

# CHILDREN OF THE STORM

by M.D. Bloemker

Sam Beckett blinked hard, trying to clear the haze from his eyes. His vision came into focus on his hands, one of which held a pair of lacy pink panties, and the other a black garter belt.

His first reaction was panic. It was difficult enough when he leaped into the life of a woman. Judging from the contents of the open dresser drawer before him, this was a woman who was into serious lingerie, the one aspect of femininity that never failed to give him trouble. The lace always itched and the garter belts always pinched and...

His morose thoughts derailed when he spotted something peeking out from the bottom of a pile of nylons. Slipping the paper out, he unfolded it, and had just enough time to scan the first few lines of print before something snagged him by the collar, yanking him backwards.

"You little *worm!*" a voice shrieked in his ear.

Yelping, Sam tried to regain his balance, but the grip on his shirt stayed tight and began shaking him, hard. The shrill, angry voice punctuated every word with another shake that rattled his teeth. "I told you to stay out of here! I'm going to kill you for this, I swear, I'm going to kill you!"

He broke free, scrambling away from his frenzied attacker on all fours until the wall blocked his escape. Gasping, he looked up into the terrifying visage of an enraged teenage girl.

Fists clenched, she advanced on him. "Get out of my room! Get out! Get out!"

Finding no reason to argue, Sam paused only long enough to spot the open door, then made a desperate lunge for it. Tumbling out into a hallway, he came to rest on the carpet, sprawled at someone's high-heeled feet.

He looked up into the woman's stern yet resigned expression as she shook her head and sighed, "Alex."

"I told him to stay *out* of my room!" The teenager appeared in the doorway, pointing a shaking finger at Sam. "I told him to stay out, and what does he do? You little brat, I'm going to *kill* you."

The older woman stepped over Sam, approaching the girl with words that held some sympathy but much more exasperation. Recognizing that she now acted as his safety buffer, Sam got to his feet, shaking his head to regain his scrambled senses. He found himself staring at a young dark-haired boy wearing a red-striped shirt, jeans, and a terrified expression. He was about to address the child before it registered that he was looking into a full-length mirror.

He reached up to touch his face, and the boy in the mirror did likewise. Behind him, the girl was shrieking, "Mom, if you don't keep that...that *insect* from getting into my stuff, I swear, he's not going to live to be fourteen!" The pronouncement was followed by the slamming of a door, and a very heavy sigh.

"All right, young man."

Sam turned to greet the woman with a sick smile. Despite the delicate sprinkling of grey in her dark hair, she seemed to be about the same age as Sam himself; or, more to the point, the age that Sam Beckett was when he wasn't a thirteen year old boy—or anyone else, for that matter.

She made an abrupt gesture over her shoulder. "To your room. I want you to stay there until suppertime."

"Aw, Mom," he protested, feeling that this much at least would be expected of him.

"And no whining, or you won't get supper, either." She put a hand on his shoulder, giving him a gentle nudge down the hall. "I warned you to stay out of your sister's room."

He protested again, which had the desired effect of annoying her so much that she escorted him to the door of his bedroom, prodding him inside. "Now stay here until I call you. And...clean this place up, will you?" With a pained look at the clutter around her, she shut the door.

Sam released a long sigh of relief. His head was still ringing from his treatment at the teenaged girl's hands. He sat on the edge of the unmade bed, rubbing his temples as he surveyed his surroundings. The single bed took up much of what room there was, the rest of the space shared by a chest of drawers and a small student desk. A large pile of clothing looked as though it might be held up by the desk's accompanying chair. Sports and music posters, most obviously clipped from color magazines, were taped clumsily to the walls. The room itself, while not beyond redemption, was heaped with discarded clothing, sports equipment, school books, and what looked like an old chemistry experiment on the desk.

He spotted a shoebox on the floor near his feet and picked it up. Inside were stacks of baseball cards, all meticulously organized and rubberbanded, all smelling of fresh bubble gum. So fresh, Sam noted, that the gum was still stacked haphazardly on the chest of drawers, and the wrappers strewn in a wide circle around the wastebasket.

He removed the band from one stack and reverently fanned out the cards. "A complete set," he marveled. "A complete 1966 set."

"You can tell that, just be flipping through the deck?"

He should have been used to Al's abrupt entrances, generally made out of his line of sight and without warning, but the cards still nearly went flying from his hand. "They're numbered—see?" he explained patiently when his breath came back.

"Oh, yeah. Yeah," Al said, instantly losing interest. He squinted up at the walls. "The Beatles and Johnny Unitas. Hm. You're an interesting kid."

"One who goes sneaking in his sister's underwear drawer, apparently," Sam grumbled, re-packing the box and setting it back on the floor.

Al's eyes widened appreciatively, but a stern look from Sam kept him from saying anything.

"All right, we've established that I'm interesting as well as precocious," Sam said, nudging a mound of books and clothes off the bed to allow him to stretch out. "What else?"

"What else is there to know?" Al said, working hard and failing miserably to keep a straight face.

"A name would be a good start."

"Okay, okay." He produced a small hand-sized device and squinted at the tiny display. "Ah...your name is Alex Murphy and you're, let's see...you're thirteen years old. You have one sister, sixteen years old, and her name is...come on...her name is Judy." He grinned suddenly. "She was named after Judy Garland, can you beat that?"

Sam nodded, less patient with the extraneous information than Al, who generally delighted in such useless tidbits. "And?"

"And...you're in a little town in Indiana called Louisville and today is October 7, 1966."

"So what am I here to do? And I hope I don't have to do it before suppertime," he added under his breath.

"What's that?"

"Nothing. Al, come on, why am I here?"

Al scowled at the display, punched a few keys, scowled some more. "I'm getting a lot of garbage here. I bet it's the storm."

"Storm?" For the first time, Sam realized that the background noise of which he'd only been vaguely aware was the sound of a hard rain beating on the window.

"Ah, here we go. Ziggy says that you're here to..."

Sam looked up to see Al's expression change abruptly. "Oh," the man murmured. "Oh, this is not good."

"What? What is it?"

"It's Judy. She's pregnant."

A moment's thought spared him the embarrassment of asking the reason for Al's distress. "Sixteen, pregnant, 1966," Sam murmured, nodding his understanding.

"Got it in one," Al intoned, pausing to dramatically puff on his ever-present cigar.

"She just found out, didn't she?" Sam realized, remembering what little he'd seen on the paper from the lingerie drawer. It had been the address of a medical clinic.

"Yeah." Al worked the keys again and slammed the side of the device once in mounting frustration. "Two days ago, she and a girlfriend cut school to get the test done at a clinic a couple of towns over. She called them for the results today."

"What about the father? Who's he?"

Grimacing, Al keyed in the query and muttered under his breath until a particularly sound wallop of his hand got the device working again. "His name is Rick...no, Richard Kramer. Folks call him Richie. He's a high school senior and..." He winced suddenly. "...he's in line for a full scholarship to Yale next year."

"Al, why am I here? What am I supposed to be doing?"

Another adjustment, another stream of curses. Then Al's expression went even greyer. "Uh-oh. She goes for an abortion."

"An illegal abortion," Sam surmised.

"In 1966, what other kind is there?" Al sighed.

"And?"

"And..." Al waved his hand in helpless anger. "She doesn't make it."

"So I'm here to stop her."

"That would be my guess, yeah."

"Al, that girl hates my guts. She'd just as soon strangle me as look at me. How am I going to talk her out of something I'm not even supposed to know about?"

Al considered, then nodded, conceding the point. "So, you take another approach."

"I tell her parents?"

"And how are you going to explain to *them* how you know all this?"

"Well, I've got to tell somebody. I'm only thirteen, I can't stop her myself."

"You're right. You're right." Al's eyes narrowed as his thought processes kept one jump ahead of his words. "And I'll tell you who you're going to tell. The baby's father."

"He doesn't know yet?"

"Well, Ziggy doesn't have that information, but I can tell you this. If she went to the clinic with a girlfriend and just got the results today, that girlfriend is the only other one who knows. Besides you, that is."

