

Well Enough  
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Artwork by Kate Nuernberg

Silence. I had landed sitting down.

As my vision cleared, I found myself looking at a medical chart, held between my two well-worked, spotlessly clean hands with a watch on the left with a sweep second hand ticking away.

Hand. Wrists. Sleeves. White sleeves -- white jacket. Pockets. Stethoscope tucked into a pocket. Name tag hanging on pocket. Hospital name on tag. Name with MD after it.

I'm a doctor? A real one?

"Lost your place, Doc?"

What? Oh yeah, sitting down...have a chart...looking up, I took a deep breath.

She had an elfin, heart-shaped face, but the eyes caught my attention first. Dark blue, almost too dark to tell, they were deep set but they sparkled brightly under blond lashes and eyebrows as straight as a number 2 pencil. Then she raised them in question and I saw they were hardly straight at all.

Then her mouth twisted in a smile and the eyes half-closed in mirth. "You look like I feel," she said. "Must have been one hell of a night, eh Doc?"

I managed to nod. She was wearing a hospital issue bed jacket over surgical scrubs, a lavender scarf covering her head in an artfully tied turban. There was no doubt that she had lost all of her hair. It was also clear she was by herself in what appeared to be a semi-private hospital room. There was nobody in the bed next to her and we were alone -- for the moment.

Cancer patient? Chart! "Uh..."

"Take your time, Doc. I'm not going anywhere."

I quickly flipped the pages. Janet Miller, born in 1949. The chart was thick...she'd been here a long time...finding the original diagnosis was difficult. Then I found it. Acute

lymphocytic leukemia. Damn.

"How old did you say you were, Janet?"

"Twenty-nine. Do you think I'll see 30?" The tone was wistful, although it contained a smile.

1978. Damn again. I don't know!

"Aw, c'mon Doc. It was a joke!" Looking up over the edge of the chart, I watched her smile at me again, but this time it didn't reach her eyes. A joke? You're as terrible a liar as Al...wonder where he is...I dredged up what I hoped was a pleasant expression. "That's better." she said, "Now Doc, what's the scoop? You know I've been waiting days and days and days for those results. Am I in remission, or not?"

I took refuge in the chart again, but it wasn't the safe haven I wanted it to be. It didn't look good...not good at all.

See, she'd been fighting this a long time...the chemo had taken a lot out of her, aside from the cancer itself. Aw, she was close...damn close to remission, but -- not. And the rest of the picture wasn't pretty. Another round of traditional chemotherapy would certainly ruin the health she still had. What she really needed was some new bone marrow, and I may forget some things, but I know that was pretty hard to come by in 1978.

I met her eyes again. Damn, I needed time to regroup! So, I stalled. "You've been my patient for a long time, haven't you?"

Not a good tactic. The eyebrows met over her eyes as she frowned. "From the very beginning. Jeez, you've never been like this -- you've always been straight with me! Don't worry -- I can take it. What's next? More chemo? Something worse? C'mon, Doc!"

My eyes dropped to the chart again in defeat. "Oh, boy."

"Damn. I was afraid of that." Her voice was soft, tired.

###

Janet wasn't my only patient. As I discovered, I was one of the oncologists on staff for the hospital I was standing in. I had eleven other patients I totally baffled while I saw them on rounds. My patients called me Doctor Randy, but when I passed off the confusion of the day as a late night, most of them only

frowned and reminded me to take it easy. One of them, an older woman, clucked and shook a finger at me while she told me to take better care of myself -- not to work too hard. I took a look at the name tag -- Dr. R. Wilson, it said.

As I went through chart after chart, I decided I liked Randy Wilson, MD. He had made many careful notations on the charts, aside from the basic orders I would have expected. All his patients were leukemic, in varying stages of treatment. "Get patient more Nero Wolfe books," one had said. "Patient needs 1 lap of the unit, p.i.d. Patient needs to be moved to room with a view." At least one of Dr. Wilson's patients was being released today -- the one who liked mystery novels, and she was going home in remission. Not all of the cases were doing as well.

Getting my chance to regroup, sitting back in the unit lounge, I had gotten hold of a can of 7Up while I went over the charts. Being a doctor was nice -- but a cancer specialist? This was something else.

"I hate cancer." I said it to the empty room, as I sat back and rubbed my eyes. Thinking of Janet and the life I saw in her eyes, I folded my arms and looked at the ceiling without seeing it, thinking long thoughts. There was no doubt she was the reason I had been pulled here. But was I here to save her life...or to ease its passing?

Cancer reached disruptive tendrils into all aspects of a person's life, much like the actual disease process. You couldn't work, you couldn't plan a future. You were always afraid, sick, tired; always aware that there was something **wrong** with you. And then add in the concept of pain.

Being in this hospital wasn't going to give me a convenient memory lapse when it came to doctoring. I may not have been certain where I was geographically, the name of the hospital was Valley Memorial (big help) -- but protocols and treatment plans were already beginning to form in my mind, and there was no question I'd done this before. And no question I hadn't liked it then, and I didn't like it now.

"Why couldn't I have been a potato farmer in Idaho?"

"Pity you didn't end up a gynecologist like this guy's twin brother."

Al. So help me, if he was smoking anything after the

morning I'd spent, I'd...something. It would be the thought that counted. But somehow, I was smiling. "Hi, Al." I said, straightening in my chair slowly, looking around to find the source of the jibe. "I'd bet you'd like that."

"Make life interesting." Al was standing in front of the vending machine across the room, wrinkling his nose at most of the contents. Then he turned his head to look at me. The eyes were bright, the eyebrows raised and he looked as if he had just come to work -- freshly shaved, the hair curling at the temples still damp. He was wearing greens today -- a sage green jacket shot through with gold threads, a lighter shade shirt underneath it with a tie that would wake the dead. "How's it going, kid?"

"Outside of being a doctor with most of my patients terminal -- life couldn't be better. Don't tell me I'm here to save all of them...there's a whole hospital full --"

"Shh. You're not here to save the world...this time." Giving the vending machine a dismissive glance, Al pulled out the comlink and began calling up data.

We went through the basics pretty quick. Good thing, too. We'd had just enough time to cover what I already knew when the shift change arrived and we were shooed out of the lounge. I decided to take the elevator down to the lobby and step outside. See where the hell I was.

Al and I made the circuit outside the hospital, walking the perimeter of the facility. It sat apart from the community it served, nestled inbetween gentle rolling hills of lush green grass with the odd tree dotting the landscape. There were no mountain ranges in any direction, the sky opening above our heads large and blue. I saw farmhouses in the distance, a small town formed around a main street. The hospital itself seemed large for such a small place, four stories high with wings jutting out here and there. And busy, too. As I walked with Al in the garden behind the facility, an ambulance pulled in, cutting its siren as it hit the emergency room entrance.

"So, you've narrowed it down to Janet Miller. For once, Ziggy agrees with you. 87% that she's the one." We walked along a small lake, the late afternoon sun filtering through the clouds. Ducks noisily paddled in the water, and I found the remnants of some saltines in the pocket of the lab coat I had on. Somehow, I realized I was following in the habit of my host, and tossed the birds the crumbs.

"She's dying, Al."

He only looked at me out of the corner of his eye and smacked the comlink a good one. "Yeah. Well, that's where the scenario comes to a screeching halt. Y'see, this Dr. Wilson, he went on to be quite a name in his field of practice -- was very successful, did a lot of research, wrote a lot of papers, helped a lot of people get well. Left a paper trail a mile wide. I could tell you what he ate for breakfast this morning."

"Then figuring this out should be easy. We know everything about this situation."

"Should be, but ain't. One of the things he wrote in his later years was a autobiography, and one of the cases he discussed in great detail was Janet's." Al gave the comlink a final look, then shook his head and put it away. He looked worried. "He described her case as one of his greatest failures."

"She dies? Al, that's --"

"Terrible, I know. I know, Sam." He folded his arms across his chest and rocked on his toes, looking at the ground. "I don't get the impression he felt he failed because she died, though. I think he regretted her death because she never had much of a life."

I remembered the thickness of the chart. "I know she's been fighting this a long time, Al. What are you saying?"

He didn't want to look at me. "She really doesn't need to stay in the hospital, Sam. She just doesn't have any other place to go. Her parents are dead, and she had no brothers or sisters. No other family. She never had much of a chance to make friends, 'cos she got this thing when she was a teenager and spent most of her high school years in the hospital. So, until something happens, here she stays."

"So I'm here to get her out of the hospital."

"That's one idea. But from there?" Al shook his head. "She's gonna die, Sam. Here, or at home."

"Maybe not." Tossing the last of the crackers, I began to pace as a scenario began coming together in my head. "Patients don't always do their best in a hospital situation. She might beat this thing if she could rest up at home...yeah. Or, just

get a vacation...positive thinking."

"Quack, quack. You're beginning to sound like those ducks."

"No, Al, hear me out. Maybe we're here to find her a cure -  
- all she needs is a bone marrow transplant and she'd be fine."

"But Sam, right now those are only done on an experimental basis -- and only between family members. Ahhh...that's your angle! You want to see if there's anyone out there -- great idea!" He pulled out the comlink with a flourish and began pecking away with anticipation.

It didn't last long. The comlink squealed, Al punched it, it squawked in protest and went silent. Then Al looked at it like it was something that had sprouted legs and was about to crawl away. "Sorry, Sam. No dice. She's adopted."

"Aw, that can't be it. See if Ziggy can get into the adoption records. Maybe there's somebody out there she's related to -- I'll just bet there is and that's why I'm here."

He looked up at me while pecking away, heaving a deep sigh. This time he just scowled at it, one hand resting on his hip. "Ziggy says no."

"No what? No, she can't get into the records or no, there's nobody else out there she's related to?"

"No, she won't tell me, no."

"What? You tell Ziggy I said tell me."

He punched it in. "Ziggy says, are you sure you really want to know?"

What could it be? Al looked at me as I looked at him. We were both well aware of Ziggy's personality quirks, but this was something new. "Has she ever refused to give information like this before, Al? I don't remember."

"It's okay, kid. She hasn't, to the best of my knowledge."

"Tell her I need to know. See what happens."

He did. "She says, okay. You asked for it."

