readout on everything that's happened with Sam since my last contact with him. I'll be in the Waiting Room." Al flicked off the lights, slammed his door, and limped down the hallway, just as fast as he could go.

Since Verbena Beeks had wanted to know when Al arrived back at the project, Ziggy had taken it upon herself to inform Verbena at the exact moment Al checked in with the guards at the main entrance. That had been twenty minutes ago. It had taken Al a little longer than usual to park his car and make it up to his office with his broken toe and the moving box. So it came as no surprise (to Ziggy) that Verbena and Al were about to meet, face to face, in the hallway.

Dr. Verbena Beeks had graduated at the top of her class in Psychiatry when Sam had begun to woo her to join his project. At first she had begged off, citing her own research she wanted to pursue. But Sam could be a very persistent and determined fellow when it came to his project.

Verbena was rumored to be in her late thirties. Her personal files were kept under the tightest wraps and were well guarded by Ziggy. Her black skin was smooth and wrinkle

free, except for some tiny laugh lines around her eyes. She was trim and fit and always dressed immaculately. Today she was wearing a beautiful gold silk blouse, with a light tan skirt. She came clicking down the hallway, walking gracefully in her brown, two-inch, suede shoes. She paused and watched Al approaching. The usually dapper admiral was a wrinkled mess and he was favoring his right foot. Verbena stopped and acknowledged Al, "Good afternoon, Admiral Calavicci. I'm glad you made it back . . . in one piece." She paused and tried not to smile.

Al frowned at Verbena. He shifted his weight off his foot and leaned against the wall. He was all business. "Gooshie never observed Sam while I was gone. I want to know why!" Al was upset and it was taking all of his self-control to keep his temper in check.

"I see. . . ." Verbena said, nonplussed at his response. She never blinked as she answered, "Yes, Admiral. Gooshie did not observe while you were away."

"Why not?" Al interjected.

Verbena calmly smoothed out her skirt. "Shall we discuss this in the hallway or in my office?" She raised her eyebrows and looked at Al.

Al folded his arms across his chest. "Right here will be just fine. Dr. Beeks, as the project's head administrator, I demand complete cooperation from my staff. I don't understand why you changed a procedure which we agreed upon yesterday."

"I'm not going to argue the point with you, Admiral. I changed the procedure because I felt it wasn't necessary to subject Gooshie to the diverse side effects of the Imaging Chamber. The current events of Dr. Beckett's Leap didn't call for an observer. I took into consideration all the facts and that was my conclusion." She smiled at Al.

Al's jaw dropped. "But what about—"

Verbena held up her hand and silenced Al with a quick look. "Dr. Beckett's life was never in jeopardy. Surely, Admiral Calavicci, you know and trust me better than that. If I felt Dr. Beckett's life was in jeopardy, I myself would

step into the Imaging Chamber." She leaned back against the wall.

"But the murder! Ziggy said there was a murder."

"Yes, that's right, Admiral. The murder Ziggy mentioned occurred sometime yesterday afternoon. If you hadn't returned soon I was considering sending Gooshie into the Chamber. But now you're here." Verbena smiled and shrugged her shoulders.

"Exactly, and—" Al began.

Verbena cleared her throat and interrupted again. "This issue has more to do with your refusal to appoint a permanent replacement observer than me not following your suggestions for Gooshie, if I may say so, Admiral." Verbena peeked down at her watch and clucked her tongue in disapproval. "I have a meeting scheduled back in the Waiting Room. You're welcome to join me. We are finished here, aren't we?"

"Finished!" Al's mouth dropped open with surprise.

"Good." Verbena nodded her head and stood up straight. "I'm glad that we discussed this." She turned and started back down the hallway.

"Hey, wait a minute," Al called out after her. He didn't like the turn the conversation had just taken. He hopped to catch up with her. "Slow down, Verbena. Please, *I'm* not finished discussing this yet."

Verbena stopped and turned around. Without any warning she asked, "Why are you limping?"

Al shifted his weight to his good foot and reached out with his hand to balance himself against the wall. "I broke my toe," he mumbled. He patted his shirt pocket for a cigar. "What did you mean when you said that stuff about me not finding a permanent replacement?"

"Gooshie is not a suitable replacement as an observer for this project."

Al chortled. "Gooshie is not a suitable replacement for a lot of things."

Verbena did not share Al's humorous point of view. "Admiral, we've come to the conclusion that each time

we've used Gooshie, the results have been rather disastrous."

"Gooshie did . . . well, okay." Al shrugged his shoulders and began to motion in the air with his hands. "I mean he gets sick and disoriented, but that's to be expected. Hell, he is in the Imaging Chamber, for crying out loud."

Verbena folded her arms and shook her head. "He becomes deathly ill in the Chamber, so much so he is unable to function. And Ziggy has never been able to project his image very well for Dr. Beckett's benefit. Ziggy doesn't have a neuron match for Gooshie like she does for you." Al pursed his lips and ran his thumb over a small scar on his finger. "Furthermore," Verbena continued, "I think you like to watch Gooshie suffer. You can't tell me you don't get some kind of satisfaction watching poor Gooshie in the Imaging Chamber."

"Now wait a minute. . . ." Al protested.

"Besides," Verbena continued, "you promised the committee in Washington you'd have a suitable replacement by now. If something were to happen to you, Admiral . . ."

Al pushed away from the wall and put his weight on both feet. He winced a little, but quickly recovered. "Hey, first of all, nothing is going to happen to me. Second, I've been meaning to select a replacement, but I haven't had time. And third, about Gooshie . . ." Al dropped his head and studied the floor.

Verbena drummed her fingers on her arm and looked up at the ceiling tiles. "The files for a substitute observer have been sitting on your desk for six months," she pointed out in a softer voice. "We've narrowed the choices down to three top candidates and have been waiting for you to act upon those choices."

"Hey, what is it with everybody today? I'm gone for a couple hours and now I'm considered obsolete," Al complained.

"Keep that ego of yours in check, Admiral. No one wants to replace you permanently. And this has nothing to do with how long you were gone today. I, for one, think

you should take more time off. Just keep in mind, at some point you're going to have to step down, be it ten years from now or ten days. Wouldn't it be fair to Dr. Beckett if he had a little experience with another observer? It's safer to iron out problems now rather than later."

Al nodded and leaned into the wall. "Yes, you're right, Verbena. I was gone too long today and nobody is more aware of that fact than me. And you're right also about Gooshie. We should have a permanent replacement . . . just in case. I don't like to think about somebody else looking out for Sam, other than me, but it is in the project's best interest. I'll get started on those files. I'll have a substitute observer to recommend to Washington by the end of next week." He glanced up at Verbena. "Okay?"

Verbena smiled. "There. I feel better now that we've had this discussion. Don't you, Admiral?" She turned and let Al walk with her.

"No," Al growled as he limped. "And don't ever disobey a direct order from me again."

"Are you pulling rank on me, Admiral Calavicci?"

"Absolutely."

"Fine. It won't happen again."

Al nodded curtly. "Now, what's going on with Sam?"

"Very interesting things are happening. Ziggy discovered some hard facts about this Leap just recently. Other than a jukebox, Dr. Beckett seems to be holding his own with this investigation. Oh, and Will Williams has been asking for you." They came to the Waiting Room and paused.

Al looked down at his clothes and shook his head. "I need to change." He hooked his thumb in the direction of the door. "You said Will wants to see me?"

Verbena nodded and punched in the code on the keypad. As the door unsealed, she gave it a push with her hand. "It will only take a second to talk to Will. Sam's back at the Maple Street address in Brick. He's doing fine." She stepped back and invited Al inside. "As far as your appearance goes, I don't think Will Williams will mind."

Al held the door for Verbena and followed her inside. "Well, I mind. I look like something the cat dragged—" Al stopped. Sitting up on the main table, dressed in a white robe, was Sam. Actually it only looked like Sam for a brief instant as the aura around the visitor changed.

Verbena touched the admiral's shoulder and lowered her voice. "Very interesting things are going on with this Leap concerning Will's memory. Why don't you go have a talk with Will?" The door resealed behind them.

Sam Beckett sat on the porch swing, drained from the day's events. He didn't push the swing, he just sat and thought. Meg pushed the screen door open and leaned out. "You want anything besides that iced tea? Could I fix you a sandwich?"

Sam looked up at Meg and shook his head. "I'm not very hungry, Meg."

Meg let the screen door swing shut. "Okay. I'm going to put Tyler down for the night. I'll come out and sit a spell with you later, if you'd like?"

Sam smiled. "That's sounds nice."

As soon as Meg was gone Sam sunk lower in the swing, staring at the porch. He swirled the ice in the glass and took a sip. A flicker of light caught his eye and he heard the distinct sound of the Imaging Chamber door opening.

Al was wearing a wrinkled white shirt with the sleeves rolled up. His trousers were crumpled and crimped. He was leaning heavily to his left as he stepped out of the Imaging Chamber door. He raised his hand, his fingers entwined around a thick cigar, and gave Sam a small wave.

Sam just looked up at his friend. He took another long sip of his iced tea and swirled the glass again. The ice clinking in the glass was the only sound. "Hello, Al," he muttered without much feeling. He sat up in the porch swing.

"Hi, Sam." Another silence fell between them. The link twittered loudly in the admiral's pocket. "Tough day?"

"Yep." Sam stirred the ice again and took a drink. He

caught an ice chip in his teeth and crunched it.

Al tried to walk into Sam's line of vision without limping. No matter how hard he tried, he still favored his foot. Al wasn't very good with small talk and Sam was in no mood for it anyhow. So Al just began. "Ziggy tells me we've got a murder investigation going on." Al retrieved the link from his pocket and began to press the buttons with his thumb.

Sam laughed quietly and shook his head. "We?" He looked up at Al and raised his eyebrows. "Since when did *we* become involved?"

Al stopped playing with the link. He rammed the cigar in his mouth. "Okay, I deserved that. I wasn't around much today. Sorry."

Sam sat on the edge of the swing, getting closer to Al. "Hey, *nobody* was here for me today. Not you. Not Gooshie. No one. I had the distinct pleasure of investigating a murder scene all by myself. I then get to break the news to the deceased's family. Unfortunately, the only family the deceased has is behind bars. That's because I arrested and put him there. 'Course, I don't have a clue who did commit the murder. Oh, and I'm forgetting the lovely time I spent in this bar. I managed to plug a jukebox with a couple of slugs. Very sheriffy thing to do, don't you think, Al?"

"I don't know," Al replied around the cigar. "Depends what was playing on the jukebox." He smiled.

Sam didn't smile. Instead he got out of the swing and pointed his finger at the hologram. "See, none of this is even remotely funny, Al. I don't want to joke about this. I don't want to kid around." He pointed at Ziggy's link in Al's hand. "If you don't have any facts yet, why don't you just limp back over to the Imaging Chamber door and leave." Sam turned his back on his friend and walked to the end of the porch.

Al narrowed his eyes at Sam's back. He tucked the link in his pants pocket and blew a perfect smoke ring into the air. He shrugged and folded his arms across his chest. "I said I was sorry, Sam. I'm sorry I wasn't around today. I'm

sorry you had to go through this mess all by yourself. I'm sorry if I'm joking about it now and it's pissing you off."

"Sorry isn't good enough, Al!" Sam turned back and faced off with Al. "It's just not good enough this time. I've got a murdered girl on my hands."

Al raised his hands into the air. "Well, that's all I can say, Sam." He brushed at some dirt on his sleeve. "You know, you're not the only one who hasn't had a perfect day."

Sam set his drink down on the porch. "Oh, please. Don't tell me you've had a worse day than me. Don't." He held his hand up to silence Al as he collapsed back into the swing. "I don't even know her last name." He lowered his head and sighed.

Al twisted the cigar around in his mouth. "It's Tritten. Carla Sue Tritten. Born April 5, 1931 to George and Marion Tritten in Millbrook, Texas." Al was glad to see Sam's head snap up with that information. "When Carla Sue was eleven years old she moved here with her older sister Joyce. Carla lived in that same trailer with her sister until Joyce married. Carla was fifteen years old at the time. The older sister split and not very long after that, Tom Madison moved in." Al had begun to pace slowly, painfully in front of Sam. "If you're depressed about stopping her murder, don't be. Ziggy's calculated that she was murdered before you Leaped in. Ziggy has found a transcript of the court proceedings in a student's law journal in Mississippi. That's where we're getting most of this information.

"According to the original history, David Bo Jefferson was arrested for Carla's murder. David is the only child of your housekeeper, Beulah Jefferson. The trial was held right after Labor Day and he was convicted and sentenced to life in prison. The evidence presented in the trial was all circumstantial and David was in the process of an appeal when he was killed in a prison riot in 1956. Ziggy says there is a 92.45 percent chance that you Leaped here to prevent David's murder, not Carla Sue's. In order to do that, you're going to have to find Carla Sue's killer before

this weekend is over.” Al plucked the thick cigar out of his mouth.

Sam sat back in the swing, amazed. “Wait, Al.” He held up his hands. “How did you get Ziggy to—”

“Ziggy finally located a journal about the trial. Seems this trial was a big to-do all around this area. People from as far away as New York came down to cover it. Plus, Will helped me fill in a few of the pieces.” He began to dig around in his pocket for the link.

Sam sat back in the swing. “That’s a start.” Sam pondered the possibilities. He looked at Al and nodded his head. “Thanks.”

Al nodded curtly. “You’re welcome, Sam.” He pulled the link out of his pocket and started to jab the neon buttons.

Sam ran his fingers over his bottom lip and studied his friend’s clothing. “Umm, tell me, Al . . . how was your day? How’s Maxine? Do you have any little Calaviccis running around?”

Al pivoted and stuck his head up in the air. “Oh, that. No. But you’re not really interested,” he said around the cigar.

“No,” Sam insisted, “I am.” He pointed at Al’s foot. “Looks like she got the better of you, if you ask me.”

Al turned and nearly lost his balance. He waved his arms in the air in defiance. “Hey, she didn’t get the better of me. Remember who you’re talking to here.”

“You’re limping pretty badly. And I don’t think I’ve ever seen you look so . . .” Sam bit his lower lip and cocked his head. “Rumpled?” He snapped his fingers. “Maybe that time on the Star Bright project when you were drunk, but . . .”

Al hobbled over to where Sam was sitting. He yanked the cigar out of his mouth and pointed it at Sam. “Hey, I didn’t have time to change. You think I like walking around looking like this?”

“*Limping* around looking like that,” Sam corrected. “Guess you and Maxine didn’t hit it off very well.”

Now Al was more than perturbed. His sexual prowess was on the line. "For your information, Mr. Know-It-All, Maxine and I hit it off very well. Better than well." Al smiled wickedly. "Seems like I haven't lost my touch after all these years." His eyebrows bounced up and down.

Sam's smile disappeared. He blinked at Al. "You slept with her?" He sat forward in the swing. "You actually slept with your ex-wife!" he almost shouted.

"Sam," Al scolded, drawing his finger to his lips, "keep your voice down."

Sam was on his feet again. "How could you sleep with your ex-wife?"

Al took a long drag on his cigar. "Easier than you think. Maxine and I didn't hate each other when we split up. It was my fifth marriage and it was never what you'd call stable. We lived in New York, but I spent a lot of time working in Washington. First came the Eco-Environmental Project. Then Star Bright. When I signed on for Star Bright, Maxine filed for divorce. That's one of the reasons I was drinking so much when you met me. My marriage was over and my career seemed to be headed for the dumper.

"Seems Maxine's going through this rebirth/reborn-type experience thing and wanted to come to terms with everything in her past. That's why we had the meeting in Santa Fe."

"And that's why she wanted to see you again?" Sam asked in disbelief. "So she could sleep with you?"

"No!" Al snapped. He tried again to explain. "She wanted to return all my stuff she had boxed up. I was in Texas on Star Bright when I received the final divorce papers. Maxine had all my things shipped to storage in New York."

Sam's curiosity was getting the better of him. "Stuff? What kind of stuff?"

"Stuff. You know," Al said, waving the link through the air, "photo albums, school records, moon rocks, old pictures, medals, military records, boxing gloves, that kind of stuff. She and I had a great time talking over the mem-

ories. We had a lovely lunch served in her hotel suite. She was very grateful that I took the time to come and see her. We began to reminisce about the good old days in New York and . . . well . . . one thing started to lead to another.” Al paused and smiled impishly at Sam.

Sam shook his head. “But that doesn’t explain the limp,” Sam pointed out.

“Oh, this,” Al walked toward the steps. “It’s nothing. I just broke my big toe.”

“Please, Al.” Sam held up his hands. “I don’t even want to know how that happened.”

“Well, it’s not what you’re thinking. Maxine and I fell asleep afterwards. Remember, I hadn’t slept the last few nights and, well, things caught up with me. She woke up, got dressed, and slipped out before I woke up. On her way out, she placed a wake-up call for me at the front desk. That damn phone rang and startled me out of the best sleep I’d had in days.” Al took the cigar out of his mouth and rolled it between his fingers. “I thought the wake-up call was Ziggy. I had forgotten where I was. I got up and headed straight for where Ziggy’s monitor would have been in my quarters. Only I wasn’t in my quarters. I was in this hotel suite. I ran smack into the coffee table with my big toe.” Al jabbed at his foot with his cigar. “And that, Sam, is how I broke my toe.” He limped over to Sam and tipped the cigar in the air.

The screen door banged open and Meg joined Sam on the porch. She sat down in the swing and began to rub his shoulders. “Boy, you must have had a bad day. Your shoulders are so tense.” She began to knead Sam’s shoulders.

“This is where I came in,” Al announced. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Sam.” He brought the link up, winked, hit a button, and vanished.

“That feels so good,” Sam sighed. “Tell me, Meg . . . what do you know about David?”

Meg continued to massage Sam’s neck and shoulders. “You mean Beulah’s boy?” She laughed as she worked.

“Miss Beulah raised him all by herself and she did a fine job. He’s going off to college just like your daddy said he would.”

“What are your impressions of him?”

“Impressions? Of David?” Meg muttered. Sam was pleased to let Meg launch into a long discussion about David. She didn’t need any other prompting. Sam sat back and listened as Meg rubbed his back.

CHAPTER FIVE

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Al stepped out of the Imaging Chamber and rammed the link into his pants. He poked his head around the corner and caught a glimpse of Gooshie sitting idly behind the humming control panel. Gooshie was sitting on a stool, his hands running over the control panel in front of him. "Is it clear?" Al hissed, his head turning this way and that, scanning the room.

"All clear, Admiral," Gooshie called out.

Al stepped away from the Chamber and Gooshie shut the door behind him. Al limped up to the panel, chewing on the end of his cigar. "Where is she, Gooshie?"

"Tina is currently tending to General, I believe, Admiral Calavicci," Gooshie replied slowly, his eyes avoiding the admiral's. "At least, that's what she told me approximately eleven minutes ago."

Al made a face. "Good. It usually takes Tina over half an hour to feed that damn pet alligator of hers." He rubbed his chin as he thought. "If Tina comes looking for me, you

haven't seen me, got it? You have no idea where I am or what I'm doing. I don't want Tina to see me like this."

"Yes, Admiral." Gooshie pushed at his wire-rimmed glasses, which were always slipping down on his nose. "Do you happen to know where General resides these days?" he asked, his eyes darting this way and that across the floor. It was as if Gooshie expected General to appear in the control room.

"Are you kidding?" Al exclaimed. He dusted off his shirt front as he spoke. "I don't want to come within ten feet of that overgrown reptile handbag. I hope wherever she keeps that gator it's as far away from me as possible." He turned away from the humming control panel and headed toward the ramp that would lead him out into the hallway. "And remember, Gooshie," Al warned, "you haven't seen me."

"Deception and mistrust are the first signs that a relationship is in trouble, Admiral Calavicci," Ziggy's smooth, alto voice chided Al as he made his way to the door. "You should try being open and honest with Dr. Martinez-O'Farrell, Admiral. You might be surprised at the results."

"And who asked you?" Al growled up at the silver ball on the ceiling. "You're supposed to be cross-referencing files concerning Sam's Leap, not spewing out marriage counseling mumbo-jumbo," he reminded the computer.

Ziggy loved a verbal match, especially with Al. "Oh, yes, Admiral," Ziggy cooed back. "But from the way you've been limping since your return from Santa Fe, I'd say you could use some form of counseling. And I shouldn't have to remind you, of all people, that I can easily do two functions at one time without the—"

"Listen, Ziggy," Al began to reason. He caught himself and glanced over at the control panel. Gooshie dipped his head down, trying to avoid eye contact with the admiral. Al snapped his head up in the direction of Ziggy's glowing silver ball on the ceiling. "Why am I standing here trying to reason with an overblown circuit breaker?" He shook

his head as he limped through the door. "I'm certainly not going to inform you about my love life."

"Tina fills me in on that subject quite nicely," Ziggy responded in her same neutral tone. "And reverting to name calling is so beneath you, Admiral Calavicci."

Al gave Ziggy a distracted wave of his hand as he hobbled out of the control room.

A few hours later, Al was in the process of balancing two cups of steaming coffee as he waited for the Waiting Room door to open. He had changed into a silk shirt with a red, white, and green paisley design. A thin, metallic green tie hung loosely around his neck and his silver loafers matched his pewter-colored slacks and coat.

The door opened and a cool breeze blew past Al into the corridor. It was past midnight at the project and only a small skeleton crew remained on duty. Al entered the Waiting Room and waited for the door to shut silently behind him. He walked past the nurses' table, which was unmanned, and proceeded to the main table in the center of the room. He shot a quick glance up at the main observatory windows and was relieved to see the observation deck dark, the shades drawn. He had almost lost his limp completely, thanks to his well-broken-in silver loafers. He carefully approached the padded table.

Will Williams was sitting on the table, his legs pulled up underneath him, leaning on an elbow, and jotting something down on a yellow notepad.

Al gently set the cups down on the table, near Will's hand. "Careful, it's hot," Al cautioned.

Will Williams smiled and wrapped his hand around a steaming cup. Two dark brown eyes blinked back at Al. Will took a swallow of the black liquid and tipped back his head, letting the coffee flow down his throat. "Thank God for small miracles."

Al listened to the voice. It was familiar and yet strange at the same time. "Strong, black, and lethal is the only kind of coffee the cafeteria serves," Al pointed out. He picked up his cup and also took a swallow. He grimaced and set

the cup down on the table. Al took a shoe box he had carried under his arm and set it down on the table.

Will took another soundless drink. "This is great. The cranberry juice was getting old."

"I see you've been keeping busy." Al tapped at the yellow notepad on the table.

Will laughed. "I've got to tell you, I'm beginning to feel like a hamster in a science experiment gone awry." He nudged the yellow legal pad. "At least this keeps me sane." He turned the corner of the pad with his finger and surveyed its contents. "Dr. Beeks has been taking my notes and analyzing them, I think. I told her I like to scribble and doodle when I'm not writing and she seemed to get more excited about my scribbling than my note taking."

"Well, Dr. Beeks is thorough." Al pushed the shoe box toward Will. "This should help." Will cocked his head and picked up the box. "I don't know what rules I'm bending by getting these for you, but try not to draw a lot of attention to them, um, if you can."

Will opened the box and took out a white running shoe. "Mighty fancy-looking footwear." He turned the shoe over in his hand.

Al tapped the box with his index finger. "They're running shoes. You were complaining about your feet."

Will pulled the protective tissue booty off his foot. He eased the shoe over his bare foot. "Wow, that feels so much better. Not a bad fit either. 'Course, I'm not planning on doing any running." He began to lace up the shoe. "Thanks, Admiral."

"It's Al. Call me Al."

Will dug out the other shoe from the box. "I appreciate this, Al. I really do." Will noticed the lag in the conversation so he shifted gears. "My wife and kids—are they all right?"

Al seemed relieved that the subject had changed. He looked up and put his arms behind his back. "Yes, your wife and kids are fine."

Will stopped wiggling his feet and grew silent. "You

mean they can't tell that Sam is there and I'm here?" Will seemed more than a little disappointed.

Al began to rock on the balls of his feet. "No, but it's nothing to be worried about. We'd have a real mess on our hands if everyone noticed Sam every time he Leaped. Your memories of this place will fade once you return."

Will shook his head in disbelief. "It's amazing when you come to think about it. Except . . ." Will folded one of his legs underneath him and pointed at the yellow pad. "That Sam's a physicist, not a sheriff, and he's got a murder to solve."

"That's where you come in," Al moved around to the head of the table. "You've been a tremendous help in filling the gaps. Ziggy, Dr. Beeks, everyone is astonished at how much you remember." Al pointed at the pad. "Just keep writing the details down that you remember."

"But I can't remember that much," Will protested. "A flash here, a detail there. It's maddening. It comes and goes."

"Don't let it get you down," Al reassured him. "Whatever you remember, write it down. No matter what detail or how small, it could be important."

Will picked up his pencil and pulled the pad closer toward him. "I've been a good sport. I've been answering your questions, writing down what I can remember. I've answered a long list of questions from Dr. Beeks and Lord knows I've let them take enough samples to start their own blood bank." Will's deep brown eyes looked into Al's eyes. "Would you answer a few questions of mine?"

The men stared at each other. A machine beeped softly in the background. Will shifted on the table and the rustling of his robe was loud in the room.

Al stopped rocking. "Depends on the questions."

Will nodded. He thought a moment. "How come, with all this future high-tech stuff, you need the help of little old me?"

Al ran his index finger over his bottom lip and studied the table. "Ziggy would have a conniption fit if I told you too much. I'd also be breaking more rules than I care to

admit. Let's just keep this simple. Yes or no answers."

Will tapped the pencil on the pad. "Okay. Ziggy's the supercomputer, right?" Will asked.

Al nodded. "Yes. She keeps track of everything." Al glanced nervously at the door.

"Except she doesn't have records for Brick?" Al hesitated in answering. "Come on, Al," Will coached. "I've been getting all kinds of questions about 1955 and Brick. I can put two and two together."

"Normally, Ziggy should have the data we're discussing. But she doesn't." Al looked very uncomfortable.

"So something happened to the records of Brick for 1955?"

"Yes."

"Something that wipes out a whole year of records." Will paused and watched Al flinch. "Official records for Brick are kept in Dunsmoore, I remember that much. What happens, Al?"

Al stood very still and closed his eyes. "I can't tell you that."

Will picked up the notepad and hugged it to his chest. "Then I can't help you anymore either. Fair is fair."

Al opened his eyes and saw Will clutching the pad. "Will," Al began to reason, "you've got to understand. Sam needs this information to help solve the murder and catch the killer. Without your help, history won't be changed."

"And you've got to understand my position. I'm the sheriff in a small town. Something so terrible happens to that town that vital records are destroyed. I know records don't simply disappear unless something drastic happens. You know what happens and when. I want that information. We'll swap details."

"Will, don't you understand? I can't tell you that." Al stepped forward and spread his hands out. "It's highly classified. It's against the rules."

"I'm sure we can work something out. An exchange of information seems fair, in my opinion. I'm willing to tell

you everything I can remember, but I want the people who make up my little town out of harm's way. I've been cooperative enough. Bend a little, Al. Please?" He extended his hand.

Al looked like he was being torn in two. He kept biting his lower lip and studying the floor. He finally exhaled and reached for Will's hand. He gave it a firm shake. "I can get in big trouble here," he grumbled as he reached for Ziggy's link. He turned on the link and the lights blinked to life. Will picked up the pencil on the table. "Wait. You can't write this down," Al cautioned.

"Then how will I remember it?" Will asked.

Al shook his head. "I don't know. But for now listen, don't write." He consulted Ziggy's link and began in a soft voice. "In May of 1965 a tornado touches down in the middle of the night in the towns of Brick and Dunsmoore. There was no forewarning. Dunsmoore suffers the worst damage. The city hall, courthouse, and library are destroyed along with a couple homes and most of the businesses. All of the records for the towns of Dunsmoore, Brick, and Miller are destroyed. Very few vital records remain from prior to 1965. The town of Brick fares better, with only a couple buildings destroyed." Al stopped talking. He continued to read the information on the tiny data line.

Will was shocked. "No warning?" he repeated. "Any casualties?" Will clutched the robe around his chest. "There had to be some."

Al continued to read. "The storm caught everyone by surprise. Five persons were killed in Dunsmoore." Al lowered the blinking link. "Seven killed in Brick."