"So she's probably going to go through with the abortion without telling her boyfriend about it..."

"...to save his scholarship or whatever noble reason sixteen year old girls have about these things. If you're going to stop her from going through with this thing, you've got to get the boyfriend on her side."

“Well, that’s great, if it works out that way. But what if the guy runs out when he hears the news? It happens, you know.”

“Oh, I know,” Al said, displaying his regard for such men with a sneer. “But something tells me that’s what you’re here for.”

“That’s just great. This guy is going to listen to his girlfriend’s thirteen year old brother about how he’s got to stand by her through a pregnancy he doesn’t know anything about?”

“I have faith in you,” Al pronounced solemnly. “You will prevail.”

Sam stifled an impulse to tell Al what he could do with his faith, and heaved a sigh. “Okay, okay, uh... when does this all happen with Judy? How much time do I have?”

Al consulted the remote again, muttering, “Jeez, this interference is driving me...ah. Oh. Tonight. Your parents are going to a party—in this storm?—and she slips out with her girlfriend after you go to sleep. That gives you at least five hours to get to this Richie guy and talk some sense into him. To be on the safe side, you’d better go now.”

“I can’t.”

“You can’t?” Al stared at him, dumbfounded. “What do you mean, you can’t?”

“I can’t, Al. I’m grounded.”

“You’re...” Al’s eyes widened in growing amusement.

“I’m grounded,” Sam repeated sheepishly. “Until after supper.”

Al snorted, turning away so that Sam couldn’t see the rest of the laugh. “Knock it off, Al, it’s not that funny,” Sam grumbled after a moment or two spent watching his friend’s shoulders shake.

“Yes, it is,” the other man assured him fervently between chortles.

“Just tell me if I should try to sneak out now.”

“No, no, let’s not give the warden a reason to extend the sentence,” Al said, finally under control, but still grinning broadly. “You’ve got time here, so...look, here’s what I’ll do. I’ll go find out where Richie is so that we won’t waste time looking for him, and then after I do that, I’ll keep an eye on Judy. Sound good?”

“Well...okay, if you’re sure we’ve got the time.”

“I’m sure, Ziggy’s sure. Hey, look, this kid’s a connoisseur. Must be a couple year’s worth of *Mad* magazines here, have yourself a ball.”

“Thanks, I will,” Sam sighed as the closing of Al’s portal door cut off the man’s delighted cackle.



“Did you wash your hands?”

“Yes,” Sam replied in what he hoped was the proper tone of thirteen-year-old exasperation. He settled into the chair at the dinner table, trying not to stare too hard at the strangers whom Alex Murphy knew as his mother and father.

“Where’s your sister?” the man asked without looking up from his evening paper.

“In her room, I guess.” It was actually more than a guess; after Al had returned from his successful hunt for Richie Kramer, he’d been keeping Sam posted on what Judy, closeted in her room, was doing. For the most part, he said, the girl had either been sitting quietly staring out into the rain, talking on the telephone to her girlfriend and confidante, or crying her heart out. Sam kept his eyes down, wishing he could tell the pair sitting at the table with him about the pain their daughter was in, knowing why he couldn’t—and hating every minute of it.

“I’ve called her three times, and I won’t call her again,” the mother declared firmly, passing a laden plate to her husband, who took it without glancing up.

“Sam!” Al appeared abruptly, gesturing upwards. Sam covered his start with a cough and tried not to look like he was staring into space as Al continued excitedly, “She’s on the phone to this friend of hers, Ann-Marie, right now. I think she’s going to call Richie and tell him. At least, Ann-Marie’s trying to talk her into it, but it sounds like she might do it.”

Waiting until both parents were looking away, Sam mouthed, *Is this good?*

“Yeah, yeah, I think so. Saves you a trip in the rain, anyway. I’m going back up there and eavesdrop some more.” He vanished as abruptly as he’d appeared.

“Alex?”

His name was spoken in a tone that instantly alerted him to the fact that it must have been spoken at least twice before without acknowledgement. He jumped, staring at his mother with genuine confusion. “What?”

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” he said quickly, reaching for the nearest serving dish to heap potatoes his plate.

“Alex, you hate potatoes,” the woman said, completely baffled.

“I do? I mean—I do. I mean—I used to, but...I love them now. They’re great, especially the way you make them.”

She stared a moment, then shook her head with a resigned shrug, returning her attention to her own meal.

“Sam!”

He hissed in irritation as his reflexes got the better of him again, but Al was too excited to notice. “Sam, she called him. He’s on the phone, right now. It doesn’t sound too good. Look, take the extension in the hall and listen in.”

Horrified at the suggestion, Sam began to protest, "I can't...!"

"Can't what, dear?" his mother asked.

"Uh...uh, I can't, uh...eat this. I hate potatoes. And...I just remembered, I didn't wash my hands. I'll be right back."

He bolted from the room before the woman could protest, noting in passing that the man remained unperturbed, reading his newspaper.

"Over here, Sam!" Al waved to him from where he stood in the hall, next to the telephone stand.

Checking to make sure that he was out of the line of sight of the dining room, Sam leaned over to whisper angrily, "Do you seriously expect me to...?"

"You do what you've got to do," Al said firmly, pointing down at the phone. The accusation was clear; if Al could spy on a broken-hearted teenaged girl for two hours, then Sam could compromise his own ethics long enough to listen to a simple, if intensely personal, phone conversation.

Grimacing his distaste, Sam eased the receiver off the hook. He needn't have bothered taking the care; Judy was clearly too emotional to notice anything.

"I'm sorry, Richie," she was saying, voice broken by tears. "This is going to mess up your college plans, isn't it? You're mad at me, aren't you? Richie?"

There was a long pause in which the only sound was Judy's labored breathing. "Richie?" she said plaintively. "Richie, come on, say something."

A heavy sigh answered her, followed by a cold voice that said: "Are you sure the baby's mine?"

There was a sound that could have only been the vocalization of a teenaged heart breaking in two. Sam stared at Al, eyes wide with astonishment, which prompted the man to demand, "What? What?" and then shoot a longing look up when Sam waved him to silence.

Another sound, a desperate attempt to say Richie's name, and then a louder noise, that of a receiver crashing down onto a hook. Sam, in shock, was about to turn to Al when he heard something else on the receiver still pressed to his ear.

Al, watching Sam go paler still, gestured frantically with his hands. "What? Will you tell me, *what?*"

Sam let the receiver fall, barely managing to catch it and fumble it back on the hook. "That bastard," he muttered. "He laughed."

"He what?" Al's voice was deadly soft, already beyond simple anger.

"First he questioned the baby's paternity and then, after she hung up on him...he *laughed*."

Al stiffened, face muscles working angrily. "That lousy, no-good, sonuva—that does it. You've gotta go straighten this guy out."

"And just what am I supposed to say to him?"

"Who said anything about talking?" He brought his fist up in a hard jab to the air.

"Al, I'm not going to beat anybody up. No matter how much he deserves it," he added under his breath.

"Sam, I heard her up there, talking to that friend of hers, just before she called that slimeball. She was hoping, really hoping that Richie would say something to make her change her mind—which is already made up," he added, leaning on the words.

"Look, if I can get her parents on her side...."

"No." Al gave him a look that brooked no argument. "No, you can't tell them."

"Al, they have a right t—"

"Listen to me, listen. No, I said *listen*. If she was ever going to tell her parents, she would have done it before she planned this midnight drive with Ann-Marie. I'm telling you, Richie's the only one who can say anything that will mean anything to her."

"I don't agree. I think if I explain to them...."

"Explain?" Al's patience was nearing its end. "Explain what? You're thirteen, and your sister's sworn enemy!"

"I can get them to listen to me, Al, make them understand...."

Al cut him off with an impatient wave of his hand. "We're wasting time here. We'll put it to Ziggy."

Sam made a warning noise as Al turned away in a not so subtle attempt to shield the remote's display from him. Disgruntled, Al punched in the query. After several minutes of fruitless fiddling, and more than a few muttered curses, he suddenly smiled.