The information began rolling, I could tell by the look on

Al's face. It was a kind of "it's about time" kind of look, but it also went away quickly. It was replaced by one I hadn't seen in so long, I would have forgotten he was capable of it. Some would have thought he was about to faint, but I knew better. He had just taken a personal hit, right where it would hurt the most. Ziggy hadn't been warning me off. She'd been trying to protect him.

"Al. Al, what is it?"

He'd gone white around the mouth, his eyes never leaving the display. It probably rolled on in its way, but he didn't hurry it along. He'd was as still as a shadow on a cloudy day, and quickly becoming just as frightening. There weren't many places you could hit Al that would anger him into the rage I saw building in his eyes. If he spoke, I wasn't sure I wanted to hear whatever he had to say. The last time....

The last time, I had been able to physically corner him, make him talk to me. Yes, I had gotten hit. Yes, he had fought me. But we had talked it through. We'd worked it out.

But what had it been over? I couldn't remember...but I did what came to mind first. I covered the display with my hand so that he couldn't see it. His eyes moved from the display to my face and I swear I saw red glint in the black depths. Then he took a swing at me, dropping the comlink. It winked out of existence without a single thought.

His fist whizzed through me like my hand passed through his arm as I instinctively tried to block the blow that never landed. He didn't notice. He then half-heartedly tried to kick me, his breathing audible as he began to sob. Then, as if it were all too much, he tried to lean into me and ended up standing with me in the same space, half in and half out. "You. You and your damned experiment." Now, I was scared. I had done this to him - - but what? Would I ever be able to find out? He was my only source -- and it looked like I had lost it forever.

"What have I done?" He shook his head. "Come on, Al, take a step back so I can see you..." My hands instinctively went to his shoulders, passing through the image of him without so much as a breath of resistance. "Talk to me. I don't know what's going on."

"I never wanted to know, dammit. You son of a bitch, I never wanted to know what happened to her!" He was like an angry terrier, his whole frame shaking with rage. Yes, he stepped back

and looked me in the eye, but then, he said nothing and I found nothing to say as I looked into his eyes that now contained the tears I had put there. He only glared at me for a moment, then walked back to where the comlink had fallen and picked it up. "I'm getting out of here." Tapping the command in, the door sprung up behind him. Thankfully, I saw a silhouette in the doorway, waiting for him. Take care of him, Verbena.

"I don't know if I'll be back, Sam." Our eyes met, and I could see him struggling to regain some measure of balance. "I don't think I can do this anymore. Not and stay your friend."

We both knew what that meant. I'd chosen Al for his infallible objectivity in a pinch, ignoring how quickly it disappeared when he had to use it on his own problems. So, here it was. Out of all the times I'd told him I couldn't do it and he had pointed out just how I could, when he was my own private cheering section, played the part of my own best judgement...here he needed me to play that role and we both knew I'd fall way short of the mark.

It wasn't me, not exactly. I just hadn't had the black holes in my past Al had had. Anything I could say would sound lame, at best. We both knew I couldn't offer the 'I've been there' speech -- I hadn't. All I could offer was my love, respect and belief in him. And while my heart was thudding wildly in my throat in panic, my head knew that this was what he was trying to hold onto as tight as he could.

"S okay." I heard myself whisper. "I understand." If only I did!

"Son of a bitch," he muttered, walking towards the door with the step of a very weary old man. "Well I should know."

He stepped through, the door closed and I was alone.

More alone than I'd ever been in my life.

###

I did the basic survival things you do when you've had the rug pulled out from under you. You eat, you sleep (if you can) and you go back to work. Should have known it wouldn't help, but you can't fault me for trying. At least it let me keep on going.

Released another one of Randy's patients in the morning, a mother of two who was going into her third bout of remission and

I was wishing Al was there to tell me if this one was going to stick or not. Her kids were so little...I wish I knew what was going to happen to the three of them. But I bit my tongue as I shook her hand and signed her out, wishing her luck.

And then I visited Janet. She was still alone in her room, sitting cross-legged on the bed. Her breakfast tray had been pushed aside, stone cold and she had dug into a fresh, hot pepperoni pizza she had magicked out of thin air. Seeing my face as she bit deep into a slice, the eyes rolled skyward as she finished the bite and chewed. Then she pushed the box at me.

"Here. You need this more than I do." When I hesitated, she continued to nudge it my direction. "Gwan. You look like shit."

To my surprise, it was delicious.

We went over her chart together, with me trying to find the key to what had tweaked Al, while she was looking for something far more basic -- when she would have her freedom, if at all.

"Can't we go outside and do this?"

I didn't see any reason why not.

She allowed a wheelchair ride as far as the door where she hopped out of it as if the seat was burning her. Janet seemed to have far more energy than I ever would have given a post-chemo patient to have -- something I had to attribute to Dr. Randy's regime that had required her to keep moving, even if only to the nurses' station and back three times a day. She was in good shape today -- throwing sticks into the lake full-armed, laughing in the sunshine like she had been solar-charged. It could have been a memory fragment that Randy had left behind, but I swore I could imagine Janet in her younger days with a full head of strawberry blonde hair that had reached her waist in one, straight fall. It had looked glorious in the sunlight.

Then I blinked and saw her for what she was -- nearly fifteen years older, and tiring quickly. I called a halt to the stick-throwing and we sat down on the grass. Energy she might have in abundance, but she had no constitution whatsoever. She looked she had just ran a marathon, circles forming under her eyes.

"Janet, we have to find you a donor."

We had skirted the issue all day, but her eyes met mine and I knew she didn't want to talk about it. "Doc, I know you want to help. I just don't have anything for you to work with."

"Just because you're adopted -- "

"Means I don't want anything to do with the woman who abandoned me at birth. Do you understand that?" Her eyes had gone grey, flinty and sharp. "She didn't want me when I was healthy -- damn her! I don't want a thing to do with her when I'm dying!" Looking down, she began to tear at the grass.

"Janet..." Taking in the small, well-formed hands in my own, I pried the remnants of grass out from between her fingers. She watched me do this with a curious sense of detachment.

"Doc, will I ever be free? Will I ever be able just to go and do what I want?" she asked, her eyes filling with tears. "Is it so much to ask? I just want out. Just -- out."

The tears fell onto the ground, whereupon I reached for her and she came into my arms like an old friend. "You know how I've been wishing I could go places...I know how bad I want to see the ocean, Doc. I want to go to Disneyland. I want to get sunburned -- just one more time. Get good and dirty camping out someplace. Sounds desperate, I know. Will I have time to do that before I'm dead?"

"Janet, you don't have to die."

She gave me a little squeeze and patted me on the back. "Don't tell me you're going to miss me, Doc." she whispered in my ear.

Yes, I'd miss you...But I couldn't say a thing.

"Aw, Doc. I didn't mean it."

"Yes, you did," I said. "And you've got a right to feel the way you do. C'mon, we gotta try for a transplant, Janet. We've got to try and find you a donor."

She was silent for a long moment. "Do I have to see her if we find her?"

"That's up to the two of you."

"It isn't going to be easy."

"It doesn't have to be." Releasing her, our eyes met. "I think we're tough enough."

She gave a nod, her head bobbing in one quick jerk. "Okay. On one condition."

"Which is..."

"If we don't find a donor, you let me go. This is it. No more chemo, no more hospital. Got it?"

"You got a deal."

And we shook on it.

###

So that's how the search began. I halfway expected it to end in one of two ways -- in a bureaucratic dead-end or I would leap, having placed enough events in motion that I wasn't needed anymore. Neither seemed likely as the next few days progressed.

I had an office, or I should say Randy did, that supported my practice at the hospital -- a receptionist, secretary, patients -- the works. Well, you know the drill.

The receptionist, Martha, spent most of her spare time helping the hospital auxiliary manage a thrift store for the local cancer research fund, but Rachel the secretary spent most her time pushing paper. She welcomed the challenge of knocking on doors and bothering the powers that be regarding Janet's adoption with a grin like I'd just thrown her in the briar patch. She went to it like a hound on the fox trail.

It wasn't Ziggy and Al, but it was going to have to do. I'll admit I didn't hold out much hope. Adoption records were still sealed very tight in 1978 and getting a thirty year old one open might require more than a pushy secretary, even if it was Rachel. She was the one who kept my office schedule light enough that Randy and I could spend most of the time at the hospital. This doesn't sound like much, but the good doctor, being as good as he was, was naturally in great demand and you can figure out the rest. Rachel was tough -- nobody got by her, and she seemed like the type of woman who made a skill out of getting what she needed.

And even that reminded me of Al. What a pair they'd make!

Rachel's idea of a slam was to call someone a mush for brains. When I suggested substituting the word nozzle, a wicked gleam came into her sea-colored eyes. She's used it ever since, chuckling to herself all the while.

Didn't solve a thing, but it made me smile. It would have been so much easier had Al been around. I thought of him constantly, wondering how he was. His last words spun in my mind in quiet moments, trying to connect with the information I was able to glean from Janet and ever so slowly from Rachel.

But then, at times, the only thing I heard was 'you and your damned experiment.' Dammit, it only made me more determined. I wasn't about to admit that my project had turned ugly on me. Something good had to come out of all this. I just wasn't sure what it was going to be.

I was also becoming concerned about the time I was spending on this leap. It had been almost four days since I had last seen Al. Days that I had spent on the phone following up Rachel's leads, writing orders for my patients, taking Janet for long walks in the evening. We never left the hospital grounds.

Without Al's help, would I stay here forever?

Even Janet became pensive, waiting. We did the best we could to keep her comfortable, but all the wear and tear of the chemos seemed to catch up with her from time to time. She slept a great deal, and lived almost exclusively on junk food. The dietician didn't like it much, but an apple pie from McDonald's was an apple pie and she would eat it.

Unlike the applesauce, sliced apples (brown from sitting out too long, ugh!) and the bisquick-and-apple pie-filling-crumble stuff they sent up, Janet would eat anything apple, as long as it came from outside. I'd made a few sharp statements about the quality of the food and got the standard 'it's the best we can do in quantity' excuse.

The dietician also ordered out for lunch, I'd noticed. Really ought to make them eat their own cooking. That would change things pretty quick!

After sending back a number of uneaten dishes, I decided to take measures into my own hands. I began bringing dinner along with me for Janet and I on our evening walks. And I also brought something in with me for her on morning rounds. Janet's weight stabilized, she kept her pep and I made a friend.

Randy's colleagues took this in stride -- he'd gotten results, after all -- so they left me alone. They all knew Janet's case of course. And not one of them had ever lifted a finger to help her.

