

THE BONE PEOPLE

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The first time she heard it, Sarah didn't think twice about the "Bone People" news blurb as the media called them. But now, with her own daughter missing, she couldn't help but wonder with fearful apprehension if these latest media-hyped abductions had any connection to Melissa's disappearance.

She had no way of knowing if the "Bone People" were actually involved in her case. The police were not telling her anything. They refused to confirm or deny if a bone was found anywhere in the vicinity of Melissa's last known location, which was her school. The police apologized profusely to Sarah, but continued to insist on total secrecy even from the victim's mother.

"Mr. Spade will see you now," announced the recep. It wasn't a particularly sophisticated one, just a holo-anime depicting a female receptionist. Its specs did not appear to include even the standard facial expressions, just a blank stare, obviously a sample version downloaded off the net. As Sarah proceeded to get up, the recep went through the motions of pressing a virtual button underneath her virtual desk as if to open the door to the inner office. The door opened automatically as Sarah walked through, nervously looking around.

"Sam Spade at your service," said a man with his hand extended, ready for a handshake. Sarah responded by giving her hand to the man, whom she assumed to be the private investigator.

"Did you say your name was Sam Spade?" Sarah asked with bemusement as she withdrew her hand from the man's.

"As promised," he replied. "Actually it's not my given name, but professional name. I've always been a bit of a Dashiell Hammett fan. Anyway, this business being what it is, well, I figured it couldn't hurt, maybe even help drum up a few jobs."

"Right," Sarah sarcastically acknowledged his remark, not having a clue of what he was babbling about.

"Well, it's nice to meet you Miss . . .?" Spade continued.

"It's Mrs. Kane, but I prefer Sarah," she interrupted nervously.

"Oh, sorry, Mrs., I mean Sarah," Spade started again. "So you're here about the missing . . .?"

"Daughter," Sarah filled in again, this time with irritation in her voice. "Look, Mr. Spade, or whatever your name is. If you don't think you can handle this case, I can go to someone else."

"Of course I can handle it!" Spade blurted out with exaggeration of hurt and anger in his voice. "I am very good at my job. Never had a case I couldn't solve," he boasted.

"I didn't mean to offend you Mr. Spade," Sarah said apologetically, slightly taken aback by Spade's exuberant display.

"Nothing to it! And please call me Sam," he replied amicably. "Now, shall we get started? Tell me everything you know about your daughter's disappearance."

Sarah settled herself in the beat-up chair across from Spade's desk and proceeded to tell him the whole story. She had recounted these events so many times to the police that the words now leaving her mouth no longer felt like her own, rather like a script from a play. Robot-like, Sarah delivered the well-rehearsed monologue, her mind disconnected from her speech.

With her thoughts drifting and unfocused, Sarah began to take in her surroundings. The room was small and dingy with no daylight, at least not any natural daylight. Having no windows was not that uncommon these days, but not having a functioning view simulator was a sign of either extreme

financial strain or total disregard for personal etiquette and social norms. Judging from the way Spade was dressed it was probably the latter. And the whole Sam Spade affectation was definitely more than a professional gimmick. It went beyond the clothes and the name; it was as if he was playacting.

“Anything wrong?”

Startled by his voice, “I’m sorry, you were saying?” She asked with a tone of confusion.

“I wasn’t saying anything Toots, it was you who suddenly stopped talking.”

“Oh . . . well that was all of it. And please don’t refer to me by that chauvinistic, out-of-date derogatory name.”

“Sorry, I meant to say Sarah.” Spade replied with a gentle tone, not at all in character. This change in his voice caused her to look up. Sarah found herself looking straight into his eyes, with him staring right back into hers. She noticed how brown they were.

“Hmm . . .well . . . I think there is only one way to solve this baby...” Spade started again, hurling her attention back to reality. It was obvious that their eye contact made him uncomfortable. His eyes were probably the only part of his face not hidden by the Sam Spade façade. “We need to break into their net-house.”

“But that’s impossible.” Sarah protested. “The police-house is fully guarded, it’s common knowledge.”

“Of course it’s common knowledge. If it weren’t, every hacker and his brother would be trying to break into it. But, don’t you worry about it Sweets. Spade here has a few tricks up his sleeve that might just get us in.”

“Well, I hope you know what you are doing. If you’re caught I’ll have to find another P.I. and you’ll end up in prison.”