"There." He held up the hand-link for Sam to see the results. "You see, I'm right. If you go behind Judy's back and tell her parents what's up, they'll stop her from getting the abortion, all right. But she'll run away from home when her parents press charges against Richie and try to force her to give the baby up for adoption. Nobody ever hears from her again."

Sam looked ill. "There's no guarantee that won't happen anyway, is there?"

"Sure, there's a guarantee." Al eyed him, expression inscrutable. "You."

Sam's shoulders drooped, signaling defeat. Inwardly, though, he was heartened by the quiet affirmation of Al's resolute faith in his ability to somehow make everything right, against unreasonable odds.

"All right, all right," he said tiredly. "I'll go talk to Richie. Where is he?"

"He works at a service station about six blocks from here. When I found him, he had a car engine in about a hundred different pieces, so he's probably still there. Just follow me, I'll show you how to get there."

"I don't suppose Dad would let me borrow the car—"

He strode to the front door as he spoke, his voice breaking off as he opened the door to a torrent of rain.

His eyes glinting in evil pleasure at the look of utter consternation on Sam's face, Al took a puff on his cigar. "No...but he might lend you a canoe," he grinned.



For once, Sam greatly appreciated Al's predilection for garishly colored clothing. His red shirt and bright yellow jacket kept him visible in the downpour, more so than the car that nearly mowed him down in the crosswalk because neither driver nor pedestrian could see more than a dozen feet in any direction.

He'd wasted a lot of time convincing Alex's parents, who caught him as he was digging a raincoat out of the hall closet, how vital it was that he get to the store in time to buy the last packs of baseball cards on the shelf. They'd given up after being fervently assured that he had no intention of catching pneumonia, but his emotional growth would be put in serious jeopardy if he missed getting those cards and completing his collection. He left with the nagging feeling that they'd abandoned the argument not because they really believed those cards were that important to him, but because they were running late to the party.

Every time Sam turned a corner, Al would disappear from his side, reappearing a short distance away in the direction he wanted Sam to walk—or, more like it, run. The raincoat had ceased to be useful by the time he'd reached the end of his own sidewalk; every inch of him was soaked through and the coldness was beginning to seep into his bones. Sam felt a stab of irrational irritation every time he caught up to Al, who was completely dry and not so very understanding about why Sam couldn't go any faster.

Then Al disappeared and didn't reappear again. On the verge of panic, Sam looked around and finally spotted gas pumps a few yards away. He sprinted the distance to the station office, startling the attendant at the service desk with his explosive entrance.

"Whew, look at you," the man laughed as Sam, breathing hard, shook the worst of the rain from his face and body.

Swiping sodden hair out of his eyes, Sam squinted at the man, and saw from the look of recognition on his face that there was obviously a friendship here that he had to acknowledge. "Hi, uh...Bill," he stammered, silently thanking the auto service industry for their tradition of embroidered name patches.

"Hi, yourself." The man chuckled again, shaking his head over the boy's sorry condition. "If you're looking for Richie, he's in the bays."

"Thanks."

He opened the door leading to the bays and peered in. There were several mechanics at work in the area; two underneath a car up on a hoist, another patching a tire in the back. Without having to ask, or surreptitiously check name patches, Sam knew instantly that Richie was over at the far end of the bays, head buried under the open hood of a car. He was, after all, the only mechanic who had an angry, cigar-puffing hologram circling him like a vengeful wraith.

"Slime," Al was snarling as Sam negotiated the cluttered area toward them. His image passed through the car and several pieces of heavy equipment as he paced around the oblivious young man. "You're slime. No, you're worse than slime. You're...you're...."

"Richie?"

A pleasant-looking face looked up in surprise, but with a smile. "Hey, Alex, buddy!"

"Buddy?" Al spluttered, looking like he was about to explode.

"Listen," Richie continued, grabbing a rag to wipe his grease-soaked hands. "If you've come out in this storm for that five bucks I promised you for getting lost last Saturday night, you know payday isn't until tomorrow." Sam swallowed his disgust with an effort, managing to keep a straight, serious face. "I didn't come here for that."

Richie's easy laugh died as he regarded Sam in growing confusion. "Hey, uh...what's up?" he asked uneasily. "You look kinda funny."

"You think lots of things are funny, don't you, Laughing Boy?" Al sneered, leaning forward to glare at the young man.

"Is Judy okay?"

"No," Sam said stiffly.

"No?" Alarm sparked in Richie's eyes. "What's wrong with her?"

Al's face went bright red. "What's *wrong* with her?" he roared. "What's *wrong* with her?"

"You know," Sam replied, two words delivered like a challenge to a duel.

"Do you believe this guy?" Al was nearly hopping with rage. "I don't believe this guy. Do you *believe* this guy?"

"Know what? Alex, come on, tell me what's wrong with Judy, okay?"

"You," Sam spat, unable to contain himself any longer. "You're what's wrong with her."

Richie stared at him, eyes narrowed incredulously. "Is she still claiming I ruined her life because I didn't get her that friendship ring for her birthday?"

"Sam, hit him," Al pleaded. "For my sake, please, I'm begging you, a good one, right in the chops."

"Not because of a stupid ring, no," Sam said, struggling for control.

"Then what are you talking about?" the young man demanded, losing patience.

"Forget the chops. Lower the punch about a foot or two."

"I'm talking about the baby, Richie."

"Baby?" Richie's head went back as he echoed the word in a genuinely perplexed voice. "What baby?"

Ignoring the incoherent noises that issued from Al, Sam squared his jaw. "Her baby, Richie. *Your* baby."

It took a moment, but then the young man's expression fell into a mask of total shock. With a quick glance over his shoulder, Richie took Sam's arm, tacitly directing him to move away a short distance, out of sight and hearing of his co-workers behind a tire rack. Once there, Richie crouched, taking Alex's shoulders to meet his gaze, eye to eye. "What are you talking about, Alex?" he demanded in voice that was on the verge of breaking. "Wh-what baby, what—?"

"You know what I'm talking about," Sam glowered, but he could no longer put any real anger behind it. Richie was too pale, too shaken; no one was this much of a cad, or this good an actor.

"You're telling me that Judy is—?"

He made a gesture, unable to finish. When Sam nodded, Richie's hands dropped from his shoulders, dead weights. "Oh, boy," he muttered, sounding sick. "Oh, boy."

Sam exchanged a glance with Al, who looked as utterly baffled as Sam felt. "Richie, she told you about this."

"No." The young man gasped for breath. "No, she didn't tell me, she didn't...."

"I heard you," Sam insisted, anger rising again. "I...I picked up the extension and I *heard* you talking to her...."

Richie spread his hands, helpless with confusion. "When?"

"Just twenty minutes ago."

"Alex, I haven't talked to Judy since lunchtime."

"I heard you, Richie. I heard you ask her if she was sure that you were the father."

Richie jolted as though someone had punched him in the stomach. For a moment, his voice was gone; then, he managed, "Alex, I swear to you, I haven't talked to her...."

Suddenly, fury sparked in his eyes. "She called the house, didn't she?"

"I...I don't know...."

"*Damn* him!" Richie spun, landing the side of his fist hard against a stack of tires. "I'll kill him, I swear, I'll kill him!"

"That seems to be first on everyone's list of problem solving strategies," Al muttered, fidgeting with the hand-link.

Richie took a deep breath, composing himself before turning back to Sam. "Alex, I came here straight from school, I haven't been home yet. Twenty minutes ago, I was right here, and I didn't talk to Judy."

"But...who?"

"Eddie. Who else?"

He hissed the name with such vehemence that Sam flinched. Richie lowered his head as he swore oaths under his breath, giving Sam time to look over at Al and mouth, *Who's Eddie?*

Al was already working frantically, and after a moment, he gaped at the answer. "Edward Kramer. He's...oh, boy. He's Richie's twin brother. Damn, how did Ziggy miss this?"

"That creep," Richie growled, walloping the tires again. "He always gets a big yock out of pretending he's me on the phone. He's probably laughing his head off right now."