Where was the glory of saving the life of a single woman with no family? No rooting section, no crowd to play to. They went and played their golf together, talked shop together, ignored their patients together. Made me angry, then sick.

So I left them alone, too.

Then the morning came when I brought in the granola bars and the sun came out from behind the clouds.

"Granola?" she'd said, wrinkling her nose. "Yuckola. You don't expect me to eat this stuff, do you?"

**Mmmmm...that sounds yumola....**

I smacked my forehead with the palm of my hand and barely made it to the chair as Al's voice rang in my memory. **Son of a bitch...well, I should know.**

"Doc, are you all right?"

I looked at her - God! - I looked at her and wondered how I'd missed it. Things went into slow motion as I stared at her, taking in every eyeblink, every move.

It was her coloring that had thrown me. If only her eyes had been brown - but they weren't. If she'd been a boy - but she hadn't.

I'd never seen a picture of any of Al's family -- I wasn't sure if one existed. But one thing was as clear as the nose on her face -- Janet must have been the product of an encyclopedia salesman and someone else's mother. It all came together.

I watched as the eyebrows dropped, met over the bridge of her nose, the crease appearing between them, the way the eyes changed shape...the set of her shoulders, the way she held her head -- just so. It was Al all over again...in a new style and color.

"What did I say?" She looked at me as if I'd lost my mind.

Taking no chances, she got a granola bar out of the box and began munching on it. "S'good, okay? Now, aren't you going to talk to me or what?"

I couldn't help it. I jumped up and hugged her, spinning the two of us around the room. "I've got it." I told her. "I know what to do, now."

"Fine," she spat between crumbs. "Great. Now do you have anything to wash this shit down with? Gack." Setting her down, she scrubbed her mouth with the back of her hand and looked up at me, skepticism written in every line.

I couldn't wait for Al to meet her. I just needed to find him.

###

Was I surprised when the elevator doors opened? Thank God it was empty...I got in, let the doors close and snapped the switch that stopped the elevator between floors.

I walked through him three or four times, waving my arms like a madman as he watched me from behind a cigar-induced smokescreen. Then I leaned against the elevator wall and looked at him. Just looked, my face hurting from the smile it wore and couldn't suppress and we laughed at each other.

He looked at me, shaking his head just the smallest bit. I knew there wouldn't be any apologies from him and he wouldn't expect one from me. We were even.

"Kid, where the hell have you been?" Al said, "I've been waiting for you in here all morning."

He did look the worse for wear. I think I had gotten more sleep, which was hard to believe. His clothes looked like he'd had a fight in them at one time, one sleeve torn at the shoulder seam, a smudge on the lapel. "What's that?" I said, pointing.

"Fight with Tina."

"And that?" I noted the torn sleeve.

"Fight with Gooshie."

"And that?"

"Fight with Verbena Beeks."

"That, too?"

"Naw, that was with...never mind." He scratched his head with the hand holding the cigar, reaching for the handlink with the other. "Give me a break, Sam. They all took turns trying to throw me in here and I wouldn't go. So there."

"Look pretty good, for all that," I said. "So, who got you into the imaging chamber?"

"That damned secretary you sicced on my trail."

"What? She finds something?"

"In about six months, which is too late to do you any good. Janet fell too far out of remission, and the last chemo they tried on her to get her back to where she is now, killed her. Heart attack. Boom, gone."

"She got the adoption records open. She found out --"

"That both of her natural parents were as dead as her adoptive ones." Al held the comlink as though he was going to pull the data, and then stopped, looking skyward. He then closed his eyes, dropped his head and put the comlink away. "I don't need to look at it again, Sam. It isn't pretty."

The elevator's alarm began beeping, reminding me that other people needed to use the elevator besides me. I snapped the switch back over and punched up the ground floor. "Let's get out of here."

"Ducks again, Sam? I could learn to hate this place, real easy."

So we kept walking past the lake, to a few trees over a hill. Looking back, the hospital didn't seem so big. But it did look menacing, like a penal institution.

"Okay." I said, turning to face him. "Talk to me."

He stood next to me, looking out at the horizon. "This happened a long time ago, Sam. There's nothing either of us could have done to prevent it, it happened before you were born." He took a deep breath and sighed. "I told you about my family. Do you remember?"

"Yeah. Your dad, Trudy and the encyclopedia salesman."

"Don't forget my mother." he said, "Very important."

"What happened?"

"After she ran off with the guy -- his name was Bob Tyler, by the way, stupid, boring name! Anyway, afterwards, about five months later, she got pregnant by the guy. He split, and left her holding the bag. She had the baby and put it up for adoption. But that's not where the story ends. Less than a year later, old Bobbo got himself killed in a car wreck. And less than 3 years after Janet was born, my mother died of the same thing that's killing her. I think she was sick when she had her."

I closed my eyes, leaning against a tree. "I'm sorry, Al."

"It's not your fault. Does explain a lot, tho'."

"How so?" I turned and looked at him, his face in profile intent, distant. He took a puff off the cigar, and blew it out gently.

"You can die from pneumonia if you're leukemic, Sam." he said quietly, "You can't come back and pick up where you left off if you're dead, either."

"Do you think that's what happened?"

He only shrugged. "Could be. Maybe. I dunno, there's no hard evidence to support any assumption I make. The important thing is, nobody can help them now. No one. Get that through your head, I don't want you feeling sorry for me."

"No problem."

"What we can do is save Janet. We've got a window opening up in less than two hours."

"What happens in two hours?"

"I end up in the emergency room of this hospital."

"How? Are you hurt?"

"No," he said sadly, "I was driving drunk and got caught."



I'll be here to have blood drawn. You'll have to be quick."

I remembered another Al, from long ago. This was not going to be easy. Or fun. "Oh, boy."

"Oh, boy. Oh, joy. Oh, rapture."

###

I made emergency medicine my business that day. "Be good for me to get a little variety." I'd said. They all thought I was slumming. But the physician on duty wasn't complaining -- after pulling an all-nighter with the victims of a train/bus wreck, he was happy to have any extra hands he could get.

Al stayed very close, but silent. Almost as if he knew I would have to get used to him being there again. I wasn't sure I

wanted him there when they brought him into the unit. He didn't look like he had regained all of his objectivity, and heaven knew he'd need every bit he had.

He hated hospitals. He hated sick people, people hurting. But still, he stood by, watching over me. All I had to do was turn my head and he saw me and smiled, just a little.

I'd seen the typical gamut of the emergency room crowd -- a few sprained members, cuts that required stitches, the odd ingestion of a foreign substance (in this case, a two-year-old had bitten the head off a Smurf and swallowed it), colds and flues that had progressed to the point they required antibiotics...it was refreshing, to say the least. At one time I had every age group, each gender, every one with a different problem. Thank God, none of them needed real intensive care, like a heart attack or a gunshot wound.

When the cops brought Al in, they came in and requested a gurney because he had passed out in the patrol car. Driving drunk? He was dead drunk, and I wouldn't have recognized him except he kept singing some obscene drinking tune and I would have known that voice anywhere. I can't imagine how he could have driven anything. How could he have found his keys?

"Drove his car into a ditch. Found him there." One of them said. I looked at the name tag - M. Murphy. It was a ironic twist -- Murphy's law had brought Al to me. It figured.

Murphy's partner, Jamerson, looked particularly itchy. "He's all yours." he said, tapping Murphy on the shoulder. "We've got to get back."

"What do you want me to do with him?" I asked, absent-mindedly signing the clipboard they presented me with.

"Whatever you can. Put him away someplace to sober up." he said, "I'd run a blood alcohol on him, but he wasn't driving at the time we found him, so..."

"It didn't stand up in court, Sam." I looked over my shoulder and got a nod. "Pathetic waste of time."

"Yeah, might be a waste of time." I parroted. "I think we can find a place for him to sleep it off."

With that, I took possession of one very drunk - and vocal - Albert Calavicci. And I knew just where I wanted to put him.

I told Sandy, the nursing supervisor that I wanted to put him someplace where he wouldn't bother too many people -- Tower One, third floor. It was the middle of summer and the census was low, and lowest up there on Janet's floor. All through this, my patient kept singing "When A Man Loves A Woman", off-key and skipping verses, making up a few of his own that I won't go into here. The supervisor and I arranged the transfer, all the while wincing at the noise.

"Christ, will you hurry up and pass out already?" I looked up at Al looking at himself and he only shrugged as our eyes met.

"Okay, Dad." the drunk mumbled, rolled over and went to sleep. And then began to snore.

"I liked the song better." Sandy told me. "Sure you want to keep him? Kashogi's the one on call..."

"I'll keep him. I want to keep an eye on him."

We got him settled in across the hall from Janet. Lucky for me, it was the isolation ward on that floor with a door that locked.

Even so, Janet poked her head out of the room as we passed by. She looked at me and Sandy, whom she knew, and then her eyes shifted to the gurney and she smiled.

"Look what the cat dragged in." she said, chuckling and shaking her head. "What happened? Bad white count results?"

"No, just a common everyday drunk." Sandy Webster, R.N., was an ally of mine, but I could see she was getting tired of dealing with me and this particular patient. "Drunk tank downtown is full, and we're not."

"I get the picture."

The fact that my Al wasn't protesting got my attention. Looking over my shoulder I found him, just out of the corner of my eye. He'd hadn't heard a thing that had been said. He was looking at Janet and I realized he hadn't seen her before. Mesmerized was a good word to describe the look on his face.

He stood there in the hall while we got Trouble settled in his bed. Then Sandy waved goodbye and she stepped into the elevator and I shoed Janet back into her room and back into bed

where she promptly fell asleep, the dark circles under her eyes making her look like a raccoon.

"Sam."

I turned around to see Al standing in the doorway, motioning me out into the hallway. "Yeah."

"Call Rachel and give her this information. This will lead her right to me and you'll have enough evidence on paper to convince me."

We went back to the unit lounge and made the call. Rachel had some other issues for me to deal with as well and the call went longer than I expected. But the lead I gave her was a sound one she had already begun and I knew before nightfall I'd have what I needed and before morning, we'd be ready to confront Trouble with his new-found family.

But Al stayed quiet, pensive. If anyone had ever asked me to describe Al, I'd always used the word "sparks" -- and for the first time, I couldn't see them. He kept pacing aimlessly, not looking at anyone or anything. He looked old, and I don't remember ever thinking that about Al.