Sarah looked at Spade with hesitation, hoping to find the slightest sign of reassurance in his eyes. He didn’t give her the chance. He got out of his seat, walked over to the coat tree grabbed his hat and coat, and started out the door.

“Well, come on!” He blurted out.

“Where are we going?” Sarah asked with confusion in her voice.

“To break into the house. You didn’t think we’d do it from here did you?” Spade grabbed Sarah’s arm and the two of them rushed out of the office.

“That’s the place,” Spade said as they approached a grimy bar in the slums of the city.

The sign above them read, “Lou’s Joint.” The catchy name did not in the slightest way help put Sarah’s mind at ease. What was she thinking? Here they were, in the worst part of town, looking for some meeting between an undercover cop and a mob mole. Among all this lunacy, the only man she had to rely on was this throwback to the 1940’s. What was she getting herself into? How could this possibly have anything to do with her daughter? Still, it wasn’t like other options were lining up in front of her dying to present themselves.

“What do we do now?” Sarah asked Spade as they parked themselves on two bar stools farthest from the entrance.

“We sit and wait, and try and look like we belong here.”

“Well in that case, I’ll have a gin, straight up barkeep,” Sarah ordered.

“What are you doing?” Spade objected.

“Fitting in,” Sarah replied. “He’ll have one of the same,” she called to the bartender.

The bar opened itself up and presented the beverages with a thumb reader. “Five thousand credits,” the voice stated.

Sarah placed her thumb on the reader and confirmed, “Accept.”

Sarah and Spade proceeded to nurse their drinks and to casually look around.

“How are we going to know who they are?” Sarah inquired.

“Don’t worry honey, I can always spot a flatfoot,” Spade replied with overconfidence.

They watched as people came and went. It was a pretty homogenous crowd. Not that they looked alike, or were of similar social background; what made these folks appear the same is that they didn’t seem to have anything better to do or any better place to be. They chose, for whatever reason, to spend their afternoon in this dingy, smoky bar, drinking their uncomplicated poison, isolated from each other and liking it that way. These were definitely not a social bunch.

“Notice the one in the corner booth,” Spade whispered to Sarah, leaning in close. “He’s been sitting there the whole time, and not a single drink.”

He did seem a bit odd. He was very neatly dressed. Every detail accounted for, except one. His clothes were very obviously out of date. Not simply out of style, but from the wrong century. He might as well have been a gentleman from Victorian England. No one seemed to notice or care about his getup. There were lots of weirdoes in the city. It had always been that way, part of its charm. Each nut was allowed his own quirks and obsessions as long as they didn’t interfere with anyone else’s.

The door chime sounded as another person entered the bar. He was a casually dressed, medium-built, average-looking individual. Upon entering he gave the place a quick scan and proceeded to sit down in the corner booth, opposite the man in the anachronistic suit.

“That’s the cop, and the spiffy dresser is our man,” Spade observed.

“Who, the lunatic in the ancient clothes?” Sarah exclaimed with disbelief.

“Yeah, that one. We will follow him when they are finished,” he responded with confidence.

“How can you tell if he is the right one?” She persisted. “The house didn’t give a description.”

“Who else would be talking to that cop?” Spade returned with a question.

“But how do you know that?” Sarah continued, still not satisfied.

“Know what, that he’s a cop?” Spade asked patiently.

“Yes,” she confirmed much less so.

“That’s easy, they always try to be so average to fit in that they stand out like sore thumbs,” Spade chuckled. “Look around; do you see anyone more average looking in this joint than our friend there?”

“What ever you say,” Sarah gave in. Although Spade seemed confident in his assertions and relayed them with a touch of gloating, she did not buy-in to his logic. This whole situation was beginning to make less and less sense. Sarah had never seen a mobster who dressed that way. And how did Spade spot him so quickly? He knew something he was not telling her. Maybe he learned more at the police-house than he was letting on.

“He’s leaving, hurry! Let’s go!” Spade whispered with excitement. He grabbed her arm and dragged her with him out of the bar.

They followed the supposed gangster from alley to alley through what seemed like the whole city. After two hours of chasing, only to end up on the airway, Spade decided that it was time to push. They were going to make themselves known.

“End concealed mode,” he ordered his flyer. “Approach the black coupe and stay on its tale.” The flyer obeyed. The close proximity of Spade’s machine had no effect on the coupe in front of them, so he continued to steadily gain on it. Suddenly the coupe dropped altitude and landed on the street below. Spade followed without hesitation.