"Eddie and Richie both had it for Judy, and Eddie, he didn't take it too well when Judy made her choice," Al explained hastily. "He was always pretty hateful to her after that, and it really strained his relationship with his brother."

Richie was looking around with the dangerous eye of someone looking for a weapon. "I'm gonna pound the living daylight out of that...."

"No, Richie! Wait!" Sam grabbed the young man's arm as he tried to stalk past, obviously intending to put threats into action. "You've got to talk to Judy first. She's really upset about what you...what she thought you said, and she's going to get rid of the baby."

"Get rid of..." His confusion became horror. "Old Mrs. Biddles. Alex, I've got to stop her."

"Yes!" Al crowed, fist raised in triumph.

"She's at the house," Sam told him, relieved. "Her par—my folks are going to a party, they've probably left by now, so you can talk to her there...."

"Thanks, buddy," Richie said, genuine gratitude in his still-shaken voice. "Come on, I'll give you a lift home."

He ignored the shouted queries of his co-workers that came in response to his loud declaration that there was something he had to take care of, dashing out into the rain to an old, beat-up Chevrolet. Sam followed on his heels, and was barely into the passenger seat before Richie peeled the car out of the service station lot.

"Sorry," Richie muttered in response to Sam's alarmed yelp, concentrating on keeping all four tires on the rain-slicked road.

Clinging to the seat, Sam noted with a sinking heart that the old vehicle had no passive restraint system. "You should really think about getting seatbelts installed," he said, wincing as he felt the familiar sensations of hydroplaning tires.

Teeth biting into his lower lip, Richie held tight to the wheel, expertly bringing the car out of a threatened skid. "What did you say?"

"Nothing," Sam muttered, deciding not to break the young man's concentration.

Richie did that himself, after several minutes of silence broken only by the frantic motion of the overworked windshield wipers and the occasional squeal of tires taking a sharp turn. "Alex—do your parents know about this?"

"No. The only person she told was, um...."

"Ann-Marie," Al prompted from the back seat.

"Ann-Marie."

Richie considered, frowning. "Then how did you find out?"

"I, uh...I found a receipt from a clinic for the test she took...."

He half-smiled, nodding. "You were sneaking in her room again."

Sam cleared his throat, deciding not to confirm or deny. "And then I heard her talking to Ann-Marie."

"You listened on the extension."

Sam looked away with a grimace of disgust, which Richie would never know was for the low chuckle from the back seat that only Sam could hear. But the young man caught the look from the corner of his eye and took his hand from the steering wheel just long enough to nudge Sam's shoulder. "Hey. I'm not ragging on you for it, not this time. Thanks for coming to me, buddy. That's one I owe you."



The front door was locked. A green Dodge that had been parked in the driveway when he left was missing, which could only mean that Alex's parents had blithely gone off to their much-anticipated soiree. "You got a key?" Richie asked, not all that surprised when Sam's quick search of his pockets turned up empty. He leaned on the doorbell, growing more agitated by the moment.

Sam stepped back just as Al materialized at his side, grumbling at the hand-link. "Key," he said suddenly, jabbing a finger at the display. "Try under the mat."

"There is no mat," Sam whispered back.

"Oh. Yeah. Well...maybe one of those fake rock things?"

"The back door," Richie exclaimed, already running.

"Or maybe the back door is open," Al agreed as Sam dashed after the young man.

It was open and swinging violently from Richie's entrance by the time Sam got to the back of the house. He caught up with the youth at the top of the stairs, where Richie paused, stymied by the five closed doors facing the hallway.

"Her room's on the right," Sam offered.

Richie sprang for the door, knocking furiously on it just as Al exited, his holographic image seeming to drift, ghost-like, through the solid wood. "Sam, she's gone!"

"Gone?" Sam echoed, remembering barely in time to lower his voice to a whisper, although Richie appeared to be too upset to notice anything other than the fact that his pleas to open the door went unanswered. "But you said we had hours—"

"I know, I know," Al said, an anguished expression twisting his face as he worked the hand-link's controls frantically. "I should have kept checking. Ziggy says you've changed things twice already, I should have kept checking...."

Frustrated, Richie finally turned the knob and threw the door open. With a glance back at Al, who was still fighting a losing battle with the remote, Sam followed the young man in. It took Richie a moment to realize what Sam already knew, and when he did, his shoulders slumped in eloquent despair.

"Maybe she just went to visit a friend," Sam offered weakly. He turned as he spoke, and withered under the look that Al, who had moved to stand in the doorway, gave him for the effort.

Richie leaned over and picked up something that lay discarded on the bed. It was a musical jewelry box, the kind that opened to reveal a pirouetting ballerina. Wound down, the music box emitted a few forlorn notes as Richie proved it empty with a swipe of his hand inside.

"Her prom dress," he said, voice as hollow as the look in his eyes. "She told me she was saving up for her prom dress, and had all the money in her old jewelry box."

"Ann-Marie picked her up fifteen minutes ago," Al piped up. "You've got to stop her, Sam."

"I've got to stop her, Alex."

"She can't have left all that long ago, we can catch up to her," Sam offered.

The flash of hope in Richie's face died, killed by a stab of pure pain. "I don't have any idea where Old Mrs. Biddles lives!" he groaned.

"I do," said Al.

"I do," Sam repeated instantly.

Richie's eyes widened in genuine astonishment, but to his credit, he wasted no time on useless questions.

"Okay, where?"

"Uh..."

He waited, but all he heard was the squealing of abused circuitry, and another of Al's muttered tirades against the state of modern technology. "I'll take you there," he covered quickly.

"Ah...no," Richie said firmly, the repugnant thought twisting his face.

"Richie..."

"I don't want you anywhere near that woman, okay? In fact, I'd be just as happy if you'd forget that she exists."

"Don't let him out of your sight, Sam," Al said, his voice low with dire warning.

"I have to go with you," Sam insisted. "I want to help Judy, too."

"Alex," Richie groaned, his resolve to spare the boy this particularly nasty bit of life experience weakened by the sincere declaration.

"We're wasting time," Sam spoke quietly but firmly in the silence created by Richie's indecision.

The young man sighed, nodding. "Okay, okay. Come on."



It was nearly full dark by the time Al's directions got them headed north on a rural route out of town. The rain had abated into a steady light drizzle, but earlier downpours had turned dips in the road into small ponds, and more than once, Sam heard Richie swear under his breath as the car engine spluttered after a dash through yet another flooded section of road.

Sam leaned back in the seat, battling his growing unease. From the back seat he heard Al address Ziggy in colorful terms that would have earned him a solid punch in the mouth from a human target. Al's irritated manipulation of the hand-link was producing tortured squeals of protest from the machine, and no satisfaction. Even if he had felt free to ask Al what was going on, part of him wasn't sure he really wanted to know right now.

But there was one thing he did want to know, and the answer couldn't come from Al this time.

"Richie?"

"Yeah?" the young man replied, not taking his eyes off the road ahead.

"What are you going to do?"

The high-pitched mechanical yelps from the back seat stopped abruptly.

"I'm going to get Judy and bring her home," the young man replied, obviously confused by why the question had even been asked.

"I mean after that."

"After that..." Richie drew a sharp, deep breath, as what Sam was really asking drove home. "I...I don't know, Alex. I guess the first thing we've got to do is sit down and...talk about this."

Sam went silent, thinking some more. No sounds came from the back seat.

"What about college?" he ventured after a while.

Richie's shoulders sagged. "Yale," he said lowly, almost a moan. "My parents are going to..."

He made a noise and shook his head. "I don't know," he repeated, more firmly. "Judy and me, we'll...talk about it. Okay?"

There were some advantages to being only thirteen years old, Sam realized. It meant that he could get away with asking a hopelessly naive question without being told to mind his own business. "Are you going to marry Judy?"

"I..." Richie's voice broke, and if there had been enough light around, Sam was sure that he'd see that the young man had gone very pale. "Alex, I...can we not talk about this right now? I've got to concentrate."

"Another half mile, take a left on the old post road," a quiet voice intoned from the back seat. Sam dutifully repeated the instructions and lapsed back into reflective silence.