"Who are they?" Will demanded.

Al struck the link with his palm. "It doesn't say." The link stopped blinking. "I'm sorry, Will, that's all it says."

Will dropped the pad on the table. "I appreciate that, Al." He seemed to be having trouble digesting the information about his town.

"I shouldn't have said anything. I should have kept my mouth shut," Al lamented.

Will blinked and pushed the pad of information toward Al. "You wanted as much information on David as I could remember." Al picked up the pad and scanned it as Will continued. "David Bo Jefferson is the only child of Beulah and Lucas Jefferson. He's almost eighteen, I think. He works doing chores for folks around the area, white and colored. He's been attending a school set up at the Baptist church. Miss Beulah calls him her miracle child. Miss Beulah and Lucas were married a long time before David came along. Miss Beulah was hired to take care of me and my father after my mother passed away. I was five years old when she came to cook, clean, and care for us. She stayed with my family even after David came along. Her husband died in some kind of accident, I can't remember what exactly. Seems to me that David was about ten years old. David is a good kid and a hard worker, just like his father. He had a couple of scrapes with the law when he was a teenager. He got mixed up with the wrong crowd. Miss Beulah steered him on the right path. She's hoping he can get accepted at a Negro college next year."

"Do you think he would murder Carla Sue?"

"No," Will answered strongly. "I don't. He doesn't mix with those kind of people. I can't imagine why he'd be tried for her murder. Does he know her?"

"The first time around he did," Al replied. "Or it was implied pretty heavily at the trial."

"Doesn't make sense, Al." Will had picked up his coffee cup. "I mean, you've got a murder, you need a motive. What would David's motive be? I mean, if he didn't know her. David doesn't strike me as a person who could murder another person."

Al wasn't about to get into the complications or allegations brought up at the trial. He again shifted gears. "What do you remember about Carla Sue?"

Will tapped his head with his finger. "Hardly anything. She lived in a trailer on some land owned by . . . um . . . B-somebody. Crazy as a coon dog that guy was, I do remember that. He rents the land to Carla and Tom dirt cheap.

Carla worked at the Hole as a waitress. She did other things on the side, so I've heard. I don't recall ever arresting her for anything. I think she had a nice smile and a polite manner about her. Didn't come across as a hard person, if you know what I mean. But there were those rumors around the town and it sure didn't cast her in a very good light."

Al nodded. "Anything about Tom?"

Will lowered his head and a small smile crossed his lips. "Slow, well-meaning oaf. Lived with Carla Sue for as long as I can remember. Does odd jobs. Fixes cars mostly. Seemed devoted to Carla Sue. Caused me a few headaches over the years but nothing serious. He doesn't seem a likely candidate for murder either. Never seen him get really angry. Their fighting consisted mainly of yelling matches. Tom might get drunk afterwards, but nobody complained. But something different was happening with Tom. It seems to me he was getting in some kind of trouble lately, I just can't recall what it was about."

Al spied over his shoulder. "I just got a few more things to ask you, then we'll call it a night. If Beeks finds out what we've been up to, I'll be toast for sure."

Will snapped up his head and smiled. "I like Dr. Beeks." He shook his head back and forth in amazement. "I never thought I'd meet someone like her, doing what she does. And her being a doctor and all." He caught Al smiling slightly at him and Will leaned back on the table. "I keep forgetting I'm not in Oklahoma in 1955 anymore." He cocked his head, "This isn't Oklahoma, is it?"

Al folded his arms and smiled broadly at the amused look on his face. "It's New Mexico and the year isn't important. I'm glad you like Verbena. Dr. Beeks is a top-notch doctor. You are in perfect hands with her, none better."

"I'm not questioning her ability, by any means, Al. She's been very nice and professional and everything. . . . It's just such a shock to—"

"To see an African-American woman who happens to be a doctor?"

Al watched as the color in Will's cheeks rose and turned

a bright red. "Don't be embarrassed, Will. You're on the edge of a lot of change for the South in 1955. Civil rights, the freedom marches, the bus boycotts, all this will take place in your lifetime. The old stereotypes and roles will start to crumble, but it will be at a price. A lot of innocent blood will be spilled before . . ." Al let his voice trail off.

"Al, if this really is a time experiment in the future, why can't you change all that suffering and pain?"

"Good question," Al sighed. "I find myself asking that same thing on every Leap. Believe me, if I was running this experiment, I know the first thing I'd change, but it's not up to me."

"Well, who decides on what needs to be changed?"

Al stepped back from the table and checked his watch. "We still haven't figured the 'who' part out yet."

Will made a face. "Seems like you got a lot of bugs to work out of this so-called experiment," he observed. "What about the names? Can you get me the names of those casualties from Brick?"

Al drummed his fingers on Ziggy's link. "I'll see what I can do, but I can't promise you anything at this point." He picked up his coffee cup and dumped it in the trash by the wall. "Oh, I almost forgot." Al snapped his fingers. "Gene Dupree, your deputy."

"He hasn't fainted on Sam, has he?" Will ran his hand over the notepad. "Gene's a good person. My father took to him when he was thirteen years old. He was headed for trouble. Mother abandoned him right after he was born. Gene was being raised by an alcoholic father, who beat him at every drop of the hat." Will shuddered. "What a mess. My father arrested Gene on a petty crime. His father wouldn't bail him out. Left him in jail. My father was appalled. He spent the next two days and nights talking to Gene. Finding out what made him tick. My dad was good at talking to people and figuring out what made them do the things they did. He discovered that Gene was an impressionable kid with good intentions. My father put up the

bail money, went to court with him, and, when he was released, brought Gene home.

"Gene adored my father. It was strange having him around at first. Gene was a funny kid. Shy, quiet. He wasn't dumb or stupid. Pretty smart, in fact. My father convinced Gene to stay in school. He got Gene interested in law enforcement. I made him my deputy when I took over the sheriff's position from my father. He's been a good deputy."

Al had more information than he had planned on asking. "What about as a sheriff? Isn't he going to follow in your footsteps?"

"I don't think so." Will saw the look of surprise on Al's face. "He's just not what I would consider sheriff material. He gets ribbed a lot about his appearance. He's as skinny as a stray dog. He faints at the sight of blood, so he stays away from the messy traffic accidents and mishaps. Kind of hard to have a deputy that won't investigate a murder or accident scene. Won't have a thing to do with autopsy reports. But he is a good deputy despite all his flaws. Trustworthy, loyal, dependable, honest."

"Sounds like a regular Boy Scout." Al picked up the pad from the table.

"Gene is a Boy Scout, in some ways. Nobody in four counties can handle a gun like Gene. Best damn sharpshooter I've ever seen. Now that's one thing I wish I could do. Handle a gun like Gene." Will whistled and the sound bounced around the empty room. "I've never had a problem with him backing me up."

Al checked his watch again and stood drumming his fingers on the pad. "I should be going now. Try and get some sleep, Will."

Will laughed. "I'll try. Sleep isn't coming very easy though."

Al shook his head. He held the pad up. "Thanks for the notes."

"Can you get me the exact date and time I need for 1965?"

Al took another quick look around the room. "I don't know. I'll try. Good night, Will,"

"You can do better than try, Admiral." Will raised his hand. "Good night."

Thursday, September 1, 1955

Sam pounded on Doc Adams's door again. It was seven fifteen in the morning. The heat was already rising up from the warm pavement, promising to be another hot, miserable day. Sam had spent a sleepless night tossing and turning, going over the details of the case in his head. His time was running out.

Sam tipped his ear next to the door. Silence. He assaulted the door with his fist. "Doc! You awake?" Sam shouted through the thick oak door. He picked up the brass knocker and rapped as hard as he could. "It's Will Williams."

Through the door Sam thought he heard a muffled cough. A drowsy, deep voice called out, "I'm coming, I'm coming. Hold your damn pants on." It took forever before the lock on the door slid back and the front door opened a crack. A bloodshot eye peered out at Sam. Doc recognized the sheriff and pulled the door open wider. "What's a matter, Will?" He smoothed down his hair, which was standing out in all directions. His face had the start of a scruffy beard. "Has there been an accident?"

"No. I need to talk to you about Carla Sue's autopsy. I need to see your report."

Doc stopped smoothing out his hair and looked at Sam. His eyes narrowed and a red flush from anger spread to his cheeks. "You mean to tell me you've gotten me up at this hour in the morning for an autopsy report? Hell, I haven't even finished it yet." Doc started to shut the door in Sam's face. "Come back at a decent hour. I distinctly recall telling you to come *this afternoon*."

"I've got to talk to you now," Sam insisted as he pushed

at the door. "I don't have much time and I need your help."

Doc was surprised at the tone of Sam's voice. He let the door swing back. He pulled a frayed bathrobe around his middle. "I don't even have any coffee made yet," Doc complained. His eyes squinted in the early morning light.

"I'll make the coffee," Sam offered. "I'll even make breakfast if you want. Please let me in."

"You don't have to cook breakfast, Will Williams. But I do expect you to get that coffeepot going. I'll let you see what I've done so far. But mind you, the report won't be finished."

"That's okay, Doc. We'll talk about what you've found so far. Where's the kitchen?"

Doc snorted and pointed. "In that direction. Don't make a mess either. I don't want Esther giving me hell about messing up her kitchen." He shuffled in his slippers in the opposite direction. "I've got to get dressed and find my glasses. Won't be able to find the right drawer in the morgue unless I've got my glasses." He began to trudge upstairs muttering to himself, "Damn sheriff is off his rocker, waking me up at this time in the morning. I'm getting too old for this. Let that fancy doctor from Ashcroft handle this stuff. I'm getting too old."

By seven thirty Doc had gotten dressed and had Sam join him in the back of the house. This part of the house was reserved for the pathology lab and the morgue. The room was a large one, built onto the back of the house. It might have been a garage at one time, but now it was a makeshift morgue for the small town of Brick. The stainless freezer with four unmarked doors hummed loudly. Doc ambled into the room and switched on a bright overhead lamp. He pulled a file from the top of a filing cabinet.

"I'll go over what I've found so far. Remember the report is not complete yet. I had to reschedule the rest of my patients around yesterday. After I see my few morning patients, I'll work on completing the report." He straightened his glasses and scanned the report. "Victim: white, female,

age twenty-four. Cause of death: multiple stab wounds to the upper torso. Stabbed at least thirty times with a sharp pointed instrument. Swelling on her left cheek is due to a blow she suffered before the time of death. Some contusions and bruising on her back and shoulders, no broken bones. The bruises on her back occurred when she fell or was pushed down. The exact time of death hard to pinpoint because of the heat in the trailer. I haven't done a full autopsy on the body yet. I was going to get started this afternoon," Doc grumbled.

"She was at the Hole around twelve or twelve thirty," Sam noted.

Doc nodded and thought a moment. "If she was last seen alive at noon, I would hazard to say time of death anywhere from two to six P.M. More likely occurred between three and four, but I can't say for sure." Doc ruffled through his notes. "What time did you go after Tom?"

"I think it was after three o' clock. Could have been closer to four." Sam watched Doc pour over his notes. "Tell me, Doc, would you consider Tom a suspect?"

"I wouldn't, no. I don't think Tom did it."

Sam reached for the notepad in his pocket. "Why not?"

Doc pulled a stool away from the table and eased his large frame onto the small stool top. "Don't make sense to me. Why would Tom kill Carla? They've been together all this time. What would cause him to do this to her, now? Just don't feel right."

Sam leaned against a counter. "What if Tom found out that she was seeing other people. It makes him angry. Pushes him over the edge."

Doc shook his head back and forth. "Tom's feeble-minded. Even if he knew about her seeing other men, I doubt if he'd believe it. He's been around and heard the rumors. Tom never believed them before. Why should he start now?"

"But the suicide attempt—"

"That was no suicide attempt!" Doc interrupted. "I keep telling you that was an attempt to get Carla worried about

him. That's all. He'd never jump. Might fall by accident, but never jump." Doc pointed to his report. "Let's see here, she was thrown or forced back down on the floor. Okay, Tom's big enough to do that all right. He must weigh close to three hundred pounds. There are those bruises on her back and shoulders. Someone forced her down and she was stabbed repeatedly. Not once or twice, but over thirty times. Overkill. What does that tell you, Will?"

Sam thought a moment. "The murderer was angry, enraged. Out of control."

"Yes," Doc agreed. "And so out of control he didn't stop. I've determined the third or fourth blow cut clear through her aorta. She would have bled to death in minutes and stopped struggling. Yet the killer kept stabbing her, even after she gave up the fight. Deep penetrating wounds. I found that the stab wounds on her stomach and hips weren't driven nearly as deep as the ones on her neck and shoulders. It's as if our killer was getting tired as he worked his way down the body."

Sam stopped writing and shook his head. "All this created a bloody mess. When her aorta was cut it would have sprayed the killer with blood. He would have been covered in blood."

"Yes. This was a gory murder. To find the killer all we have to do is find someone who was covered in blood day before yesterday." Doc laughed and took off his glasses. "I don't recall anyone in Brick walking around like that Tuesday, do you, Will?"

"No." Sam pointed at Doc's notes. "Do you mind?"

Doc shrugged and handed over his report. "Remember it's not complete."

"Was the murderer right-handed or left-handed?" Sam asked as he scanned Doc's notes.

"Very difficult to say. I'm going to guess our boy is right-handed, judging from the angle of the stab wounds on the body, but don't hold me to that." Doc shifted his weight around on the stool. "It's just a guess." Doc turned and

pointed at the report in Sam's hands. "Got any suspects, Sheriff Williams?"

"No," Sam said as he shuffled through the paperwork, "just Tom."

"I still think Tom didn't do it," Doc quickly interjected. "I know he and Carla had been living together. They were known to fight. Tom had fought with her prior to going out on that balcony. But he's still not your man, Will."

"He's right-handed, isn't he? He's big and strong," Sam argued.

"He's right-handed all right. I'm way ahead of you, Will. I picked through his medical records last night." Doc pointed to a thick folder sitting on the countertop. "Tom was raised in a large family. Ten brothers and sisters in all. His family lived down the road toward Ashcroft. Dirt poor. The kids would go work on farms for money instead of going to school. When Tom was about ten years old he was involved in a farming accident. Nearly lost his right arm above the elbow. He can still use his arm, but he favors it. He doesn't have much strength in that arm and I know for sure he can't raise it above his shoulder. Tom had a bad case of the mumps too. He had just turned sixteen. Whole family came down with them. Tom had to be hospitalized, along with his older brother. Was in the hospital for two weeks. He was very sick. Guess that's why he and Carla never had any little ones running around."

"You think he was sterile due to the mumps?" Sam asked with little interest.

"That's my guess. They lived together for almost ten years." Doc pointed at the notes. "Back at the murder scene, some evidence turned up that bothered me. Flip through that report. I think I mention something on page five." Sam began to flip pages. "See, we're back to motive, Will. I don't think Tom paid much attention to the rumors surrounding Carla Sue. He'd always shrug off the slightest bit of information about Carla's infidelity. He'd always said nobody knew her like he did. She sure had the wool pulled over his eyes, but then Tom was easy to fool. He was never

very bright. I found that appointment card in the trailer. It's for a doctor in Ashcroft. I've always treated Tom for all his ailments. He'd come to me with the slightest problem. However, I never treated Carla Sue. She and her sister always went into Ashcroft. I called the doctor listed on that card, but he's out of town till Tuesday."

Sam had found the card and was studying it carefully. It listed a general practitioner who resided in Ashcroft.

"How long would you say she'd been having affairs?" Sam asked.

"Don't know for sure. Couldn't really call them affairs. Tom and Carla were never legally married. They were common-law husband and wife. Happens quite often with the poorer folks. If I had to hazard a guess about her sideline, I'd probably say since she started working down at the Hole. She was fourteen or fifteen then. It's a shame, she was quite a beautiful girl." Doc stood up from the stool and consulted his watch. "Esther should be arriving at any time now. I've got my first patient at nine this morning. She's going to have a fit if she finds me back here." He motioned at the reports. "Help me gather all these things up." Doc began to shuffle papers back into files.

Sam handed back the files to Doc. "Some witnesses saw David Jefferson walking away from the bar with Carla Sue."

Doc stopped shuffling the papers. "Have you questioned David yet?"

"No," Sam admitted. "I was going to do that after I talked to you. I have to either charge Tom or let him go. Looks like I'm going to be letting him go for now."

"Will, . . ." Doc began. He paused and wrung his hands. "Were Carla and David . . . um, involved together?"

"I don't know. I don't think so." Sam picked up his untouched coffee. "He just walked her home."

Doc tossed the files down on the countertop and shook his head. "Don't you find that kind of strange? A colored boy walking home a white girl who he doesn't even know?"

Sam thought for a moment. "It does seem kind of odd, but I'm sure David had a reason."

"Could it be the same reason other men followed Carla Sue home?"

Sam shook his head as he handed Doc the file. "I don't know, Doc."

"Look at the facts, Will. David walks Carla home. Why did he do that? Did they know each other? He's probably the last person to see her alive. Why was he at the Hole in the first place? That's a notorious hangout for the Klan after dark. You know how Patch treats Negroes. If he and Carla were involved—"

"Don't jump to conclusions," Sam interrupted.

"But let's just say they were, for argument's sake. What if they were more than just acquaintances and what if someone finds out about them? What does Carla do? If she cries rape, she might have a case. No matter that most folks wouldn't give her the time of day if they passed her on the street, she cries rape by a Negro, those same folks would submit her name for sainthood."

"I don't believe this and I won't believe anything until I hear David's side of the story." Sam poured his coffee down the sink.

"You know, Will, I like David and Miss Beulah. I don't have anything against them. But if what I'm saying is true, you're gonna have real messy investigation on your hands."

"What are you talking about?"

"Let's just say it was David who murdered Carla." Doc held up his hands to ward off Sam's protests. "Just listen. Let's say it's true. If this gets out, this town will come apart at the seams. There are people in this town who aren't afraid to don a sheet and take justice into their own hands over a case like this." Doc patted Sam's shoulder. "Tread lightly, Will, and watch your back. I hope I'm wrong about David, I really do. Don't let your loyalties cloud your judgment. Someone wanted her more than just dead." Doc looked at his watch and led the way back into the main

part of the house. An older woman was just letting herself in through the front door when Sam and Doc emerged from the back. "I'll call when I finish up the rest of my report."

Sam thanked the doctor and nodded at Esther who was giving Sam a good once-over. "Your first patient will be here in twenty minutes," she reminded Doc as she slipped past the men. "And you better not have messed up my kitchen."

Sam opened the door and stepped out into the hot sun. "Watch yourself on this case, Will," Doc warned again as he shut his door.

When Sam entered the jail he was more troubled than ever. Gene was filling out a duty roster behind his desk and was eating a doughnut. A paper cup of coffee sat not far from his right hand. Sam doubted if the doughnut ever touched Gene's system before it was gobbled up by his metabolism. Sam checked the log by the door.

"You're up bright and early," Gene noted.

Sam didn't look up. Instead he made a mark in the log. "I'm not going to charge Tom with Carla's murder. I'm releasing him today."

"What!" Gene turned suddenly and tipped his coffee over on his desk. The coffee soaked through the blotter and splashed over the top of the desk onto Gene's leg. Gene jumped up and began wiping at his leg with a napkin.

"Are you okay?" Sam reached for some tissues from his desk and began to blot up the coffee spill on the desk.

"Damn. Oh yeah, I'm just too clumsy. I'd thought I'd outgrown it, but . . ." Gene rubbed his pants leg. The duty roster was soaked. Gene picked up the roster, coffee dripping off its corners, and threw it in the trash.

Sam tossed the wet tissues in the trash. "Do you have an extra pair of pants to change into?"

"Yeah, I'll just go and—Oh, wait a minute. My extra uniform isn't here. I forgot I . . . left it at the cleaners in Dunsmoore." Gene sucked his breath in and looked up at

the ceiling in frustration. "I do have a spare pair of pants at home though."

"I'll let you run home in a minute. Wait till I get Tom released and then you can go," Sam offered.

"Okay," Gene said with a sigh of relief. "I won't be more than a few minutes."

Sam held out his hand. "I need your keys."

Gene pulled the ring loose from his belt buckle and handed it to Sam. "Holler if he gives you any trouble."

Sam took the keys and headed down the hallway. "I don't suspect that Tom will."

Tom Madison rose off the bed when Sam came down the hall. He walked over to the door of his cell and gripped the bars. He didn't say a word as Sam approached and found the correct key.

"I'm releasing you on your own accord, Tom. You'll have to stay around town if we need to ask you more questions."

Tom grunted and peered through the bars at Sam. "Are you charging me with Carla's murder?"

"Not at this time. Her murder is still under investigation." Sam inserted the key in the lock. The lock opened and the door swung open. Tom stepped out into the hallway.

"I'm going to find who murdered Carla and then I'm going to do to them what they did to her." Tom stood in the hallway, watching Sam very carefully.

"That would be a mistake on your part, Tom. Let us handle this case," Sam said as he shut the cell door.

"We'll see whose mistake it is." Tom's eyes flared with anger as he started down the hallway. The men entered the office and Tom headed straight for the door. He grabbed for the knob. "Does Doc Adams still have Carla?" he asked without turning around.

Sam had opened his desk and pulled out a folder. He emptied the contents of the folder on his desk. "Yes."

Tom swung the door open and was momentarily blinded by the sunlight.

"These things are yours, Tom. You're gonna have to sign for them before you go."

Tom squinted as he turned around. He marched over to Sam's desk, picked up his wallet, and shoved it in his overalls. He then picked up the pen and scrawled *T-O-M* across the envelope. He turned and strode across the room toward the door.

"You're forgetting these." Sam held up a set of keys and jangled them. Tom turned around. Sam palmed the keys and tossed them to Tom. Tom started to catch the keys with his right hand. When his hand was level with his elbow he winced. The keys sailed through the air and dropped at Tom's feet. He bent down, picked them up, and left the office. He didn't close the door on his way out.

Gene stood in the doorway and watched him walk away. "I got a bad feeling about him. Did you have to let him go?"

Sam swept the envelope off his desk top and into the trash. "I can't charge him, Gene. You know I don't have any proof."

Gene pulled at his damp pants leg. "Do you think he left the Hole and went back to their trailer to wait for Carla Sue? Could it have happened like that?"

"I don't think Tom could have been up on the balcony if he had murdered her. He wasn't covered in blood for one thing." Sam pulled the notebook from his pocket. "Go home and change your uniform."

"Okay. I'll take the car out front." He picked up some keys from his desk and started out the door, where he almost collided with Mayor Tilden.

"Dear God, Gene Dupree, where's the fire?" the mayor bellowed. Gene stepped aside and let the mayor pass. "What happened to you?" The mayor asked, pointing at Gene's damp leg. "You look like you wet yourself."

Gene squared his shoulders. He gave the mayor a nasty look and pushed past him out the door. The mayor whistled

and watched Gene storm off. "He's a might bit touchy, wouldn't you say, Will?"

Sam watched with dread as Mayor Tilden pulled off his wide-brimmed hat and sat down on the corner of Sam's desk.

"You might say we're all a might bit touchy this morning. Did you come by for a reason, Mayor Tilden?"

"Yes. Yes I did." The mayor pulled a piece of paper out of his coat pocket and set it down on Sam's desk. "That's a cleaning bill for the upholstery in my car." He smiled at Sam.

Sam took the bill, wadded it up, and deposited it in Will's top drawer. He smiled back at the mayor. "Anything else, Mayor?"

The smile disappeared from Mayor Tilden's face. "Are we alone?"

"Yes." Sam was growing annoyed with the mayor.

"You released Tom Madison?"

"Just now, Mayor."

"Fine." The mayor replaced his hat.

"Mayor Tilden, I don't have time to play games with—"

"That's about the only thing I like about you, Will. Straight to the point. As you know, we've got our big Labor Day picnic coming up this weekend. Three days of fun and festivities. I'll be looking forward to your wife's home-baked pies again this year." He smiled and reached for a red bandanna in his back pocket. "As the mayor of Brick I'm concerned about this murder investigation. I don't want anything to dampen the atmosphere surrounding the picnic."

"The picnic?" Sam asked incredulously. "You're worried about the picnic?"

"In a way. Frankly, I'm more concerned about this town and its citizens. Seems we may have a problem on our hands."

"What are you talking about, Mayor?"

"Let me spell it out for you, Will. There's that little

matter concerning David Jefferson and Carla Sue," Mayor Tilden said suggestively as he eased himself off the desk. "Seems my wife's cousin, Clark, heard a rumor down at the Hole. He heard that boy was walking Carla Sue home on the day she was murdered. Seems to me, he heard a rumor that they were more than just friends. Now Sheriff, I know you'll do your utmost to protect this town and its citizens and to uphold the law. You're like your father, a man of your word. When you became sheriff, you promised to uphold a high level of integrity."

"Save your speeches for the campaign." Sam pushed back his chair. "I'm busy, Mayor Tilden. Now if you'll excuse me."

The mayor stuffed the bandanna in his pocket and stuck a fat finger in Sam's direction. "Be warned, Will. If that boy killed Carla there'll be hell to pay. And I don't want my town being turned upside down by the Klan. Handle this fast and swiftly and see that justice is taken care of. I want that boy questioned and if he is responsible for her murder I want him arraigned the day after Labor Day. Anything less and we'll have a war erupting on our hands. Do your job as you see fit, Williams. But I want someone in custody by Tuesday. I'm just warning you."

Sam licked his lips and looked at Mayor Tilden closely. "I bet you know more about the things that go on down at the Hole than you're letting on."

Mayor Tilden laughed. "Maybe I do, and then, maybe I don't. We're very different men, Will. You didn't want me to become mayor and I sure wasn't thrilled to see you be elected sheriff. But that's water under the bridge, as they say. Just understand that this town won't back up a yellow-bellied coward who keeps a felon loose and endangers this town and its citizens. Especially the citizens who vote."

"You can leave my office the same way you came in." Sam pointed to the door. "I don't like to be threatened, Mayor."

"No one is threatening you, son. Believe me, you'll know when you're being threatened. Just don't mess up this

investigation. Keep your well-meaning, liberal intentions out of this investigation and we'll just see if you understand what I'm trying to tell you or not. We'll just see." Tilden started to leave. "Oh, by the way, Will. It's a shame about that jukebox down at the Hole. Are you going to plead self-defense?" Tilden brayed loudly.

"Get out, Tilden."

The mayor laughed as he left. Sam got up and slammed the front door behind the mayor. He was surprised a few minutes later when Gene eased the door open and poked his head in.

"What happened with Tilden, Will?" Gene had changed his coffee-splattered pants for a crisp, clean pair. "You look ticked."

"I'm fine. Just had to deal with Tilden. You sure did get back here fast." Gene just nodded. "I'll be leaving for a while." Sam retrieved his notebook from his desk. "I'll be back later. Call me if anything happens."

"Sure," Gene answered as Sam banged the door closed.

CHAPTER

SIX

The Williamses' kitchen was full of laughter and the aroma of fresh baked pies. Miss Beulah and Meg were standing over two rolling boards. Miss Beulah had just set down her rolling pin and was dusting off her hands on her apron. Tyler held a blue ball in his arms and walked underfoot, dropping the ball here and there.

Meg was laughing and the latest gossip was being swapped back and forth between the two women about the picnic committee. Miss Beulah smiled and listened as she stepped around Tyler on her way to the oven. She pulled on the oven mitts and pulled two more pies from the oven. Meg made some room on the counter. "Five pies baked, five more to go."

Miss Beulah set the pies down and wiped her forehead with her hand. "Thank goodness we got a start on them early. It's going to be another hot day."

"I'll die if it stays this hot for the picnic." Meg had picked up a handful of flour and was sprinkling it over the

rolled-out dough on her board. "Worst hot weather in years."

The screen door banged shut and Miss Beulah looked at the kitchen clock. "That's probably Becca coming in from outside."

"Rebecca," Meg called out from the kitchen, "is that you?"

Tyler threw the ball at the doorway. "Play wit' me."

Meg looked up and stopped rolling out the dough.

Miss Beulah took off the gloves and set them down by the stove. "Oh my."

Sam nodded at the surprised women. He reached down and tousled Tyler's blond curls. He squatted down and rolled Tyler's ball into the living room. Tyler screamed in delight and waddled after the ball.

Meg wiped her hands on her apron. "Will, what's going on? You've still got your gun on."