"Al, do you remember any of this?"

"No. Not a damned thing." he said, giving the vending machine another dirty look. "Don't they ever change the stuff in those things?"

"What did you think of her?"

Al stopped and turned to look at me. "I think she's beautiful, Sam. Past that, I'm numb."

"Understandable."

"Nah, actually, I'd like nothing better than to go back to the project and hide under the bed until this leap is over." Then he shrugged. "Problem is, when this leap is over, things ain't gonna be the same."

"If it's for the better..." I began, then looked away. "What makes you think that?"

"Because before I came back, Ziggy was taking odds on me."

On **me**, Sam. Last time I checked, it was up to 47%. Old Trouble next door is going to be a handful tomorrow morning, Sam."

"What do you suggest?"

"I'd hold off for a day or so. Let them get to know each other before dropping the bomb on 'em."

"I won't be able to keep you here past morning."

"Oh yes, you will."

"How?"

"Look Sam, the only reason I was in that ditch was because I couldn't think of anything better to do. I wanted to die and I'm going to be mad as hell when I wake up in this friggin' place." he said, spitting the words out like they were poison. "I'll probably say something to that effect and you can keep me here under a 72-hour watch or something."

I only stared at him, feeling the tears sting my eyes and still, I could only stare. "I wish --"

"Kid, you're years in the future. I'm kind of glad."

"Why?"

"Because, right now, I didn't even like me. Give him a break -- he's got a lot of growing up to do. There's a lot of things he's going to get to do that he can't even dream of right now. He'll be okay, Sam."

Where are you in your life, Al? He'll be okay...sure. But right now? How am I going to reach you?

"What do you remember? How did it go the first time?"

He looked at me, frowning. Then he looked at the floor, and began tapping one foot. I could almost smell the wood burning.

"It's all one big headache, Sam." he said, shaking his head. "I got out, got my car out of the impound lot and skeddadled as fast as I could. End of story."

"So we've already changed things."

"Yup. We're committed, wherever that leads." He pulled out the handlink and punched in a request. "Nothing's going to happen until morning, Sam. Go home. Get dinner and a good night's sleep. I'll try to do the same." The door snapped up behind him.

"Sweet dreams, Al."

"You too, kid."

###

I took his advice and went home -- Randy's home, which after the nights I'd spent there, was quickly becoming as familiar to me as any home I'd ever known.

He lived on a five-acre parcel on the outskirts of town. The house was modest in size, but large enough for a bachelor to have many members of his family visit from time to time. Besides his bedroom, library, office and den, the house had two guest bedrooms -- one decidedly feminine, the other just as strongly masculine. The porch was screened and had comfortable chairs and a swing with plenty of room for a small crowd to talk the long summer nights away.

Photographs decorated the house -- faces smiled out at me from every nook and cranny. Randy was clearly a person who loved people -- there were many pictures of him with his patients, Janet included.

A family portrait hung over the fireplace -- it was here I spent a great deal of time nights, trying to acquaint myself with Randy, his past and who he was.

He was from a large family -- and he did have that twin brother Al told me about. I'll have to assume he was a doctor too, like he had said. Both parents were in the picture, along with sisters and other brothers, in-laws and their children. I counted them up one night -- 24 people in that one picture.

They stood close together, some of the younger children making "help, I'm being squashed" faces. A hand on a shoulder here, a head leaning against another there -- they were a tight clan, if this was any indication.

Nobody had called Randy while I was here, but letters from around the country had trickled in the last few days. Brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles. Cousins....parents. The faces

blurred and faded away until all I saw were the faces of my own family. Just the five of us, in the last family portrait we had taken.

And then the faces dwindled down to two. Al...and Janet. It just wasn't fair. What Al had lost...and I had never thought about until I had lost them too...what it was to have family. Good family. It was something "friend" couldn't quite encompass and was never meant to. A mixture of love and acceptance mixed with perpetual expectations, forever in negotiation. These were people you could hate -- disagree with on every issue. And you'd see them, deal with them, entrust them at times with some of your most intimate feelings. You could do that. There was just something about those people...those people who were your family.

I found something warm to drink and started a slow-burning fire in the fireplace, curling up in Randy's easy chair to think as I watched the flames dance.

It was times like these I realized how little of my memory followed me around intact from leap to leap. But it also renewed my wonder at how incredible a thing one single memory could be.

I could remember Katie as a tiny little girl of four -- chasing a cat she had by the tail, the cat running in circles, Katie being pulled along as fast as her legs could run, yelling "Kitty, come here! Kitty, come here!" as authoritatively as only a four-year-old can get.

But her high school graduation? I know I was there, I remember traveling back home on break to be there. But I can't even see the color of her gown.

*"Sam, there's this guy from the government side I think you should meet."*

What was his name? I see him so clearly, the man who told me about Al...taller than me, fair-haired, ice-blue eyes...a good man, my feelings say. But his name is gone with the wind. He was with Project Starbright, but left when the budget strings got a little too tight for his liking.

*"He's a bit of a loner, crazy too. Straight arrow, though. Good with the suits. They love him."*

We had talked about this admiral he knew working on our project, set up a meeting even. He had sounded like just the man we needed in our section -- but he never showed and I'd written

him off. I hadn't liked that -- I had not been someone who tolerated that kind of first impression.

I remember being in that mood when I hit the lobby and recognized Al from the description I'd been given.

Blue eyes, you were a good friend to point me in his direction that day. First thing I did was take the hammer away from him. The rest drops off into a black pit.

The next thing I remember about Al is a late night at my project. The end of a really bad day.

Nothing had worked right that day and the harder we tried to make it work, the bigger it blew in our faces. To top off the general feeling of frustration and failure, I'd blown a mint's worth of parts in a prototype when I had plugged the power supply in the wrong way and had been too mad to doublecheck it before powering it up. Zap, 6 months out the window.

Al had only looked down at me, sitting on the floor amid the smoke and fried circuits. I was ready to kill, a soldering iron in one hand, a screwdriver in the other. Okay, so I'd blown the thing -- come hell or high water, it was going to get fixed, **right now**. Al had only motioned me aside. "Get out of the way, Sam. Do it now, kid."

He'd then pulled out the .38 and shot the damned thing, saluting as he did so.

"You'd better start laughing about this, Sam," he'd said. "Screw ups don't get much better than this."

I stood there, gasping like a beached fish. How could he just stand there, when half a year of my life was gone?

Oh, it's a beautiful, intact memory. I can still smell the smoke. It's summertime, and of course, the air conditioning had pooped out. Verbena, like some of the others, had gone to town to get out of the heat.

Verbena...oh my God, that was the night we drove Verbena off the road!

It's two in the morning, there's not a soul in sight except me, Al and Gooshie. I'm behind the wheel of my car, that Bronco I bought so that I could go anywhere I wanted to around the

Project and carry anything I wanted with me. Got lousy gas mileage and had no pickup to speak of whatsoever. Al's right beside me, behind the wheel of that red sports car he loves more than his life.

The guard shack is down the way, Al says it's a quarter of a mile. Gooshie is down there with a handkerchief tied to a stick. There's a full moon out and it's almost as bright as daylight out. We're revving our engines, Gooshie waves the flag -- and the scenery flashes by me as I race Al to the guard shack!

Of course, Al wins. I can see him getting out of his car as I walk up to it, grinning. "That wasn't any surprise." I hear myself say.

"Yeah, but it was fun, wasn't it?"

"Fun for who?"

"Trade cars, then." Gooshie says. We both look at him like he's crazy, then reconsider.

"Okay, you're on!" Al runs over, snatches the keys out of my hand and hops into the Bronco.

"Don't readjust those seats!" I bellow. "Don't you change a thing in there!"

Al looks out of the window at me like I've gone mad. He can barely reach the pedals and he's looking out through the steering wheel. We're not that far apart in height, but it's distributed very differently. "I won't if you won't." Al deadpans back to me.

So I try to get into his car and find my knees don't want to go under the dashboard. And I have to tuck my arms in to my sides to get the door closed. The steering wheel nearly rests on my chest. But, like a good loser, I hold my tongue. Thank God this thing is a convertible.

We motored back to the starting line, and Gooshie stands at the finish line with the flag ready. He's so wrapped up looking at the two of us morons behind the wheel that he doesn't notice the headlights making their way up the road, and to tell the truth, the morons don't notice them either. I've got a fighting chance now of beating Al, and I know he's going to make the best of it in that old Bronco.

Gooshie waved the flag, we took off like a couple of hare-brained idiots. Just as I crossed the line ahead of Al, I heard a horn sound, and a pair of headlights appeared in my face, swerving off into the soft shoulder of the road just outside the guard shack.

I skid to a stop, Al does the same just ahead of me and we both turn to look as Verbena Beeks steps out of her car, slams the door and looks at her car, now fully stuck in the sand. Gooshie walks up to her, naive soul that he is, still holding the handkerchief on a stick like a baseball pennant at the World Series.

Verbena is not pleased. I brace myself for impact as she turns around to face us. I sure hope Al has a good way of explaining this....

She turns, sees us in each other's car and bursts into laughter, and soon the tears are rolling down her face. "What are you two doing?" she finally gets out, hugging her sides and wiping her face with the back of her sleeve.

To a man, the three of us look at the ground and begin waffling.

"Okay, okay, enough already. You boys are going to be the death of me."

I see her shaking her head and the memory ends there.

I never considered Al brother material, but you know, there were things I talked to him about that I never would have taken up with Katie, my Mom...or Tom, had he been there.

Al was always a good listener for me. It was something I counted on.

*"Sam, you don't know what you've done with him. I hardly recognize him anymore."*

Verbena is sitting with me in the cafeteria, poking at the salad she doesn't want to eat and eyeing my chocolate cake with undisguised avarice.

"C'mon, you're kidding." But she only shakes her head.

*"I think you're the only person he really trusts. The rest of us -- we'll all dry up and blow away someday."* She made a

*hand-washing gesture and then blew the "remains" away, smiling wryly. "But not you. He doesn't see you that way. Somehow, you've never betrayed his trust and that's pretty tough to do. And it's making all the difference," she adds meaningfully. "He's not the man I knew ten years ago."*

Did I listen to you half as well as you listened to me, Al? Was it the fact that I insisted you talk to me? That I picked you to be my friend? That I never gave up until you gave in?