He was mildly surprised to find that Old Mrs. Biddles didn't live in some backwoods shanty with half a roof and running water only when it rained. Al's directions brought them down a long muddy driveway, to a small, neatly kept, wood frame house, set in the midst of a tended quarter-acre of land surrounded by woodlands. A large dog fiercely announced his presence long before Sam finally saw him; safely behind a chain link fenced enclosure by the far side of the house, to Sam's great relief.

Richie sprang out of the car and was halfway up the front steps of the house before Sam had time to react. "Judy!" he yelled as he knocked furiously on the front door. "Judy, it's me! It's Richie, I've gotta talk to you!"

Sam scrambled up the steps, to be met by Richie's fierce glare. "Alex, get back in the car," he snapped angrily.

"Oh, no," Sam insisted, prepared to hold his ground.

"Alex, I want you to get back into the car, *now*—"

The snap of the door lock spun him around, putting an effective end to the argument. A frightened female face appeared as the door slowly opened, and her eyes widened in a strange mixture of surprise and horror. "Richie?"



He pushed past her, not heeding her cry of alarm as she nearly lost her balance. A quick, frantic survey of the small, dimly lit living room revealed no other occupants. "Where is she, Ann-Marie? I've got to talk to her, where is she?"

"Sh-she doesn't want to talk to you," the girl quavered, giving Sam a grateful, if confused look as he extended a hand to her in concern. "Alex, what are you doing here?"

"Judy?" Richie lunged for a curtained doorway at the far end of the room. Ann-Marie rushed after him, obviously harboring a forlorn hope of stopping him. Sam dashed after them, finding himself in a small, old-fashioned kitchen. Ann-Marie, hands covering her mouth in anguish, was half-collapsed against the icebox. An elderly woman stood by a coal stove, paused in the act of stirring a boiling pot as she glared at Richie, who had skidded to a halt in the middle of the room, next to a table on which Judy huddled, dressed only in a full slip with a thin blanket draped over her shoulders.

The older woman snarled, stalking toward Richie with the steaming wooden spoon raised over her head. Sam dove, intercepting her halfway to her intended target. "No, wait," he gasped. "He only wants to talk to her. Let them talk, please."

The woman shook him off roughly, but stayed where Sam had stopped her, regarding the scene before her with narrowed, suspicious eyes. Richie approached Judy carefully, hands held out in open supplication as he spoke to her in quiet, pleading tones. At first she cringed away from him, and visibly flinched when he tried to take her hand. But after a few moments, she seemed to unfold, tentatively. Richie kept talking, gripping her hand tightly, and it wasn't long before she cracked open her eyes, finally daring to look up at him.

Old Mrs. Biddles harrumphed, then turned back to tend the simmering pot as she muttered, "I usually get 'em after all the talking's stopped."

Waiting until he was sure that the woman no longer had any interest in attacking any of them, let alone talking to them, Sam made his way across the kitchen to the still-frightened, but now badly confused Ann-Marie. All he had to do was mention Eddie's name and the girl nearly collapsed from relief and rage. When her brief spell of ranting included how she planned to deal with Eddie's little 'joke', Al, who had popped up from nowhere was usual, leaned forward to assure her, "Take a number and move to the back of the line."

They were interrupted by Richie's request for Ann-Marie's attention. "I'll make sure Judy gets home safe," he told her as he held the exhausted, but no longer hysterical Judy in a supportive embrace. "Do you think you could drop Alex off?"

"Sure, I could do that," she agreed hesitantly, managing a half-smile.

"No, Sam." Al shook his head vehemently as he continued to prod the hand-link. "Something's not right yet. Stay with them."

"No." Sam evaded Ann-Marie's attempt to get him to follow her out. Hating himself for intruding when it was obvious that the couple needed some time alone, he dropped into a stubborn little brother mode. "I want to stay with Judy, make sure she's okay."

"Alex," Richie cajoled.

"It's okay." Judy raised her head from Richie's shoulders with an unexpected, bleary smile. "Let the little worm stay if he wants."

Ann-Marie went to her friend's side to offer a handkerchief, some whispered words and a quick, heartfelt hug. Sam took advantage of the distraction to turn his back on the others and whisper, "Well?"

Al slapped the remote with the back of his hand, shaking his head ruefully. "You did it, she doesn't get the abortion. She carries to term and delivers a fine, healthy baby."

"You don't look very happy about that."

"Richie and Judy get married, and needless to say, he doesn't go to college. He joins the army next year to get enough money to support his family. Goes MIA the first week of his second Vietnam rotation. A body was never recovered. Judy's a presumed widow at twenty."

Sam's stomach churned at the news. "You're sure about that?"

"As sure as I'll ever be," Al sighed, giving the hand-link a mournful look. "I don't see how you could change that, but..."

Sam realized that they both held the same vague hope and gave voice to it. "Maybe that's why I'm still here."

"Well, I don't know why you're still here," a shrill female voice said, close behind him. He turned as Old Mrs. Biddles moved past him to settle into a worn rocking chair, a steaming cup in her hands. She used a spoon to bring yellow broth to her lips, and blew on it gently. "Decent people don't barge in at dinnertime."

Unable to stop himself, Sam blurted out, "Decent?" with a short, derisive laugh.

The woman paused before her second spoonful, fixing him with a steel-eyed glare. Then, carefully, she set the spoon back into the cup as she drew a deep breath. "Listen, sonny. I don't drag 'em in here. I don't advertise in the Yellow Pages, I don't hand out flyers on the street corner, and I don't hang around schoolyards whispering in little girls' ears. I don't go looking for them. They find me. They come to me because they're in a lot of trouble and they know I'll help them out of it."

"There's other ways," Sam said stubbornly.

"Sam," he heard Al's warning voice behind him. "Don't do it."

"You ask." Her eyes were steady on him, stern yet curiously free of either righteous or guilt-ridden anger. "Any of 'em who's come through my door, you ask. I don't ask, because I already know what the answer is. If they can get up the nerve to come here, I already know what the answer is."

"That doesn't make it right," Sam insisted, shaken.

She shrugged, unruffled, and took up the spoon again. "I don't go to them, sonny. They come to me."

"Sam, let it go," Al warned again. "Let it go."

His face flushed red with indignation, Sam turned away before he could be tempted to say anything else.

Richie was easing Judy down from the table, solicitous of the way she pulled the blanket tightly around her in embarrassment. Catching Sam's eye, Richie nodded in the direction of a nearby chair, on which a flowered garment had been draped. Understanding, Sam fetched the dress and handed it to Judy, who mustered a quavering smile on her reddened, tear-streaked face.

"I suppose you'll want a refund," Mrs. Biddles grumbled when, in an effort to give Judy some privacy, they were forced to face in her direction.

Richie stared at her a long moment, then lowered his eyes. "Keep it," he said wearily.

She dug into an apron pocket and pulled out a thin bundle of bills. "Babies cost money. You'll need it."

Richie made no move toward her, so Sam stepped forward to take the money from her outstretched hand. She raised a finger to stop him from turning away. "You learn something here, and you remember it. Okay?" she said with unexpected sincerity.

"No, I won't forget," he assured her with more irony than she could ever suspect.

"Good. Now get out and leave an old woman to eat her supper in peace, or I'll sic Caesar on the lot of you."



The drive back began in silence, disturbed only by the rain, the gentle swish of the wipers and Judy's occasional congested snuffle. Relegated to the back seat, Sam congratulated himself when he didn't jump a mile when Al abruptly appeared next to him.

"I haven't leaped yet," Sam said as loud as he dared. "Why?"

"Garbage. I'm getting nothing but garbage here." He tipped the hand-link's display toward Sam, who had to agree that the readout, while recognizable English, made no sense. "Elevations! Who gives a flying Reebok about elevations? I've got to talk to Gooshie, I'll be right back." He winked out as suddenly as he'd appeared.

Sam lifted his feet onto the seat, settling with a sigh. The motion of the car had nearly lulled him to sleep when, some minutes later, Al's voice jolted his eyes open.