Sam put his hand on the belt and looked at Meg. "I know. I need to speak with Miss Beulah. I'm not staying."

Meg turned and looked at her housekeeper. Miss Beulah was walking across the room, her eyes wide with concern. "Has there been an accident?"

"No accident," Sam reassured her. "I need to speak to David. Do you know where he is now?"

Miss Beulah narrowed her eyes at Sam. "Yes. Today he should be home from school by now. He does a few things around the house before going to do his chores."

"Will, what's going on?" Meg asked.

"I need to ask David a few questions. Miss Beulah, why don't you take a ride with me out to your home? I'm sure Meg can manage by herself for the rest of the day." Sam gave Meg a look that told her not to protest.

"Is David in trouble? Did he do something wrong?" Miss Beulah looked from Sam to Meg, and began to pull at her apron strings.

Meg put her arm around Miss Beulah's shoulders. "You go ahead with Will. We're almost finished here anyway."

"Let me get my things, William. I'll be with you in a

moment," Miss Beulah said as she walked out of the kitchen.

"Will," Meg hissed, "what is going on?"

"I can't talk about it now," he answered in a hushed tone of voice. "It's got to do with that murder investigation we talked about last night. If I'm going to be late, I'll call you."

Meg caught his hand. "David's not in trouble, is he? I can't believe that David would do anything wrong."

Sam squeezed Meg's hand and released it. "I hope not."

Miss Beulah reappeared with her purse and hat. Sam let Miss Beulah lead the way out of the house. Tyler came giggling back to the adults, his ball captured again. Meg picked him up as Sam and Miss Beulah left.

David and Beulah Jefferson lived across the railroad tracks, on the east side of Brick. All of the black families in Brick lived there. Sam pulled the police car in front of a house with a dirt yard. The Jeffersons' home was kept in better shape than most of the homes on the street. Some bright geraniums bloomed in a window box and the storm windows were freshly painted. The yard, although without grass, was neatly lined with red bricks. Sam got out and opened the door for Miss Beulah. She didn't say a word as she climbed the stairs and took a key from her purse. She opened the door and invited Sam into her home.

The house was dark and the air inside felt stifling. There was a small parlor with a sofa and a chair. Miss Beulah pointed to a verandah. "Make yourself at home, William. I'll go see where David is. Would you like some iced tea?"

Sam smiled but politely declined. He sat down on the couch and patted his shirt pocket for the notepad. He watched Miss Beulah enter the kitchen, open the back door, and call for David.

Sam heard a voice answer back. The screen door opened and David appeared. He looked surprised to see the sheriff of Brick sitting in the living room. Miss Beulah whispered anxiously to him.

David was seventeen years old. He wore a white T-shirt that was soaking wet with perspiration. He reached for a towel with his well-toned arms. He wiped his forehead and nodded in Sam's direction. David walked into the parlor and stood awkwardly before Sam.

Sam smiled and pointed to the opposite side of the sofa. "Why don't you sit down, David? I'd like to ask you a few questions." Sam smiled at Miss Beulah, who was standing in the kitchen. "You're welcome to join us, Miss Beulah."

"I think I will join you." She sat down in the only other available chair, facing David and Sam. Her back was straight, her chin held high, and her hands folded tightly in her lap. She nodded her head in David's direction as he sat down nervously on the edge of the sofa.

Sam flipped open the pad with his pen. "You look like you've worked up quite a sweat, David."

"Yes, sir, Sheriff Williams." David cleared his throat. He spoke in a deep, strong voice. "I was out back chopping wood for my mother's stove. It's going to be another hot day."

"We don't get electricity or gas out this way," Miss Beulah explained. "We're lucky just to have a phone. It's a party line, but I don't mind. David chops the wood for my stove and keeps this house from falling down around our heads." Miss Beulah smiled at her son.

Sam smiled and checked his notes. "David, I need to ask you a few questions about your whereabouts Tuesday afternoon."

"Why?" David asked.

Sam looked up at David. "There's been a murder," Sam told him in a quiet tone of voice.

"A murder?" David repeated. "But I don't know anything about a murder. Who's been murdered?"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Sam cautioned. "Now David, what did you do Tuesday?"

David shrugged and looked down at his hands. "I usually attend the school the Reverend Niles runs out of his

church. I attend from seven in the morning till eleven or so. It varies on how I'm doing with the schoolwork."

"David's a smart boy. He's going to finish up his basic requirements this year. Then with the reverend's help and the Lord's blessing, he's going to apply to college come next fall." Miss Beulah reached over and patted her son's leg. "He's been working around the community to raise some money. Books and tuition are going to be expensive."

David seemed embarrassed by his mother's boasting. "Now, Momma," he complained, "no need to go on about me in front of Sheriff Williams. I practically grew up in the sheriff's house." He bowed his head and continued his story. "Tuesday I didn't go to school because I was caught up with my lessons and I had promised a farmer I'd help out on his farm. He's getting ready for the fall planting."

"What was the farmer's name?"

"Mr. Nicholas. It's the old place out on the highway. I started working for him last year. I do chores for him. The pay is good and I can work the hours around my schooling."

"What kind of chores do you do on the farm, David?" Sam asked as he jotted down his notes. He glimpsed up and watched the boy's hands twist in his lap.

"Cutting up wood, baling hay, cleaning out the barn, tilling the fields. Farm work."

Sam turned over a new page in the notebook. "Hard work?"

"Yes, sir," David replied. "I don't know any kind of work that ain't hard."

Sam smiled briefly and nodded. He knew how hard working on a farm could be. "When did you finish at the farm?"

"About noon."

"How did you know it was noon, David?"

David laughed a little. "White folks went in for their supper. They always take supper at noon. I finished up and left for another job back in Brick that afternoon."

Sam paused and studied his notes. "You went right from the Nicholas farm to this other job?"

David sat very still on the couch. He looked down to his shoes. "Not exactly, Sheriff Williams."

Miss Beulah leaned forward in her chair and studied her son. "You always go from one job to the next." She turned to Sam. "He's got lots of folks wanting him to work for them. He's a good worker and strong too."

Sam smiled at Miss Beulah. "I bet he is, Miss Beulah." Sam addressed David again. "What do you mean, 'not exactly'? Did you stop in between the two jobs?"

David had grown very still. He couldn't look up at Sam or his mother.

Miss Beulah grew concerned. "David, Sheriff Williams has asked you a question."

David remained silent, studying his shoelaces.

Sam coughed and leaned back into the sofa. "David, I've got witnesses that can place you at the Watering Hole Tuesday between twelve and twelve thirty." He paused and tapped his pencil against the notepad. "I need the truth, David, and I need to hear it from you. You did stop by the Hole Tuesday, didn't you?"

David moved his head to the left and right. "I haven't done anything, Sheriff," he muttered.

"But you were at the Hole? These eyewitnesses that claim they saw you there, are they telling the truth or aren't they?"

Miss Beulah sat riveted on the chair, looking at her son. "Tell the truth, David."

David swallowed and slowly looked up into his mother's face. His lips trembled. He turned and frowned at Sam. "So what if I did stop by the Hole? It's not a crime to get a soda, is it?" A small, audible sigh escaped from Miss Beulah.

"No, it's not, David. Do you remember anyone at the Hole that day when you stopped?" Sam asked.

"I don't know. I didn't go inside. I got a soda from the machine outside and then I left. I know better than to hang

around that place even in the broad daylight. I just got my drink and left. I didn't see anybody." David's tone was very defensive.

"Why would you stop at that place anyhow?" Miss Beulah snapped. "I warned you to stay away from that place. It's an evil place. Bad things happen there."

"I know what you've told me, Momma," David insisted. He lowered his voice. "I don't usually stop there on my way home. Except yesterday I did. You know how hot it's been. I'd been tilling fields all morning under the sun. I was hot and tired and I wanted a cold drink." David turned to Sam. "That soda machine sits out front for anybody to use. Patch don't care as long as you don't disturb his customers. I got a bottle of soda."

"So you paid for a soda outside and never went in, is this right?" Sam asked quietly.

"That's right," David agreed. "Going inside would have been stupid on my part. I was only looking for a drink, not to cause a scene."

"And you didn't talk to anybody outside the Hole?" Sam coyly asked.

David hesitated slightly as he answered the question. "No. . . . I didn't want anyone to know I was there."

"You're lying," Miss Beulah whispered. She trained her eyes on her son. "I can tell when you're lying."

David turned toward his mother and he shook his head. "Momma, please. . . ."

"You can't even look me in the eye," Miss Beulah declared.

"David," Sam began, "I've got witnesses that place you at the bar Tuesday and have you speaking to Carla Sue. This is a very serious matter. I'm trying to get to the bottom of this."

"I keep telling you I didn't do anything!" David's voice began to rise. He shot a quick glance at his mother and fell silent. His hands twisted into two tight fists. "I got my drink and . . . I left. That's all that happened."

Miss Beulah leaned over to her son. "David, you have

got to tell the truth. Sheriff Williams is trying to help you."

"But I don't need his help. I didn't do anything," David protested. A clock ticked in the kitchen. A dog barked down the street.

Sam jotted a few more notes down on his paper. "So these eyewitnesses that say you spoke to and later left with Carla Sue are lying?"

"You were seen leaving with Carla Sue?" Miss Beulah shrieked, her voice shattering the quiet afternoon. She slapped at her son's leg. "You left with that girl in plain sight? David Bo Jefferson! What were you thinking?" She brought both hands up to her face. "You know better than to walk down the road with that girl."

"That's why I'm here, David. Carla Sue was murdered Tuesday." Sam saw the look of utter surprise on David's face.

"What!" David looked from Sam to his mother. "I didn't know she was murdered."

Miss Beulah pulled her hands away from her face and tried to calm herself. "I've heard rumors all over town. People are saying a black man killed her." Miss Beulah fought back tears. "I didn't know they were talking about my son. That girl was nothing but trouble." She turned to Sam. "Please, Will, don't let them take my son from me. He didn't kill her. I know they're going to blame him. They're going to put him in jail or . . . worse." She stifled a cry of anguish.

David sank back in the sofa. An expression of shock crossed his face. "I was just hot and thirsty," David began in a soft voice. "I had worked the whole morning away on the Nicholases' farm. I was headed back to town. I didn't even think about a soda till I'd almost passed the place. I've walked past the Hole every day now for over a year. Tuesday afternoon I was so hot. The place was deserted and all I wanted was a soda.

"I just had gotten my drink and started to leave when the front door flew open. First Tom Madison came stumbling out. He was holding his hand over his eye. He was

bleeding. He tottered down the stairs toward his truck, moaning all the way. I didn't think he saw me at all. He scared me and I guess I just froze where I was. I watched as he got in his truck and drove off. I got my feet moving and had just hit the parking lot when I heard a women scream. I looked back and that bartender, Patch, was pulling someone out of the bar. He had ahold of Carla's hair and was yanking her out of the place."

Sam was writing like a madman. "What did you see next, David?"

"I was trying to get to the main road without trouble." David shook his head. "Patch and Carla were fighting, real nasty. Carla had gotten Patch to turn loose of her hair and she was screaming at him, threatening him. She swung at him and missed. That made her even angrier. She warned him not to touch her or he'd be sorry, or something like that. Patch backhanded her across the face. He hit her hard, Sheriff Williams. Knocked her flat down the stairs. He started to kick her. Poor Carla was scrambling away in the dirt. Her nose was bleeding and she was crying. Patch grew weary of chasing her and started to go back inside. He yelled at her, calling her nothing but a cheap whore." David dipped his eyes and nodded at his mother. "Sorry about that, Momma, but it's what he called her."

David resumed his story. "Carla's nose was bleeding and her face was swelling up where Patch hit her. She was just sitting in the dirt, holding her nose. She ripped up her shirt and with the torn piece, she tried to stop her nosebleed." David stopped talking.

"Did you talk to Carla, David?" his mother asked quietly.

David murmured quietly, "Yes, I did. I knew I shouldn't. I knew I should just keep on walking but . . . she was hurt. I went over and made sure she was all right. She was pretty upset. I helped her up. She was pretty woozy on her feet and her nose was still bleeding. She thanked me for the help. She was limping as she walked away. She turned around and asked me which way I was headed. I told her

and she asked me if I would mind walking her home.”

Miss Beulah closed her eyes and sighed heavily, “Oh, Lord have mercy. Don’t tell me you did?”

David didn’t have to answer; his posture and eyes gave his answer away. His mother stifled another cry and shook her head angrily at her son.

Sam turned another page in his notebook. “David, did Carla Sue know you?”

David started to shake his head. “No. But . . .” David looked over at his mother. “You all don’t want to know the real truth. I didn’t have to walk her home, but . . . I owed her a favor.”

Miss Beulah stared at her son, her mouth agape. “What do you mean you owed her a favor?”

David could not look at his mother. He lowered his head. “I never wanted you to know about this, Momma. I know how much you worry.” He wrung his hands. “About a year ago I started working on the Nicholases’ farm. Pay was good, but the hours, at first, were long. One day I got tied up with the livestock. It was almost dark when I started for home. I had just passed the Hole when a pickup truck went by. Instead of turning into the bar’s parking lot it turned around and started coming my way. There were three white boys in the cab. I didn’t recognize any of them. I got off the road and started to cut across a field. I figured if I was off the road they’d pass me up and go back to the Hole. They started following me, across the field.

“I started running as fast as I could. That truck just kept on coming. I was scared, Sheriff Williams. I kept running toward a light. I thought it was that crazy’s house, Blythe’s place. But it turned out to be Carla Sue and Tom’s trailer. That truck was almost on top of me. I pounded on the door and yelled for help. When nobody answered I took off again. The pickup cut me off before I could get five feet away. Those boys got out and they had a baseball bat. They were taunting me, calling me names. I was caught in the truck’s lights like a deer. I tried to get away and wound up backing up into a tree.

“Those boys were circling me and swinging that bat. They kept telling me what they were gonna do with my body. I thought for sure I was dead. Then that trailer door bangs open and somebody runs down the stairs and back through the field. Whoever it was ran away fast, off behind the trailer. That person must have seen what was happening, but they just kept on running. The boys got jumpy after that happened.”

David took a breath. “The next thing I know there’s this gunshot. Bang! The shot took the bat out of the boy’s hand. Then there’s another shot just inches in the dirt from where one boy is standing. We all just froze.

“Carla Sue comes out of the shadows and moves into the light thrown by the truck’s headlights. She’s holding a big pistol and pointing it at those boys. She was wearing hardly anything at all and she was barefoot.

“One of the boys starts to take a step forward. Carla Sue just plants a bullet in the dirt right at his feet and makes that boy dance like he was sidestepping with a rattlesnake. Carla ain’t afraid. Never takes her eyes off those boys for a second. Carla waves the gun and accuses us of scaring off her best customer. Those boys warn her to mind her own business. Carla said something like, ‘You’re on my property, making this my business.’

“They started taunting her. She fired a shot and took out one of those headlights. She points that gun at the other headlight. ‘I might hit something or somebody in the dark,’ she warned us. Those boys aren’t interested in me anymore. They just head back to their truck, cussing her and calling her all kinds of names. She just stands there, smiling with that gun in her hand. They warned her they’d be back. They got in the truck and went back through the field.”

David rubbed his hands on his pants. “Now I’m afraid she’s gonna turn that gun on me. She aims the gun at me and asks me my name. I tell her. She then wanted to know what I was doing running across her place. I told her how I was chased. She lowered the gun. She told me how to cut across Blythe’s place. She even warned me to stay off the

main highway in case those boys came back looking for me. She then turned around and went back in the trailer.” David looked over to his mother. “I never told you this ’cause I know you’d worry yourself sick, Momma. You wouldn’t let me work on that farm again and the pay was too good to pass up. From then on I just told the foreman at the farm I’d have to leave before sunset. And I’ve never had a problem since. Carla Sue remembered my name and face yesterday at the Hole. She even asked me if I ever had any more trouble. I didn’t want to leave her by herself. She said she was afraid that Patch would send his buddies out after her. That’s why I walked her home, Sheriff Williams. And that’s all I did. I walked her to her trailer steps and then came back into town.”

Sam looked up at David. The young boy bit his lower lip and met Sam’s gaze. Sam knew that David was telling the truth. “Did she say anything to you on the way home?”

“Nothing special. I didn’t have to do much talking, she just kind of rambled on. Said she was never going to work at the Hole again, that she was going to have a better life for herself soon. People who put her down and talked behind her back would be sorry.” David looked down at the floor. “She wanted the money back on my soda bottle, so I gave it to her and left.” David watched as Sam and Miss Beulah exchanged looks of dread. “Now what’s wrong? I told you the truth. That’s what happened.”

“Besides the witnesses, you left your fingerprints at the scene of a crime when you gave Carla that bottle,” Sam explained. “Doc Adams was able to lift some good prints off it.”

David sat in silence as the implications sank in. “But I didn’t do anything except walk her home. She was alive when I left her, I swear.”

Sam closed his pad and tucked it away in his pocket. “I’m going to be honest with you, David. This is not good. I was hoping you might have seen someone at the trailer or that maybe Carla told you about someone who was threatening her. See, your prints were left at the murder

scene and there are witnesses that saw you leave the Hole with Carla Sue." Sam looked up at Miss Beulah and shook his head. "I'm sorry, David, but I think it would be best if I take you back to the jailhouse with me."

"Jail!" David jumped up off the sofa. "But I didn't do anything. You can't take me to jail."

"Oh, Will, please don't take my son to jail," Miss Beulah whispered desperately. She reached out and grasped Sam's arm. "He can't go to jail. You can't take him away."

"David, I had to come out here and question you about this murder. Other people know you were with Carla before she was murdered. If I don't take you to the jail, there is no way I'll be able to guarantee your safety. Right now the jail in Brick is the only place where I can keep you safe." Sam reached over and closed his hand over Miss Beulah's. "I'm sorry, Miss Beulah, but I've got to do this."

"But I didn't kill her," David protested loudly. "I didn't kill her. I'm telling you the truth."

"David, I believe you. Now we've got to prove your innocence. Until I can do that I have to take measures to keep you safe and alive." Sam rubbed his neck. "Miss Beulah, I don't think you should stay here by yourself either. You come and stay with Meg and the family."

Miss Beulah raised her head and removed her hand from Sam's arm. "I will not burden you and Miss Meg with our troubles." She squared her jaw and smoothed out her dress. "It won't look right to folks if I stayed with your family." Miss Beulah sadly shook her head. "I won't stay at your home. I'll just wait until David is cleared, then no one can say you favored anyone in this case."

"But you can't stay alone," Sam insisted.

Miss Beulah looked at her modest house. "I won't stay alone and I won't stay here. I'll ask the Reverend Niles to put me up. He'll have room for me and if he doesn't, then someone in the congregation will." Miss Beulah nodded and turned to her son. "David, please get my Bible out of

my bedroom. Go change into some nice clothes and wash your face.”

David rose silently from the couch and faced his mother. He embraced her and whispered fiercely, “I didn’t do anything wrong. I didn’t do nothing to shame you. Momma, I’m so sorry for all this.”

Miss Beulah patted her son’s back as she fought back tears. “I know you didn’t and the Lord knows you didn’t. And Sheriff Williams knows you didn’t do it either. We’ve got to place our trust in him for now and let him find the person who did commit this terrible crime.” She motioned with her head. “Go on now and fetch my Bible.”

When David left, Miss Beulah looked up into Sam’s face. Tears rolled down her cheeks. “Please, Will, promise me you’ll see that no harm comes to David. You’ve got to make things right. You’ve got to see that David is cleared. My son did not murder anyone. He was foolish to walk that girl home, but he did not murder her.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Sam said quietly. “I’m going to do the best I can.”

“You’ve got to do better than that,” Miss Beulah warned. She grasped Sam’s hand. “You’ve got to clear David. He’s my only child, Will. He’s all I have.” Miss Beulah released Sam’s hand. “I cannot stand by and watch him go to prison for something he didn’t do. He’s innocent, so help him God.”

Sam embraced Miss Beulah. “I know. Now I’ve got to prove it.”

The jailhouse was a swarm of activity when Sam, David, and Miss Beulah arrived. Several men were sitting on the steps, fanning themselves against the day’s heat. As Sam pulled up, the men scampered down the steps and swarmed over the squad car.

“I’m from the *Dunsmoore Bulletin*, Sheriff Williams. Is this the murderer of Carla Sue Tritten?” a reported demanded as a photographer next to him snapped away.

“No comment,” Sam replied tersely as he helped Miss

Beulah out of the car. She held up her hands to fend off the questions and flashes. When Sam opened the back door for David the reporters descended on the young man. Sam wedged his body in between Miss Beulah's and David's and herded them up the stairs.

"Why isn't that boy handcuffed, Sheriff?" one of the reporters shouted.

"You can't get away with murdering a white woman," another one taunted.

Sam pushed and shoved his way through the men, leading Miss Beulah and David up the stairs and into the jail, where he heartily slammed the door on the reporters.

Gene was involved in a heated discussion with someone on the phone. Gene warned the caller about making threats and slammed the phone down. The phone began to ring again.

"Where'd all those reporters come from?" Sam growled as he herded Miss Beulah over to his desk. He pulled out his chair and let her sit down.

"Hell if I know." Gene nodded at Miss Beulah, "Sorry, ma'am. They pounced on this place about ten minutes after you left. It took me forever to get them out of the office. Then the phone started ringing about half an hour later and it hasn't stopped. There's a reporter that claims to be from a newspaper in Tulsa, if you can believe that." Gene picked up the ringing phone. "Sheriff's office." He grew disgusted and hung up on the caller. "We're starting to get an occasional death threat too, Will."

"Dammit," Sam kicked his desk out of frustration. "Someone leaked this murder investigation to the press. That's all we need, the press here to stir up the animosity."

Gene ignored the ringing phone and walked over to David. David and Gene took a long look at each other. "Hi, David." David stared silently back at the deputy.

"Take David, fingerprint him, and put him in a cell near the front," Sam said as he picked up the phone. "Sheriff's office." He listened for a second and then snapped,

“Where did you get that information?” He shook his head and replaced the phone on the hook.

Gene led David down the hallway. Someone began pounding on the outside door, demanding to speak to Sheriff Williams.

Miss Beulah sat behind Sam’s desk dazed. Her heart ached as David was led down the hallway and out of sight. “You be strong, David. You keep your head held high. You didn’t do anything wrong,” she called after her son.

“Sam.”

Sam whirled around. He looked down at Miss Beulah.

“Over here.”

In the back of the room, standing in the corner, was Al. He stood out against the pale yellow walls in a white silk shirt with baby blue polka dots. A trail of blue smoke wound up around his head and over the top of the filing cabinet he was leaning on/into. “We need to talk.” He motioned with his head toward the bathroom and pocketed his lighter in his crisp white pants.

Sam looked down at Miss Beulah. “I need to freshen up. I’ll be right back. Gene is just down the hall if you need anything.”

“I’ll be all right. You, however, look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”

Sam gave her shoulder a squeeze and followed Al into the bathroom. Sam turned on the light and bent down to the sink. He turned on the faucet and let the cold water run. He dipped his hands underneath the stream of water and splashed his face. After two or three handfuls he reached for a towel. He straightened up and looked at the reflection in the mirror. Will’s reflection stared back at him. Sam wiped his face and turned to Al.

“You’re looking a little worse for the wear,” Al pointed out with his cigar. “When is the last time you got a good night’s sleep?”

“Not during this Leap, that’s for sure. This is all starting to come apart at the seams,” Sam complained as he dabbed his face. “Those reporters, for instance. Do you know who

called them?" Sam buried his face in the damp towel.

"Could have been the mayor. Or Tom Madison. I don't know." Al stuck his cigar back between his lips. "That's not the reason I'm here, Sam. You've got an even bigger problem on your hands now."

Sam pulled the towel away from his face. "How so?"

Al pulled the link out of his other pants pocket. "Ziggy is now predicting there is a ninety-five percent chance that David will be killed if he stays here in Brick."

"Killed?"

Al winced and shushed Sam. "Lower your voice. Yes, killed as in dead."

"How could he get killed?" Sam insisted at a lower volume.

Al removed his cigar and rolled it between his fingers. "You've changed history, Sam. When David was arrested in the previous time line, Will took him to Dunsmoore. I've been running some figures by Ziggy and she concluded that Dunsmoore is going to be a lot safer for David than keeping him here. Ziggy ran across an article from a paper in Tulsa that reported an alleged jailbreak that takes place late tonight. The jailhouse is going to be stormed by some Klan members. David was killed in the melee that followed. The paper reports he was shot when he tried to escape. Gene Dupree was also wounded in the attack." Al juggled the link in his hands. "I've run this by Ziggy and conferred with Will. They both concur that you should move David to Dunsmoore. The sheriff in Dunsmoore is Billy Joe Cooper. He's an old friend of your—er, I mean Will's family. He and his four deputies can keep an eye on David until the trial."

"Trial?"

Al nodded solemnly. "David still stands trial for Carla's murder, even if he is moved to Dunsmoore."

Sam tossed the towel into the sink. "You've been running this by Will?"

"Sure. He's retained some of his memory and he's been helpful." Al shrugged his shoulders and held out his hands.

“Hey, don’t look at me like that. I’m just using all my available resources.”

Sam rubbed his eyes and considered Al’s suggestion. “If I move David to Dunsmoore, will he be safe?”

“Yes.” Al gestured with the link. “Ziggy says if you move David, then the raid on the jail will never take place. Thus, David will be safe.”

Sam clicked the light off with the chain. “But he still stands trial?”

Al stuck the cigar back in his mouth. “You’ve still got to prove that he didn’t murder Carla, Sam.”

Sam grunted and leaned back against the sink. “Just what else have you been running by Will?”

Al made a noise. “Oh, don’t worry. I’m not giving away any big secrets.” Al waved the link at the bathroom door. “You’d better go back out there. I’ll be back. We’re still digging up more information.” Al pushed a button on the link and disappeared.

Sam returned to the office and was confronted with the persistent ringing from the phone. He ignored the phone and knelt down by Miss Beulah. “I’m sorry, Miss Beulah, but I’ve decided to move David to the jail in Dunsmoore. In light of all that’s happened, I hope you can understand why.”

Miss Beulah looked crestfallen. “Dunsmoore! But that’s so far away. Are you worried about those pesky reporters out there?”

“No. I’m worried about David’s safety.” Sam paused. “I don’t believe David will be safe if we keep him here. This move will be the best thing for David.”

Gene came back down the hallway. He pointed at the phone. “Do you want me to get that, Will?”

Sam stood up. “No. Clear the line and get Sheriff Cooper on the phone. Tell him I’m bringing over a murder suspect who’s going to need some protection.”

Gene blinked and didn’t move. “Dunsmoore? Sheriff Cooper? But—”

“Don’t argue, Gene. Just do it.”

Gene shut his mouth and moved over to the phone. He lifted the receiver. He cleared the line and waited for a dial tone.

As Gene dialed the sheriff's office in Dunsmoore, Sam tried to reassure Miss Beulah. "David's going to be all right, Miss Beulah. After Gene gets through, why don't you call the Reverend Niles and have him meet us at Dunsmoore." Miss Beulah simply nodded, overwhelmed by everything.

Gene pulled the phone away from his ear and motioned with the receiver toward Sam. "It's Sheriff Cooper. He wants to talk to you, Will." Gene lofted the receiver in Sam's general direction. He scowled and made his way to his desk.

Sam caught the phone and watched his deputy sulk off. He held the phone to his ear and began to make arrangements for David.

Al strolled out of the control room on his way back to his office. He was just passing the Waiting Room (with his smoking cigar in hand) when a nurse rushed past him. She was in such a hurry she hadn't even tried to salute as she pushed her way inside the door. The missed salute didn't bother Al, but the urgency of her trip into the Waiting Room did.

Al started to move on to his office but hesitated. He walked over to the Waiting Room door and punched the keypad. He didn't feel anyone would mind if he just stuck his head in for a second. The door opened. From behind the door Al could make out the pings and beeps of machines sounding off. Voices were raised and there was a buzz of activity in the normally quiet room. Al pushed the door open and stepped into the Waiting Room.

From the looks of the room, all hell had broken loose.