I only remember snippets -- feelings, mostly. Stubbornness on my part, feeling sore inside and wanting to make it go away. The thanksgiving you spent with me and my family when you went off by yourself after sitting silent as a stone throughout dinner. I found you with the wine you had brought to go with dinner and had "forgotten." I took it away from you and insisted you come back to the house where your family was waiting for you.

"I don't belong here. They're your family, Sam. Not mine."

"I'll share. Why don't you give them a chance?"

"Why would they want me around? I'm not related to them."

Around and around we went that day. Around and around.

Is that the Al I'm going to meet tomorrow? The one with a chip on his shoulder and a bucket with a hole in it for a heart? I think I know that man. I think I can deal with him.

1978. Where were you then? How did you get here -- you were working a lot with NASA then, and they're coastline people, not like this landlocked little town. Were you traveling to a new assignment perhaps? One you didn't want?

You didn't talk much about this time, Al. That I'm sure of. Between marriages, between assignments...in a lot of ways, you were cut adrift in 1978. **I couldn't think of anything better do.** Perhaps you thought your life was over.

I know one thing, though. This is where you looked back on what had happened to you -- and swore it was never going to happen again. From here, you met and married again. And, in time, you believed you had been abandoned or were about to be (it's hard to remember which, I confuse your ex-wives more than you do) and you divorced. And then you did it again, with someone else. A pattern that was to continue up to the time I met you, by which time you had sworn off on marriage for good and

always. Said you couldn't afford it.

But in each case, you had committed to someone and then ran away from the relationship before they could run away from you.

You remained on good terms with all of them, nearly all the time. I met one or two of them...I think...it's just a blur of faces, no names...I'm guessing a lot now, but I don't think any of them ever cheated on you, Al. You just thought they did. You expected that to happen, even when it never did. After Beth, you never felt that sense of family with a wife -- just the dread of being dumped again for someone else. And then being alone, again. A self-fulfilling prophecy, and you never learned from one marriage to the next why it failed. It's so simple, and if this was happening to somebody else, you'd point it out to me in a split second.

My drink was getting cold and I got up to refresh it. This was a turning point in your life, Al. Yeah, I can see it now. You and Janet should have bumped into each other, both of you being here at the same time. That's what went wrong the first time. Here is someone who will never leave you, Al. Here is someone who can show you, better than I ever will, what it is to belong to something again, to be a part of a family -- to have that connected sense again.

All I have to do is make it happen. I have to convince you to try again. To trust her. Really, truly, trust her.

You're here to save her life, Al.

And I'm here to save yours.

I love it when a plan comes together. I sat and happily slurped my hot chocolate and watched the embers glow, late into the night.

###

Morning began like all the mornings had before it -- food for Janet, newspaper for me and the morning rounds. I wondered, like I did every morning, how Randy was doing back in the waiting room, but judging from the schedule I had been keeping, it was probably for the best, a vacation he had needed for a long time.

This time, however, the morning included Al - both my Al and the one we had both nicknamed Trouble. When I passed his room, I looked in to see him looking quite contrite and very hungover. Truth was, he looked miserable and I decided to leave it alone

for the moment. But I slipped the set of surgical scrubs I'd brought with me into his room while he wasn't looking. Given the choice, it's what I would have wanted.

Al was a silent partner this morning, more observer than I had ever seen him be. He simply stood by, smoking a cigar aimlessly, not noticing when it went out. Our eyes met now and again, but past "good morning, Sam" he hadn't said anything. The comlink stayed in the inside pocket, too. I couldn't blame him - I imagine if I saw my life being rewritten in front of me, I'd be a little preoccupied as well.

Janet happily dug into her breakfast, making me drink the coffee, but her attention kept wandering to the patient across the hall.

"Why'd you put him up here?"

"Here's where we had the most room."

"Oh." she said, "He woke up early. Is he okay?"

"I would imagine so." I answered, looking up at Al standing next to the window.

"I would imagine he was very noisy, Sam." he added dryly and I smiled.

"Did he wake you up?"

"Nah, the housekeeping people did when they went in the clean up the mess." Janet gulped down the last of the orange juice, watching me out of the corner of her eye, which was twinkling in mischief.

"Did you sleep well?" She nodded, then shrugged.

The phone next to Janet's bed chose that moment to ring -- she answered it.

"Joe's bar and grill, Joe's dead...can I help you?" she singsonged. The party on the end was loud -- I could hear Rachel's voice myself, sitting at the end of the bed. "Hold on, he's right here." She handed the phone to me with a grin. "What did you put in her coffee? She's wild!"

"I can imagine." I said, taking the phone and fishing out a notepad and pen from a coat pocket. "Whatcha got, Rae?"

Good thing Al was standing by the window -- I could look at him without looking suspicious. And look I did, as Rachel gave me the story as quick as I could get it down. He looked me in the eye as I watched him, eyebrows raised. She had it -- all of it, down to the police report that was filed last night, placing Albert Calavicci at this hospital. Wild was a very good word for Rachel this morning. She was delirious.

"He's here! He's here! He's **right** here! Ohmigod, ohmigod, ohmigod! He's right here!" I couldn't tell if she was laughing or crying.

"What a coincidence." I managed, "Rachel -- Rae -- Ra -- now calm down. **Rachel!**" Rolling my eyes at the ceiling illicit a giggle out of Janet and a chuckle from Al. "Come on now, I need you to do something. Yes, I heard you. Bring the hard copy over here -- I'm not going in there without it, he'll think we're nuts."

Silence, finally. Then a deep sigh. "Yeah, I guess this would be a little hard to swallow, first thing in the morning."

"Good girl. I'll see you soon."

"Sure, Randy. I'm on my way."

I replaced the receiver on the hook and handed the phone to Janet, who put it back where it belonged, watching me as she did so. The mischievous glint had vanished from her eyes, to be replaced with that hard, direct stare I had gotten to know so well. **Don't bullshit me.**

"Do I want to know what that was all about?" she said, folding her hands in her lap, brushing the crumbs away.

"Yeah, I think so." I said, adopting a similar posture. "I think we've found someone who could be a donor for you. Someone related to you, genetically. We haven't contacted him yet, but--"

The eyes widened. "You said 'him'. My father?"

"No. A brother. Older."

This took a little getting used to. Janet sat back with a puff of breath, deflating as she looked around. "I never though

I'd have a brother somewhere." she whispered. "Older...older? Wow." The head tipped down, the eyes unfocused and she began to nibble on a fingertip, frowning. "How did that happen? I always thought my mother must have been a kid who got knocked up or something. How much older is he? How did you find him? Did you find my mother?"

"Whoa, whoa, hold on. I'll tell you what I know...Rachel's bringing the rest of the information with her."

"What's he like? What's his name?" The eyes met mine, shining now with unshed tears. "Does he look like me?"

I looked at Al standing in the sunlight streaming in through the window. He was smiling, comlink in one hand, one arm propping the other up. "So many questions. She wants to know everything, Sam." he said softly. "And I would have passed this up in a hot second."

His eyes met mine and I only shook my head at him. Janet took it to mean her and she pounced on me, grabbing lapels and shaking me. "Tell me!"

"Okay, okay..." I said, settling her back down. "His name is Al-bert."

She scrunched up her face like she had bitten into something nasty. "Allllbert?! Ooh, poor thing...I'm doomed. What else?"

"What's he like..." I looked over at "my" Al, then looked across the hall, where I heard Trouble grinning around, trying to get comfortable, and failing. The floor was alive with its usual daytime chatter and clatter and banging and bumping and I knew Trouble has having nothing but trouble. "That's a toughie. We really don't know much about him, yet."

She only settled herself in, wriggling. Her eyes, big, bright, met mine. **Tell me.**

"We know he served in Vietnam." This brought a frown to her face. "He was released from a POW camp a some years ago...they said he adjusted well, but..." Janet's face fell, paling.

"Oh, poor thing. Where is he now?"

I pointed. "Across the hall."

"WHAT?!!" Screeching, Janet climbed onto her feet, standing up in bed and scuttled away from me, up onto the pillow, bumping into the wall. "That's **him**? He's -- he's -- aiyiyi -- yi!" She sank down, squatting on the pillows, hands folded across her knees. "He's right there." she whispered. "Ohboyohboyohboy. Ohmigod." She began to rock, oblivious to me and everything around her. "What do I do?" she whispered.

She was quick, I've got to admit that. Before I had moved enough to put a hand on her shoulder, she had whipped around to face me with a dazzling smile. "I know!" she chortled, "I'll go introduce myself! Yeah, that'll work!" And she was gone, out of my hands and across the hall.

"Stop her, Sam!"

"Janet, wait!"

I looked at Al, he looked at me. "Uh, oh."

Then we dashed across the hall.

She had already hopped onto the bed. "Hi, you don't know me yet, but I'm Janet. And I know something you don't know," she sang. Trouble looked green to the gills and Janet's bouncing on the bed wasn't helping things any. He had grabbed hold of the edges of the mattress, trying to steady himself and he looked absolutely stunned, wild-eyed. "Albert Calavicci, is that Italian? Does that mean I might be Italian? Sure would explain a lot." This got his attention.

I had skidded to a stop in the doorway, Al right behind me. And the last thing I expected happened. Al started laughing.

"What the hell..." Trouble tried to get a grip on her, and failed. She kept hopping around him like a Mexican jumping bean. "Who let you in...who are you...lemme go...leave me alone!"

Janet had gotten a hold of a wrist and checked out the wristband. "Oooh, same blood type too! Great birthday, I was born in March. Were you adopted too?" Then she jumped over him to the other side of the bed. "You don't look so good."

He threw himself back against the pillows with a groan. "Pink elephants. They promised me pink elephants. They **promised!**" Then he opened his eyes and looked. Janet had settled onto the edge of the bed. "Who the hell are you,

anyway?"

"Your little sister." she said, extending a hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Oh, you deserve this, you idiot." I heard Al say behind me, still chuckling. "Go ahead, shake her hand."

If it were possible, he went paler, frowning. "You've gotta be kidding. Who put you up to this?"

"No joke. C'mon, get up!" Janet jumped off the bed, grabbing him and pulling him along with her. "There's a mirror right over here. Look, we've got the same nose...see?"

"I'm waiting, God." Trouble said to the air, "I'll take the purple cockroaches right now, God." But he followed her to the mirror, wobbling badly. Poor guy. He hadn't been doing well, and with Janet rocking the boat like that....