"I just don't get this, Sam."

Al's holographic image appeared to be sitting on top of his knees, a sight that was disturbing enough to bring Sam sitting bolt upright in a hurry. Richie turned his head at the commotion. "You okay back there?"

"Fine. I'm fine," he said hastily. "Get what?" he whispered to Al.

"Gooshie says there's nothing wrong with Ziggy, but I'm telling you, there's something...." He whacked the hand-link with the palm of his hand, hard. "...*wrong*. She's giving me weather reports now."

"Weather reports?" Sam looked out the window into the darkness. By the pale glow cast by the car headlights, he saw that the downpour had picked up in volume again. The narrow paved roadway was surrounded on both sides by huge pools of water, which seemed to be steadily encroaching on the asphalt.

"Six inches of rain fell in a thirty-six-hour period," Al read directly off the display. "Local flooding caused extensive damage to farm, businesses, and homes, as well as roads and br—"

His breath caught as his eyes went wide. "Richie, stop the car!"

Sam instantly echoed the shout, giving it the same sense of urgency. Startled, Richie began to demand an explanation, but obediently jammed on the brakes when Al, then Sam insisted with even more desperation.

"The bridge is washed out," Sam repeated after Al.

"How do you—"

"Never mind how I know. We—"

He broke off, feigning an attack of speechless panic when Al interrupted to exclaim. "Sam, you've gotta get out of here! The river's rising, fast!"

"Richie, get us to high ground, the river's rising."

Richie froze, staring fearfully out into the rain-soaked darkness as though expecting a wall of water to overwhelm them at any moment. Sam grabbed the young man's shoulder tightly. "Hurry! Turn the car around!"

It was Judy's fearful, "Richie?" that snapped the young man into action. Sam tumbled back into his seat as the car jolted backward, and then forward in a tight turn. Judy stifled a cry as the car went into a skid, which Richie controlled after a few tense seconds, but not before the tires had sent a shower of mud over the windows.

"Alex, are you sure about this?"

Breathing a sigh of relief that the young man had acted before giving his voice to his doubts, Sam leaned over the back of Judy's seat. "If we head back to Old Mrs. Biddles' place, we should be safe."

"Her place is safe enough," Al affirmed, in a tone of voice that heralded bad news. "If you get there. This isn't good, Sam, this is not good...."

Judy made a sound that eloquently expressed how she felt about seeking shelter from the storm at Mrs. Biddles' house. Then she gasped, hands clasped to her mouth. "Ann-Marie," she breathed. "Oh, I hope she made it. She's got to have made it...."

Sam glanced back at Al, who, recognizing his cue, made a fast query. "She's fine, Sam. She made it over the bridge ten minutes before it washed out. It's all high ground over there, she's fine."

"I'm sure she's okay," Sam told Judy gently.

She stared at him, face twisted in fear and confusion. "How can you know that?" she protested, very near hysteria. "You can't know that for sure."

Richie seemed about to second the accusation, but instead shook his head, and kept his concentration on the road. He'd already committed to a course of action and obviously saw no sense in questioning it further.

"Sam, Ziggy says that this stretch of road is going to be under five feet of water in less than ten minutes," Al warned, voice rising.

Sam never heard the end of the sentence, which was eclipsed by Richie's violent oath, followed a split second later by a cascade of water spinning out from beneath the tires. "What happened?" Judy asked fearfully as Richie began to mutter under his breath, "Oh, no. Oh, no, don't do this to me...."

The engine sputtered, oblivious to Richie's frantic efforts to keep it alive. His imprecations grew more frustrated and angry, exploding into a curse as the car slowed to a halt, silent, in the midst of a huge pool of rainwater that had collected across the road.

He slammed the steering wheel with his balled fist, causing Judy to cringe back into her seat. "Now we can't get out of here until the wires dry out."

"No!" Al cried, genuinely frantic. "Ziggy says that if you stay here, you'll all drown!"

Sam jumped out of the car, wincing as he landed in freezing, ankle-deep water. He yanked open the passenger side door, grabbing Judy's arm. "Come on, we've got to get to high ground."

"Alex, we'll be safer and a whole lot dryer if we just stay here," Richie protested when Judy looked back at him for a decision.

"We'll be dead if we stay here," he said, the desperation in his voice fed by Al's terse declaration, "Five minutes!"

"Alex, come on, this is crazy," Richie said in a voice that made it clear he was digging in his heels.

"Sam, will you please get these people out of here?" Al begged.

"Richie, there's no time for this. You and Judy, you've got to come with me. We've got to get to higher ground."

The young man shook his head unhappily. But it was Judy who called the question. After looking between Richie and Alex several times in an agony of indecision, she suddenly jumped out of the car. For a moment, it looked as though she were about to jump right back in again as her feet sank into the cold water, but she gritted her teeth and held on to Sam's shoulder for support. "Richie, come on, let's go."

"Judy," he protested, hurt and shocked.

"Don't argue with me," she shot back with a fire that caused Sam to blink twice. "Look, this section of road is already flooded, and if there's more water coming, I don't want to be here when it gets here, and neither do you. Come on!"

He leapt from the car, growling his protest. For a moment, he hesitated, looking back at his vehicle with an expression usually reserved for a precious possession. "Look, maybe Alex can help me push—"

"Richie...."

"For pete's sake, you're in no condition to—"

"Richie!" she warned between clenched teeth.

Sam's attention was on Al who had reappeared next to him, worried eyes glued to the hand-link's display. "Okay, you've got to head this way—ah, wait. Yeah. No." Annoyed, he walloped the side of the remote. "Yeah. That way. Keep going that way, as high and as far as you can go."

Richie grabbed Sam's arm. "I'm telling you, this is crazy," he pleaded. "Your sister is pregnant, you can't ask her to stay out here in the rain, not in her condition. Help me push the car and...."

"There's no time for this, Sam!"

"There's no time for this, Richie. We've got to get out of here, *now*."

Richie made a disgusted noise and released him, but Sam's heart sank when he retreated to Judy's side and put his arm firmly around the shivering girl's shoulders. He wasn't about to move, at least not without considerable argument. Al was making urgent noises, one hand pointing frantically in the direction he wanted them to move. In desperation, Sam began to back away.

Judy stiffened, alarmed. "Alex?"

"Get back here, Alex," Richie warned.

"Follow me," Sam insisted, moving faster.

"Alex, I said get back—damn!"

Richie didn't react fast enough to keep Judy from going after her brother. As soon as she moved, Sam turned and ran, praying that the concern he'd seen on her face was strong enough to bring her running after him. From the way Richie shouted and cursed, he was sure that his gamble had paid off.

Hampered by deep mud and rain-slicked undergrowth, Sam ran as fast as he could, hoping that the pull on his calf muscles meant that his progress was uphill. But Alex's shorter stride let Richie catch him after only a few hundred yards.

"Kid, you're making me nuts," he gasped, one balled fist held up in silent threat. "What the hell are you trying to—?"

"Sam." His name, spoken ominously by the gaudy hologram that had suddenly appeared at his side, was a warning that his time had run out.

"Listen!" Sam said desperately. "Can't you hear it?"

"Hear what?" he demanded without attempting to listen.

"That rumble. You can hear it, can't you?"

He directed his plea to Judy, who, winded from the chase, tilted her head and held her breath, shushing Richie's protest with an impatient hand motion. She gasped suddenly. "He's right. I hear it."

"It's only thunder, then," Richie insisted, out of patience. "Judy, I've got to get you back to the car...."

"No." When Richie released his collar to turn his attention back to his girlfriend, Sam dodged past him, grabbing Judy's hand and clinging. He stared at her with pleading eyes. "You have to come with me."

He pulled away from her as far as he could without releasing her hand, silently urging her to run with him. Judy hesitated, neither resisting nor giving in. Torn, she looked at Sam, and then at Richie, who stood frozen, waiting for her decision.

Her eyes went back to Sam, suddenly resolute. "Come on," she breathed, moving quickly so that it was now Sam who was being dragged forward by the hand.