The room was filled with many doctors and nurses all scurrying around and snapping at each other. They talked loudly over the main table in the center of the room. Verben and three other doctors stood with their backs to Al,

huddled over the body on the table. Dr. Beeks talked rapidly to the other doctors, her head bobbing up and down, back and forth. The body on the table was out of sight, hidden by the medical staff, a row of machines, and a white blanket.

Al walked into the room, his mouth ajar. The machines were beeping endlessly and an IV bottle was being placed at the head of the table. Verbena was still deep in a discussion with the other doctors.

“Admiral? Pardon me? Admiral Calavicci?”

Al was startled by the voice to his left. A nurse was giving him a sharp salute. Al returned the salute and started to walk away.

“I’m sorry, Admiral, but you’re not allowed to smoke in here.” She pointed at the cigar in Al’s hand. “It’s a no-smoking area.”

Al searched and found an empty wastebasket, which he tossed his cigar into. “What’s going on in here?”

The nurse rose from her desk, her arms loaded down with charts. “The patient had an incident. Excuse me, Admiral.” The nurse walked around Al and headed toward the table.

“What’s an incident?” Al asked loudly as the nurse walked away. A few heads turned in his direction. One of them belonged to Dr. Beeks. She said something to a doctor on her right and walked briskly toward Al.

Dr. Beeks’s mouth was drawn in a tight line as she hurried away from the table. A loose strand of hair had worked its way out of her bun and she tucked it behind her ear as she advanced. Underneath her open white lab coat flowed a bright red sweater and matching red and black skirt. She reached Al and touched his arm. “I tried to reach you as soon as this happened, but you were already in the Imaging Chamber.”

Al looked past Verbena to the table. “When what happened?”

“Approximately ten minutes ago, Will . . . fainted, for lack of a better term.”

Al motioned around the room with his hand. “All this

over a fainting spell?" He looked at Verbena. "I don't think so."

Dr. Beeks shook her head. "It was more like a blackout. He just dropped the pad he had been working on, went as white as a sheet, and passed out." She pulled at her coat. "I've got Dr. Larson, the neurologist, checking him out now."

Al blinked in disbelief. "Is he all right? Has Will come around yet?"

Verbena nodded. "He's given us quite a scare, Admiral. He was out for almost three minutes. He's very groggy and disoriented. I've ordered a sedative and I'm restricting his visitors to just his immediate medical team. His vitals are stable and that's a good sign."

"Is he going to be okay?" Al listened as the beeps and clicks of machinery began to soften.

"I think so. There doesn't seem to be any neurological damage. However, his recall seems to be affected."

Al raised his eyebrows, "His recall? You're talking about his memory, aren't you?"

Verbena nodded. "Will had retained more of his memory than other patients I've observed. It was uncanny how he was able to help fill us in on the details that Ziggy couldn't. I guess it's all catching up with him now. He's lost most of what he could remember. It could be temporary; I don't know yet. He's back to where all our other patients seem to be when they first arrive. Disoriented and with large memory gaps. I want him to rest for the remainder of this Leap. No more sessions with you discussing possible murder suspects. I'm sorry, Admiral. I know he was helping you and Dr. Beckett."

Al was straining to peek around Verbena. "Can I see him? Just for a second?"

Verbena turned the admiral's request over in her mind. "Yes, but just for a minute. He's very tired and that sedative should be starting to take effect now."

"Thank you." Al walked cautiously toward the table.

The men in the white coats parted and let Al come to the edge of the table.

A variety of different machines were gathered at the head of the table. A white blanket was pulled over the body and it came up to Will's neck. Al gazed upon the face at the head of the table.

Will was very pale. His eyes slowly opened and focused. "Al?"

Al leaned down and smiled at Will. "Hey, Will, how are you doing?"

Will licked his dry lips and struggled to remain awake. "I passed out, I think. Can't remember. Dr. Beeks gave me a shot. I'm really sleepy but . . . I wanted to tell you something." Will's eyes began to close.

Al leaned closer. "Will?"

Will's eyes flew open with a start. "What we talked about—you have to write the information down in 1955. I can't remember the details. Sam's got to help me."

Verbena had joined Al at the table. She touched Al's arm, letting him know his time was up.

"Get some rest, Will. Don't worry, I'll handle everything."

"The details . . ." Will sighed and drifted off to sleep. Al put his hand on Will's shoulder. He withdrew his hand and turned away from the table. Al thanked Verbena again and headed out the door.

By the time Gene and Sam returned to Brick it was dark. It had taken all day to get David transferred into the Dunsmoore jail and make arrangements for Miss Beulah to visit each day. Some of the press had tagged along with them to Dunsmoore and that had meant more pushing and shoving when they arrived. Miss Beulah had made arrangements with the Reverend Niles to stay with his family. Sheriff Billy Joe Cooper promised Sam that David would be well protected and chided Sam for not dropping by more often. The press had disappeared by the time Sam and Gene arrived back in Brick.

Sam was glad to see that the reporters were gone. He opened up the roasting office, tossed his keys on his desk, and sat down wearily. Gene, who was in a foul mood, went to the soda machine and got a bottle out. He drained most of the drink in one swallow. He turned the fan on and it began to blow warm air around the room. Gene sat down in his chair and studied his partner.

Sam was trying to figure out where this Leap had gone so wrong. He was depressed over the fact he hadn't been able to keep David from being arrested. If he couldn't come up with the killer before Tuesday, then David would go on to stand trial and eventually be convicted of Carla Sue's murder. Sam was lost in thought when Gene coughed.

"Um, Will? Excuse me for interrupting your thoughts, but I need to discuss the work schedule for the next few days." Sam turned and looked at Gene with a puzzled expression on his face. Gene set down the bottle and wiped his hands on his pants. "I know it's not the best time right now, but I don't know when the right time would be. These past few days have been so crazy and strange. The duty schedule has changed now that David's at Dunsmoore. I'd figured he'd be staying here and I'd be taking the night shift. Now with David housed up in Dunsmoore, that makes this place empty at night. Do you think it would be safe if we left this place unoccupied at night?"

Sam realized that Gene had been staying at the jail each night since Tom's arrest. He nodded his head in agreement. "With David in Dunsmoore I don't think anyone will try and storm this place. We should be able to lock it up without any trouble."

"Good. I don't mind sleeping on the cot, but I was sure hankering for my own bed." Gene reached for his keys in his pocket. "What about tomorrow, Will? Can I still take my usual day off on Friday?"

Before Sam could reply the front door flew open. It caught Gene and Sam both by surprise. Gene was on his feet, his pistol in his hand, before Sam could get out of the chair.

Mayor Tilden, his chest all puffed out, came bounding into the office. His sleeves were rolled and his shirt untucked. His cheeks were flushed with color and he held onto the doorknob to steady himself. He looked around at the office and wagged his finger at Gene. Gene muttered under his breath and replaced the gun in his holster. The mayor swayed over to Sam and stuck out his hand. "I wanted to congratulate you both on a job well done." His words were slightly slurred and he rocked like a boat on rough seas.

Sam looked at the mayor with disgust and didn't make an effort to shake his hand. "What job well done?"

Mayor Tilden slowly withdrew his hand. He cleared his throat. "Why, the fine job you both did in rounding up Carla Sue's murderer. This is the way I like to see crime handled, fast and quick." He turned to Gene and nodded. "Gonna be a big write-up in the *Dunsmoore Bulletin* tomorrow. I was very generous to give credit where credit was deserved."

Gene just shook his head and pulled out his chair. He sat down and propped his legs up on the corner of the desk.

"This murder investigation is just beginning." Sam's tone made the mayor take notice. "It's just getting started, in fact. And I don't appreciate leaks to the press."

The mayor eyed Sam closely. "Huh? I don't know what you're talking about, Will."

"He's talking about the idiot who sicced the press on us this afternoon," Gene commented from across the room. "Hell, Mayor, we could have had a riot on our hands. Or didn't you stop to think about that when you were mouthing off to those news hounds from Dunsmoore?"

"You watch who you're talking to . . . boy." Mayor Tilden put his hands on his hips and turned around to face Gene. "I didn't call anyone regarding this arrest. They contacted me. I must say that I felt pretty foolish not knowing what was happening in my own town. I'm the mayor, by God, not some two-bit little deputy."

Gene slammed his feet down on the floor hard and pushed himself up out of his chair. "I'm getting tired of

everybody riding me tonight," Gene warned.

Sam's brow furrowed and he cautioned his deputy, "Easy, Gene. Don't get too—"

"Don't tell me to relax, Will. I suppose a drunk mayor waltzing into your office and spewing out insults doesn't bother the great and wonderful sheriff of Brick?"

"Gene!" Sam glared at his deputy.

"I am not drunk," Mayor Tilden informed the men with loud indignation. "I've just been celebrating the arrest of that colored boy."

"We've placed David Jefferson under arrest, but we're just investigating. I'm not convinced he did anything," Sam pointed out to the mayor.

Mayor Tilden turned and laughed. "It looks like an open and shut case to me, Williams. You've arrested the right boy. He was last seen walking Carla Sue home. There are witnesses at the Hole that saw them together. Everyone knew she'd take anyone into her bed for cash, black or white. Something went wrong, that's all. He panicked and killed her."

"You don't know the first thing about this murder case, Tilden," Gene responded angrily. "You don't know the facts."

"I've got all the facts I need, Gene Dupree. And I plan on making an announcement at the picnic."

"What do you plan to announce?" Sam pushed his chair out of the way and stood up. "That the murder investigation is continuing? That we're still talking to possible suspects?" Sam took a step toward the mayor.

Mayor Tilden's face darkened and he raised his index finger in the air. "Now, you just wait a minute here. You got your murderer at Dunsmoore, plain as I and this town can see. Carla Sue was murdered by that boy. He couldn't afford to let anybody know about the way they were carrying on, so he killed her. And your job, Williams, is to see that he stands trial and is convicted. That's exactly the way I see it."

"You can't see past the racist nose on your face!" Sam

stepped closer to the mayor's face. He began to raise his voice. "You don't have any hard evidence that will stand up in a court of law. All you're worried about is your job and your standing with some very questionable men in this town. You could care less about David Jefferson."

"How dare you call me a racist!" The mayor came nose to nose with Sam. "You care too much about that boy. I think it's clouding your judgment. I think I might need to replace you with someone who can deal with this case with an open mind."

"You mean someone who thinks like you do," Sam challenged. He pushed the mayor with his shoulder and the mayor wobbled. "Someone who thinks like a bigot and reacts like one. Someone who listens to men beneath white cloaks, cowards who refuse to show their faces."

Mayor Tilden recovered his balance and stuck his finger inches from Sam's face. "By God, Will Williams," the mayor shouted, "I'll have your badge by morning if you call me a bigot again and slander my good name." He started to jab at Sam's chest, but Sam shoved his hand away, which infuriated the mayor all the more. "I don't care if your daddy was a sheriff, Williams. I will not have you speak to me in that tone or manner. I'm the may—"

"You're drunk, Tilden." Gene elbowed Sam out of the way and pushed Tilden. "You've been down at the Hole and got all liquored up, drinking with those idiots who inhabit that place after dark. You have no right to show up in this condition and order us around like a couple of stooges."

"Now wait a minute, Gene," Sam said, moving forward.

Gene's eyes blazed at Sam. "Shut up, Will, and butt out of this." He turned back to Tilden. "You need to sober up and keep that mouth of yours shut until this investigation is over. That mouth just might get you into trouble." Gene eyed the mayor coldly.

"Is that so?" The mayor watched Gene with contempt in his eyes.

Gene nodded. "As you know, Will and I have both been

busy trying to crack this case. I don't know who called the press today, but it only made matters worse. This case is only a couple days old and already we're ready to try and convict. A full-blown race war isn't going to sit well with the citizens of Brick. You may just wind up getting blamed for causing it to happen in the first place."

Mayor Tilden puffed out his chest. "You think you've got this handled, Gene Dupree?"

"Just watch your mouth. We'll try and keep you up to date as soon as we can," Gene finished.

Mayor Tilden pushed away from Gene and walked toward the door. He turned around and pointed a finger in Sam's direction. "I still might have your badge, Williams. There are a lot of people watching your moves very carefully on this case. Watch where your sympathy lies—it could put you out of a job. The time is ripe for change around here." He reached for the doorknob, missed, and found it the second time. "I'll be waiting for a full report on my desk by Monday morning." He threw Sam an angry glance over his shoulder and slammed the door.

Sam melted down in his chair. He pulled the notebook out of his pocket and laid it on the desk top. Sam's hands were still shaking from his encounter with Tilden.

Gene had taken his seat at his desk. "Your daddy always said he was just a windbag that somebody needs to deflate every now and then. Got his name in the paper and with David's arrest, he's probably got a lot of pats on the back from the guys at the bar." Gene dropped his head down and studied his hands in his lap. "He's right about this murder case though. We misstep and we're liable to have more than just reporters camped out at our doorstep."

Sam tapped his fingers on the top of the notepad. "Does Mayor Tilden spend a lot of time at the Hole?"

Gene shrugged. "I wouldn't know. Just hear things. He seems to know a lot of what goes on in this town behind the scenes, if you know what I mean. He got a lot of his votes from the guys who hang out at old Patch's place.

Why, that's one of the reasons you opposed him running for mayor. Everyone says he has an inside source to the Klan, but nobody can prove it. Let's just say he would fit in real good with some of those men at the bar."

Sam glanced at his notes. "Would he have known Carla Sue?"

Gene laughed. "Well, sure. Anyone who goes into that place would know Carla Sue. She's been known to flirt with everyone. Wouldn't surprise me one bit if she and the mayor took a roll in the hay." Sam jerked his head up. "Don't look so surprised, Will. Mayor Tilden has been seen with some pretty young things now and then. His wife doesn't seem to know or care." Gene pulled at his damp shirt. "What about tomorrow, Will? Do you want me to stay here in Brick?"

Sam looked back down at his notes. "Do you have plans?"

Gene picked his key ring up off the desk. "Nothing important. Just headed into Ashcroft for the day. I've got some errands to run."

Sam shook his head. "Go ahead and take tomorrow off. In fact, why don't we call it a night? We both could use some time to relax."

"Fine," Gene agreed, "I'll stop by the office here on Saturday morning. The picnic starts on Saturday and we agreed that I'd stay here while you attend the picnic with Meg. I'll be here or at the lake on Sunday and, of course, everyone will be at the lake on Monday." Gene got up from his desk and headed out the door. "I'll come in bright and early on Saturday morning so you won't have to worry and miss a thing at the picnic. Oh, sorry about the elbow in your ribs. Tilden just makes me so mad sometimes."

Sam rubbed his fingers over the spot where Gene had nailed him. "I should have stepped in and ordered him out of the office."

Gene scoffed at Sam's remark. "Oh sure. I'd like to have

seen that." He caught the knob in his hand and shut the door.

Sam sat in the quiet office and wondered what Gene meant by that last comment. He pocketed the notepad and reached for the phone to call Meg.

CHAPTER

SEVEN

Friday, September 2, 1955

When Al located Sam, he was bent over his desk in the jail's office, working on his notes. He had transferred the notes to a bigger pad and was scribbling away when Al popped in.

Al was a sight for Sam's weary eyes in his black fedora; black, white, and pink striped silk shirt; black trousers; red socks; and gold shoes. Sam looked up from the notepad and rubbed his eyes. He leaned back in his chair and stretched out his legs.

Al's right hand cupped the link and he rubbed his brow with the back of his hand. "Been doing that long?" he asked as he pointed to the pad.

"Since four this morning. I couldn't sleep so I came down here to work. It's"—Sam glanced at his watch—"almost eight o'clock now."

"Any progress?"

Sam's smile disappeared. "No. I keep going over David's testimony, looking for something, anything that will clear him. What about you?"

Al waved his arm through the air, making Ziggy's link, held in that hand, wail. "I can't talk to Will. Beeks has got him under strict supervision. No visitors."

Sam drummed the pencil on the desk top. "Why? Did something happen?"

"Yeah, the Leap is catching up with him. Looks like we're on our own for a while."

Sam pointed at the link. "What about Ziggy?"

Al snorted. "She still can't piece together enough data to help us. Although she is rather proud that she suggested the move for David." The phone rang on Sam's desk. It rang. And rang. Al pointed at the phone. "Aren't you going to pick that up?"

Sam turned back to the pad. "Why bother? It's just another reporter calling."

Al began to tap his foot impatiently. "You can't just let it ring!"

"Why not?" asked Sam. "I've been doing it for most of the morning."

The phone kept ringing. "Sam!" Al cried, putting his hand to his head. "It's starting to drive me nuts. Pick it up."

Sam picked up the phone on the tenth ring. "Sheriff's office, Sheri—" Sam winced and pulled the phone away from his ear.

"What? What?" Al asked quickly.

Sam put the phone back to his ear and whistled into the receiver. "Hey, hold on. Try that again without yelling."

"Where have you been?" Doc Adams demanded. He began to pace back and forth in his kitchen. "I've been trying to call you for the last hour. I thought you liked to get up with the chickens."

"You and a hundred reporters have been trying to reach me," Sam informed the doctor.

"That's what I'm calling about," Doc snapped. He rat-

tled his morning paper by the phone. "Have you seen the *Dunsmoore Bulletin* this morning?"

Al was trying to listen in on the conversation. Sam moved away from the hologram. "No, Doc. I haven't been reading the paper. Any newspaper, for that matter."

"Judas H. Priest, Williams! You've got yourself a snitch on your hands," Doc began to protest.

"What are you talking about, Doc?" Sam flipped to a clean page on his notepad.

"My damn autopsy report, that's what I'm talking about. Who leaked it to the press?"

"Your autopsy report? You mean Carla Sue's?"

"What's going on?" Al hissed. "I hate being left out." Sam motioned with his fingers to be quiet.

"Of course Carla's. I'm reading from the front page. . . . 'And other evidence to support the arrest of David Jefferson of Brick was a bottle with his fingerprints left at the murder scene. The murder weapon is suspected to be a sharp knife, which has not been found.'" Doc rattled the paper. "That's what I'm talking about. I thought you wanted this to be kept quiet. The whole front page paints David as the murderer. Some unnamed source is quoted as seeing David and Carla leave the Hole together. Tom Madison is running his mouth too. Looks like Tom is getting involved with those fellows down at the Hole. That can't be good, Will."

"Doc, I haven't even seen the report." Sam moved the phone to the other ear.

"How could you not have seen the report? I dropped it off at the jail yesterday afternoon while you were out. I gave it to Gene," Doc grumbled. "Gene said that he would make sure you got it."

Sam nearly dropped the phone. He covered the mouthpiece with his hand and motioned to Al. "Go look over on that desk."

Al drifted across the floor to the other desk. "Well, what am I looking for?"

"An autopsy report."

Al jumped back from the desk. "That's disgusting, Sam. I don't want to look. . . ."

Sam got up and carried the phone over to Gene's desk. He cut in front of Al and began to rifle through the desk's contents.

"Will, are you still there?" Doc asked gruffly.

"I'm still here," Sam answered. "I'm looking but I can't find the report. Are you sure you dropped it off? Did Gene say where it would be?"

Doc laughed. "Now who's getting senile? Of course I remember what I did with that report yesterday. You had your shorts all in a knot when I didn't have it finished yesterday morning. So I brought it by the jail just as soon as I finished. Don't tell me Gene has already misplaced it. I told him specifically not to let anyone but you see it. I told him it was Carla's autopsy. He looked like he was going to pass out just by handling it."

"Don't just stand there. Help me look for the report," Sam hissed at Al and indicated the desk.

Al held up his hands. "I don't know where to look. Besides, I can't pick anything up."

"Who are you talking to now?" Doc asked.

"Nobody," Sam answered in frustration. He shut the bottom drawers of the desk with his foot. "I've got to track down that report."

"You'd better," warned Doc, "or else the whole county will be reading about this murder case before it goes to trial. And Will, be sure to read the part about Carla's—"

"I'll call you back." Sam hung up on Doc and carried his phone back to his desk. "Come on," he said, gesturing to Al as he headed out the door, "I'm going to need your help."

"Where are we going?" Al asked as he started to slip through the wall.

"To find that autopsy report."

"So where is it?"

Sam paused by the door and kept his temper in check. "I don't know where it is. Obviously it's not here. Maybe

Gene accidentally took it home yesterday.” The phone began to ring again.

“How do you accidentally take—” Al began.

“Al!” Sam opened the door. “*Let’s go.*”

The pair drove out of Brick on Route 21. The business section quickly fell away to long, open farm fields. Al gave Sam directions to Gene’s house via Ziggy. They had just driven past a field of cotton when a lone house came into view.

“Is that it?” Al asked from the back seat. He peered through the car’s window, looking for a street number.

“It’s not the right address, unless Ziggy’s wrong.” Sam slowed the car. “Gene’s place can’t be much farther. He made pretty good time the other day when he had to hurry home and change clothes.”

Al swatted at the link. “This house belongs to a family named King.” Al leaned closer to the window. “This is a really big place. They’ve got their own garden on the side.” Al suddenly sat up in the back seat. “Sam! Look! Do you see that?”

Sam hit the brakes and brought the car to an abrupt stop. He looked out the driver’s side window. “What! What do you see?”

“That’s air pollution,” Al announced proudly. He pointed at the thin trail of smoke snaking up behind the house. “See that black smoke coming from behind the house?”

Sam turned so he could get a better look at Al. “You gave me whiplash because of some smoke?” Sam turned around. “It’s probably just the trash pile burning. We used to burn trash on the farm.”

“But it’s not just a trash pile burning. It could be the start of the breakdown of the ozone layer.” Al leaned forward over the seat. When it came to environmental issues, no one was more determined than Al to drive a point home.

“I’m not interested in burning trash piles, Al. Besides, what am I supposed to do about it?”

"You're the sheriff," Al pointed out. "Arrest them."

"I can't just arrest people who burn trash, Al. It's not illegal." Sam hit the gas and the car moved on down the road.

"Not yet, but it will be." Al sighed wistfully and watched the house grow smaller.

Another mile down the road from the Kings' house was a small, one-story house set back from the main highway. Sam pulled into the deserted driveway and shut off the engine. A detached garage sat at the back of the driveway. The house looked well cared for.

"Ziggy says this is the address she got off the court records for Gene. Looks kind of lonely, doesn't it?" Al scrunched forward in the back seat.

Gene Dupree's house was nestled behind two big weeping willow trees. Al leaned over, his elbows disappearing into the seat. "Now what?"

"If Gene's got the report it's got to be here. Why don't you and I go do some investigating?"

Al moaned. "Fine. If you want to waste your time digging around in an empty house . . ." He hit a button and appeared on the front porch.

Sam joined Al on the porch. Sam tried the door and found, to his dismay, that it was locked. He knocked on the door and called out Gene's name. "Why would you keep your door locked in a small town like this?" Sam asked as Al paced the length of the small porch.

"Well I would," Al chimed in. "Especially if I was a deputy and happened to be involved in a murder case that's going to make headlines fifty miles away." Al waved his hands in the air and the link chirped. "Nobody's home, let's go."

Sam stepped back away from the door and looked at the windows. "All the blinds are drawn too."

"So he likes privacy. Big deal. We're wasting our time."

Sam stepped back. "I've got to get my hands on that report. Gene's supposed to be spending the day in Ashcroft." Sam put his hands on his hips. "I'm going around

to the back. Why don't you go in through the front door and take a look around?"

"This is breaking and entering, *Sheriff*," Al started to point out. But Sam was down the steps and around the corner of the house before Al could finish.

Mumbling to himself, Al slid through the door and into the living room. The room was dark and it took Al's eyes a moment or two before they adjusted to the dimness. The drapes were closed and heavy curtains hung in front of the windows, blocking out the sunlight. Al walked around blinking until he could make out a stream of sunshine coming from the kitchen. He walked into the kitchen and waited for Sam.

Al inspected the countertop with the glasses neatly lined up and the plates all stacked. The table was bare. A small 1955 calendar hung on the back of a door that Al guessed led down to a cellar. The calendar was opened to Miss September and showed a very bosomy girl in hot pants and a midriff top.

Sam jangled the doorknob and the kitchen door gave way. He cracked open the door and peered into the kitchen. He eased his body through and gently shut the door. "I'm in," he whispered. "Did you see anything?"

"Yes," Al whispered back. He rocked on the balls of his feet and pointed at the door. "Check out this calendar."

Sam took one look and turned away. "That's not what I meant, Al. Let's just find that report and go. I don't want to get caught breaking into my deputy's house." Sam headed out of the kitchen and into a narrow hallway. "What's down this way?" Sam whispered.

"Why are we whispering?" Al answered in his normal speaking voice, causing Sam to jump a bit.

"Because," Sam said, spinning around. "Just . . . because," he answered in his normal voice. "Did you see anything in the living room?"

"No. Too dark. Let's head this way. This is not a huge house by any means."

Sam walked down to the end of the hallway and opened

a door. It was a bathroom. He walked back and checked out the room to his right. It was a small bedroom. There was a bed and a dresser, and another small bathroom.

"The kid lives kind of Spartan style, don't you think?" Al noted as he drifted from the bedroom to the bathroom behind Sam.

Sam nodded in agreement. "Let's check the last room and get out of here. This is starting to give me the creeps." Sam walked down the hallway to a doorway. He tried the knob and the door swung open. The men entered a small room that appeared to be a study. Sam and Al separated, looking in different areas. Al paused by a wooden desk and let out a low whistle. "Hey, Sam, come here."

"What?" Sam strode across the room. "Did you find the report?"

"Um, I don't think so," Al responded truthfully. He pointed at the desk top, which was covered with loose papers and magazines. "Pick up that magazine near the top there and flip it open." Sam pulled out the magazine from under two other magazines and flipped it open. It was difficult to make out what Sam had picked up from the desk. Like the living room, the windows were shut and the drapes drawn. Sam reached over and turned on the lamp sitting on the desk. A smiling, naked woman striking a provocative pose emerged from the pages of the magazine.

"Bingo!" Al smiled and leaned over the desk. "I was right."

"Of course," Sam sighed with disgust. He flipped the magazine shut. "Concentrate on finding the autopsy report, Al."

"Hey, that's a 1955 *Playboy*." Al patted his chest and produced a cellophane-wrapped cigar. He undid the wrapping and tossed it into a trash can. As soon as the wrapping left Al's fingertips, it vanished. "That's a collector's item and I haven't seen the centerfold yet." Al found his lighter and lit his cigar.

"And you're not going to see it either. Why couldn't you have been this helpful earlier?" Sam asked as he set

the magazine down on the pile where he found it. He hit another stack of magazines with his forearm and sent them scattering onto the desk top and the floor. Sam caught the pile and steadied it before more magazines tumbled off. "These are all the same type of magazines, Al."

"Over against the wall too. Look, two more stacks." Al sighed. "Boy, I wish I could turn pages. Seems like Gene Dupree knows how to take care of his spare time." Al began to walk around the desk. He whistled again. "These run the gambit of taste, I see. Chains, bondage, S & M." Al shuddered. "This is some bizarre stuff, even for me. I would have never guessed by looking at the kid either. Wow." Al stepped around a small stack. "There are some weights tucked over here in the corner."

Sam was searching the cluttered desk top, trying not to disturb anything. He picked up a photo by the corner and moved it to another pile.

Al walked over to the desk and studied the photo in Sam's fingertips. "How does she do that?"

"Hey Al, look." Sam was moving some more magazines and pictures away from one corner of the desk. He had discovered some handwritten notes. He picked up a few more items off the desk and discovered Doc's autopsy. The report was opened to the description of the murder scene.

"What did you find?"

"The autopsy report. Gene's been taking notes, it looks like. Damn. I can't remove it without Gene knowing we've been here. It's half buried." Sam moved a few more pictures on the desk top, uncovering more of the report.

Al tipped his head and read a line of the report. He made a noise and looked away. "Boy, that's pretty descriptive." He paused and looked down at his cigar. "You know, something's not right about this."

"How can I get the report out of here without Gene knowing I've moved it?"

Al shook his head. "You can't."

Sam popped his head up and listened. "Did you hear something, Al?"

Al cocked his head toward the door. "Naw, I didn't hear anything. We got zilch here. Unless you want to lift that report. Gene's gonna know you broke into his house, and worse"—Al motioned around the room with his cigar—"he's gonna know you've found his Den of Love."

"I know, I know. But I don't want to leave the report here. Why didn't he tell me yesterday?"

"Because he forgot?" Al shrugged and sucked on his stogie. "Remember the joint was really jumping yesterday," Al chuckled to himself.