He looked. Then looked at Janet. Frowned. Looked in the mirror again. Frowned harder. "You can prove this?"

"Yeah." The tone of her voice changed drastically -- I think that was precisely when Janet ran out of steam. "Ask Randy. He knows everything." Paling herself, Janet's eyes widened as she turned to see me in the doorway. "I don't feel so good, Doc..." The turn completed itself as she spun down onto the floor, but not before Trouble caught her.

He caught her, but not before the reality of her appearance hit him. **There's something really wrong here...** "Oh, no. She's sick. She's sick, poor kid." Scooping her up, he sighted me in the doorway. "What's wrong with her?"

"Across the hall." I said, "C'mon. We'll put her back to bed. She's a patient here, just like you." He looked like a man on his first leap, all messed up and nowhere to go.

"What is this, a looney bin?" He carried her into her room, all business now, even though I'd seen pea soup that looked healthier.

"No, a cancer ward. You're staying up here because business has been bad lately."

"She's got cancer. In her head?"

"No, in her blood. Leukemia."

This stopped him in his tracks as he braced himself against the doorjamb and glared at me. "Is she yanking my chain?"

"No."

Trouble closed his eyes and began shaking his head. "And she's sick. She's sick...oh Jesus. Why me?"

I think if he had had any other place to go, he would have taken it, but he had his arms full of Janet. And nobody could have been gentler with her.

We got her back into bed, and tucked her in. Rallying a little, she opened her eyes to look into Al's and smiled. I swear, it was love at first sight.

"Hey there, feeling better?"

She nodded, spent. "Where'd you get such curly hair? Mine's straight as a stick. When I have hair, of course."

"Yeah, sure." I'd never seen someone so befuddled. I still gave even money on a quick getaway on his part, but he never stopped looking at her. He was utterly bewitched by those deep blue eyes.

"Do you have any other family, Allllbert?"

That made him smile, though the confusion in his eyes stayed. "No. Why do you want to know?"

"My mother dumped me. Did she dump you too?"

"Dumped you, what do you mean, dumped you?"

"I was adopted, ditzo. Same as you."

"Now wait a second, I wasn't adopted...my mother left us and Dad...." The eyes blinked, and then he went for Janet's wristband. "Well, son of a bitch."

"Sam." I turned at the sound of the voice. "Get out, Sam."

"What?"

"Out. Get out. C'mon, we've got work to do."

I met Al in the hallway. He had the comlink out, and he looked furious. "What's wrong?"

"Plenty. Go to the nurses' station and write up some orders for Janet. She's in big trouble."

"Oh no, Al. We've done it...we've found her a donor, you."

"Uh, uh. Ziggy says no. Right now, her hemoglobin's in the basement, you're gonna have to order up a transfusion, medicine, all kinds of stuff. Quick, Sam."

I didn't budge. "Al, what's wrong?"

He looked up at me from the comlink, the anger clear in his eyes. "Nothing has changed. She still dies, Sam. Alone, in this hospital." He whacked the comlink once, but it only squealed in protest and produced the same answer.

I looked past him into Janet's room. Trouble was carefully adjusting the pillows, tucking the blankets in just a little closer. I couldn't see his face, but Janet was smiling like she was looking into the face of an angel.

"That's why you didn't leap. This hasn't changed anything."

I didn't try to explain it. I just went cold inside. This couldn't be happening. It couldn't happen to Al - not again. He wouldn't leave her without helping her - would he?

I walked over to the nurses station and got the appropriate forms to order up the bloodwork on Janet. Yeah, her blood count was going to be abysmal, I just knew it. Without continuing the chemotherapy, it had only been a matter of time. And my time had just run out.

Then I felt someone tapping me on the shoulder and I turned and faced him. Trouble. But this wasn't Trouble, this was the Al I knew -- only he didn't know me from a hole in the ground. My Al was standing just a few feet away, comlink still in hand. **He** was watching this with great interest, as suspicious of the man in front of me as I was. In a lot of ways, he was a complete stranger to me. And I wasn't sure my Al liked him, either.

He stood still, as straight as he could in front of me.

After tapping me on the shoulder, the hand dropped back to his side. He was wearing the scrubs, and he looked like he could use a week at Club Med, but it was Al. Sober, he'd had some hard wear and needed a shower and a shave. He'd gotten himself together pretty fast, just like the Al I knew him to be -- confused, bewildered Trouble was nowhere in sight. "Doctor Wilson?" He extended his hand for me to shake and I took it. The grip was warm, firm. Familiar. I even recognized the smell of him, though right now it wasn't pleasant. "Would you like to tell me what the bleep is going on here?"

"Sure." I managed. "Let's go find a place and sit down."

"Sam..." Al's tone was warning as the three of us moved over to the floor's waiting area, Randy's Al sitting down in a naugahyde chair across from me.

He folded his hands together, steeping the fingers as his arms rested on the arms of the chair and leaned forward. Barefoot, and in his jammies, he was still pretty impressive as he tried to intimidate me. He glared, he stared. He tapped his fingers together as I waited for him to speak. I knew this act -- he wanted me to get nervous. Well, I wasn't going to bite. "How can I help you?" I said, matching his posture.

"For one thing, you can find me my clothes so I can get out of here."

"Don't let him do it, Sam. I'd head for the hills right now if I were him and I am -- think of something to keep him here until he can help Janet."

I threw a dirty look at my Al over my shoulder. Give me something I can use then, I wanted to say. Just what I needed. Al in stereo.

"In a moment." I said, "First thing, what's your hurry?"

"None of your business."

"Uh, uh. You're my patient and it is my business until I release you. Now, once again. Where's the fire?"

His eyes narrowed and he glared at me. I could have laughed -- I knew this ploy so well. It never worked with me, never had. I always saw through it -- he was scared and wasn't about to admit it. So he was trying to scare me into leaving him alone.



"Look you --"

I heard the elevator doors open down the hall and poked my head out of the door to see Rachel striding down the hallway, a thick kraft envelope in her hands.

She spied me with Al and ran up, thrusting the envelope into my hands. She smiled at me, gave me a thumbs up sign and trotted back to the elevator.

Rachel's not the most unusual looking woman in the world, but she isn't bad looking. And she had been dressed nice, well-groomed and Al hadn't even blinked when she came by. I could even smell the perfume she had put on this morning.

Looking down the hall, I saw Rachel waiting for the elevator. She looked back at me and smiled, then continued to wait. I looked at Al sitting across from me. No reaction. It was then I realized that this Al wasn't interested in anything Rachel might have to offer. All he wanted was an escape from this complication in his life, and the sooner, the better.

"Don't you have any questions for me?"

"No." he replied flatly, the eyes beginning to glitter. "I want out of here. Now."

I opened the envelope and looked through the contents. There was stuff in there on Al that I had never seen. And on his mother, as well as a salesman named Tyler. That had been some lead Al had given me. "C'mon," I said, coaxing, "Someone comes into your room, jumps on your bed and makes statements like the ones she made, and you're not even curious?"

"Stranger things have happened." The tone was dry, almost bored. I thought about it. He was right.

Clearing my throat, I went back to the paperwork.

"Stick to the facts, Sam. Then let him get some sleep. He's toast."

Nodding, I flipped through the pages. "I, uh, see you're still in the Navy. Is it Commander Calavicci, then?"

"It'll do."

"Okay. Uh, Commander, this is the long and short of it. Nobody's pulling your leg. This isn't a prank. I've been looking for someone biologically related to one of my patients -- Janet Miller, who you met. She needs a bone marrow transplant and the best candidates for donors are family members. So far, you're the only one we've been able to find."

He wasn't buying it. "It's bit coincidental, don't you think, me just dropping in like this at the right time and all?"

"I think it's something that was meant to happen." I shrugged. "Does it matter where you are? We would have found you, in any case, wherever you were. And asked you to help Janet. She'll die without the transplant, Commander. It's that simple. That's why you're still here."

"You can't keep me here, Doctor."

"No, I can't." I admitted. "I can ask you to stick around and help out, though. Will you?"

He looked out the window, but I don't think he was seeing the sunshine outside. One foot kept bouncing a little as he thought, one finger kept tapping. He wanted his freedom from this place as badly as Janet did, that much was clear. But it was also clear Janet had scored some badly needed points for her own survival. His urge to flee was warring with that part of him that wanted to do the right thing. He was needed -- so be it,

he'd help if he could. That was the Al I knew.

"Aw, hell, she's a sweet kid. I'll stay until lunch and I'll think about it. Is that your proof there?" He indicated the envelope in my lap.

Nodding, I handed it over. Our eyes met as he took it from me and he silently rose, turned away and walked back to his room, closing the door behind him without another word.

Rachel watched as he went by, shaking her head. The elevator finally arrived and I heard her mutter to herself as she got on.

"What a nozzle."

###

Al agreed to keep an eye on himself while I finished rounds. A representative from Patient Accounting had shown up to get the paperwork straightened away to pay for his stay in the hospital. Being in the Navy helped, but as I stood outside the room, I heard how they were going to work it -- he would have to arrange payment now, and then get his money back from the Navy insurers later. His car, now sitting in the impound yard, was doing nothing but accruing more charges as he sat there. It was adding up to be a tidy sum, all legitimate, but the hospital was being a stickler on the issue and I couldn't blame them. He was between destinations -- his residence and his employer were on different sides of the country, he'd been brought in drunk...it wasn't going down well -- it seems he was also broke, too. It didn't help me when my Al stepped into the conversation. What he had to say about it wasn't polite in any company.

The conversation began to get ugly -- they were threatening to call his superior officer (the one he hadn't even met yet) when the call light in Janet's room went on.

"Randy, look in the nightstand there. Second drawer." She'd been too tired to come get me, even though she knew I was nearby. I could hardly look at her -- her eyes had black circles around them now, the skin translucent. That bouncing around she'd done had cost her, big time. I'd ordered up a transfusion, but it hadn't gotten to her yet. That would help, but....

"Get some rest." I told her. She nodded, closing her eyes.

"Look in the drawer. You'll know what to do."

What was in the drawer was her billfold, along with some magazines. "Janet, I can't go through your purse."

"Just take one of the cards and shut those pigs up." she drawled, rolling over. "Or some of the cash, it doesn't matter. I won't be needing it. Mom and Dad won't mind, they left it for me to do whatever I wanted to with it."