“Street mode on,” he ordered the flyer as they continued the pursuit, this time back in the alleys. The black coupe sped up, taking sharp corners at high speed.

“Now the real fun begins,” Spade remarked, winking at a terrified Sarah.

“Watch it!” she yelled, as they nearly didn’t make a turn. “Left, he’s getting away.”

It *was* exciting. As absurd as the whole situation was, Sarah found herself getting caught up in the thrill of the chase. Compared to her daily routine at work, this was excitement. Hell, it would be for anyone! It didn’t matter why they were after this guy, or even if he could help Sarah find Melissa, all she knew and felt at that moment was that they could not let him get away.

As the coupe veered left into yet another tiny alley, Spade pushed the flyer hard to follow.

“STOP!” he heard Sarah scream. Instantly and instinctually Spade hit the breaks. And in good time too, for they were about to slam into the dead end wall in front of them.

“Where did he go?” Sarah yelled with bewilderment. She jumped out of the flyer, running directly in front, up against the wall. There was no one there. The coupe had no place to go. It had simply disappeared, VANISHED!

“All right Spade!” Sarah spoke out, heading back to the flyer, fully intending to confront him. “What’s going on here? I want the whole story and I want it now!”

“Ok, ok, just calm down,” Spade started defensively. “I only intended to protect you from jumping to conclusions, until I was sure, anyway.”

“I don’t need your protection or your patronizing attitude,” Sarah blurted out angrily, “I just want the truth.”

“Ok, but you won’t like it, Sarah” Spade replied with gentle dismay.

With a serious, yet calm tone Sarah addressed him, “This isn’t a game Sam. The chase was a thrill, and for a moment I forgot where I was, but now it’s back to reality. My daughter’s life is at stake so if you know anything, please tell me. I must know.”

Sarah’s desperation had a visible effect on Spade. He lowered his head to meet her eyes and spoke gently, “I’ll tell you what I know. It could end me up in a loony bin, but what the hell. You know this character we’ve been chasing, well, he isn’t a wise guy. And he is not the first of his kind that I’ve seen. I’ve had suspicions for quite a while now, but your case gave me the excuse I needed to risk snooping around the police-house. What I found there, and this disappearance, had confirmed everything.”

Sarah listened nervously and impatiently.

Spade stopped and looked down.

“Well, go on! What did you find?” She prodded.

“These guys...” Spade continued. “These people are not people at all. They are aliens. And I don’t mean from another country.”

“Come off it. I thought you were getting serious.” Sarah responded angrily.

“I am serious. Just hear me out,” he defended.

“Fine, go on,” she let up.

“Well, I am sure you’ve heard of the ‘Bone People’ by now. I believe our vanishing friend is one of them.”

“What makes you so certain,” Sarah interrupted, horrified by the thought of her daughter held captive by some monsters.

“The police-house,” Spade responded. “When we broke in, I found evidence linking the aliens to the kidnappings. The authorities believe that they use the ‘Bone People’ tactic as a cover.”

“But what do they want with all those children, or with Melissa?” Sarah asked with apprehension.

“That I don’t know,” he replied. “The report only mentioned the aliens and the connection.”

Sarah was stunned. She had listened intently to Spade’s wild story and couldn’t believe it. *Aliens*. How ridiculous. And even if it were true, what could they possibly want with Melissa? She was just a child. She didn’t possess any state or planetary secrets or anything remotely valuable.

First monsters, now aliens? Thinking about it made her skin crawl. No, it was simply nonsense. It had to be.

“Sam,” Sarah interrupted. “I find what you’re saying pretty far-fetched. You’ve got to admit it’s really out there.”

“I thought you said you’d hear me out,” Spade protested.

“Wait, now it’s your turn to hear *me* out. Let’s assume that what you say is correct. What possible use could these aliens have for my daughter or any of the other children? What kind of proof do you have besides the police info?”

“I don’t have any actual forensic proof, but think about it. Why was the guy dressed so weird and out of date? And to where could he have possibly disappeared? Besides, if they are aliens, how can we ever assess their motives for these kidnappings? We know nothing about their culture or their people.”

“If you’re trying to make me feel better you’re not succeeding,” Sarah responded dejectedly. “If we really have virtually no info on these people, or what ever they are, how can we hope to find them, and Melissa?”