Sam ran his fingers over Gene's handwritten notes. The phrase "locate murder weapon" was circled and underlined.

"Look," Al reasoned, "just get the report tomorrow morning. I'll try and have Ziggy run a check on it until then."

Sam stepped away from the desk and brushed off his hands. "What if Ziggy can't come up with the report? I hate to wait till tomorrow. In the meantime we'll explore a hunch I have."

"Now where are we going?" Al asked as he drifted through the door. Sam swung the door shut and continued down the hallway and back into the kitchen.

Sam was listening and looking all around as he paused in the kitchen. "I checked the garage in back. The windows are boarded up."

Al rolled the cigar in his mouth and juggled the link in one hand. "What hunch are you talking about? You found the report. I don't think I like the sound of this."

Sam opened the kitchen door. "I've got to find the murder weapon. Time is running out for David."

Al rolled his eyes. "I *know* I don't like the sound of this. Just where are you off to, Sherlock Holmes?"

"We're off to Carla Sue's trailer."

"That's where I draw the line, Sam. I'm not going to the murder scene." Al waved the link in the air. "I don't like murder scenes. Count me out!"

"Al, I'm running out of time. You won't have to go

inside the trailer. Just walk around outside and look for clues."

Al pondered this a moment. "You promise I won't have to go inside?"

Sam nodded. "I promise." He let himself out the door.

Al heard Sam going down the steps. He mumbled to himself as he pocketed the link and blew a thin blue trail of smoke into the air. The house was still. "Sam's getting me spooked," Al mumbled as he started to walk through the back door after Sam. Al stopped to admire the calendar once more. He looked at the calendar and froze. The calendar was swinging ever so slightly back and forth on its nail. Unless you looked closely you could hardly detect the movement. Al looked closer at the door. It was open just a crack. He racked his brain, trying to remember if that door had been open before. The hair on Al's neck stood up and the cigar trembled in his fingertips. The calendar's momentum had stopped. Miss September smiled back at Al. Al swallowed and took a step closer toward the door. "Gene?" he called out in a shaky voice, even though Al knew no one could hear him. He stared at the door, waiting for it to open further.

The window banged loudly behind Al's back. Al yelled and flew backwards, away from the door. He dropped his cigar and it disappeared through the floor. Al staggered away from the door and window, managing to step through the table. Someone was standing at the window.

Sam smashed his face up to the dirty window and spotted Al. "Come on, Al," Sam's muffled voice shouted through the glass. "Let's go."

Al put a trembling hand over his heart. His knees were turning to water and he had nothing to hold himself upright. "You just scared me to death, Sam Beckett," Al yelled at the window. "And I've lost my cigar too." Al scanned the floor looking in vain for his cigar.

"Quit messing around." Sam was motioning with his head and body.

Al stomped over to the window and shouted back at Sam,

"I'm coming." Al stepped away from the window and swore under his breath. He pulled the link from his pocket and it almost slipped through his shaking hands. He hit a button that put him outside.

Inside the deserted kitchen the sound of the car starting up drifted in from the outside. The cellar door slid soundlessly shut, causing Miss September to swing back and forth, ever so slightly on the nail.

Al was trying to light another cigar. He was having a difficult time getting his fingers to work the lighter. After the fifth try the lighter glowed to life and Al lit the end of his cigar. He pocketed the lighter and took a long drag on his cigar, hoping to calm his jagged nerves.

Sam was emerging from the trailer. He came down the steps and wiped his face off with the back of his shirt sleeve. "How are you doing?"

Al sneered and exhaled a trail of smoke. "I'll live. What about you? Find anything?"

"No, nothing." Sam dusted off his hands on his pants leg. "The inside of the trailer has been gone over with a fine-tooth comb. Let's take a walk." Sam headed away from the trailer, keeping his head down as he walked.

Al walked a few paces back. "What exactly are we looking for? And how are we going to find it in all these overgrown weeds?"

"I don't 'exactly' know," Sam confessed.

"You don't really think the murderer is going to just drop the weapon out here, do ya?" Al asked as he stepped around an old, rotting tire.

"Could have happened," Sam muttered. "No one would ever find it. Why don't you stop jabbering and start looking? Get Ziggy to help us."

The weeds were growing thicker as Sam and Al wandered away from the trailer. Al shook the link up and down in his hand. "I can't rewire this thing on such short notice. I'm no Einstein, you know. You should have warned me

ahead of time." As Al walked, his legs from the knees down began to disappear into the weeds.

"You've gotten Ziggy to work through that link before. Now is a fine time to feign incompetence."

Al halted. "Incompetence?" He snapped his head up. "Who are you claiming is incompetent?"

Sam turned around and wiped his sweating brow. "I don't want to argue, Al."

"I'll show you who the incompetent one is." Al straightened his shoulders. "Just watch this." Al thumbed his nose at Sam and disappeared into a large patch of tall weeds.

Sam began to pick through the weeds ahead of him. He heard a click up ahead in the grass. Sam paused and listened. "Don't fool around here, Al," Sam called out, "we're supposed to be looking for evidence." A formidable silence met Sam's rebuke. "Al?"

Al suddenly came charging back out of the tall weeds, his arms held high in the air. His eyes were wide and he began to wave his arms frantically. "Run, Sam, run!"

The weeds parted where Al had just charged out and Sam found himself looking down the barrel of a shotgun.

Sam whipped his hands up into the air and shouted, "Don't shoot. It's Sheriff Williams." The barrel of the gun remained pointed at Sam and time stood still.

Slowly the barrel was lowered and a dirty hand parted the weeds. Two dark eyes peered out.

Al jogged over to Sam's side, one hand smashing the fedora down on his head, the other hand holding the hand-link pressed tightly to his chest. Al had lost his second cigar of the day. He breathed through his mouth in short, raspy breaths. "It's . . . him . . . the . . . killer, Sam."

"Who's out there?" Sam called out, his hands still in the air. "Show yourself."

The weathered hand, twisted with arthritis, separated the weeds. "You're trespassing on my land," a scratchy, deep voice shot back. An old, wrinkled man stepped through the weeds and squinted in Sam's direction. He lowered the

shotgun a bit and took a step forward. "Is that you, Gene Dupree?"

"No," Sam answered back, keeping his hands in plain sight. "It's Sheriff Will Williams."

The old man put a hand up to his ear. "Who?"

"He's deaf, Sam." Al tugged at his brim. "And he's gonna shoot us."

Sam took a step closer and bellowed, "I'm Sheriff Williams. From Brick?"

The gun dropped down to the man's side. He turned his head to one side and spit a long, brown stream of tobacco out on the ground. Tobacco juice dribbled into the man's beard.

"On top of everything else," Al announced as he watched the old man, "I think I'm going to be sick."

"You're on my property, Sheriff." The old man held his hand up to his brow. "You're lucky you aren't dead."

Sam looked at the old codger. "Can I put my hands down?" Sam asked.

The old man laughed and set the butt of the shotgun on the ground. "Suit yourself."

"I didn't know I was on your property." Sam lowered his hands until they were resting near his gun belt. "You must be Mr. Blythe. You gave me quite a scare."

The old man spit again and Al moaned quietly behind Sam. "I should have killed you, running around on my land. This is private property, Sheriff. Been in my family for three generations."

"And what prime real estate too," Al snipped.

Blythe shrugged his shoulders and turned back into the weeds. "You know the way off my land," he called over his shoulder.

"Wait, Mr. Blythe," Sam called out. He surged forward after the man.

"Sam," Al cried, "that guy's a nut. Come back here."

Sam ignored Al and continued in his pursuit of Blythe. Al muttered, readjusted his hat on his head, and glumly followed Sam.

The old man made good time striding through the weeds. He reached the deteriorating house before Sam could catch him. He carried the shotgun as he climbed the rickety stairs.

Sam broke through the weeds and came into the yard.

The old man turned around and stopped. He watched Sam approach. Blythe was dressed in a torn and tattered shirt and a pair of dirt-caked pants. He spit another stream of tobacco shot, which splattered down on the porch. Most of his teeth were gone and he ran his blackened tongue over his gums as he spoke. "You're still here?"

"Sam!" Al stepped through the weeds and into the yard next to Sam. "Come on. This guy isn't going to tell you anything."

"Mind if I ask you a few questions?" Sam shouted.

The old man shrugged and came back down the stairs. He cradled the shotgun in his arms. "Go ahead and ask."

"Sam," Al warned. "He's going to tell you about the little green men from Mars."

Sam walked into the yard and stood about a foot away from Blythe. The odor from the man nearly knocked Sam down. Sam didn't even want to hazard a guess as to when the man had bathed last. "I just want to ask you a few questions and then I'll be on my way."

Blythe looked up at the sky. "Yeah?"

"The trailer in back?" Sam pointed in the direction of Carla Sue's trailer.

Blythe followed Sam's finger. "You want to know about the girl?" Blythe acted like Sam was boring him. "I let that girl live there with her man as long as they kept to themselves and didn't cause me no trouble."

"She was murdered. Did you know that, Mr. Blythe?" Sam had reached for Will's notebook again.

The old man shrugged. "Figured that's what brought out all those people. What's done is done."

"Sam," Al called across the yard, "Ziggy's got nothing on this guy." He stuck his finger next to his head and twirled it.

The old man spit and pointed to the tall weeds next to

his house. "They messed the grass up. Those demons who roam this land at night. Can't kill them with guns or knives. I should know, 'cause I tried."

Sam saw the crazed look in the old man's dancing eyes. He started to put the notepad away. "I'm sorry if we troubled you, Mr. Blythe."

The old man roared with a wicked laughter that sent chills up Sam's spine. "All those damn visitors coming and going. Making tracks back to that trailer. Going to see the tooth fairy for a treat." He chuckled loudly and spit. "They come and make the demons go away. Do you know what I mean, Sheriff?" Blythe scratched at his arm with his dirty hand. "I know there were a lot of men going back to her trailer when Tom wasn't around. 'Course Tom is so dense and thick you'd have to hit him over the head to get him to see things the way they were. I may be crazy, but I saw what went on." He pointed at the tree not far from where Al was standing. "She was shooting at that tree one day. Her and that boy. He was teaching her how to hold a gun. He was teaching her to shoot and she was teaching him things by night. They stood on my property shooting at my tree. I guess he was better than that lying windbag who came around. Brazen hussy, Carla was." Blythe stopped talking and looked up at the sky again. "She attracted all kinds, Sheriff. Good, bad. Black, white. Mostly white. Mayors, city councilmen, deputies, pastors, young and old. Mostly good on the outside, but some were bad and dark on the inside."

Sam turned and studied the tree. Al shrugged his shoulders and consulted with Ziggy's link. "Who was teaching Carla Sue to shoot a gun?" Sam asked.

Blythe snorted. "One of her regulars. Used to come and park his car back behind my house. Thought I didn't know. I watched him. He was just a demon in disguise. He'd been courting her for more than a year. He was here the day she died. Tore out of here like a bat from Hell. Half dressed, running through the weeds, like the true demon that he was.

Splattered with demon's blood." Blythe wheezed and coughed in the sun.

Sam felt his heart and his temples pounding. "The man that you saw running away that day—was he a colored man?"

Blythe shook his head. "I hadn't seen a black one in a while. Like I said, mostly white." Blythe turned around. "I'm done talking. You've got two minutes to clear off my property. You go back to Brick and deliver a message for me. Tell that upstart deputy of yours to stay off my property. And you tell the mayor I want my electricity turned back on or I'll tell the town what kinds of underwear he really likes to wear by the light of the moon." Blythe turned and pointed at Sam. "You got that, Sheriff?"

Sam's pencil became still. "My deputy? Gene Dupree was here? On your property?"

Blythe laughed as he climbed the stairs. "'Course he was. He was here this very morning." He pulled open the rotting screen door and before disappearing inside said, "Those demons come at night and steal parts of my house. Those demons will be back, I'm telling you. They always come back."

Sam turned and briskly headed back toward Al.

Al tipped his fedora back on his head. "What a wacko." He saw the look on Sam's face as he approached. "Now what?"

Sam didn't stop as he pushed back through the weeds. "Meet me back at the car."

"Sam? What's a matter?"

Sam pushed through the weeds and disappeared.

Al was standing next to the patrol car when Sam joined him. Sam was sweating profusely and had to wipe his face off with the back of his arm. He leaned against the car and looked down at the ground. "It's Gene. It's my deputy."

"What are you talking about, Sam?" Al had both his hands in his pockets. "You can't believe the things that crazy old man said. His testimony would never stand up in court. Heck, you'd be laughed out of the state if you tried

to bring that old geezer in." Al pulled his hands out of his pockets and gestured with them. "Look what he said about the mayor. You can't take what he says seriously."

Sam opened the car door and sat down. "He said a lot of things. He claimed he saw Gene teaching Carla Sue to use a gun."

Al dug the link out of his pocket. "He's crazy, Sam. Besides," Al pointed out, "Gene's a good guy. I mean, forget about his den and the magazines. We all have our little faults."

Sam dug his heel into the dirt and weeds. "That's just it. I can't forget about those magazines or the pictures. And why was he at the murder scene this morning?"

"I dunno, maybe he was investigating?"

"Then why did he lie to me about going into Ashcroft today?"

Al squinted up into the sunshine. "I don't know. But you've got to prove it to me that Gene Dupree could commit murder, Sam. From what I've seen of him he looks like a young Barney Fife. Besides, I know *I* wouldn't be investigating a murder scene no matter what. Not even in broad daylight." Al stopped talking and a puzzled look crossed his features.

Sam rested both his arms on the car door. "I know I'm jumping to conclusions. It could have been Tilden too. But why would Tilden murder Carla Sue? He's had lots of affairs according to Gene. Why would this affair be any different?" Sam shook his head. "I'm really confused now." He tapped the seat and closed his eyes. He opened them a few moments later. "Al, have Ziggy run a perimeter on this area."

Al stopped thinking about Gene and began to punch at the link. "Okay. How wide?"

Sam looked around. "Say two to five miles. I'm looking specifically for residences."

Al was quiet as he entered the data into the link. "Less than a mile due west is Gene Dupree's house." Al tapped the link with his fingers. "And the only other house after

Gene's is the King residence. It's about two and a half miles down the road."

"Let's take a ride. I'm working on a theory." Sam shut the car door and started the engine.

Al walked around and leaned down at the window. "Where are we going now?"

Sam dropped the car into gear. "To the Kings' house."

CHAPTER EIGHT

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Al and Sam were subdued when they arrived at the King residence. The house was surrounded by woods on one side. A large garden was spread out to the other side and back of the house.

Sam opened a tall wooden gate that led them into the yard. A woman with a large sun hat was bent down and working a row of flowers not far from the house. Sam called out and waved. The woman waved back.

Mrs. Sally King was kneeling beside a row of flowers. She put down her shovel and dusted the dirt out of her work gloves. "Afternoon, Sheriff." She tipped her wide brimmed hat back on her head. "What brings you out here? Have you got another jumper?"

Sam shook his head. "No, nothing that serious. I understand we borrowed a tomato from your garden. I wanted to thank you."

"Oh, Will Williams, no need to do that," the woman told him, laughing. Her laugh was deep and hearty. "I had

tomatoes rotting all over the ground from this year's bumper crop. Besides," she added, her blue eyes sparkling beneath her hat, "I heard it landed in the mayor's car. Good shot, William."

Sam knelt down and admired the flower bed. "Marigolds. My mother used to grow marigolds."

"Gardening keeps me occupied now that the children are all grown up and on their own. I love working out here."

"Mrs. King . . ."

Sally swatted playfully at Sam's knee. "You've known me too long to call me anything other than Sally."

"Sally," Sam began again, "did you see Gene Dupree, my deputy, when he came by the other day?"

"I saw him from a distance." She pointed back toward the house. "I was in the kitchen doing some canning. Saw him wave from over by the fence. He said he needed a tomato. I told him where the tomatoes were and he let himself in. Why? Is there something wrong?"

"Um . . ." Sam began to hedge.

Al stepped up to Sam's back. "Tell her Gene lost your favorite pocketknife and you've come by hoping to find it."

"It seems," Sam continued after a moment's pause, "Gene's lost my favorite pocketknife."

Sally King frowned. "Oh no. Not that nice one your daddy gave you when you became sheriff? With the engraving on the handle? I remember the day when he gave it to you. Oh, what a shame."

Sam cast a worried glance up at Al. "Yes. That's the one, all right. Do you mind if I go and hunt around for it?"

"'Course not," Sally insisted with a wave of her hand. "Go ahead. I don't get many visitors out this way. The tomato patch is back by the trash pile. I could fix you some iced tea while you look."

"No, don't get up," Sam said as he rose, "I'll only be a minute and I don't want to trouble you."

"I'll be right here if you change your mind." She turned back to her flower bed. "Take your time."

Sam and Al followed the trail of smoke from the smoldering trash pile. It brought them through the garden, out by the tomato vines.

"Look at this," Al complained as he circled the trash heap. "This is a major source of pollution. Look at all the stuff that's burning here. It's going to give off enough toxic fumes to get to even me." He waved his hand in front of his face.

"You're one to talk," Sam pointed out. "You're lucky I can't smell those cigars you keep smoking or I'd be the one complaining about toxic fumes." Sam paused and walked over to the trash heap. Al was pacing around the perimeter of the pile, grimacing at what was smoldering at his feet. "We used to burn trash on the farm," Sam said as he eyed the heap. "By the looks of this heap, I'd say this trash has been smoldering for a day or two, wouldn't you?"

Al shrugged, clearly disgusted. "I wouldn't know. It just looks like a bunch of burnt trash to me." Al held his stomach with his hand. "Man, this has *not* been a good day for me."

Sam looked around and headed in the opposite direction from the pile. When he came back he had a rake in his hands. He began to rake apart the trash pile.

"Where did you get that rake?"

Sam kept raking. "Over by the compost pile. Seems Mrs. King does recycle."

"Good," Al decided. "But what are you looking for?"

"The murder weapon."

Al sighed. "So who do you think committed the crime? Loyal, trustworthy Gene the Boy Scout? or Tilden the adulterous mayor? My money is on the mayor."

Sam paused. "You're calling Gene a Boy Scout?"

"No, I didn't but Will did." Al wrestled with the handlink. "He said some good things about Gene." Al began to read the data silently to himself. His face fell and he studied the link closely. "Wait a minute. . . ."

Sam was busy raking through the trash and didn't bother looking up. "You found something?"

Al looked up from the link. "I remembered what was troubling me back at Gene's house when we were in his den." Al's tone had gotten Sam's attention. "You know, Will told me Gene faints at the sight of blood."

Sam was a damp mess. His shirt was soaked with perspiration and it clung to his back and chest. He stopped and wiped his face with his shirt sleeve. "Yeah. Doc mentioned it too. It's a real sore point with Gene."

Al began tapping his fingers to his chin. "Will also mentioned something about Gene not being able to read autopsy reports." Al looked at Sam with concern. "Gene was not only *reading* that report but he was making detailed notes regarding the murder scene." Al grunted and he began to stab at the link with his finger.

"Maybe Gene is just trying to solve the murder. I think there's more to Gene Dupree than meets the eye. I mean, those sure weren't comic books in that study."

Al was frantically punching keys on the link. "Something's not right." The link blinked and chirped and twittered at the admiral. "Aha!" Al cried out a few moments later. "Wow, Sam, listen. I don't know why I didn't think of this before. I had Ziggy run through the town records of Brick from 1965." Al tapped the display with his fingertips. "Gene Dupree isn't listed as your deputy in any newspaper accounts. In fact, Ziggy can't find Gene Dupree anywhere in her data banks for 1965." Al punched a few more buttons. "It seems he just disappeared. He got a driver's license in Nebraska in 1957 but after that, it's like he dropped off the earth."

Sam stopped raking. "Nebraska? What about Tilden?"

"Ziggy's got more on him. He resided in Brick until his death in 1974. You're gonna love this. He was recalled as mayor in 1956 and never held a higher office. Tried to run for the House of Representatives in 1958 but got tangled up in an investigation with the IRS. He withdrew and never was elected to anything again."

Sam went back to raking the trash pile and started thinking out loud. "Carla Sue was murdered in the early afternoon, very close to the time Tom was on the balcony. If Gene was at the trailer and if he killed her, he'd be covered in blood. Blythe said he saw a white person running from Carla's trailer with blood on his clothes."

Al stepped around the trash Sam was raking. "Yes, but he didn't say it was for sure Gene. Remember Carla had quite a little sideline of activity and it could have been anyone. You can't go on what Blythe saw anyway. He's nuts. You're going to need solid proof to clear David."

Sam nodded in agreement. "Okay, but let's say it was Gene. He must have changed clothes, since the duty roster shows him as being on duty that afternoon. On the way home to change he hears Will's call over the radio about Tom. He goes home, changes his clothes, but he doesn't have time to get rid of the murder weapon or his bloodied clothes. He stops here on the way into town to get a tomato, sees the fire, and gets rid of both the knife and his blood-stained clothes."

Al grimaced and shook his head. "Talk about a long shot. You don't have a lot of evidence to back that theory up."

"That's why I'm looking for the murder weapon. This would be a good place to ditch the weapon and clothing."

Al wagged his fingers in the air. "You don't know that *David* didn't stop here on his way into town. Granted it's a little out of his way but if you're going to get rid of a murder weapon . . . ?"

Sam bit his lower lip and wiped off his forehead. "Maybe. But remember David was on foot. I'll have to see what time he arrived back in town that afternoon. Sally King seems to keep a close eye on her property. She didn't mention seeing David back here. I still think Gene or even Tilden could have come from Carla's place and gotten rid of the knife. They were both in the area at the same time. And whoever it was might have gotten rid of the murder weapon in those woods out back."

Al turned and looked out toward the back of the yard. "Gee, Sam, you don't have a week to search through those woods. The way things are going, David's going to be arraigned on Tuesday. Even with a dozen deputies you'll never get those woods searched."

Sam picked up the rake and began vigorously spreading out more of the pile. "Does Ziggy have any information regarding the weapon in the court papers?"

"Let me find it. . . . Here it is. In the original history no murder weapon was ever found." Al backed away from the pile as Sam raked trash over the top of his shoes. "Sam, you're making a mess. Won't the clothing and knife be burned up anyway?"

Sam knelt down at the edge of the pile. "The clothes, yes, and most of the knife. I'm looking for the blade." He combed the debris with the rake. The trash was spread out over a large area of the yard now. Sam fished his pencil out of his pocket. "Ever get the feeling, Al, that you're on the right track? I've got that feeling. I think the murder weapon is here and Gene planted it."

Al searched the ground. "I don't know, Sam. You are making a big mess."

Sam pulled and separated and cleared the debris away at his feet. "I know David is innocent and it's going to be up to me to . . ." He surged forward and stepped over the smoldering pile. He knelt down and picked through the trash until he had uncovered a blackened, burnt piece of metal. He reached for a half-burned newspaper and scooped up the charred remains of a knife blade in his hand. Sam carefully wrapped the blade in the paper. "I'm going to take this to Doc Adams and see if he can get any prints off of it." Sam held up the paper and carefully retreated from the trash pile.

Al was unconvinced. "It's 1955, Sam. You know Doc Adams isn't going to get much from that knife—if that is a knife. It's hard to tell if this is even the knife we're looking for. You wanna know what Ziggy says the odds are that's the genuine article?"

“No, I don’t. But it is a knife blade, that much I know. And I didn’t see any other cutlery out here. I doubt Sally King would just throw a knife into the trash pile. It’s the only hard evidence I can produce right now, even if it’s not much.” Sam set the paper-wrapped knife down in the grass and began to rake up the mess he had made.

Ziggy’s link shrieked and Al read the display. “Ziggy’s located a paper in Tulsa that did a follow-up story on the murder a year later. Nothing much has changed, according to the report, except that Will Williams has a new deputy. Seems Gene Dupree left Brick about two months after David’s trial ended.” Al looked up at Sam. “Tilden could be involved in some way too. You still think Gene acted alone?”

“I don’t know. Tilden is still here a year after the murder and Gene isn’t. Can’t figure why Gene would up and leave Brick. Seems he wants to hang around and follow Will’s father’s footsteps. If Gene did commit the murder then he could flee once David is convicted. I would guess that Will would be looking for some way to get David’s sentence overturned once he’s convicted instead of looking for the real killer.” Sam had raked up the trash pile and returned the rake where he had found it. “I don’t really have a motive for Gene and that troubles me. Looks like I’ll have to question Gene tomorrow morning. I’m not going to stake out his house tonight. He might get suspicious and flee. Maybe he didn’t do it, but he might know who did. Especially if Blythe is right and Gene was involved with Carla Sue.” Sam tucked the wrapped blade in his arm and led Al back through the yard.

Sally King spotted Sam and called out, “Did you find the knife, Will?” she asked hopefully.

Sam gripped the paper wrapped blade in his hand. “I sure did. Thank you for letting us have a look around. By the way, Sally,” Sam added as he tucked his blackened hands around his back, “could someone get inside the gate without you knowing it?”

Sally King scoffed. “Not hardly. I lock the gate at night

and if I'm not going to be at home. Otherwise I'm out here ninety percent of the time. The other ten percent I'm in the kitchen or house. Almost all the windows face this yard. I'd know if someone was in the yard. Why do you ask, Will?"

"Just wanted to make sure you're taking precautions. Part of my job of keeping the town safe."

Sally laughed. "This murder is the most interesting thing this town has to talk about since Tom Madison started climbing out the city hall window. I sure hope you find out who did it. I've read in the papers that your housekeeper's boy may be involved. I hope he didn't do it. He seems like such a nice boy."

Sam bowed his head. "Thank you again. I'll let myself out."

"What if it's not Gene?" Al asked quietly as Sam shut the gate and headed back toward the patrol car.

"Then I've run out of time and suspects," Sam said as he climbed into the car.

"I'm going to run a few more things by Ziggy," Al said as the Imaging Chamber door opened up behind him. "I'll go with you tomorrow morning when you talk to Gene."

"Good idea," Sam agreed as he started up the car. "I'll get Meg and the kids headed off to the picnic tomorrow before I swing by the jail and question Gene. First I'm going to run this by Doc's place and see what he thinks."

Al watched Sam drive off. He had a bad feeling about this Leap all of a sudden. He stepped into the Chamber and closed the door.

As twilight descended upon Brick, a car pulled along beside Sally King's garden. It coasted up to the gate and stopped. The figure in the car watched the house. Bright lights in the kitchen and the upstairs signaled someone was at home.

A few minutes later a lone figure crept up to the gate and opened the latch. The gate opened easily and without a sound. The person blended into the long shadows the setting sun was casting. Along the row of cornstalks this

person walked, being careful not to rustle the dry stalks. The person was heading toward the back of the garden, toward the trash pile. Just a few more feet to go, around by the fruit trees and then into the tall protective vines of Sally King's prize winning tomatoes.

Sally King tossed the last of the weeds on the pile and listened. She looked at the tomato vines and spotted the intruder, hiding in the shadows.

The intruder felt the gun tucked under his belt, next to his skin. The fingertips of the intruder brushed down across the small bulge it made in his shirt.

Sally King walked boldly over to the vines. "Who's there! Come out." She had a shovel in her hands, which she held up protectively in front of her. She was still quick on her feet for sixty.

The intruder looked around. Nowhere to escape, nowhere to run. The gun tucked away seemed heavy and so accessible.

Sally King raised the shovel in the air. "Come out of those vines now. Don't think I can't see you."

Gene Dupree felt beads of sweat forming on his neck. He stepped out of the vines into the fading light. "It's just me, Mrs. King. Gene Dupree." He held his hands up as he walked. "Don't hurt me with that shovel, Mrs. King."

Sally King slowly lowered the shovel as Gene approached. "Gene Dupree, you scared the living daylights out of me."

Gene lowered his hands and smiled. "I didn't intend to scare you, Mrs. King. I thought you were in the house. All the lights were on."

Sally King studied Gene carefully. She didn't put down the shovel. Something about his manner made her uneasy. "You just can't go walking into people's backyards. Didn't Will's father teach you better than that? Why, I didn't even recognize you without your uniform."

Gene stopped smiling. "I have manners." His tone was bitter. He saw the surprise on Sally King's face. Gene made himself grin again. "I just forget to use them sometimes. I

am sorry, Mrs. King. I'll just let myself out." Gene stepped back into the vines.