When I hesitated, she shooed me away. "Go on, do it. He's family."

So I did.

And I had the honor of seeing Trouble dumbfounded a second time. He couldn't believe it. So he got angry.

He went storming into Janet's room, shoving past me with as much force as he could muster. I let him by, knowing this wasn't the time to shove back -- this was a man with a mission. He went in first, my Al right behind him, comlink flashing as he kept trying to draw information from it faster than it would give it to him.

"What the hell did you do that for?!"

Janet was watching television -- an old episode of Bonanza -- which she clicked off as he came in. I stood in the doorway, my Al across the room in the darkened, empty section watching, as Janet rolled over and gave him a look that would have dropped an elephant.

"Look, you." she said, in a tone identical to his own, "As I see it, you and I have one thing in common. That makes us family. And family does things for family. I haven't got anyone else to do it for, and neither do you. Accept it and get the hell out of my room."

If he grew an inch in his rage, I wouldn't have been surprised. But he went -- not able to get another word out. My Al applauded in his section of the room, smiling to beat the band.

"You got style, kid. Atta girl."

No, Al. She just did what you would have done.

Janet looked at me and sighed. "We've got our work cut out

for us, don't we Doc?"

"I think things will work out. Get some sleep."

"Can I have a hot fudge sundae for lunch?" she asked, looking wistful. I came in and sat down on the bed.

"Sure that's all you want?"

"Chocolate cheesecake?"

"C'mon, get real."

She closed her eyes and smiled. "Okay. Big Mac, you know how I like it. Fries. And get something for Allllbert too. And you'll have lunch with us, won't you? Outside?"

"Sure, Janet. See you in a bit."

My Al was running scenarios on the comlink again as I left the room, and he was still shaking his head. "I don't get it." He said sadly, "I just don't get it. What's the matter with me? Ziggy says I dump her and run -- sometime tomorrow night. Why would I do that?"

I had my own theories on that, but I wasn't talking. Not yet. "Come on Al, one thing at a time." I said, walking past Trouble's room. He was curled up on the bed, laying on the covers, looking through the paperwork I had given him, studious in the extreme. Once in a while, he would shake his head, eyes wide. "He's certainly taking this better than you did."

"This was some time and four marriages ago." he said, "It's funny. I can remember being somewhat curious about what happened to my mother when I was about his age. There just wasn't a lot left of my life, y'know. Startin' over and all. I just wondered a lot."

"I'll just bet you did."

We walked the halls a little more, talking quietly as I checked on my other patients. Both Al and I knew I wouldn't be here much longer. I was going to miss them. I hope I had been able to help most of them.

Then we went out and fetched lunch for the crew and came back. At my suggestion, I loaded Janet into her wheelchair and pushed her past Trouble's room. She invited him to lunch, which

he refused, as we had expected. She suggested he check out the lunch tray. He did, and came along quietly when Janet waggled the McDonald's bag at him, munching a fry as she did so.

He took over the pushing job, and I can honestly say from then I became the third wheel. Inside of an hour, they were laughing together and talking like they had known each other for ten years. All I had to do was keep my mouth shut.

But my Al stayed stoic, watching things unfold in front of him with a serious eye. He still remembered none of this happening, he'd never met Janet like this...and it worried him. Ziggy's predictions never changed. No matter what they said, or if they laughed until they cried together. He was going to bail on her tomorrow night and never see her again.

I had the tests taken, and as you would know it, the results were going to take -- you guessed it -- until tomorrow night to get back. I had Al ask Ziggy for the results.

Janet was walking with her Al then, it being evening. Like always, she had bounced back well once she got some time to recharge her batteries. They talked together, arm in arm as I watched from a window high above the park. Janet didn't miss me, much. For every thought that came into her head, there was one in Al's to go with it. A story, a memory. Have you evers were met with yes I haves, chuckles and then more talk. I wondered why they didn't run out of breath.

They strolled like a pair of lifelong friends, Janet gesturing with her right hand, Al with his left. They never stopped, just took turns. And once in a while, they took brief pauses to laugh and hug each other.

Al never let go of her, his head down and in to listen to her. Janet leaned on his arm heavily, looking tired but happy, smiling up at him as if he'd hung the moon.

"I'm not the one, Sam." Al said sadly. He took a deep breath and sighed, looking like he wanted to heave the comlink into outer space. "The tests come back negative. I'm no match at all for her."

I remember my point of view shifting from the window to my shoes, as I went cold all over. How could that be? He was supposed to save her life...the world went black as my eyes closed. No, I couldn't be this wrong. I couldn't! Where had I gone wrong?

"It's over, Sam. If you asked him to stay, you'd be asking him to watch her die. I wouldn't -- couldn't -- do that, Sam. Not now...and definitely not then."

My head was spinning. Where was the missing piece to the puzzle? This had to be it -- I was here to put this family back together again. How could I rekindle the fire when there weren't even two sticks to rub together again?

But I knew I couldn't let Al give up.

"I've got until tomorrow night to think up something else, Al." I told him. "She needs you, Al. That's why I'm here. She needs **you**."

"I don't know how you're going to make it happen, Sam."

"I'll think of something." I said. "I've got to."

###

Janet looked at me strangely most of the next day. I wasn't at my best, either, to tell the truth. As hard as I thought, as much as I turned the facts over in my head, nothing fit together.

I only had hours now, just a few hours now, before the tests came back. The only thing I knew for certain was that Al couldn't give up on Janet when the tests came back. Somehow, I had to make sure he stuck around.

I looked at Al and Janet together, talking every spare moment, most of it in her room with her sitting on the bed, Al pacing back and forth like a caged tiger, telling war stories, tall tales from a childhood that would have given anyone else nightmares. Al took them and made her laugh, instead.

"...and I'm tellin' you, we ran so hard to get away, Schmitty ended up spitting up in the bushes. And that stuff we took? In the clear light of day, it wasn't worth -- well, it wasn't worth spitting in the bushes, I can tell you. God, we were stupid kids."

Janet smiled and shook her head. "I thought about running away once." she admitted. "I think I was about nineteen." She smiled softly as the memory took over her face. "I was so sick of being sick. Y'know? Cooped up all the time...and stuff."

"What did you do?"

"Got as far as the front door." she said wryly, "And realized I had nowhere to go. Where could I go? Mom was real sick by then, Dad was gone...."

"I would have taken you." he said, grinning. "God, would we have had fun, or what?"

"Yeah." she said, eyes glistening. "We would have partied, big time, huh Allllbert?"

Then they smiled at each other. And said nothing more for five minutes.

"God, he loves her." Al stood outside the door, punching buttons at random on the comlink, not even looking at what he was doing. "I don't want to see what comes next, Sam."

"Me neither." I said. I felt like I was trying to capture a wind, one that would blow through here like a tornado, destroying everything in its path. Right now, it was only a gentle breeze.

"Alllbert, will we go to Disneyland when I get out of here?"

"Oh, yeah. That'll be the first thing on the list!"

"Will we go to the ocean? Can we go fishing?"

"Sure, I'll take you sailing. You'll love it." Sitting down, he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Have you ever been aboard a ship before? Not a little boat, mind you. A ship. Like an aircraft carrier."

Janet shook her head, her eyes widening as the idea grew in her imagination.

"I can't wait." he said, "You're gonna love it."

Al looked me in the eye. "You've got to stop him, Sam."

"I'll have to stop you, Al." I said. "I'll have to keep you from doing..." **No, I'll have to make you do something....** "That's it. Change his mind."

"What?"

I turned and looked Al squarely in the face, standing toe to toe with him. "I'll have to talk you into something, Al."

He shook his head, averting his eyes. "Not this. You'll never talk me into this, Sam. Never. Not in a million years."

"Come on. You haven't changed your mind about **anything** since I leaped in here?"

Al wouldn't look at me. He was studying his shoes.

"Al, would you miss out on having a sister like Janet? Even if it was for only a little while? Would you trade that away just to avoid saying good-bye to her when the time came?"

The head came up, and a new glint was in the eyes. "Yes, I would, Sam. Damn me and everyone who looks like me -- **yes, I would!**"

He held my stare for a long moment, then broke away. "Look, it's not like I don't care, Sam."

"You're just a big chicken."

"Hey! That's not fair! How would you feel?"

"Scared, just like you. But I wouldn't have missed this leap for the world, Al. I wouldn't have missed any of them -- none of them. Every person I've been able to help -- was special, Al. Every one had his or her own story to tell me. Something for me to learn." Al was meeting my eyes again, the eyes dark, bright. "You know I'm right, Al. This is meant to be. This is part of your life, a part you never had before because you were too scared to live it."

"I'm not the one you have to convince, Sam." he said quietly. "You'll have to convince him. And he's going to be a pretty tough customer."

I looked back at the room, watching Al dance and Janet laugh. How could he leave her? It would kill both of them.

I had to tell him that.

"Al, stay with me. Keep me posted. Don't let me lose him."

"Like always, Sam. I won't leave you."

Our eyes met, and I knew we were both thinking back some days past. "I'm going to be there for you, Al. I promise."

*I'm going to make sure you get through this.*

The phone rang, and the results came. Right on schedule.

###

He took the news pretty well. Standing next to Janet, holding one of her hands, he nodded in a fashion I knew well. But when I got a good look at his eyes, I saw him for what he was -- shocked, angry, hurting, and terribly frightened. But Janet surprised us both.

She brushed the back of his hand with her cheek, smiling. "Free." she breathed, "I'm finally free."

Trouble was back and he was looking at her like she had lost her mind. "Janet...didn't you hear him? The transplant won't work...."

"Yes, yes..." she said, beaming up at him. "And it means I don't have to stay in this hospital any more. I can go home, now. I don't have to worry anymore." She giggled, then began to laugh, throwing her arms into the air. "I'm all done with doctors and hospitals and pills and crap. FREE!"

Trouble let go of her, and moved away. "Free..." he murmured. "Oh, God."

"Oh, Alllberty! Don't be a silly! We can go and do stuff now. We can party! We can see the world! I'm not tied to any more tubes or drugs or stuff! I can live my life now, don't you see?"

"Yeah, sure." Two more steps towards the door.

"Don't you want to go to Yosemite? I can't wait!"

"Sure, we'll have a great time...I can just see it now." He kept moving towards the door, getting more nervous as the minutes ticked by. "I'll just go get my stuff and be right back, okay?"