Half-expecting her to head back to the car, Richie yelped when she headed in the opposite direction, and scurried to catch up. "You're going to catch pneumonia out here!" he persisted. "Your parents are going to kill me for this!"

Judy paused only long enough to throw over her shoulder, "They're going to kill both of us anyway. Come on, hurry!"

Given no choice, Richie scrambled after them, in time to keep Judy from losing her footing on the slippery vegetation.

Al stayed ahead of them, incongruously unhampered by the rain and difficult climb as he frantically waved Sam forward. "Just a thousand yards, that's all you need!" he exhorted. "Come on, you can do it, as long as you do it fast!"

Judy suddenly stopped, straining against the grip Sam put on her arm to urge her forward. "It's getting louder."

The sound that Sam was trying to ignore had frozen her with fear; a low rumble, growing in intensity as it approached them. Already the ground on which they stood was covered with nearly an inch of water, which began to swirl and eddy in seeming anticipation.

"Keep moving," Sam insisted. "We can't let it catch us here, keep moving!"

She responded with a frantic gulp, then used Richie's arm to steady herself as she moved forward again, faster this time.

"Up here, Sam!"

He pulled up short at the sound of Al's distant voice. Squinting into the darkness, he barely made out Al standing about a hundred yards away and five feet up on the crest of a steep knoll. "You'll be safe up here, Ziggy guarantees it," he called down, waving them forward.

"Up there," Sam pointed when Judy and Richie gave him curious looks for the sudden pause in their flight. "We've got to get up there."

"That's a hell of a climb," Richie muttered dubiously.

Sam was spared having to begin or abruptly end another useless argument by a sudden surge of freezing water. A small, slow-moving wave dashed against them, nearly knocking them off their feet. In seconds, they were standing, barely, in knee-deep, fast-moving water.

"Let's go!" Richie yelled, grabbing Judy to pull her along with him in the direction of the knoll.

Sam groaned when he realized that to reach the base of the hill meant traversing a lower elevation for nearly twenty yards. Judy squealed and recoiled as each step sank them deeper into the rapidly rising water. Another wave swept past them, and only Richie's timely grab kept Sam on his feet. The water level was up to their hips, and Sam's waist by the time they had reached the base of the knoll.

The water's edge visibly crept up the hill, spurring Sam forward. With Al shouting encouragement from as little as twenty yards away, he prodded Richie forward, helping the young man to clamber free of the water so that he could in turn aid Judy out of the flood.

Shivering violently, the young woman turned and, digging her bare feet into the mud, extended a hand to Sam. "Come on, Alex, we're nearly there," she urged.

His fingers clutched hers just as the roar exploded. A wall of water burst through the trees, a boiling wave splitting in a dozen directions. Sam stared in horror as white foam, three feet high, rolled toward him. At that moment, Judy screamed her brother's name and tightened her grip on his hand. There was no time for Sam to get his footing, no way that Judy could pull him free without being overwhelmed herself, and no hope that Richie could save either of

them. His decision took less than a second, long enough to look up and make out the anguished expression on Al's face, high above him. Then he let go of Judy's hand.

She shrieked, the last sound he heard before the wave slammed into him. His head went down, his feet up, and for a terrifying eternity, he tumbled helplessly in the grip of the current. Water filled his nose and mouth as he frantically lashed out, desperately seeking air or something solid with which to anchor himself.

His arm snagged on something. Barely aware of the pain as the pummeling water tried to pry him away, he clung to what felt like a submerged tree branch. It swayed in his grip, threatening to shake him loose, but it gave him enough stability to determine direction. His head broke the surface only long enough for him to gasp in a lungful of air and to hear, somewhere distant, Alex's name being called by frantic voices. Then the tree branch snapped, sending him back into the relentless grip of the flood.

This time he managed to keep from tumbling head over heels, but any attempt he made to control or slow down was thwarted by the strong current. It sucked at him, pulling him down, and each time he managed to struggle back to the surface, but at an increasing cost to his strength. The water was winning.

"Put your hands up, Sam! Put your hands up!"

The voice was strong and clear, as though the speaker stood, impossibly, only a few inches away. The imperative behind the words was stronger still and Sam obeyed as best he could, using what strength was left him to lift his hands. The movement plunged his head underwater, for what he suddenly knew would be the last time.

His hands and wrists slammed into something solid. He clung, a sudden rush of hope giving him enough to pull his head free of the water. Alternately coughing and gasping air into his strained lungs, he blinked rapidly until his blurred vision cleared. He found himself at least five feet away from solid ground, clinging to a branch whose parent tree stood just above the water's edge. This branch stayed firm as he tried, hand over hand, to use it to reach the shore. But his weakened muscles betrayed him, and he barely kept his grip. It was all he could do to get his arms up and firmly anchored around the limb before he collapsed in exhaustion.

Telling himself, over and over again, that he couldn't let himself slip into sleep or unconsciousness had no effect. A hysterical female voice roused him slowly from a curious grey calm. Judy stood there, perilously close to the water's edge, one hand extended to him as she shouted Alex's name. Beneath him, the branch trembled, dipping abruptly and dangerously. Richie was the reason why; the young man was trying to reach him by carefully climbing out onto the limb.

"Sam, hang on!" Al stood near Judy, anxiety twisting every muscle of his holographic body. "Hang on, you gotta hang on!"

"Give me your hand," Richie urged when he'd gone as far as he dared. Any farther, and his weight would send the part of the branch to which Sam clung under water. "Come on, Alex, give me your hand."

He tried, but it was all he could do to lift his arm. Gritting his teeth, he shifted in an attempt to close the distance between his hand and Richie's. The movement dislodged him, and with a cry of alarm, he lost his grip altogether.

Judy shrieked as Richie reacted instantly, jumping off the branch into the rushing water. One hand firmly gripping the slippery tree limb, the young man grabbed Sam's arm. "I've got you," he soothed as Sam spat water from his mouth and nose. "I've got you. Can you hang on to my shoulders? On my back, yeah, like that. You can do it, come on, just hold on as tight as you can."

His arms felt like solid pieces of lead as he got them, somehow, around Richie's neck. He clung as tightly as he could as the young man clutched the branch and slowly began to make their way back to where Judy waited anxiously for them.

She braved the waters despite Richie's warning, plunging in to reach for her boyfriend's hand. He shook his head and twisted around, silently telling her to see to Alex first. She pried Sam away, encouraging him to use her for support as she dragged him free of the surging water.

He tried to get his feet under him, but weakened muscles and slippery mud defeated him. Judy pulled at him, but her own footing was threatened, and they both slipped, nearly going under water. Richie caught Sam just in time, steadying him long enough for Judy to establish a firm foothold. With Richie pushing and Judy pulling, Sam finally collapsed on the muddy ground.

"I'm okay," he mouthed in response to Judy's repeated, anxious demands. "I'm okay...."

"Sam, are you okay?" Al, his face ghastly pale, appeared just over Judy's shoulder.

With a cry, Judy abruptly left Sam's side, splashing back into the water to reach for Richie's hand. Al glanced their way, turned back to demand an answer from Sam again, then glanced back, eyes going wide. "Look out!" he shouted.

Sam twisted to look in the direction Al was staring, in time to see the cause for his friend's alarm. A huge, dark object tumbled in the frothing water, heading straight for Richie.

"Look out!" Sam cried, his hoarsened voice cracking. "Behind you!"

Judy shrieked. Richie, clinging to her hand, turned his head just as the object, an entire uprooted tree, swung in the grip of the current and slammed him across the back.

The impact bashed him against the tree branch he'd been using for support. Judy's scream propelled Sam painfully to his feet, just in time to keep her from plunging in after her boyfriend. He pushed her back, scrambling into the water himself.

Richie was conscious, barely. Enough, Sam saw with relief, to keep his grip on the sturdy branch and his head above water. The flood relentlessly crushed the floating tree trunk against Richie's back, wedging him between the two. Gritting his teeth, Sam pushed at the floater until it began to swing wide. Another bravura push, and it finally tumbled back into the current, freeing Richie enough for Sam to dive in after him, one hand firmly anchored on the life-saving tree limb.