"Did you come looking for the knife?" Sally King asked as Gene retreated.

Gene stopped. He slowly turned around and looked at Sally King with a neutral face. "Pardon me?"

"Will's pocketknife? He came by earlier today and was looking for it too. Said you misplaced it when you came by the other afternoon. You don't have to worry about it, Gene—Will found it."

Torrents of sweat began trickling down Gene's face and chest. He could feel his heart hammering. "Oh. Will's knife." Gene needed time to collect himself. Could she see his anxiety? Could she hear it in his voice? She would be easy enough to kill, he reasoned. What to do with her body would be the tough part. He ran his hand over the gun under his shirt. "I'm glad he found it," Gene lied.

"I've got a lot of work to do before the picnic tomorrow, Gene, so if you don't mind?" Sally pointed at the gate.

Gene heard the disgust in her voice. She wanted him to leave. Gene pulled his hand away from his shirt. "Of course you do, Mrs. King. Why, it wouldn't be a Labor Day picnic without you winning all those blue ribbons for your canned goods." *And you'd be sorely missed at the picnic tomorrow if you didn't make an appearance,* Gene thought to himself.

Sally King stood where she was. The last traces of light were fading rapidly from the horizon. "How could you look for a pocketknife in the dark, Gene Dupree?"

"Good night, Mrs. King. I'll see you at the picnic." Gene turned and began to make his way back through the yard. He walked rapidly and didn't bother looking back.

Sally King watched Gene leave. She carried the shovel with her as she followed behind him. She watched as he swung open the gate and jogged to his car. She sighed and shook her head as she closed the wooden gate. She listened as his car pulled away into the night.

Sally King thought about calling Sheriff Williams and

telling him Gene had come looking for his knife. She also thought about all the preparations she had to do before tomorrow and decided in the long run she was just overreacting. Will was too busy to be concerned about his deputy's whereabouts. She locked her gate and went inside.

Saturday, September 3, 1955

Sam spent yet another sleepless night tossing and turning. He rose before dawn and tiptoed out of the bedroom. He quickly dressed, made some coffee, and waited for the sun to rise. A small breeze had begun to pick up and blow through the open windows, bringing with it the first relief from the heat in three days. Sam stood at the window and let the cool breeze blow into his face. He watched as the eastern sky began to turn pink.

Meg came down the stairs, fully dressed and with Tyler in her arms. Tyler looked priceless in his blue jumper, all scrubbed and shampooed. Meg was dressed in a beautiful sleeveless pink dress with a white satin ribbon for a sash. A matching white ribbon was tied around her blond curls. She set Tyler down and wandered over to the window by Sam. She inhaled deeply. "Lord, thank you for that breeze. Do you think it's the end of the heat wave?"

"I hope so." Tyler toddled into the kitchen and Meg dutifully retrieved him. "You're up early," Sam noted as he headed into the kitchen after Meg.

"I've got to get to the lake as soon as possible," Meg answered as she began to pull box after box off the kitchen table. "Becca stayed at Patty's house overnight. I sure hope Wilma can get them ready. I'll need everyone helping this morning."

Sam walked over and began to help Meg box the pies. "I need to do something this morning before I head over to the lake."

Meg stopped boxing the pies and looked at Sam.

"What!" Meg grew slightly irritated. "What could be so important so early this morning?"

"I can't explain," Sam began as he handed another box to Meg. "I shouldn't be gone very long. It has to do with the murder investigation."

Meg looked down at the kitchen table loaded with food and items for the picnic. "Can't it wait, Will?" she demanded. "How am I supposed to cart all this food and supplies over to the lake by myself? You said you would help me."

"Becca will help you. I said I shouldn't be gone very long." Sam watched Meg out of the corner of his eye.

"I can't possibly carry all these things," Meg complained. "Maybe if I had Miss Beulah here to help, but she'll be in Dunsmoore," Meg finished in a lowered voice.

"Meg . . ."

"No," Meg nearly shouted. "Not today, William Tyler Williams. Of all the days to go wandering around on police business, why today? Let Gene handle whatever comes up. I thought we agreed you'd come to the picnic with me today and we'd spend it together as a family. You can't go back on your promise. You promised me nothing was going to spoil this day. It's Saturday, for goodness' sake. Surely this investigation can wait. . . ."

The screen rattled and a friendly voice called out, "Hello? Anyone awake this morning?"

Meg pointed her index finger at Sam. "Don't leave. We're not finished talking yet," she snapped, and walked out to the living room. Meg smoothed out her dress and opened the door for Miss Beulah and the Reverend Niles.

Sam wandered out to the living room, trying to calm himself and hoping to get a moment alone with Meg.

Miss Beulah was dressed in her Sunday best, with matching shoes and purse. "I'm off to visit David this morning," she said, looking at Meg and Sam. "The reverend and I need to keep his spirits up. I understand they may arraign him as soon as Tuesday. Is that so, William?"

Sam nodded curtly, "Yes, ma'am."

“So soon.” Miss Beulah shook her head. “How can they be so sure they’ve got the right person?”

Meg took Miss Beulah by the arm. “I know it isn’t much, but I’ve got a basket made up for David. I know how much he looked forward to this picnic. It’s in the kitchen.”

“You didn’t have to go to all that trouble, Miss Meg. I’m sure you’ve got your hands full today. Thank goodness you’ve got Will to help.”

Meg and Sam exchanged blistering looks across Miss Beulah’s head as Meg led the party into the kitchen.

“Look at all this food and all those preparations,” declared the Reverend Niles in a loud voice. “My, but you ladies have been working hard.”

“Yes.” Meg smiled. “I’m so glad Will’s going to help me. I’d be lost without his help today.”

“Meg, I need to talk to you.” Sam pulled at Meg’s arm.

Meg just ignored Sam. “Wish you were coming today, Miss Beulah. Wish things were different.”

Miss Beulah turned and glanced up at Sam. “I wish they were too, Miss Meg.”

The screen door opened and shut in the living room. Tyler, who had been playing in the kitchen, bounded out into the living room calling, “Bec, Bec, Bec.”

“Rebecca? Patty?” Meg called. “Is that you?”

“Yes,” Becca called from the living room. “Momma, call Tyler, he’s bothering us.”

“Becca and Patty come in here and show the Reverend Niles and Miss Beulah your outfits.” Meg turned to the reverend. “Patty’s mother made them matching dresses. They’re gonna look like twins today.” Miss Beulah smiled and waited for Becca to make her entrance. Sam glanced at his wristwatch. It was ten minutes after six.

“Becca, don’t keep these people waiting,” Meg chided.

Patty appeared in the kitchen doorway at once and smiled. Her hair was in two braids and she was wearing white tennis shoes and her brand new, freshly ironed yellow cotton dress. Becca slowly walked up behind Patty. One of

her braids was coming undone and her shoes were missing. She stood behind Patty in her stocking feet. Meg leaned forward, reaching for Patty. Patty jumped out of the way, exposing Becca. Becca's dress was wet, torn, and covered with dirt. Both her legs were splattered with mud and her socks were soaking wet.

Meg was stunned. Sam was shocked. Miss Beulah was amused and the Reverend Niles cast a watchful eye on Meg.

"My Lord, child," Miss Beulah clucked at Becca, "you look like you rolled in the mud."

Becca raised a sorrowful face; her eyes were filling with tears. "I'm sorry, Momma and Daddy. I slipped in the creek."

"Slipped!" exclaimed Meg as her face turned red. "What were you doing down by the creek? The creek is not between here and Patty's house."

"It was an accident, Mrs. Williams," Patty bravely spoke up. "She didn't mean to fall in."

Meg shot Patty a look that silenced her. "An accident!" Meg's voice began to rise. "This is no accident, Rebecca Sue Ellen Williams. This is a disaster." Meg towered over her daughter. "What were you thinking?"

"We should be going," the Reverend Niles said as he guided Miss Beulah away from the kitchen. "You all have a wonderful time at the picnic." Miss Beulah smiled sympathetically and gave Becca's arm a squeeze on the way out.

Sam eased himself between Meg and Becca. "Calm down, Meg. You're going to have a stroke."

"Calm down! How can I calm down when we're supposed to leave for the lake in five minutes? Rebecca looks like she just crawled out of a pigsty and I've got fifty boxes to haul to the picnic by myself 'cause you need to go off on some mysterious, last-minute investigation! How dare you tell me to calm down!"

Sam kept his tongue clamped firmly between his lips and looked down at Becca. Tears were spilling down her

cheeks. "Becca, I must say I'm very disappointed in you."

"I'm know, Daddy. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to slip."

"Are you all right, Becca?" Sam looked over the wet and scratched girl who stood in front of him. "Are you hurt?" Becca shook her head. Sam sighed. "All right now, you're too old for tears. You go upstairs, wash up, and change out of those clothes." Becca turned and fled up the stairs, relieved not to be the center of attention anymore. "And don't leave a mess. And don't dawdle," he called after her. Sam then turned to Meg, who was looking absolutely exasperated. "Meg, I'll help you load the rest of the picnic supplies into the car. Then you take Tyler and Patty and go on to the picnic. I'll bring the rest of the food and Becca as soon as she's ready. I'll drop the food and Becca off, but then I'm going to leave." Sam held his hand up in the air, "And I don't want to hear any arguments. I'll return to the picnic as soon as I can. It lasts for three days, Meg. I doubt if I'll miss much."

"But, Will," Meg began to complain, "all those boxes of pies? You promised. . . ."

"Please, Meg, let's not argue now. I'll drop the pies and Becca off later. I'll join you as soon as I can and I'll give you a full explanation. Right now, let's get you, Tyler, and Patty loaded into the car." Defeated, Meg turned and gathered up an armload from the table and headed toward the screen door.

As Sam was loading the last box in the trunk the phone rang.

"It's probably the game committee wondering where I am," Meg groaned and rolled her eyes skyward.

Sam dumped his load of gunny sacks into the back of the car. "I'll catch the phone. You head on over to the picnic."

"Oh great." Meg dug around in her purse for her set of keys. "I could just kill Rebecca. And I wish you'd tell me what's so important."

“Later.” Sam waved at Tyler as he watched Meg climb behind the wheel and start the engine.

The phone was still ringing as Sam came back in the house. He walked through the living room and heard the water running upstairs. Sam came into the kitchen and picked up the phone. “Hello?”

The line was silent. Sam hung up the phone and began to box up the pies. It was six fifty-five on Saturday morning.

CHAPTER

NINE

Rear Admiral Al Calavicci sat at his desk early this morning poking and pecking away at the computer. His smoldering cigar was sitting in a LAS VEGAS SANDS ashtray, just an arm's reach away. A cup of Verbena's fresh-brewed mocha almond coffee was steaming in his favorite mug. Al had been up most of the night going over Ziggy's data for the Leap. That pile of paperwork was almost as tall as the paperwork he needed to complete for the project's monthly reports. After working on Ziggy's pile of readouts Al had opted for a break. He had gotten in four hours of much deserved sleep, showered, and shaved. Now he was ready to work on the project's pile of paperwork for a while, until Ziggy came up with something else for the Leap.

Al had dropped by the Waiting Room to check in on Will, only to have Verbena veto the suggestion. Will Williams's condition was still unchanged and Verbena was worried he was getting worse. She was in the middle of running more tests when Al dropped by. So instead Al had

settled for a mug of Verbena's fresh coffee and her take on Will's condition.

Al had hoped to be spending part of the day in a romantic liaison with Tina, but Tina was still miffed about Al's visit to Santa Fe. He hoped the red roses and baby doll lingerie he was having delivered to her would change her mind.

So Al found himself sitting behind his desk, with a ton of paperwork and no Tina in a slinky teddy. Since he planned to work behind his desk for a few hours and since he wouldn't be meeting with Tina, Al resorted to something he rarely ever did in the presence of the project's personnel. He chose to dress down this morning. Way down, by Al Calavicci's clothing standards.

After his shower Al had pulled on a pair of well-worn, faded blue jeans, his favorite pair of high-top tennis shoes, and a horizontal-striped, purple and gold polo shirt. Al vowed if he was going to be alone with all those Sat-Com reports due for Washington, at least he was going to be comfortable.

He ran his hand through his still-damp hair and reached for his coffee mug. He had closed and locked his door before extracting a pair of tortoise-colored reading glasses from his locked top drawer. Vain though he was, Al knew his eyesight was going, slowly but surely. He could still pass the mustard when it came to flying. It wasn't as though he was flying bombing missions anyway. He just needed the glasses for occasions like this, when he was alone and had a ton of reading. Fortunately, those conditions didn't occur very often. No one else knew he wore glasses. Not Verbena or Gooshie or Tina. Not even Sam. So far Al had managed to get by reading the tiny print on Ziggy's handlink. Al pledged he would get a bigger handlink rather than wear his glasses.

Al sipped the coffee and slipped on his glasses. He pulled a heavy manila folder off the top of the pile and opened it with dread. Most of these reports were overdue to the com-

mittees in Washington. He had missed a few deadlines; other deadlines he had bargained for extensions and won. Al turned to the computer screen and hunted down the file he needed. As he waited for the report to pop on the screen, his eyes drifted to the moving box from Maxine. It was still sitting where he had dumped it upon his arrival from Santa Fe. He looked at the deteriorating corners of the box and the sagging bottom. The computer beeped and Al turned his attention back to the screen. He updated the report in front of him with a few jabs at the keyboard. When he finished the update he sent the copy back to D.C. with another jab. As the computer confirmed D.C. had received the report, Al's attention drifted back to the box.

The box was an ugly sight sitting in his neat and pristine office. It was covered in dirt and grime. The tape holding the box together had long ago lost its tenacity. The lid of the box bulged, as did the sides. Al looked around his office. He selected a corner where he could put the box for now. He'd have to wait until later to go through its contents. He should have hauled it to his quarters instead of his office. Sitting here it was creating an eyesore. The computer beeped and waited for its next command.

Al slipped from behind his desk and walked around to the chair that held the box. The moving box was almost as wide as it was tall. Al remembered how much trouble he'd had when he carried the box up to his office. He calculated the distance from the corner to the chair. Five short feet, easy. The box could sit back in the corner for the next millennium and at least he wouldn't have to stare at it. Al jiggled the box. Things rattled and clicked together inside. Probably wasn't filled with anything of value anyhow. Maxine would have scrounged through it before she packed it away.

Al wrapped his arms around the side of the box. It seemed wider now than he remembered it being when he carried it up to his office. He tried to lift it. It seemed heavier too. Al pulled his arms away and noticed his polo shirt was covered with dust and grease. That did it. Al

grabbed the box and lifted it away from the chair. The contents inside shifted wildly. It sounded like something broke. The box began to slip through the admiral's arms. "Oh no, you don't," he grunted. He brought his knee under the box's bottom and nudged it up. He was balancing on one leg, his knee pushing the bottom of the box and his arms squeezing the middle. Al's face was getting red and he was beginning to sweat. He carefully lowered his knee. The box stayed intact. "Just five feet," he wheezed. He eased the box between his desk and the chair and took his first step. He took another step. The box slipped an eighth of an inch through his arms. Al's back began to hurt. On his third step the bottom gave way and a lifetime of memories and mementos exploded out of the box. The box collapsed and emptied. The box was now very easy to hold.

Al's tennis shoes were buried under broken glass, year-books, awards, trophies, and a silk negligee just for starters. A large textbook from MIT landed on the admiral's broken toe. A rosary hit the floor and its string broke, sending glass beads everywhere. A pair of boxing gloves hit the pile and rolled under the desk.

Al flung the tattered, empty box against the wall at the far corner of the office. He was buried up to his ankles in junk. A broken bottle of wine began to seep its contents from one spot of the pile. The air was soon pungent with the aroma of sweet grapes. Al could just picture Maxine laughing at him, wherever she was. "Aw . . ." Al angrily kicked his wine-stained shoes free of the pile. The toe that had been on the receiving end of the MIT textbook had begun to throb.

Al sat down in the vacant chair and stared at the pile on the floor. He moved the silk teddy with his shoe and discovered an old black-and-white photo. It's frame's glass was intact, just dirty. Al reached down and picked up the photo. He wiped the glass off on his jeans. Al, his father, and Al's little sister, Trudy, waved and smiled into the camera. Al caught his breath. He rubbed the picture with his hand and tilted it in the office light to get a better look.

His glasses slid down his nose and Al pushed them back into place. Suddenly, Al felt very old. He took off his glasses and set them on the desk.

A drama award Al won while he was in the orphanage caught his eye. More photos, black and white, their frames broken and bent were catching his attention. He set the family photo on his desk next to his glasses.

Ziggy's monitor behind Al's desk gave off a shrill whistle and at the same time, the handlink next to his cigar began to blink.

Al couldn't take his eyes off the pile. He was finding all kinds of treasures he had forgotten about. "What is it, Ziggy?" Al said as he bent down to retrieve a crumpled, pink paper umbrella. "What did I save this for?" he exclaimed, turning the umbrella around and around with his fingers.

"Admiral, I would like to update you on the current time lines which are now forming."

"So update." Ziggy had been updating this Leap for the last twelve hours or so. Another tidbit of useless information had probably found its way into her data banks. Al continued to pick through his lost belongings.

Ziggy didn't like to be ignored. Al's voice patterns indicated to her that he was preoccupied. She ran a quick check on several of the project's female personnel and determined that none seemed to be missing from their current posts. "There has been a major change in the time line," Ziggy began in a deliberate and slow monotone voice. Al was rummaging around and had retrieved a book of matches. "Dr. Beckett has once again altered history as we know it." Ziggy waited patiently for a response. Instead her audio circuits picked up broken glass and heavy grunting. She increased her voice playback a decibel. "Admiral Calavicci?"

Al had just picked up a heavy trophy and he shoved it over to one side. "What?" he growled.

"Are you listening to my report? Are you paying atten-

tion? I would not have troubled you if I didn't think it wasn't of the utmost importance."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, and yeah," Al said as he dusted off his hands on his shirt. He sat up in the chair and addressed Ziggy. "You've got my undivided attention, Ziggy. Shoot."

"Precisely," Ziggy seemed to sigh.

"Precisely what, for crying out loud," Al demanded.

"Shoot, Admiral Calavicci. That is precisely what is going to happen to Dr. Sam Beckett in exactly three minutes and twenty-four seconds."

Al leaned forward in the chair and forgot about the mess on the floor. "What did you say?"

"The current time line indicates—" Ziggy began again tediously.

"Forget the current time line," Al said, getting to his feet and stepping around the junk. He reached over and snatched Ziggy's handlink. "Cut to the chase."

"But there is no chase, Admiral. Just a shooting. In two minutes and fifty seconds. An intruder will enter the Williamses' home and shoot and kill Dr. Beckett, who the intruder thinks is Will Williams."

Al forgot all about feeling old. He spun around and headed for the door. He unlocked it and threw it open. He stepped out into the hallway and pulled the door shut as he began to run. "Details, Ziggy. I need more details," Al called out as he ran toward the Imaging Chamber.

Ziggy's voice boomed throughout the corridor. "Will Williams's body was discovered by Deputy Gene Dupree, who pronounced Will dead at 07:06 A.M. on Saturday, September . . ."

Al bumped into a guard who was in the middle of saluting the admiral. Al didn't bother returning the salute as he planted the Marine into the wall. "Where, damn it? Where is Sam shot?" Al was running at full tilt toward the main control door. He punched the handlink. The door eased up as Al bent down and scooted through.

"The autopsy report states that Dr. Beckett will be shot

in the upper chest at close range in less than . . .”

Al scrambled upright and began to run for the Imaging Chamber door. Gooshie and Tina were startled by Al's sudden appearance and Gooshie dropped his clipboard on the panel. Tina gasped and pulled away from Gooshie. She had never seen Al dressed in jeans before.

Al flew in the Imaging Chamber (which Ziggy had opened only seconds before) and jogged to the middle of the room. No sooner had Al entered the Chamber than the door shut behind him and the floor began to disappear beneath his feet.

“You have one minute exactly,” Ziggy reminded the admiral.

“Gooshie!” Al barked as the walls and ceiling inside the Chamber dissolved. “Get your grubby hands off Tina and center me on Sam! *Right . . . now!*” Al caught his breath and brought the link up to his face. “Where is Sam shot, Ziggy? Where?”

“Why, in Brick, Oklahoma, Admiral Calavicci.”

Sam had just two more pies to finish boxing. He was carrying the last two pies from the table to the counter when without any warning, Al came flying through the kitchen wall, his face beet red, his hands waving in the air. He startled Sam, who leaped back out of the admiral's way and in the process dumped two berry pies on the kitchen floor.

“Get out of the kitchen, get out of the kitchen,” Al yelled, the link going crazy in his hand. He was hopping across the kitchen, going through the kitchen table and chairs, and pointing at the back door.

Sam watched Al dance across the floor. “You startled me,” he barked at the dancing hologram. Sam was still sore from his encounter with Meg. He reached for a dish towel, only to have it slip through his fingers and land on the floor. Disgusted, Sam bent down and began to peel the pie tins away from the floor.

Al had almost disappeared through the back door. He

halted, charged over in front of Sam, and stood jumping from one foot to the other. "Get up. Leave the mess. You've got to get out of the kitchen." Al was frantic.

Sam pointed at Al's feet. "I've never seen you in sneakers before," he exclaimed, his eyes drifting up from Al's feet. "Or blue jeans for that matter. I didn't know you owned a pair."

"Sam," Al pleaded, "forget my shoes, forget my clothes. Just get out of the kitchen."

Sam had pried one pie pan off the floor. "I can't go anywhere now. I have to wait for—"

Al checked his watch and stomped his foot. "Forget the pies, Sam! Come on, move your ass." Al sprinted toward the back door. "It's the only way out."

Sam stood up and set the pie pan in the sink. "Al, what's going on?"

The screen door opened and banged shut in the living room.

Al moved quickly and stood in the doorway of the kitchen. "Sam, please. I don't have time to explain. . . ." Al glanced down and noticed a gun protruding out from his purple and gold polo shirt. The figure holding the gun walked through Al, blocking his view.

Sam Beckett watched the intruder pass through Al and emerge into the kitchen. Sam swallowed and took a cautious step back. "My wife has a strict policy about guns in the house." Sam's back made contact with the kitchen counter.

Gene Dupree stopped and cocked his head. "Does she now?" His dark, small eyes never left Sam. Gene was dressed in his deputy's uniform. The uniform was neatly pressed and clean except for the dark, wet patches around the collar and under his arms. His hair was slicked back away from his forehead. Slowly Gene proceeded forward and closed the gap between Sam and himself.

Al had stepped around Gene and hurried over by Sam's side. His eyes darted back and forth between Sam and Gene as his fingers slapped at the handlink furiously.

“Gene, what’s going on here?” Sam began to creep along the counter.

“You know perfectly well what’s going on here, Will,” Gene answered in a calm and steady voice. “Don’t move.” The sound of Gene’s voice made the hair on Al’s neck stand up. “I thought I’d pay you a visit. Save you a trip.”

Sam looked at the gun pointed at his chest. “What trip? And why are you here, in my home, pointing a gun at me?”

Gene pushed farther into the kitchen. “Don’t play dumb with me, Will. You and I both know that you’re about to crack this murder case wide open. We both know who murdered Carla Sue.”

“Sam,” Al warned, “this guy could go off at any moment. Don’t aggravate him.” Al swatted at the link and read the display desperately. “The time line is all jumbled up. Ziggy can’t give me a prediction of how things turn out.” Al looked up from the link. “Just take it easy with this guy. Keep talking to him.”

“Why did you kill her, Gene?”

“Careful, Sam,” Al urged.

A thin line of sweat began to bead up on Gene’s forehead. “That’s what I always liked about you, Will. Straight to the point. No useless questions.” Sam leaned back against the counter and Gene snapped the gun up and aimed it at Sam’s head. “Don’t you move or try anything funny, Will. Or I guarantee you Doc will be scraping your brains off the ceiling.”

Sam eased his hands away from his sides and into the air. “Okay, okay. Take it easy.”

Gene looked at the pies boxed on the table and chuckled. He motioned with the gun at the box. “Look at those pies, all ready to go. I bet Meg baked herself silly getting ready for this affair. You always had it easy, Will. You came from a good family and your father was a very respectable man. I always looked up to him. I loved him like he was my own father. My real father didn’t amount to much, you know? He didn’t care about me like your father did.” Gene wiped his forehead with his free hand. “I always wanted

to please your father. No one else would have taken me in like he did. He made sure I stayed in school. He died before I could show him how grateful I was. Before I could do him proud.

“You never had things rough. Life’s always been good to you, Will. Married your high school sweetheart. Settled down and had two kids. You became sheriff after your father died. You’ve never had to prove yourself. You never had people whispering behind your back, second-guessing you. You never were a loner. You were always well liked. Never had people laughing at you. You always had the respect. I wanted the respect, but I never got it. Until two days ago.”

“You killed Carla Sue for respect?”

“No!” Gene shouted and waved the gun in the air. “No, no, no. Don’t you get it? You’re usually so smart, Will.” Gene giggled. “I killed her because she thought I was a fool. She thought old Gene was going to be her ticket to good fortune and high community standing. She thought if she got knocked up, I would do the right thing.” Gene sniffed and stared off in the distance, looking past Sam. “Well, I tried to do the right thing, the way your father would have handled the situation. I gave her the money to take care of the problem. But she wanted to keep the baby. The baby probably wasn’t even mine. She thought if she had the baby I’d have to marry her. She thought she had outfoxed old Gene Dupree. But instead she made me very mad.”

Sam lowered his hands and steadied himself against the sink. “She was pregnant!”

Al lowered the link and blinked back his shock. “You rotten son of a . . .”

Gene snapped out of his daze. He looked at Sam and shrugged. “Carla Sue was nothing but a whore. A whore who got herself knocked up and wanted me to do right by her. All the time I kept thinking what would your father think of me? I’d be the laughingstock all over again. I

couldn't marry her. It was Tilden's, no doubt. He was seeing her behind my back."

"Killing doesn't solve anything," Sam shot back. "My father never would have made you a deputy if he knew you were—"

Gene grew angry. "Shut up, Will. I know what your father wanted. You didn't know. You didn't have a clue. I knew! Just me!"

"Sam!" Al waved his arms and shook his head back and forth. "Don't provoke him."

Gene began pounding on his chest with his free hand. The hand with the gun remained trained and steady on Sam. "I had everything planned out. I knew I was going to become sheriff. You'd be headed to the bench soon, just like your father wanted. It might take a year or two, but eventually I'd become sheriff. Then Carla announces she's pregnant. Hell, it could have been anybody's kid, white or black. I'd look pretty stupid marrying Carla and then having a half-and-half kid, don't you think? Anyway, Carla threatens me that either I marry her or she lets everyone know I'm the father. Either way I lose. If I marry her, then the whole town has another excuse to gossip and ridicule me. If I don't . . . well, you can see my problem.

"If you had released Tom right away in the first place none of this would be happening. Either Tom would be charged with the murder or he'd have gone out and killed whoever he thought murdered Carla. Either way, it would have been taken care of. But no, you didn't release Tom. You kept him locked up." Gene was sweating profusely now. "You destroyed my plans."

"Did you really think you would become sheriff?" Sam asked angrily, stepping away from the counter. "Did you really think you could commit murder and get away with it?"

Gene began to step back, his eyes darting all around. His shoulder blade collided with the doorway and he stopped. "Don't move. I warned you. I know exactly what I'm doing. You put me in this predicament, Will."

“Put the gun down, Gene.” Sam took another step forward. “You know it’s the right thing to do. Turn yourself in.”

Gene blinked as sweat began to run down into his eyes. “Don’t come any closer.”

Sam stopped with his hands held out. “Put the gun down. You can still make my father proud of you. He’d be so disappointed in you right now.”