There was no fooling Janet, but I think she knew he needed a little space. "You're coming right back, aren't you Alllberty?"

He flashed her a smile I knew to be as fake as the plastic flowers in the cafeteria. "Yeah, I'll be right back."

I remember telling Janet to lie back and rest, that I'd release her tomorrow morning or some such thing. But my eye was on Trouble as I walked out the door.

He had moved to his room, and gotten his things all right. And was heading for the elevator.

"I'm outta here. I'm **outta** here!" His whole posture reflected pain, fright. He stood, bouncing on his toes, almost unable to wait quietly for the elevator to arrive. He kept looking right, then left. Had anyone seen him? Would anyone see him?

"Commander? Wait."

His head snapped around, saw me and the decision was made. He ran for the stairs.

I followed, catching him just inside the door.

"Let me go!" This time the fist connected. I saw stars, but I didn't go down. Falling to my knees, I saw the flash of color I knew to be him sail out of sight down the flight of stairs.

"Stay with him, Sam! Get up, get up! Down the stairs, Sam. Quick, he's getting away!"

I ran, uncaring of the slick concrete stairs that we were racing down. I slipped a time or two, but I caught myself. Near the bottom of the second floor, Trouble wasn't so lucky and went flying.

I was beside him in a breath. "Al -- c'mon, Al. Stop. You don't want to do this."

"What the hell do you know what I want. **Let go!**"

Taking him from behind, I held him tight, his back to my chest, arms pinned to his sides. "Calm down. Let's talk about this."

"He doesn't want to talk, Sam."

"There's nothing to talk about!" Wriggling, he kicked me. He stomped on my feet. He even tried to bite me. No, we didn't talk -- we fought. I was hard pressed to keep ahold of him -- he fought me like I was every enemy he'd ever known.

"Al - stop it - **Al!** Listen to me! Ow! What'd you do that for - Ow!"

I only had him by one arm, and he was pulling it as hard as he could. "Why don't you just let go?" he snarled. "That would solve both our problems." And then he swung at me with the other arm. That's when I saw my opening.

"No, that wouldn't solve a thing." I saw my shot and took it, my fist catching him cleanly along the jaw. "Dammit, don't you know I'm on your side, you idiot?"

He took the blow, his face registering surprise as it landed, then crumpled as he fell, the tears falling out from behind the closed lids. "You son of a bitch, let me go."

"No."

His eyes opened, and I hated myself that moment for the pain, anger and terror I saw there. I hated myself for putting him through it. "She is going to die." he spat at me, with the blood from the cut lip I'd given him. "Why did you have to find me? Why couldn't you have left well enough alone?"

"She needs you." I said, hearing my voice sound simple and plain next to his. "And you need her."

"She doesn't need me!" he snarled, sobbing. "She'd be better off without ever knowing me."

I remembered an angry man with a hammer I once knew. He'd thrown that in my face, too. And it hadn't scared me away. It wasn't going to now.

"No, Al." I heard the words in my head before I spoke them -- they echoed off the walls like feathers, like I had been screaming them and my voice was nearly gone. "I don't believe that."

"Let me go." he moaned, dropping his hand like a lead weight, sinking down to sit on the stairs. I sank to the floor with him, going to my knees. "I can't do this."

"Yes you can. Al, look at me."

He shook his head. "Lemme alone."

"Sam, do something. You're losing him."

Yes, it was time for something. Something I had almost forgotten. "You're not going to run away from me." I heard myself say. "You're going to talk to me. C'mon Al, if you don't face this now, it'll haunt you for the rest of your life."

Pulling the arm I still had, I reached out for the other one. He tried to pull away from me, but our eyes met and I knew he saw more determination in mine than I saw in his.

"Maybe all you have to do is listen."

He only shook his head from side to side. "Doc, I can't stay with her. I can't."

"If you left now, you'd break her heart. And it would break yours too, and you know it."

"I haven't a heart left to break. It's gone."

We were both bloodied, tired. But I let him go, knowing he hated to be restrained like this. "Al, I know what you've been through. I know how you're hurting. Please, let me help."

He pulled away slightly, folding his arms against his chest. But he still looked me in the eye.

"C'mon, I know about the POW camp. I know about your wife, Beth. Give me a break, I've had to go through a lot to find you. I'm not going to give up on you now."

When I mentioned Beth, his eyes narrowed and his face became grim and tight. Then, as if it were all too much to carry anymore, his face fell and he shook his head.

"Why do you care? What difference does it make to you what I do? I can't help her -- nobody can."

"She doesn't need help. She needs you. She hasn't got anyone, Al. Nobody. She's been a prisoner of this hospital for fifteen years. A prisoner, Al. You know what's it's like."

He didn't say anything, but he met my eyes when I looked at him.

"Good, Sam. Good. Keep it up."

"And now she's free." he said softly. "I think I'm beginning to see it, now."

I only nodded. "Live her life with her, Al. That's all. Just be in her life as her brother."

"For however long that is. I don't think it'll be that long, will it Doc?"

I shrugged. "I can't say. Nobody can, for sure."

He snorted. "Haven't I heard that one before."

"She loves you, you know."

"Funny, the ways things happen." he said, and heaved a deep sigh. Then a tear fell, followed by another. "I can't do it, Doc. I can't. You're asking me to watch her die."

"I'm asking you to help her live, Al. You're the only one who can." I said, sitting down next to him on the floor, shoulder to shoulder. How I wished I was really me! "I'm here, Al. I know you don't trust me, but I know you're scared." Tentatively, I placed an arm around his shoulders. "I know it hurts. I know. It's okay. It's really okay. But you can do it. I know you can."

He turned his head to look at me, the falling tears mixing with the blood and I felt the tears from my own eyes fall. Then he reached for me and I was holding him, hugging him as if I'd never let go.

"I'm scared." I heard him whisper. "I don't want her to die." I said something, I don't know what. Because we cried. He, for Beth, the years he had lost, and the sister he would lose...me, for nearly losing my best friend to a whim, an experiment. And I hugged him, Lord, I hugged him until he nearly suffocated. I took in the smell of him, the smell of soap and cigar smoke and that quality that was him. I wiped the back of my hand across the top of his head and felt the wiry brush of his hair against the bruised knuckles. Al. In all the world, there would be only one and when he was gone, there would never be another. Just like Janet. Just like Randy, Rachel, Sandy...all

of them.

"Don't be scared. Please don't be scared." I heard myself say. "You'll be okay. Better than okay. Everything will be fine." Like my saying it enough would make it true. But you know, I think he believed me. Enough to try again, and that was all that mattered.

We were slow, coming back to reality. He pulled away first, smiling at me through the tears still clustered on his eyelashes.

"Doc..." He stood up, extending his hand for me to shake. I did. "She's gonna have the best life I can give her. For however long it lasts. I promise."

"Okay." I said, it being the only thing to come to mind. "You're welcome."

He grinned, and ran up the stairs. There was only one place he was heading. Janet. Then his car, and the open road.

"That's it Sam. You did it."

Turning, I looked to find my Al. But he wasn't smiling. He looked sick.

"Al? What is it? What's wrong?"

His eyes widened, while the rest of him stood stock still. "Yes, that's it." he repeated, awestruck. He pulled out the comlink, looked at it, even keyed in a few strokes. But then he only smiled softly and put it away. "Well, if that ain't a kick in the butt."

"What Al, what is it?"

He looked at me, cocking his head with the most serene expression I'd ever seen him wear. "I remember." he pronounced. "I remember it all. Everything."

"Oh, Al. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You don't know what happened...no, of course you don't." He shook his head and laughed.

Wiping the remainder of the tears away, I felt the beginnings of a grin forming. "I've gotta hear this." I said.

Folding one arm under the other, scratching his head, Al smiled softly as I watched the memories fall into place. "God, what a ride!" he said, chuckling. "She was a real toot and a half, Sam. A real whizbangaroo. And smart? Jeez, she gave me a run for my money. You should've seen her in Vegas! God, we'd be millionaires by now, 'cept she's as honest as you!"

I leaned back against the cement wall, knowing nobody would bother me. Since I wasn't saying much, nobody would hear a thing.

"God, that was the best Christmas! You oughta try it someday, Sam."

"Christmas in Las Vegas?" I said, "You corrupted her -- what kind of Christmas was that?"

"The first of many." he replied. "Only the first." Tapping his chin with one hand, I watched Al try to remember around the reverse swiss-cheesing he had just got. It must have been like getting a box of chocolates the size of New York stuffed into your head. Which one do you go for first?

"How many years did she live, Al?"

"Live?" he repeated. "Oh, oh, oh! Naw, that's the best part! She's still alive, Sam. She's still alive!"

"Alive...how...." In the back of my mind, I heard the leap coming. I tried to shake it off. "What happened?"

"We ended up in California -- and Dr. Wilson, this guy you leaped into -- sent us to some research buddies of his."

"But another round of chemo --"

"I was there, remember? I watched her like a hawk, you'd have been proud of me. Came through it like a champ."

"But that wouldn't have cured her forever...*what happened?*"

"Tyler. Bob Tyler. Her biological father. He turned out to be one of about 14 kids -- she has cousins up the kazoo and one of them turned out to be compatible. She got the transplant, Sam. Not from me, but who cares? She's still alive! She's even here at the project today -- wait a sec..." He quickly keyed the door open and I sensed rather than saw someone run up to him just a fraction of a second before she threw her arms around him and

became visible.

Janet. Older, but still as elflike as when I met her. I couldn't hear her voice but I could see her. Her hair was red, the color of a golden sunset, streaked here and there with a strand of silver. It was long and straight, held back from her face with a lavender hairband. She stepped back, clasping Al's hand with both of her own -- and I realized I hadn't taken Randy anywhere he wouldn't have wanted to go. His greatest failure -- was no more than an old friend keeping him company in the waiting room.

Her eyes met mine and she blew me a kiss.

And then the leap took me.

###

I love you not only for what you are,  
but for what I am when I am with you.

I love you not only for what you have  
made of yourself, but for what you are  
making of me.

I love you because you have done more  
than any creed could have done to make  
me good, and more than any fate could  
have done to make me happy.

You have done it without a touch, without  
a word, without a sign.

You have done it by being yourself. Perhaps  
that is what being a friend means,  
after all.

--Anon.