“Well, that’s a good question,” Spade replied. He looked quite puzzled. He’d been so busy confirming his suspicions before, that he neglected the essential part of this case, finding Sarah’s daughter, Melissa.

Spade stared at Sarah, while playing with his hat. She could tell from the glazed look in his eyes that he wasn’t actually looking at her. He was thinking, trying to figure out a way to help. She really didn’t have much confidence in him finding a solution. She didn’t even believe in his theory. It was hopeless.

“I have an idea,” Spade spoke suddenly. “It’s not perfect, but it might just work.”

“What’s the plan?” Sarah asked enthusiastically. Maybe there was hope yet.

“It will require some patience,” Spade continued. “I think that this alley holds some kind of secret passage or entrance to the aliens’ hide out. To where else could our anachronistic friend have vanished? I also can’t imagine that was the only time they’ll ever use it. If we stay put, and out of sight we might catch them in the act.”

“You mean like a stake out?”

“Yeah, just like a stake out,” Spade reapplied with contentment. Sarah knew that he’d like that term and the concept. It seemed to suit the persona he wore.

Spade proceeded to find a suitable place to conceal his flyer with them inside it. He chose an old garage, used for repair of automobiles, abandoned years ago when flyers and dual mode vehicles became popular.

He pulled in and waited. It was a long wait. Before long the afternoon became evening and then night. They didn’t talk much. Spade sat there watching intently while fidgeting with his hat. Sarah watched, too, although she spent more time observing his uneasiness than the alley.

“Tell me something Sam?” Sarah asked, breaking the silence. “What’s the real reason behind ‘Sam Spade’? I know you said it was a gimmick, but I get the feeling that there is more to it.”

Spade looked uncomfortable. His hat began to suffer as well, as his fidgeting turned into actual wringing of the brim. “I don’t know what you mean,” he replied, with his eyes cast down focused on the hat in his hands.

“Oh, come on, Sam. You know just as well as I do, that the gimmick is not necessary. You are a fine investigator, albeit an eccentric one. But you are willing to take risks for your clients. And that’s commendable.”

“Not all clients, just you,” Spade responded quietly, lifting his eyes and gazing into Sarah’s for a moment.

“Thank you,” she returned with her eyes fixed on his as well.

“Nothing to it,” Spade replied with a continued stare. He was no longer fidgeting with his hat. He leaned towards Sarah as if intent on kissing her. She responded by moving closer to him. Their lips touched. She felt an impulse to pull back, but instead she allowed him to kiss her, then found herself kissing him back.

It had been a long time since she permitted herself to feel like a woman. Raising and providing for Melissa alone took all her time and energy. There hadn’t been a man in Sarah’s life since Melissa’s father left them five years earlier. It seemed much longer than that. Being desired by another man awoke a dormant restlessness buried deep within. Her feeling echoed a reckless teenager, driven by passion and pain.

Sarah pulled back and studied Sam’s face. Through her tears she saw that his eyes were wet.

“Why are you crying?” he asked. “Are you alright?” His voice sounded gentle, not at all in character. He must have been feeling it too. Two lonely people finding tenderness and love, not likely in the harsh world they lived in.

She didn’t answer him, but he knew she was ok. His hand reached out and touched her face. She turned and kissed it. He pulled her close and gave her a longer, more passionate kiss.

They were startled by the sound of a car pulling into the alley. It was a real antique automobile, a Volvo from the 1990’s. Spade squeezed Sarah’s hand, gesturing with his other to keep quiet. They snuck out of their hiding place and followed the car on foot, staying concealed as much as possible.

The car came to a stop right up against the wall, which they’d almost run into earlier. The wall started to vibrate slightly and a bright blue beam of light began emanating from the center of the wall. It spread outward engulfing the entire wall, essentially erasing it. The car drove into the light. As soon as it passed through, the light started to shrink back, returning the wall to its original state.

“Come on,” Spade yelled. “It’s some kind of portal and it’s closing.” He grabbed Sarah’s hand the two of them jumped into the light right before it collapsed.

Sarah awoke on the floor of a dark room, her hands and feet bound by what appeared to be flexible metal rings. She could move, but not walk. The rings were not causing her pain or discomfort, but they kept her a prisoner. She managed to sit up, and wiggle her way over to the nearest wall, using it to help her stand up. She looked around. The room had four walls, a ceiling, and a floor, but no apparent door or exit. In fact it was an immaculate, sterile box with no evidence of even a single blemish or irregularity. In the corner furthest from her Spade lay unconscious.