At the mention of Will’s father, Gene’s expression changed. Gene gritted his teeth and steadied the gun. “My plan will still work. I’ve got it all figured out. Your father always said you had to have a plan, a direction in life.” Gene took a deep breath and smiled. “See, Will, you’re gonna be Carla Sue’s killer. You were having the affair with her. Doc’s already discovered her secret. It’s in his autopsy report. I guess you didn’t get a chance to read that part of the report, did you, Will?” Gene sneered and laughed mischievously. “Did you like any of those magazines?” Gene laughed and shrugged. “Don’t matter what you know about me now. You won’t be alive long enough to tell it to anyone. I’m going to tell everyone how I found out about you and Carla Sue. How I discovered in Doc’s report that she was pregnant. See, that gives you a motive, Will. You killed her and then you tried to frame David for it. You even went back to Mrs. King’s house yesterday and retrieved the murder weapon, fearing you’d be found out. I’m also going to produce an eyewitness at the Hole who will swear in court that you used to come down to the bar and sneak off with Carla Sue in the afternoon. Heck, even Tilden will testify against you if I threaten him just right. He never liked you much. I’ll say I was coming to arrest you this morning when we struggled and you grabbed for my gun. I shot you in self-defense. Then I’ll be appointed sheriff. Tilden will appoint me.”

Sam calmed his outrage and narrowed his eyes. “It won’t work. No one will ever believe you, Gene.”

“My plan will work,” Gene insisted. “Who do you

think called the newspapers?" Gene smiled wickedly and tapped his hand to his chest.

"Gene, your story will never hold up in court."

"Shut up, Will. Just shut up. I'm through listening to you." Gene blinked back the sweat running in his eyes. "My plan will work," he said in a small voice. "I know it will. I thought it all out." The hand holding the gun lowered. "I know it will work . . ." Gene muttered.

Sam was close enough to kick the gun out of Gene's hand. All he had to do was drop his weight back to his left leg, pivot, and bring his right foot up and around. Sam shifted his weight off his right leg.

It was a quick movement but Gene still caught it and raised the gun up in a flash. He aimed.

Al watched Gene pull the trigger. Al leaped into the bullet's path and lunged for the gun.

Sam tried to move out of the line of fire. He dove for the floor.

The gun made a loud pop when it fired. Sam heard the sound of the gun. That was followed by the crack his bone made as the bullet passed through Sam's upper left arm. A white, hot flash of pain spread from above Sam's elbow up to his shoulder. The bullet traveled out of Sam's arm and smashed into the tile countertop.

The impact sent Sam falling backwards. His legs buckled and he slid to the floor. Sam's vision blurred, causing the linoleum pattern and berry pies on the floor to smear and run together. Sam's nose tingled with the smell of gunpowder. His ears were ringing and his mouth was dry. Blood was flowing down his left arm and dripping off his fingertips onto his pants and the kitchen floor.

Al saw the gun pass through his hand as he reached for it. He also saw Sam spin and fall away. At first, Al thought Sam was okay and that Gene had missed. But then Al saw the blood.

Sam landed on his butt and began tilting to the right. His face was drained of color and his eyes were dazed. Al scrambled over and squatted next to Sam. Sam was leaning

so far over that his nose was almost touching the floor. He reached out with his right hand and tried to steady himself. Sam's hand slipped and he almost tumbled into Al's lap. Al reached out as a reflex to steady Sam. The handlink tumbled out of Al's grasp and for a split second Al disappeared as the link left his fingers. With lightning reflexes, Al snatched the link out of midair. He rammed the link into the waist of his jeans, where he wouldn't have to worry about it.

Sam blinked and shook his head. His vision cleared and he found himself looking at Al's high-top tennis shoes.

"Sam, can you hear me?" Al leaned over. "Hang on, Sam. Don't faint on me, buddy." Sam was just staring at Al's shoes. Al began snapping his fingers and talking in his gruffest admiral's voice. "Come on, Sam. Answer me."

Gene lowered the gun. His shirt was soaked with sweat. Gene looked sad and confused, standing there in the kitchen doorway as Sam struggled on the floor. "I'm sorry, Will." He started to raise the gun again and then stopped. "I didn't want it to be this way." He ran his left hand through his slick hair. "I wanted it to end in one quick, painless shot."

Sam licked his lips and tried to sit up against the cabinets. He shook his head and looked at Al. Al's image floated and shifted like a kaleidoscope.

The link was shrieking in Al's waist. "Sam, can you hear me? We've got to do something, Sam. He's going to shoot you again."

Sam tried to heave his body up and was floored by the pain in his left arm. He inhaled and cradled his bleeding arm. He looked up and made eye contact with Al. "My arm," Sam said with a thick tongue. "Al, my arm hurts. I think the humerus is shattered."

Gene's steely eyes flipped around the kitchen, looking for the person Sam was addressing.

Al balled his hand into a fist and pulled it down through the air. "Yes!" he roared with relief.

"My arm," Sam said thickly, "is broken."

"I know, Sam," Al said, talking slowly. He looked over

his shoulder at Gene standing in the doorway. "There's a dish towel on the floor. Pick it up and wrap it around your arm. You need to stop the bleeding."

Sam reached for the towel with his right hand. He closed his fingers around the towel and draped it into his lap. Sam picked up the towel and gingerly pressed it against the wound. He muffled a cry of pain.

"That's it," Al encouraged, wiping his perspiring face with his hands. "Just hold it there."

Sam groaned loudly. "It hurts."

"I know, I know, Sam. But you've got to stop the bleeding. Do you understand?"

Gene pushed away from the door. "Who are you talking to, Will? There's nobody here but me."

"Al, I'm so dizzy." Sam had begun to lean to his right again.

"Don't faint on me, Sam. It's just the shock. Take some deep breaths." Al frantically looked around the kitchen. There was only one way out and that was through the back door. Al doubted if Sam could stand, let alone try and make a run for it.

Gene looked down at the spreading pool of blood beneath Sam. He scratched his nose. "You know, she bled a lot too, Will. I didn't know there would be so much blood." Gene's voice was quiet and calm and he looked like he was daydreaming as he spoke. "Guess the sight of blood doesn't bother me anymore."

Sam looked up, too spent to respond. He just leaned against the cupboards for support, his wounded arm dangling down at his side.

Al leaned closely into Sam's face. "You have to try to get up and out of here, Sam."

"I can't." Sam's head sank back wearily against the cupboards. "I can't."

Gene wiped his forehead off with his shirt sleeve and began to whistle a tune. As Gene whistled he traced his toe along the patterns in the linoleum. Gene stopped whistling with-

out warning and snapped his head up. "I didn't like it when she struggled. I didn't want her to suffer either. Even though she tried to trick me into marrying her, I still liked her."

Al stood up and walked over to Gene. He scowled into the deputy's face. "You're nothing but a coward. A scum-sucking, psychopath coward." Al was so angry he began to tremble. "Don't you touch him," Al warned, his voice just barely above a whisper. "Or I'll kill you myself. I don't care how long it takes, I'll track you down. I'll find you in the future, do you hear me? I'll find you!"

Gene looked at Sam on the floor. His eyes focused. "Don't be afraid when you die, Will. I'll be sure and look after Meg and the kids when it's over." Gene took aim. His eyes became two dark pits.

Al's face was contorted as he uselessly slapped at Gene's hands. "No!" Al shouted. "Stop!"

Sam tried to move. He tried to pull himself along the floor, but his feet couldn't get any traction on the slippery surface. His arm burned and ached as he moved.

Suddenly the room was filled with another bang, causing Al to flinch.

The window in the back door exploded, sending a shower of glass everywhere. Al watched as the glass rained down all around and through him. It tinkled on the floor and skidded across the linoleum.

Al turned and looked down at Sam. "Sam?" he whispered.

Sam was lying on the floor, his right hand covering his eyes. Glass was sprinkled in his hair and on his clothes.

Al turned around to look at Gene Dupree.

Gene Dupree blinked and smashed his hand into his chest. A crimson spot began to grow and spread beneath Gene's fingers. The gun slipped from Gene's grasp and landed on the floor. Gene gasped for breath and dropped to his knees. He pulled his hand away from his chest and looked at the dark blood.

Al recoiled as Gene slid to the floor, coughed once, and

became still. Al whirled. "Sam! Are you all right?" Al's voice broke with emotion as he knelt down.

Sam stirred and moaned. Sam slowly raised his head. Broken shards of glass fell onto his shoulders and into his lap. His pallid face looked up into the hologram's. "Al?" Sam whispered through dry lips. Sam slowly eased his body up off the floor. He rested his head against the cupboards and looked over at Gene sprawled on the floor. "What happened?"

"I don't know," Al whispered back. "Gene shot himself somehow."

"What?"

"I don't know," Al said, his emotions almost getting the better of him. "He was going to shoot you. I saw him aim the gun. Then he was shot. I guess he shot—"

"Oh no. No." Sam was trying to sit up. He reached up to the counter above his head and grabbed at the tile countertop. He winced and cried out in pain.

"Sam, where are you going?"

Sam continued to pull himself up off the floor, ignoring Al and his throbbing arm. He wrapped his right hand around the countertop and pulled.

"Sam! *Sam!*"

The room rolled violently and Sam stopped to regain his balance. "Al, go help Becca."

"Becca?" Al shook his head. "You're going into shock, Sam." He pulled the link out of his pants. "I'll have Ziggy figure out how—"

"Al, please." Sam shook his head to clear it. "Becca. Out there."

Al leaned toward Sam. "You mean Becca was in the house?"

From the living room came the faintest, softest voice. "Daddy?"

Al's jaw dropped. He stepped around Gene Dupree's body and charged into the living room. There stood Becca, shaking, her teeth rattling, her father's gun in her hand. Al bent down and tried to calm the distraught child. He

wrapped his arms protectively around her, his shimmering hands passing through Becca's shoulders. Becca started to sob. "Sam!" Al bellowed. "Get in here. Quick. I need your help."

CHAPTER

TEV

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TEN

Sam pushed away from the counter and headed toward the living room. He didn't look down as he stepped over Gene Dupree's still body. Sam lunged for the kitchen doorway and leaned against it as large, black spots swam before his eyes. Sam tucked the damp dish towel carefully around his left arm and concentrated on the figures in the living room. A thin dripping trail of blood marked his path out of the kitchen.

Becca stood shivering in the living room. Tears ran down her face and she absently wiped them away. Her father's big gun dangled in her small hand, where it threatened to drop to the floor at any second. Becca gasped when she saw Sam emerge from the kitchen. "Daddy," she cried, "oh Daddy."

Sam walked stiffly over to Becca. Becca collapsed into Sam, trembling violently against him, her teeth chattering, her chest heaving as she began to sob. Sam eased the gun out of Becca's grasp and set it down on the floor. He

wrapped his right arm around Becca's shoulders and led her to the couch, where he sat down beside her. He spoke to her in his gentlest, softest voice as he cradled her with his good arm. Meanwhile, Al was ferociously pacing back and forth behind the couch, feeding data into Ziggy as fast as his fingers could hit the keys.

Sam smoothed Becca's hair away from her wet face and tried to calm her down. She was still sobbing. He felt her pulse as he kept talking quietly to her.

Al paced at a killer rate, his big brown eyes glued on the handlink. "I've got Verbena on top of this, Sam," he reported from behind the couch. "She's getting the data as fast as Ziggy can process it to her." The admiral's eyes squinted and he brought the flashing cubes closer to his face.

Becca shook uncontrollably against Sam, her small body wracked with deep soulful sobs. "I-I-I din-did-didn't want t-t-to hurt Gene," she sobbed. "But I w-wa-was afraid h-h-h-he wa-was going to hurt you. He had-d-d-d a g-g-g-un in his han-n-nd."

Sam hugged Becca the best he could. "I know you didn't want to hurt Gene, sweetheart. Everything's fine now."

"He shot you," Becca sobbed, growing more upset. "He shot you, Daddy."

"I'm okay, Becca. I'm going to be all right."

"Is... is Gene okay?" Becca looked up into Sam's eyes. "I just wanted him to leave you alone. I didn't hurt Gene, did I?" She began to cry all over again.

Sam rocked her on the couch. "He's fine, Becca." Sam looked around the living room and saw the opened closet door with the dining room chair pulled over in front of it. He looked back at Al. "We both need to go to the hospital. I'm worried that she might start going into shock," Sam whispered urgently, "and I may not be far behind her."

Al stopped pacing and came around to the side of the couch. He knelt down next to Becca, his gaze never wandering from her face. "I know," Al replied quietly. "Verbena confirms that she needs to be hospitalized. She also

says to keep talking to her and reassuring her.”

Becca shivered against Sam, jarring his left arm. Sam bit his lip and stifled a cry of pain. The white dish towel covering his upper arm was slowly turning red.

Al stood up and ran his fingers through his hair. “Ziggy says the nearest hospital is in Dunsmoore and that’s thirty minutes away. How are we going to get you both to the hospital?”

Sam was checking Becca’s pulse again. “I can drive Becca to the hospital. I’ll take the police car.”

The data display on Ziggy’s link had jammed up and Al was in the process of hammering the link with the heel of his hand when he stopped in midwhack. “You can’t possibly drive her. You’ve got a broken arm and you’ve lost a lot of blood. You’re in no condition to drive.”

“Well,” Sam whispered, “someone has got to drive. You certainly can’t.”

As if on cue the screen door opened and Miss Beulah stuck her head inside. “Oh, Will, I’m so glad I caught you before you left for the picnic. I forgot that basket Miss Meg . . .” her voice trailed off.

Sam was never so glad to see another human being. “Miss Beulah, please help us.”

Miss Beulah entered the living room cautiously. “Why, Will, what’s going on here?” Miss Beulah walked over to the couch and looked down at Becca. “Dear God, William! What’s wrong with this child?” Miss Beulah reached down and wrapped her hands around Becca’s hands. “She’s as cold as ice and shivering so.” She turned and looked at Sam. She noticed his arm. Her eyes registered concern. “Oh my God, Will. You’ve been shot.”

Sam couldn’t take the time to explain. Although Becca had stopped sobbing, she was growing too quiet for Sam. “Is the reverend waiting outside?” he asked Miss Beulah. She nodded without looking away from Becca. “Please go get him.”

Miss Beulah seemed torn about leaving Becca and Sam. “But you’re hurt, Will.”

“Please, go get the reverend, Miss Beulah.”

Miss Beulah hurriedly retraced her steps to the front porch and called for the Reverend Niles. She returned to the couch and gently eased Becca out of Sam’s arms. “You’re hurt bad, William. Let me hold her.” Sam held onto Becca’s cold hands as Miss Beulah began to rock Becca in her arms.

The Reverend Niles opened the screen door. “You called for me, Miss Beulah?” The reverend looked at Sam with bewilderment. “What’s going on in here?”

Sam leaned back into the couch. “Reverend Niles, you’ve got to call Doc Adams. You’ll have to use the phone in the kitchen. Tell Doc it’s an emergency. Tell him Becca’s hurt.”

Reverend Niles eyes bulged at the sight before him. “Why, Sheriff Williams, you’ve been—”

“Yes, I know.”

“Don’t stand there,” Miss Beulah snapped. “This child needs a doctor. Do what Will says and call Doc Adams.”

The Reverend Niles bobbed his head up and down and headed for the kitchen. He halted in the doorway and brought his hand up to his chest. His mouth dropped open and he exclaimed loudly, “Great Jesus in Heaven!” Everyone in the house jumped, including Al. Becca’s eyes flew open and she moaned.

The reverend staggered back into the living room and sank back against the wall. “Lord have mercy,” he said in a subdued voice.

Sam started to get up to call Doc Adams himself, but Miss Beulah put her hand on his shoulder. “Regardless what is in that kitchen, Reverend, you’ve got to call the doctor.”

The reverend pulled himself away from the wall and cleared his throat. “I’ll go call the doctor.” He gathered himself up and strode into the kitchen, keeping his eyes focused straight ahead.

Miss Beulah removed her hand from Sam’s shoulder. “Something terrible happened in the kitchen, didn’t it?”

she whispered and patted Sam's shoulder. "It's over now, William. Isn't it?"

Sam dropped his head and mumbled, "Yes, ma'am."

The Reverend Niles emerged from the kitchen and shuffled back to the couch. He tripped over Sam's gun on the floor and caught the back of a chair to steady himself. He seemed to be lost in a fog.

"Reverend Niles," Sam began. The reverend looked down at the gun on the floor. "Reverend Niles?"

The Reverend Niles closed his eyes. "Doc Adams is on his way, Sheriff Williams. Would you mind if I said a prayer? I feel a prayer is needed."

"Please do." Sam squeezed Becca's hand. "A prayer would be nice."

Doc Adams arrived less than five minutes later, pulling up in his station wagon. He pushed open the screen door and emerged with his black bag in hand. He was dressed for the picnic, wearing a short-sleeved shirt and blue walking shorts. His white legs stood out in contrast with his black socks and shoes. "Where's Becca? Will?"

"No need to shout," Miss Beulah declared. "We're all here in the living room."

Doc began to open his bag as he walked over to the couch. He looked down at Becca cradled in Miss Beulah's arms. "What happened to Becca?" he asked as he rummaged through his medical bag.

"I think she's in shock," Sam said.

Doc paused. "Shock?"

Miss Beulah continued rocking Becca. "She's as cold as ice, Doc Adams. And she's gotten so still, like she's asleep. Only I know she isn't sleeping 'cause she keeps trembling in my arms."

Doc reached down and cupped Becca's head in his hands as he examined her. "What caused this?"

"It's in the kitchen," the reverend said softly.

"She needs a sedative," Sam urged. "And we need to get to the hospital in Dunsmoore."

Doc looked at Sam for the first time. "Dear God, Will! You've been shot."

Miss Beulah nudged the doctor with her foot. "Keep your voice down. This child jumps at the slightest noise."

Al, who had been watching this scene unfold before him, leaned over the back of the couch. "We've got to get you and Becca to the hospital, pronto. We're wasting time."

Doc pulled out a needle and syringe from his bag. "I had no idea," he mumbled. "The Revered Niles said Becca was hurt, but I didn't know . . ." He looked up at Sam. "I tried to reach you after you hung up on me, William. I wanted to tell you about the part of Carla's autopsy report that didn't make it into the paper. I couldn't reach you and then I got a call from Julius Watt saying his wife had gone into labor. She was carrying twins and I had to get her to Dunsmoore. I was with her most of the afternoon and night. Esther said I missed you yesterday afternoon when you stopped by. I got back into Brick around three thirty this morning. Managed to deliver a mighty handsome set of boys."

Sam leaned over to Doc and winced as he inched forward on the couch. "Doc, Becca needs to get to the hospital right now. You can examine her thoroughly later."

"You're one to talk," Doc said as he swabbed Becca's arm with a cotton swap. "You're not in much better shape. Let me call for an ambulance from Dunsmoore. It shouldn't take too long to—"

"No," Sam insisted. "You've got to drive us."

"All right, all right. Goodness, Will, don't get yourself in a stew. Let me give you and Becca a shot, then we'll go to Dunsmoore."

Sam shook his head back and forth. "Not me, Doc. Take care of Becca, but I need to stay alert."

Doc made a face and turned to Becca. "Okay, Becca, you're going to feel a little prick now." Doc inserted the needle and gave Becca the injection. "I'm not going to argue with you, Will. You're going to be sorry though."

"Fine," Sam said, as he turned around to check with Al.

Doc Adams picked up the loose, damp ends of the dish towel wrapped around Sam's left arm. He made a knot and in one quick twist pulled the knot firmly against the wound. Sam yelped out in pain. "I should have warned you that might hurt," Doc said as he checked the towel. "The bleeding seems to have stopped for now," he told Sam.

Sam grimaced at Doc. He wasn't about to thank him for that. "Doc, take Becca and put her in the patrol car. Miss Beulah, you and the Reverend Niles can stay behind. I'll notify Sheriff Cooper in Dunsmoore by radio. And Meg. Someone needs to get Meg."

Miss Beulah released Becca into the doctor's arms. "I'm going with you, Will. The Reverend Niles can go get Meg. She'd never forgive me if I left you and Becca." Miss Beulah helped Sam get to his feet. The reverend looked shaken as he helped Miss Beulah steady Sam.

Sam was also very wobbly on his feet. Doc shot him a warning look over his shoulder as he carried Becca. Sam spoke to the reverend as Miss Beulah guided him toward the screen door. "Reverend Niles, please go to the lake and find Meg. Don't tell her about the shooting. Just say I've hurt my arm and she needs to come to the hospital."

Al opened the Imagining Chamber door. "I'll meet you at the hospital, Sam." He gave Sam a thumbs-up, stepped inside the door, and disappeared.

Sam, Miss Beulah, and Doc barged through the emergency door at Dunsmoore City Hospital and found themselves surrounded by a room full of people. Doc cradled Becca in his arms as Sam followed close behind with help from Miss Beulah. People with their heads bandaged and arms in slings paid little attention to them. Doc pushed his way to the reception desk and hunted down the first available nurse he could find.

She looked tired and overworked. She glimpsed quickly at Becca and laid a clipboard on the top of the counter. "You'll have to fill this out to admit your granddaughter," she said as she picked up a handful of folders.

"She's not my granddaughter," Doc said. "I'm her physician."

Sam leaned against the countertop. "I'm her father and she needs to see a doctor immediately."

The nurse sniffed indifferently. "She didn't arrive by ambulance, so she'll have to wait her turn."

"She didn't arrive by ambulance," Sam interjected, "because we drove her here by way of a police car. And she needs immediate attention."

The nurse spotted Sam's arm and made a face. She pulled another clipboard free and laid it down in front of Sam. "You'll have to be admitted too."

"Look," Doc said, trying to keep his voice down, "I want to see Dr. Brown right now."

The nurse just kept gathering up her files from the desk. "He's not here today."

Al opened the Imaging Chamber door and stepped into the room. He maneuvered around a candy striper rolling a wheelchair down the corridor and hurried to the counter next to Sam.

The nurse cast a contemptible glance at Doc Adams. "It's the Labor Day weekend. We've had a pileup on the interstate, a bar fight, and the usual weekend traffic. You're going to have to wait your turn."

"Horse feathers!" Doc snapped. He jerked his head toward an empty gurney sitting by the wall. Before the nurse could protest, Doc rushed Becca to the gurney. Miss Beulah picked up the clipboards and a pen. She gave Sam a smile and a nod. Sam's grateful smile said it all as he held Becca's hand and let Doc lead them through the hospital.

They pushed their way through two double doors and searched for a doctor. Al had to jog along behind the gurney just to keep up. He only took his eyes off the link momentarily to follow a pretty nurse along the corridor.

The group came to a main intersection in the hospital, with elevators at one end and a registration desk at the other. Al jogged around a man in a tan uniform, who was blocking his path to the registration desk. Al paused for

just a second to get a better view of the man. Was it something about his stance? That uniform? Doc was pushing the stretcher ahead and Al had to pick up his pace just to keep up.

The gurney took a quick right past the registration desk and banged through another pair of swinging doors.

A young doctor nearly collided with the gurney in the corridor. He lowered the chart he was reading. He looked like he was fresh out of medical school. He eyed the stretcher. "What happened to her?" he asked Doc nonchalantly.

Sam pushed his way in front of the young doctor. "She's suffering from shock. You'll need to get a saline drip started and I'll need to see the head of your psychiatry staff, right away." Doc's mouth hung open as he listened to Sam give orders.

The young doctor looked at Sam. "I see," he said slowly. "Well, I'll examine her in a minute and make sure she gets taken care of. Why don't you follow one of the nurses down to X-ray and we'll get that arm attended to."

"I'm staying with Becca until her mother arrives." Sam looked at the doctor's name tag pinned to his white coat. "Dr. Stevens."

Dr. Vincent Stevens looked perplexed. "Who are you?" he asked Sam.

Doc Adams cleared his throat. "This is Becca's father, William and I'm her doctor. I would appreciate it if you could locate Dr. Joseph Brown."

Dr. Stevens laid the chart down. "I'm not getting paid to page doctors, gentlemen. Now, if you'll just follow this nurse back to the waiting room . . ."

"What an idiot!" Al exclaimed. "Sam, you've got to find another doctor. This guy's a bozo."

A tall, no-nonsense nurse appeared next to Sam. "I'm not leaving her side," Sam said loudly. "And she needs to be examined by your staff psychiatrist too."

Dr. Stevens rolled his eyes. "Suit yourself. But you've lost a lot of blood." The doctor sighed as he lifted Becca's

wrist to check for a pulse. "You gentlemen are aware that it's the Labor Day weekend, aren't you? All our permanent staff have the weekend off. Dr. Logon, our psychiatrist, and Dr. Brown will return on Monday."

"If he calls me a gentleman one more time . . ." Al lamented. Becca moaned and stirred on the gurney.

"But we're not waiting till Monday," Sam informed the rookie doctor as he reached over and grabbed the startled doctor's lapel with his good hand. "You're going to reach Dr. Logon now. And while we're waiting for Dr. Logon to arrive, I want Becca taken care of." Sam released the young man's coat, pleased to see he had smeared it with blood. Sam's left arm was just a dull throb now compared to the anger he felt for this cocky doctor.

"But I don't know where he is," Dr. Stevens whined. "Besides, this girl hasn't suffered any kind of major trauma that I can see."

"That's because you're still green around the gills," Doc informed the distressed doctor. "Anyone with any good medical training can see she is suffering from posttraumatic shock."

The tall nurse smiled to herself. "Dr. Stevens," she began, "I know for a fact that Dr. Logon usually spends the weekends with his wife's family in Ashcroft. I'm sure he keeps that number around here so we can reach him in case of an emergency. I would try the reception desk at the main entrance. And I bet you'll find Dr. Brown's number there too. I think Dr. Brown is staying home this weekend."

"All right, sister," Al commented next to the nurse, "way to put Bozo in his place."

The nurse pushed the gurney toward a door. "Let's put her in here for the time being. I'll get a drip started."

Dr. Stevens scoffed at the nurse. He shook his head at them before turning on his heel and heading down the hallway.

"Thank you," Sam said as the nurse wheeled the stretcher into the room.

"You're welcome. He's such a fuddy-duddy doctor. Al-

though we are a bit shorthanded today, I'm sure she'll be in good hands until we get Dr. Brown or Dr. Logon here. I'm going to get that IV started. Then I'm going to call X-ray and schedule an appointment for you," Nurse Watkins said to Sam.

"Do it sooner than later," Doc advised the young woman.

Al found a corner away from the action in the room and retreated to it, with the squawking handlink.

Becca cried out and Sam leaned down over the railing. Becca's shaking had been reduced now to a slight quivering. With the shot, she would drift off to sleep soon. Sam squeezed her shoulder. "It's okay, Becca. I'm here." Becca's eyes flew open for a second and looked at Sam. He smiled and stroked her cheek.

"Daddy?" Becca answered wearily and closed her eyes.

"I'm right here, honey. Everything's okay."

Al edged a little closer to the bed. "That's a good sign if she's talking."

"Yes," Sam agreed as he ran his fingers lightly over Becca's arm. "It's a very good sign."

Becca opened her eyes and struggled to keep them open. Sam leaned over, ignoring the numbing pain in his left arm. "I overheard you and Gene talking," she said, beginning to shudder again. "I didn't mean to listen. Gene was so angry. I didn't want to break our promise."

The nurse came back in the room and began setting up the IV bottle. "She's fighting the sedative. She needs to rest."

"Becca," Sam said softly, "you didn't break our promise. We can talk about this later. Don't worry, your mom is on her way here. Just lie still and go to sleep."

Doc clucked softly to himself and patted Sam on the back. "I'm going to check on Miss Beulah. I'll be right back."

Sam looked up at Doc Adams and smiled gratefully. "We'll be fine," he whispered.

Doc left the room quietly. Al shook the link and it pro-

tested noisily. "Sorry, Sam. I still can't get Ziggy to produce a current time line."

Outside in the hallway a shouting match was taking place. In a flash the door to the room burst open and banged against the wall. Meg came charging through, her arms waving madly through the air, her eyes trained, looking for her daughter. Two nurses were trying in vain to stop Meg's forward motion. Once Meg spotted Becca she was no match for the nurses who were trying to take her back outside. "Unhand me. I've just spoken to Dr. Adams and I demand to see my daughter at once. Let me go or I'll have my husband arrest you. He's a sheriff. Rebecca!"

Becca's eyes flew open and she reached up with her arms. "Mommy."

Sam thought Meg never looked more beautiful as she bent over the railing and carefully gathered up her daughter in her arms. The nurses saw what was going on and let Sam contend with Meg.

Sam lowered the rail on the bed, letting Meg get closer to Becca. She smoothed her daughter's hair and hummed to her in a soft voice, "Easy now, Becca, you're in Momma's arms now. You can cry all you want to, 'cause I'm here and your daddy's here and everything's all right." Sam watched Becca's eyes close and her breathing become heavy. He leaned over the bed and gave Becca a quick kiss. Meg reached out and caught Sam's shirt. Then she noticed the towel wrapped around his arm and she opened her mouth to scream. Sam's hand covered her mouth and he shook his head back and forth. Meg gasped and her eyes filled with questions.