Judy sobbed as she helped Sam pull Richie from the water. The young man collapsed on the ground, gasping and moaning in pain. Making sure that Sam was also out of the water and out of danger, she spared him a fierce hug and heartfelt kiss on the cheek before dropping to her knees in the mud at Richie's side.

He responded, albeit groggily, to her pleas for reassurance that he was all right, and encouraged her embrace despite his sharp complaint about the pain in his back.

"He's okay, Sam," Al exulted, practically dancing with relief. "They're both okay. You're all okay. You *are* okay, aren't you?"

He looked up at the man's suddenly anxious face and managed a weary smile. "If they are, then I guess I am too."



Sam took a long pull on the straw, draining the last of his fruit juice as he watched Al intently. His friend hovered in the doorway, alternately looking down the hospital corridor and checking his hand-link's display. Wincing, grimaces and an occasional smile were Sam's only clue to the progress of the discussion taking place in the waiting area at the end of the hallway.

Leaning out again, Al lifted a hand suddenly. "They're getting reasonable!" he declared. "I think Dad's quit harping about Yale, anyway."

"You know, this would be a lot easier if I just go out there and..."

"No, no, no, you know perfectly well they won't talk in front of you. You're the child," he said, the last word a meaningful drawl.

Sam sighed, leaning back against the pillows Judy had carefully arranged for him. Earlier that morning, she'd snuck out of her hospital room to visit the one he and Richie shared. They'd barely had time to express relief at the relatively good condition they all seemed to be in before Judy and Alex's parents arrived, followed minutes later by Richie's folks. Chaos resulted, causing a nurse to sternly banish them from the room. Someone had shouted something about continuing the discussion in the cafeteria, but apparently they had made it no farther than the elevators.

"This is good," Al decided. "Mama Murphy's finally stopped crying, and Papa Kramer isn't trying to punch holes in the wall anymore. Ooo—now that's very promising."

"What?" Sam demanded, exasperated.

"Every time their parents try to separate them, Richie and Judy manage to thwart them." Al nodded, satisfied. "They're standing together, Sam. I mean, really together."

Sam released a long sigh of relief. He'd been worried when Judy and Richie seemed to be having difficulty meeting each other's eyes this morning, even as they were laughing nervously over their close call. But he'd been heartened when Richie grabbed and clung to Judy's hand the moment that overwrought parents had descended on them. If they were still side by side despite the barrage of high emotion being directed at them, then Sam realized that he needn't worry about them at all.

Al made an excited sound, almost a suppressed cheer. "Mama Kramer's hugging Judy, and Papa Murphy is shaking Richie's hand!" Reluctantly, he tore his eyes from the scene long enough to punch a new query into the hand-link. "It's all good news, Sam. Get this: Richie doesn't go MIA after all."

"What happened?"

"Apparently, that little back injury he suffered last night, the one that's not so serious right now? He aggravates it during basic training, just enough to keep him out of active duty. He sticks with the Army, though, and spends twenty years as a career paper shuffler stateside. Oh, and when he retires, he gets accepted to Yale on the G.I. bill and—aw, this is great—Judy becomes a successful free-lance writer, after getting her own degree in Liberal Arts from the University of Virginia."

"And their baby?"

Al smiled broadly. "It's a boy. He and daddy enter the freshmen class at Yale together, can you beat that?"

"That's great," Sam said sincerely. "So why haven't I leaped yet?"

"Maybe after you're discharged," Al shrugged.

Al had a point. He remembered very little after falling into an exhausted sleep right there on the muddy knoll. Judy and Richie helped fill in the pieces for him. Ann-Marie, upon learning about the bridge, had contacted the police, who had in turn dispatched an emergency rescue team to search for them. It was just as well that he didn't recall much of his hypothermia treatment ordeal, and it was probably true that he was still here to complete Alex's recovery.

"You know, those two were great out there last night," Al said, moving to the side of Sam's bed. "For a couple of kids, I mean. They didn't panic or lose their heads, they just jumped right in and did what they had to do..."

His voice faltered, as though he'd been distracted by a sudden, disturbing thought, leaving the rest of the sentence to finish on auto-pilot. For a moment, he stared down at the monitor in his hand, frowning. Then, suddenly,

he fixed Sam with a fierce glare, pointing with his cigar. "What was that all about last night? You deliberately let go of that girl's hand, didn't you? She could have pulled you out, you know. What the hell were you thinking?"

Taken aback by the passion in Al's voice, Sam blinked and spread his hands apologetically. "Al, I swear, it was an accident," he lied. "I slipped. No, I did, really."

Unconvinced, Al nevertheless grudgingly accepted with a terse nod. "Well, it was too close," he muttered gracelessly.

"Well, this may or may not be a comfort to you, but I wouldn't have made it without you, Al."

The man smiled his thanks, then immediately frowned again. "What did I do?"

"What did you do?" Sam laughed shortly. "You told me to put my hands up so I could grab that branch."

Al's confusion deepened. "I didn't do that."

"Of course you did." Sam's confidence faltered. "Didn't you?"

"I didn't do that," he repeated ominously. "Sam, I had no idea where you were until those kids found you."

"If you didn't, then...?"

Al pointed to the door, tacitly suggesting Judy or Richie, but Sam shook his head. "You...whoever it was...called me Sam."

Al exhaled noisily, eyes flicking up. Sam opened his mouth in instinctive protest, then shut it again. For once, there was simply nothing left to say, and it was obvious from Al's knowing smile that he knew it as well.

"Hey, buddy."

Sam looked up as Richie and Judy entered the room, hand in hand. Both were still in their hospital issue robes, and Judy had hers clutched tightly closed with her free hand. Her face was pale, her eyes red-rimmed, but there was a genuine smile on her face as she sat in the chair by the side of Sam's bed. Richie stood behind her, one hand resting comfortably on her shoulder.

"Hi," Sam greeted them, sitting up straighter. "Um...how'd it go?"

They exchanged glances and a nervous laugh. "The head nurse chased them off the floor," Judy told him, "so they went down to the cafeteria to plan the wedding."

"You're going to get married, that's great," Sam said, watching their reactions carefully.

More nervous glances, but their tremulous smiles were genuine. "Yeah, looks like," Richie said. "You're kinda on the short side, kid, but I guess you'll make an okay usher."

Judy leaned over, unexpectedly giving Sam a kiss on the cheek. "But remember—you'll always be *my* best man," she whispered with a soft laugh. "Thanks, Alex."

A nurse bustled in, interrupting them with her demand for Sam's cooperation. He submitted resignedly to having his temperature and blood pressure taken for the dozenth time that morning, all the while glaring at Al who took advantage of his predicament by making his usual lascivious remarks about the nurse's obvious charms.

By the time the woman pronounced him remarkably fit and left, completely unaware of the praise showered on her by an appreciative hologram from the future, Judy and Richie had moved to sit on the the other bed, and were deep in earnest conversation. Richie held her hand between both of his in his lap, and it seemed to Sam that his eyes as well as his heart were only for her. She had no trouble meeting his gaze anymore, and her soft laugh melted lines of stress from her face. Al followed Sam's gaze and smiled warmly as he puffed on his cigar. "They're gonna be okay, Sam," he pronounced.

"So what do you want to name the baby?" they heard Richie whisper to her, their heads together in a conspiratorial huddle.

"I don't know," she demurred with a shrug. "If it's a girl, we could name her after both grandmothers, I guess."

He tilted his head in casual approval. "And if it's a boy?"

"Well..." She chewed her lip for a moment. "This is going to sound a little silly, maybe, but—well, for some reason, I like the name...Sam."

Al's eyebrows shot up in surprised delight as he pointed wordlessly at them. Open-mouthed, Sam stared at them as Richie laughed and agreed with her: "Okay. Samuel Alexander, it is."

With a flourish, Al took the cigar out of his mouth to declare, "Sam—I do believe that is your cue."

He never found out whether his grand announcement was ever heard, for the only person who could have heard it was already gone.