“Sam, wake up,” she called out his name. It didn’t do any good. He didn’t wake. Left with no other option she hopped over to him and gave him a gentle shove.

“What’s going on?” Sam woke up, startled and apparently confused.

“I don’t know. I woke up here tied up like you. Last thing I remember was jumping through that light in the alley.”

Sam began to wiggle in his binds. “I think I can get out of these,” he started.

“It’s no use,” Sarah interrupted. “I already tried. They move with you, but never loosen. It’s not like anything I’ve ever seen before.”

Spade noticed how worried she looked and tried to make her feel better. “Don’t worry, we’ll figure something out. Speaking of out, there doesn’t seem to be any door or exit in this box they put us in.”

“No,” Sarah replied. “I wouldn’t even begin to try and understand it. Judging from what we’ve seen before, I can’t even tell if these walls are real.”

Spade got himself up and proceeded to bang his body against one of the walls. “Sure feels real to me.”

“Well,” Sarah spoke with a sigh “I guess we know something about these aliens now.”

“What’s that, dear?” Spade inquired, while continuing to bounce against the walls surrounding him.

“They are cold and cruel. They left us in this prison-box, bound up like animals, for God knows how long.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Spade sighed. Unable to find any fault with the sturdiness of the walls, he slid back down to the floor. Sarah hopped over and sat down next to him.

“Now what?” She asked.

“I don’t know,” Spade replied. “I guess we wait.”

They stayed in that state for an hour maybe two, her head resting on his shoulder. Suddenly a light appeared in one of the walls, and a person walked through it. It was the same man they were chasing before, but he was no longer clad in Victorian clothes. Instead, he was covered in a loose fitting black body suit. He came right up to them and reached out for Sarah’s hands. Frightened she pulled back.

“Hey! Don’t you dare touch her!” Spade yelled.

“I am terribly sorry,” the man spoke. “We didn’t realize that you were awake for so long.” He proceeded to touch the binding rings on her hands and feet. They widened and fell to the ground. He did the same for Sam. After removing their bonds, the man turned around and walked back towards the wall he came from.

“Wait!” Sarah yelled as she got up and ran to catch him. “You can’t just leave us here!”

He didn’t respond and proceeded to the wall.

“What about my daughter? Where is Melissa?” she continued to yell.

That seemed to get his attention. He turned around and looked at her. There was no readable expression on his face. He stared at her for a moment, then turned around and exited through the wall in the same manner he entered. The light closed behind him too rapidly for Sam and Sarah to follow.

“Did you see that?” Sarah turned around excited and panicked. “He knows! They know about Melissa!” She ran back to Spade throwing herself in his arms. Startled he grabbed her firmly by her shoulders and slightly pulled her away from him.

“You have to keep a cool head, Sarah,” he insisted. “If we’re going to find a way out of this mess and find your daughter we have to remain calm.”

Sarah began to cry. “It’s just that we’re so close, so very close to her,” she sobbed. “She could be here, somewhere near by.”

Spade didn’t say anything. He held her close and let her cry.

They didn’t wait long this time. The same man came back through a different wall and escorted them out of the room. Sarah couldn’t actually see where they were walking. Everything was completely dark around them. The only reason they didn’t stumble was because the alien stayed in very close proximity while escorting them.

The new room was identical to the one they came from. The only difference was that in the center of the room were two chairs. Upon their arrival, they were joined by another alien. He was dressed identically to his partner, but appeared much older.

“Please sit down,” said the younger one as they entered. Sarah and Sam did as they were told. After they were seated, Sarah remained quiet, but Spade acted restless.

“Hey, you there,” he called out to one of the aliens. “Now that we are all comfy what do you intend to do with us?”

Spade's attempt to gain the aliens' attention had zero result. The two men stood in the far corner of the room, apparently conversing. Sarah couldn't make out what they were saying, not that it was in English anyway.

"Hey," Spade yelled again, evidently more frustrated than ever. Angry at being ignored, he jumped out of his seat, but was instantly pulled down by a set of restraints that appeared out of nowhere. Startled by what she saw, Sarah attempted to get out of her seat as well, only to be dragged down in the same manner as Spade was. Neither one of them said anything. They just looked at each other, not knowing how to proceed next.