Sam uncovered Meg's mouth and touched his fingers to her lips. He shook his head. "It's not as bad as it looks," he whispered.

"Oh, Will," Meg mouthed and bit down on her trembling lips.

"You stay with Becca now while I go get this arm looked at. I'll find you later," Sam reassured Meg. Sam winked, brushed his hand against Meg's cheek, and headed

for the door. He pushed open the door with his shoulder and disappeared into the corridor.

Al smiled warmly at Meg and Becca as he passed the bed. He slid through the door behind Sam and emerged into the hallway. The link had finally started to quiet down and he studied the blinking cubes in his hands. "Hey, Sam, I think you did it. The time line is still all jumbled, but Ziggy's prediction of you succeeding is going up. See?" He turned to show Sam the link and found himself talking to empty space. He turned in a full circle. "Sam?"

Al noticed the double swinging doors leading back to the main corridor. He stepped through the doors and collided into Sam. Al had to step through Sam, who was leaning against the wall. His face had taken on a very ashen color.

"You okay, Sam?" Al knew it was a pretty stupid question. One look at Sam's face and you knew he was anything but okay.

Sam didn't even bother to sneer in Al's direction. He just rested his damp back into the wall and studied the floor. "No." He cleared his throat and shook his head. "I think . . ." He paused and inhaled deeply. "I've got to sit down."

Al stepped away from the wall and scanned the main corridor. "There's a bench over by the elevators. It's only a few feet away. Right past the nurses' station. Do you see it?"

Sam didn't take his eyes off the floor. "A bench?"

"Yeah," Al insisted. He thumbed to a point over his shoulder. "Just a few steps."

Sam swallowed and took a wobbly step away from the wall. "Oh boy."

"Just a few steps like that and you're there." Al was all encouragement as he walked ahead of Sam over to the bench. "See, it's right here. Walk, walk, walk, and you're here."

Sam reached out and tried to steady himself against the wall. "Al? I . . . don't . . . feel . . ."

Al darted back to Sam's side and began to wave his arms

around. "Sam! Don't faint. Not here. Not in the middle of the hallway!"

Sam closed his eyes and felt his knees give way. He tried to brace himself for the impact. He hoped he would land on his right side.

First he was falling, then he was jerked to the right. Two strong arms lifted him up and dragged him over to the bench. The hands eased him down on the leather seat and then pressed Sam's head forward.

Sam waited as his vision cleared. His left arm was throbbing in time with his heartbeat. Sam realized his head was bent down between his knees and was being held in place by a pair of firm hands. As he came around, he found himself staring at two pairs of feet. One pair wore spit-polished black shoes, framed by tan pants with a sharp crease. The other pair were adorned in high-top tennis shoes and were rocking nervously back and forth. Sam slowly tried to raise his head up and get a look at the owner of the black shoes. The person who saved him from taking a header.

"Hold it there, buddy. I don't want you to take another dive on me."

The person's face was still obscured from Sam. "I'm okay," Sam insisted as he slowly sat up. He leaned back against the wall and came face to face with his rescuer. "I wanted to thank y—" Sam's mouth dropped open. Sam blinked and studied the face closely, making sure his brain wasn't playing a trick on him.

"Hey, boy, are you some lifesaver, kid." Al sighed and looked at the kid who still had his hands on Sam's back. "I thought for sure Sam was—" The pair of high-tops stopped rocking.

Sam clamped his mouth shut and studied the kid in front of him. The boy was in his early twenties. Two large, brown eyes peered back at Sam from under bushy eyebrows. The kid had a pale complexion, which only made his black, wavy hair stand out around his face. The young kid broke into a smile and pulled his hand tentatively away from Sam. He wasn't very tall, but his uniform seemed to

add a foot to his height. He looked down the hallway and his eyes narrowed in a very familiar way.

"Hey," he barked in a slightly raspy voice, "can we get some medical help here?" Sam knew that voice, and he knew it would have a decided edge to it in another forty years, after a few hundred cigars. The young kid turned back to Sam and thumbed over his shoulder, saying, "If my pals would stay out of the nurse's hair for five minutes, we'd get you some help." He lost the smile. "You're not gonna faint on me again, are you?"

Sam was too dumbfounded to speak. He shook his head.

"Good." The young kid seemed relieved. "Your color is still out to lunch, but at least you seem to understand what I'm saying to ya. I got to tell you, this is one hell of a way to meet. My friends call me Bingo." The kid offered Sam his outstretched hand.

Sam looked at the hand, with the round, thick fingers. Choking back his utter surprise, Sam grasped the kid's hand. "I'm Sam."

Bingo smiled and firmly shook Sam's hand. "Well, Sam, it's nice to meet you. Let me find one of those cutie-pie nurses to have a look-see at your arm. We'll have you ship-shape in no time."

Al Calavicci stood motionless by the bench, his mouth also slightly agape. He gazed back at his younger self and his face gave way to a whole slew of emotions. The link squawked and shrilled in the observer's trembling hand. Ziggy's link could have been on fire and Al wouldn't even have noticed. He never took his eyes off the kid just inches in front of him. When he finally pulled his eyes away he looked down at the link, as if it had just been handed to him out of the blue. Al ignored the data display and tipped his head up. He looked over the young kid who had helped Sam to the bench. "That's me," he whispered through lips that barely moved. "My God, that's me."

"You still hanging in there, Sam?" Bingo asked. The kid reached out and put his hand on Sam's shoulder as he studied Sam's face.

"I'm fine. Much better now," Sam muttered.

Al Calavicci snapped out of his daze. "Sam! You're not Sam. I mean, you're Will. You can't tell me—er, I mean him, which is me—" Al stopped and started all over again. "You can't tell me you're Sam." Sam was not paying attention to Al the hologram. He was riveted to Al the person in 1955. Bingo turned away and looked down the hospital's corridor. Al ran his hand through his hair and swayed on his feet. "Now I'm not feeling so good." Al stared up at his younger self. "I can't believe it—that's me?" Al shuffled closer to the bench. Never taking his eyes off the young man standing in front of him, he motioned to Sam. "Move over, Sam. I got to sit down for a minute too." Al reached out with his hand for the bench.

Sam turned and looked at Al edging over to the bench. Sam's eyes grew wide with the realization that Al (the hologram) intended to sit on a bench that didn't exist for him.

"No, Al, wait!" Sam called out a split second too late.

Bingo spun around and eyed Sam closely. "What did you call me?"

Rear Admiral Calavicci heard Sam and remembered suddenly that there was no bench to sit on. "Oh shi . . ." Al waved his arms frantically, trying to regain his balance. He clawed the air while Ziggy sounded like a cat in heat as the handlink was waved about. Al lost his balance, toppling backwards, falling through the bench, slipping through the floor, and disappearing out of sight.

Sam leaned forward and looked under the bench. "Al?" he whispered.

"And just what do we have here?" another kid, dressed in an outfit similar to Bingo's, came around the corner, a smoldering stogie planted firmly between his teeth.

Bingo snapped his head up. "For your information, Chip, this guy needs some medical attention. And if you hadn't scared all the nurses off this floor he'd be getting it by now."

Chip whistled. "I'll say he needs some attention. Look at that arm."

"Just ignore my best friend, Sam. He has a case of bad manners today."

"He sure does smile a lot for a person who's been shot," Chip observed as he stepped back and began to puff on his cigar.

Nurse Watkins came around the corner pushing a wheelchair. She spotted Sam and wheeled the chair toward the bench.

"Here comes the cavalry," Chip announced and smiled at the nurse as she went by.

"There you are. I've been looking all over for you." Chip watched the nurse as she bent over and set the handbrakes on the chair. "Dr. Adams wants you down in X-ray, STAT. I would have been here sooner but . . ." She threw a frown aimed at the airmen. "Along with everything else we've had our hands full with a squad of wayward pilots who happened to get into a nasty barroom brawl last night."

"What?" Chip said, feigning innocence. "I didn't do anything."

"Do something constructive, Chip," Bingo said as he put his hands under Sam's good arm. "And help me get him into the wheelchair."

"A piece of cake," Chip said as he rammed the stogie between his teeth and helped lift Sam off the bench and into the wheelchair. "You're in a pair of fine hands now," Chip said, giving Sam a slap on the back. "And not to mention legs and thighs and hips."

Nurse Watkins shook her head and released the brakes on the wheelchair. "Say your good-byes, boys. It's time to move this patient."

"Are you two boys through playing wet nurses?" A tall, dark man called out, sounding annoyed. He was wearing a leather jacket over a uniform like Chip's and Bingo's. The guy's hand was bandaged and he was waving it at his friends. "We better get going if we're going to get back to Ashcroft and make New Mexico by sundown."

"Hey, we wouldn't even be in here if you hadn't got

your hand all busted up in that fight last night, Stacker," Chip yelled back around the cigar.

"Look, why don't you all go outside and shout," Nurse Watkins turned and admonished the men. She reached over and snatched Chip's cigar out of his mouth. "And if you want to smoke, do it in the smoking area." She ground the cigar out. She gave the chair a shove and began to wheel Sam down the hall.

"She told you!" Bingo pointed and laughed at Chip.

"Hey, wait a minute." Sam was twisting around in the chair trying to get a good look at Bingo.

"Your first stop is X-ray and then to bed."

"But . . ." Sam began helplessly. The nurse paid no heed; she just rolled him down the corridor away from the pilots.

"Come on," Chip said, elbowing Bingo in the ribs, "let's go."

Bingo jabbed Chip back and turned to look at Sam one last time. He raised his hand. "Take it easy, Sam."

"Thanks, Al," Sam called out as he was wheeled around the corner and out of sight.

Bingo pulled his hand back. Chip was already heading down the hallway. "Hey," Bingo called out as he caught up with his buddies. "Did you hear what that guy called me?"

Chip began to hunt around his pockets for another cigar. "What?"

"He called me Al. Did you hear him?"

Chip shook his head. "You're beginning to lose it, buddy."

"I am not," Bingo shot back. "I know what I heard."

"Ladies," Stacker said with an edge of irritation in his voice, "let's get the lead out. We've got to drive back to Ashcroft and we're running late."

Bingo turned back and looked down the corridor. "How did he know my name was Al?" he muttered. He shrugged and joined Chip and Stacker as they walked down the corridor.

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Al landed hard on his butt in the Imaging Chamber. Ziggy's link flew from his hand and skittered across the floor. The walls and floor around him slowly dissolved. He sat and watched as the hospital corridor turned into the deep blue tiles that made up the Imaging Chamber's floor, walls, and ceiling. He looked at the link, lying four feet away. He sighed and slowly laid down, gazing up at the blue ceiling.

Al hardly ever forgot he was a hologram, that he couldn't grasp items or sit down. He hardly ever got rattled as a hologram either. Al closed his eyes and braced himself, waiting for it to happen. "Just be gentle, that's all I ask." His voice echoed against the Chamber walls and floor.

The memory began as just a flicker. A memory he did not recall until a few seconds ago. The memory grew and the details began filling in. Al's own memories were being sorted and shuffled like a deck of cards. The new memory began to blend with all the other memories of Al Calavicci.

As Al lay flat on his back, feeling the cool, hard tile floor under his shoulder blades and head, he began to feel the first eerie traces of remembering. Something, he was positive, he had never experienced until a few minutes ago. Accompanying his brand-new memory was the beginning of a dull headache.

Al rubbed at his temples and began to recall his trip to San Diego in 1955. He and his buddies had graduated from Annapolis and were flying across the country to the top-gun school in California. Al knew they had covered a lot of territory on that trip. Most of it spent in bars and pursuing females. But landing in Ashcroft, Oklahoma? Stopping at a hospital in Dunsmoore for Stacker's broken fingers? Helping some guy to a bench? Al's eyes snapped open. Not only did this all take place some forty-odd years ago, making it difficult to recall all the details anyway, but this memory was already being shuffled with Al's "original" memories. That is, if Al had any original memories left. It was becoming increasingly difficult for the admiral to

sort out his original memories from the new ones Sam created for him.

Al seemed to recall a nasty barroom fight that took place between some local yokels and his buddies toward the end of their cross-country travels. He vaguely recalled Stacker breaking his fingers and the drive to a hospital. Al could also picture, just as fuzzily, the young nurse pushing Will down the corridor in the wheelchair, as he stood there waving with Stacker and Chip. And yet, wasn't it just less than an hour ago that Ziggy had informed him about Will dying?

"Awww . . ." Al began to squeeze his fingers against his temples. In a few hours Al would never recall the original history at all. Only Ziggy would know. Ziggy was keeping track of all the history before and after Sam Leaped. Running two parallel lines of history in her trillion-zillion zigawatt brain. Al dropped his hands away from his head. He had come through another ripple effect in time, thanks to none other than Sam Beckett. Al slowly pulled himself up into a sitting position and rubbed his neck. The admiral had a throbbing headache forming at the base of his skull and he had really crunched his tailbone when he fell.

Al got to his feet and began to brush off his jeans. The big changes always seemed to pack more of a wallop when they arrived. Al had spoken to Verbena about it once. Sam had been involved in a Leap where he saved an undercover detective's life, but could not fix Al's marriage to his first wife, Beth. Al had gone to Dr. Beeks the next morning after the Leap with his head feeling like he had been on a two-week drinking binge. Al's head continued to hurt three days after that particular Leap and he would have gladly welcomed the relief a migraine would have brought by the end of the third day. Dr. Beeks could only sympathize with Al and suggest he belt down the aspirin and keep a cold compress handy if Sam ever got tangled up in his past again.

Al limped over and retrieved the handlink, massaging his tailbone. He began to walk around the Chamber, trying to

work out the kinks in his body. "Hey, Ziggy," he called out after his stride began to return to normal.

"Yes, Admiral Calavicci?"

"Ziggy, has Sam Leaped yet?"

"No, Admiral. Dr. Beckett is currently undergoing an X-ray."

Al rubbed his neck, feeling his head pound. He had a feeling this was going to be one whopper of a headache.

"Anything else, Admiral?" Ziggy purred contentedly.

"He hasn't Leaped yet?" Ziggy hated to repeat herself and Al's question was met with silence. He tried a different tack. "Getting Will's arm set isn't going to cause any problems, is it?"

"No problem, Admiral. Some rather unpleasant pain for a few days."

"And the little girl, Becca? She's okay, right?"

"According to my new current time line, yes."

Al involuntary winced at the mention of a new time line. "So . . . ?"

"So?" Ziggy repeated. "A needle pulling thread, perhaps? Or are we speaking of sow, to plant seed for growth, to set something in motion?"

Al tightened his grip on the link. "So . . . why . . . hasn't . . . Sam . . . Leaped?" Al drew each word out and ground his teeth for emphasis.

"There is obviously something he still needs to correct. Oh, by the way," Ziggy added as an afterthought, "Dr. Beeks wanted me to relay this message: Will is alert and awake. He's asking for you in the Waiting Room."

Al tucked the link in his back pocket and walked over to the door. "Ziggy, please inform Dr. Beeks that I'll be in to see Will in about an hour," Al said as he opened the door of the Imaging Chamber.

Al entered his office and was confronted with the mess he had left earlier. The admiral stepped around his memorabilia strewn all over the floor and sat down behind his desk. He opened the drawer and took out a bottle of extra-strength aspirin. He popped the top and shook out four

capsules in his hand. He tossed the bottle back into his drawer and started to get up to get some water, when something in the mound caught his eye. Al reached down with his free hand and pulled a partially concealed black and white snapshot from the pile at his feet.

Al felt goosebumps appear on his arms as he studied the shot. "I'll be damned," he muttered as he laid the photo down on his desk. His head was starting to pulse big time, so Al hastily got up and went out in the hallway to locate a drinking fountain.

The black and white photo on the desk had slightly ruffled edges and was turning yellow in some spots. Three men, all young and smiling, were posing around a sign. They each wore identical uniforms and short military hairstyles. One of the two men who flanked the sign had a huge cigar clamped between his teeth. The third young man was kneeling down in front of the sign so he wouldn't obscure the words. Above the black, wavy hair of the kneeling pilot were big, black letters that read: YOU ARE ENTERING THE TOWN OF DUNSMOORE, OKLAHOMA. THE TOWN OF DUNSMOORE WELCOMES YOU.

CHAPTER

ELEVEN

The nurse at the small desk looked up as the door to the Waiting Room opened and Admiral Al Calavicci stepped inside. The nurse snapped to attention and drew his hand up in a sharp salute, which the admiral returned with an equally impressive salute of his own. Verbena Beeks waved from the observation deck above the room. Al returned the wave and strode briskly over to the table.

Will Williams was lying down, his hands folded across his chest, with a light blanket covering him. When Al entered his line of vision, Will sat up, his eyes scanning over the person standing in front of him. Will beamed and offered a curt but effective salute of his own. "Rear Admiral Calavicci."

Al seemed to glow with a blinding brilliance in his dress whites as he stood under the fluorescent lights in the Waiting Room. He snapped his hand up to the brim of his hat and saluted back.

"I guess I'm going home soon?" Will's eyes looked

tired and yet hopeful. He pulled at the blanket that covered his arms.

"That's what Ziggy says." Al put his hands behind his back and assumed a perfect at-ease. "Sam hasn't Leaped yet, but Ziggy is predicting he will at any time. I'm here to tell you how much we appreciate everything you did. You were helpful in helping us with the murder." Al pointed at Will's left arm under the blanket. "I know how bad you must feel about your arm."

Will flexed his arm as he spoke. "Dr. Beeks spent about two hours discussing what I can expect when I get back. She's prepared me for the broken arm." Will's features clouded. "But I'm not half as concerned about my arm as I am about Becca. If it's all the same to you I'd like to speed this process up so I can return to my family. I'm needed there."

"I understand," Al said.

A few moments of silence hung in the room between the two men before Will spoke up. "Admiral? Do you remember the discussion we had?"

"Oh yes." Al spied Verbena as she entered the room. "I know just how to handle it."

"My, but you're looking especially sharp today, Admiral Calavicci." Verbena Beeks smiled as she approached the table. "And how's your headache, Admiral?"

"It's still there."

Verbena glanced up at Al with raised eyebrows and then back at Will. "And how are you today, Will?"

Will smiled and tipped his head. "Just fine, ma'am. Ready to go home."

Verbena sensed something going on between Al and Will. "I'm sorry, but did I interrupt something?"

"No," Al and Will answered at the same time.

Will smiled sheepishly. "Al was just proving to me he's a real Navy guy after all. He's got the suit and scrambled eggs to prove it."

Verbena looked puzzled. "Scrambled eggs?"

Al pointed to the bright gold zig-zagging trim on the

brim of his hat. "Actually, we were saying good-bye, Dr. Beeks."

"Well, I want to say good-bye too," Verbena added. "You've been an exceptional patient, William." Will offered his hand to Verbena. "Well, a handshake won't do for me." Verbena walked over to the edge of the table and embraced Will. "Take care." She pulled back out of the embrace and smoothed out her lab coat. "I'll leave you two alone now." She threw Al one more look as she headed out of the room.

Will tipped his head to Al. "I always believed you were a real admiral. But thanks for wearing the uniform just the same."

Al snapped his shoulders back. "Before you know it, you'll be back in Brick. I've one more little piece of business to settle with Sam before he Leaps. So I'll be on my way now."

"Well, so long, Al. If you're ever in Brick, look me up. That is if you can remember me."

"Oh, I'll remember," Al answered. A wide smile broke out on his face. "I never forget a friend." Al nodded and headed for the Imaging Chamber.

"Sam."

Sam opened his eyes and peered around the darkened hospital room. His mind remained in a haze from the painkiller he had been given. Sam's left arm was encased in a cast from his hand to his shoulder. It was anchored above his head by a large metal hook. Sam closed his eyes and settled back down in the pillow, where he began to drift off to sleep.

"Hey, Sam."

Sam fought off the urge to wake up. "Mom?" he answered groggily.

Al's shoulder sagged and he rolled his eyes to the ceiling. "Hey!" Al leaned over the railing on the bed and shouted in Sam's ear. "What kind of drugs have they got you on,

anyway? Do I look or sound even vaguely like your mother?"

Sam sat upright, jerking his arm and causing it to ache at a new level of pain. "Where—what—Al?" Sam turned and blinked at the sight of Al, standing by the side of his bed, in his admiral's uniform. He was smoking a cigar which rested between the first and second fingers of his left hand.

Sam narrowed his eyes and frowned. "I'm still here? I haven't Leaped yet?"

Al detected more than a little irritation in Sam's voice. "No, you haven't Leaped yet, but according to Ziggy you're about to." Al smiled. "How's your arm, by the way?"

"My arm hurts like hell," Sam retorted curtly. "How the hell's your tailbone?"

"Touché." Al stuck the cigar in his mouth. "Boy are you in a lousy mood." Al began to hunt around in his pocket for the handlink. "Didn't they give you enough pain medication?"

"Not enough to make a difference." Sam sighed as he settled back into the pillows. He looked wistfully up at the ceiling. "So when do I Leap?"

Al rammèd at the link in his hands. "How should I know?"

Sam lifted his head off the pillow. "You're the one with the link," he snapped, clearly exasperated.

"Since when has that ever made a difference?" Al smacked the link with his fist. It bleeped noisily at the admiral.

Sam swore and closed his eyes. "Why did you wake me up if you haven't got anything?"

"Who says I haven't got anything?" Al tipped the link to read the display. He was startled as a metal bedpan flew by his head and crashed into the wall behind him. The bedpan smacked loudly against the wall and dropped to the floor by Al's white shoes.

Al took a step to the left away from the pan. "You're gonna be sorry you did that, Sam."

“Albert Calavicci.” Sam was seething.

Al figured he had pushed this as far as he wanted to go. “Relax.”

“Don’t tell me to relax. I don’t feel like playing twenty questions right now. You can’t or won’t tell me why I haven’t Leaped. My arm feels like it’s been ripped out of its socket.” Sam inhaled and shook his head. “And that just for starters.”

Al held up his hands. “Sam, don’t have a cow.”

“Speaking of cows,” Sam barked, “our vet on the farm gave better injections than that incompetent rookie medical school jerk who jabbed me this afternoon.”

“That’s your own fault,” Al pointed out. “That’s what you get when you argue with a doctor. I remember on my first tour of ’Nam, there was this cocky upstart—”

Sam hung his head down. “Al, please don’t start.” He lay down and slung his right arm across his face. “I’m not up for one of your stories.”

Al brought the link up to conceal his smile. “Well, okay. You did good, Sam. Back in Brick, David is cleared of the murder and released. He eventually becomes a lawyer. It takes him a long time, but he does it.”

“So he’s okay?”

“Yeah, according to Ziggy, he’s fine. Got a law practice set up in Oklahoma City.”

Sam exhaled. “That’s good to hear. At last some good news.” He moved his right arm. “What about Becca?”

“I had a long talk with Verbena about her. Becca’s going to have a rough six months at first. Flashbacks, bad dreams. But her parents help pull her through. She eventually comes to realize if she hadn’t fired your gun, then Gene would have killed you.”

“What about her future?”

Al dipped the link. “Ziggy says she went on to graduate from Oklahoma State and follow in her father’s footsteps. She becomes the first female sheriff ever appointed in Oklahoma.”

“Al, that’s great,” Sam said with a genuine smile.

“That’s the first time I’ve seen you smile in a while.”

Sam’s smile turned into a frown. “What about Gene Dupree?”

“D.O.A. Carla Sue was seeing him and Tilden at the same time. No one can determine for certain who the father of the baby was. It could have been Gene’s but it could have also been Tilden’s. Seems Carla didn’t want to end up in another dead-end relationship, so she chose Gene. Gene showed promise. He was young, single, and headed on his way up in the community. But then Carla never counted on Gene backing out of her marriage proposal. Gene panicked when Carla threatened to spill the beans about her and the baby. I bet Carla knew a lot of things about Gene that Gene didn’t want anyone to discover. He confronted Carla that day in the trailer and when she wouldn’t change her mind, he killed her.

“Tilden’s going to come forward in a few days and bring Gene and Carla’s affair to light. He’s trying to cover his own bases and only manages to get a little mud slung on his name and reputation. But it’s all for the best. Tilden’s through as far as his political ambition goes. And Tom Madison, who was going to be Gene’s pawn in this whole mess, packs up and moves away by the end of September. Things slowly start to return to normal, if this town ever was normal to begin with.” Al chuckled to himself and jabbed at the link. With his fingers he began to rummage around in his coat pocket. “Um, now comes the tricky part. . . .”

“Tricky part?” Sam asked suspiciously.

“Yeah, where’s that notepad you were carrying around with you all the time?”

“My notepad?”

Al pulled the cigar out of his mouth. “Will’s notepad, actually. The one you’re always writing on. Where is it?” Al smoothed out the piece of paper he’d pulled from his pocket and held it up to his face.

Sam cast his eyes around the room. “In this nightstand, I guess.” He shot a quick look at Al. “Why are you hold-

ing that paper so close to your nose? Can't you read it?"

"Yes, I can read it. It just happens that the light in the Imaging Chamber is lousy for reading." Al waved his hands in the air. "Don't change the subject. Just find the notepad."

Sam made a face and reached with his right hand over to the drawers by his side of the bed. "Why do you need it, anyway?" Sam grunted and groaned as he opened up the drawer. Feeling around with his fingers, he pulled out the pad.

"And don't forget a pencil," Al reminded him from across the room.

Sam muttered something as he reached in and found a pencil.

"Okay," Al began when Sam had the notepad balanced on the bed and the pencil in his grasp. "Flip it open and write this down."

"Wait a minute. What do you mean, 'write this down'?"

"Don't worry." Al rattled the paper in his hand. "Just jot down this date."

"Date? Al, I'm not writing anything about a date in here."

Al knew no matter in how much pain or how heavily sedated Sam was, he was bound to encounter this typical kind of behavior from his friend. "That's it," Al said, throwing up his hands, "you're the one bellyaching about not Leaping. If you don't want to Leap, fine. If you want to stay here, fine. I bet in another hour that arm ought to start really hurting—and itching too. I bet right now you can feel places you want to scratch, but can't reach. And not to mention . . ." Al nudged his foot in the direction of the bedpan and rolled his eyes.

Sam looked at his arm sealed in a cast and then over at Al. He reluctantly flipped open the pad.

"Write this legibly." Al found himself on the receiving end of a look that could kill. "May twentieth, 1965."

Sam dropped the pencil. "That's in the future. You know the rules, Al."

"Rules, schmules." Al began to walk toward the bed. "I bet that arm is really starting to ache. Just a slow, dull, burning ache you can't do anything about. Just think how it's going to feel in an hour. How's your shoulder feeling with your arm all strung up like that?"

Sam picked up the pencil and scribbled in the pad. This process was beginning to burn up a lot of his reserved energy. He tried to stifle a yawn. "Okay, I wrote down the date."

"Now write down: Tornado hits Brick. Two fifty-four A.M."

"I know what you're doing," Sam mumbled as he moved the pencil over the paper. Sam no longer cared about the rules. He wanted to Leap. He wanted his arm to stop hurting and he wanted Al to leave him alone so he could get some sleep. "You're doing this for Will."

"You're right." Al folded the paper and tucked it back inside his coat. "I owe him this, Sam. Think of this as a little tiny warning. It saves lives."

"You owe him. . . ." Sam leaned back against the pillows. His eyelids were growing heavy. "What about . . . what . . . about . . ."

"That's it." Al stuck the cigar in his mouth and sucked on the end. "You're finished here."

"Good." Sam sighed wearily as he laid the notepad on the bed. "I'm ready to go home now. . . ." The arguing had drained what little energy Sam had left. He closed his eyes. The pencil rolled out of his fingers and into his lap. Sam's head rolled to one side as he drifted off to sleep.

Al tiptoed over to the bed and watched Sam sleep. He leaned over and read the notepad on the bed. In a fairly legible scrawl were the words Al had dictated. Al cast his eyes up at Sam and smiled. "You never know where you'll Leap next. It could be home." Ziggy's handlink chirped in his hand. "Bye-bye, Sam."

The whole room sparkled and twinkled as Sam Beckett Leaped.

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