At this point, both of the aliens turned around and approached them. "Sarah," the alien seemed to know her name, "what do you know about your daughter's disappearance?"

Sarah, bewildered and angry, refused to answer.

The older one spoke again, "We understand that you might feel anger towards us, but it is extremely important that you answer, and answer truthfully. Melissa's life and the lives of many other people may depend on it."

That last implication was all it took to drain any rebelliousness out of Sarah. "I don't know much," she began to answer. "I believe that you took her and the others as well." She looked down when she spoke, paused for a minute and then looking straight at the aliens asked, "You are the 'Bone People' aren't you? What are you going to do with my daughter?" Then she broke down and began to cry.

The aliens turned around and resumed conversing in their own language.

Desperate for an answer herself Sarah yelled out, "Wait, she is just a child, what ever your intent, please don't harm her!" She continued to cry hysterically, "Sam, do something!"

Sam, boiling with anger and frustration, could do nothing.

The aliens turned around again and approached them. The younger one spoke this time, "We have something to tell you."

Sarah stopped crying and held her breath.

"We never intended to cause any harm to your daughter, however when we took her, we greatly underestimated your persistence in trying to locate her. You don't need to worry any longer. Your daughter is quite safe and has an exciting new future ahead of her." The alien pronounced with enthusiasm.

Relieved, but cautious Sarah implored, "When can I see her?"

"I am afraid that is impossible," the older one responded.

"What do you mean, why can't I see her?" Sarah insisted, a sense of alarm swelling up inside her again.

"Melissa is in stasis, and cannot be woken up for the next ten thousand years."

Sarah sank back in her seat not knowing how to react.

However, this new information had quite the opposite affect on Spade, who once again proceeded to jump out of his seat, only to be dragged down the same as before. "What gives you the right!" he yelled at the aliens with bewilderment. "What gives you the right to steal a child from her mother and then do this to her?!"

"The survival of the human race gives us the right Mr. Spade," responded the younger alien, not as calmly as his partner before.

"The survival of the human race?" Spade repeated with astonishment. "What, is there an asteroid headed this way that's going to wipe out all civilization as we know it?" Spade continued with sarcasm in his voice.

The older alien recognized his flippant attitude and responded in kind, “You may choose to think that if it makes you feel better.”

The cruelty of the last remark snapped Sarah out of her daze, “I don’t want to know what we may or may not think, tell me the truth, why do you need my daughter and the others?!”

“Yeah,” Sam added.

“We cannot provide you with any more information. You already know much more than can be tolerated!” The older one replied with irritation in his voice.

“You’ll just have to trust us,” added the younger one.

Obviously angry and determined Spade yelled out, “What do you mean, TRUST US! What do *you* care about the human race? For all we know you’re here to get rid of all of us and move in!”

“We have as much at stake here as you do,” the younger alien reacted.

“That’s enough!” interrupted the other one, while shooting an angry look at his accomplice.

“Why?” Spade insisted.

They didn’t answer.

“Why, damn it?” he demanded again.

“Because Earth is our home, too. Just in a different time,” replied the younger one again, promptly to be dragged out of the room by his infuriated companion.

Spade and Sarah stared at each other trying to figure out what they just learned. Spade was the first one to speak, “So they are not aliens at all, but time travelers.”

“I don’t care what they are, I just want my daughter back,” she responded.

“That may not be possible now,” Spade replied. “Even so, why haven’t they gotten rid of us yet?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t care,” Sarah said quietly. “Without Melissa ... I don’t care what happens to me.”

They sat in silence for several hours. Sarah slumped in her seat, completely spaced, a blank expression on her face. Spade sat uneasily with his attention fixed on the surrounding walls. With nothing happening for some time, he drooped in his seat and watched his partner with dismay.

The wall opened up and the aliens or time travelers returned. They appeared calm and reserved, as if nothing had occurred.

“We have come to a decision,” The older one began. “Despite my better judgment, we’ve decided to allow you to live.”

“Dandy,” Spade responded with sarcasm as usual. “So, if you would be so kind as to remove these restraints, we’ll just walk out of here.”

“It’s not quite that simple,” replied the younger one.

“What-da-ya-know!” Spade interjected with an exaggerated tone of surprise in his voice.

Not at all amused by the sarcasm, Sarah sat up, now out of her trance. “What about my daughter? I was never given a choice!” she demanded, “Melissa was never given a choice!”

“As we have been trying to tell you,” the younger one continued with enthusiasm, “we decided to give you a choice.”

“Exactly three options,” his partner added.

“You seem to care a great deal for the welfare of your daughter, a trait worth preserving,” the first one resumed. “So we are willing to let you participate in her future. You may choose to be placed into stasis just like she was.”

“And the second choice?” Sarah inquired nervously.

“Your other option would be to voluntarily undergo a selective mind-wipe procedure. It is not without risk, but your chances of retaining memories preexistent to your encounter with us are fairly good, ninety percent or better.”

“Great,” Sarah mumbled sarcastically. “Some choices!”

“They are yours to make,” insisted the older time traveler.

“You said before we had three choices,” Spade interjected, “what’s the third one?”

“First of all,” the older traveler responded, “these choices were extended to the mother, but if she so desires, they maybe offered to you as well.”

“Fine, I so desire,” Sarah shot back impatiently. “Please, what is our third choice?”

“We don’t believe that you will choose this option, but very well. If you are not willing to accept either of the previous two choices, your only remaining option is death.”

“You call that a choice!” Sam exploded. “It’s damn murder!”

“The decision is yours,” replied the older traveler, clearly irritated by the outburst. “We cannot afford to let you return to your society with the knowledge you possess. The risks are too great.”

“We’ll leave you alone for a while and let you make your decision,” ended the younger. The light portal opened and the two men left the room.

“It’s not so bad,” Sarah began, trying to convince herself as much as her partner. “So, we’ll be asleep for a while, but when we wake up we can be together and with Melissa.”

“But we’ll be leaving the world as we know it behind, never to return,” Spade insisted.

“Ask yourself,” Sarah persisted, “what *are* you leaving behind? Work that gets you nowhere, people who don’t give a damn about you or anyone else. I don’t think I’ll miss this world very much. Anyway, it’s better than having your memory erased.” Sarah looked into Sam’s eyes, searching for a sign of agreement, but she didn’t find it there. She saw only sadness and fear.

“Sarah,” Sam spoke softly, “you must understand, I could love you, really love you more than I ever thought I could love anyone. But I can’t leave. Face it, I am a damn coward and I always will be. *This* world, *this* me! It’s all I have ever known. I created Sam Spade and as *him* I plan to die. In this other new world, I, he . . . won’t have any meaning.”

“I understand,” Sarah replied. She knew that there was no use in trying to convince him. The sparks she had witnessed of the real man inside were not large enough to overcome the fear concealed beneath the Sam Spade facade. She wasn’t going to try anymore.

Melissa’s life monitor read normal. She looked so sweet and peaceful in her stasis chamber, unaware of the great future millennia ahead. Sarah was getting ready to join her in the deep sleep. She was sad, but anxious to get it over with. She knew that if and when she awoke again, she could cradle her daughter in her arms and hear her beautiful voice calling her *Mama*.

The procedure wasn’t complicated. All she had to do was lie down in her pod. The rest was up to the computer. If all went well, she would never notice the enormous passage of time. Sarah climbed in, and looked around for the last time.

“Sleepy so soon?” The voice said from behind.

“Sam!” She yelled, whirling around. It was Spade, standing behind her, not wearing a thing, like her. Sarah was so surprised that she forgot to be embarrassed.

“I couldn’t do it!” He exclaimed. “I couldn’t let them make me forget you.”

“You stayed!” she went on enthusiastically. Forgetting herself completely, she hung her arms around his neck and pulled him close, kissing his eyes, and cheeks.

“Yes I did,” Spade replied. “I was willing to go on knowing that you were here, somewhere in this world, sleeping. I could bear the thought that I would never see you again, never talk to you again, but as

I set there ready to let them scramble my mind, I realized that I would not feel that loss. I wouldn't remember you. I would have never known how much I love you."

"So you came back to me," Sarah whispered.

"So I came back to you," Sam replied. He took her face into his hands and kissed her on the mouth. She looked into his eyes. The fear was gone.

* **JULIA B. OSHER** was born in Leningrad, U.S.S.R and moved to New Hampshire in 1982 where she spent the remainder of her childhood. She received her B.A. from University of Pennsylvania where she studied Physics and English. Currently Julia resides in Stamford, C.T. with her husband Seth and her three adorable sons, Aaron, Dov, and Chaim.