

## Carousel Horses

by Sheila Paulson

*They faced each other across a gulf of difference. "I want to stay with you," Tommy insisted, clutching the gilt reins in one grubby fist. "I want to stay here forever and be like you."*

*"No, Tommy," Sable told him in the voice that only children could hear. "You are human and you have a life before you. Go and live that life."*

*"No." Tommy knuckled his reddened eyes. "I love you, Sable. I want to stay. If I wish hard enough, I will become like you. You're so beautiful." He traced the flowing painted mane, ran his fingers down the broad forehead to the flaring nostrils. His eyes followed the smooth line of flank, the elaborately tooled saddle, the proudly raised hoof.*

*"And you are free," Sable replied. "I may be lovely to look at, but my life is bound to the carousel, racing around and around in a neverending circle. If you choose to become like me, you will be bound as I am. If you stay as you are, the entire world is waiting for you. Don't turn your back on the world, Tommy."*

*The child flung his arms around the glossy painted neck. "But I love you, Sable. If I don't stay, I'll grow up--and we'll never be able to talk again."*

*"There are others to listen to your dreams," Sable told the child, his heart breaking. "Find them. Make them listen. Be free. If I can give you nothing else, let me give you that."*

*Tommy sobbed once, then he let go. "Do I have to go, Sable?"*

*"No. No one will make you go. Only you can decide. But decide well, Tommy, because it will be for always."*

*Tommy looked at Sable, then he looked away, at the world beyond the magical carousel. It looked big and frightening--but Sable was right. It was free. "I guess I have to stay me," he said unhappily.*

*"It won't always be this hard," Sable reassured him. "Sometimes, it will be glorious." While Tommy watched sadly, Sable seemed to stiffen, and the life went out of the painted features.*

*Tommy hugged the horse once more, then, he turned with careful courage and went out into the world and freedom."*

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Sam Beckett put down the typed paper and frowned. The tale was not terribly subtle and it needed work, but he found a grain of truth in it that touched him. Looking around the small office, Sam observed a stack of similar papers on the desk before him, some graded, some not. Was he an English teacher this time around? Curiously, he turned a name plate around and read, "Bill Carmichael, Department of English." That was a start. Since he'd started Quantum Leaping, he'd always tried to identify himself as quickly as possible when he assumed a new identity.

Noting a mirror on the back of the door, he got up to look at his new face. Carmichael was a dark haired man around 40 with a mustache and deep-set blue eyes. He managed to *look* like a professor with little effort, and he must like his work, for he wore none of the harrassed look Sam had occasionally seen on the faces of high school teachers who had to deal with modern teens.

Returning to his desk, he looked at the stack of stories again. The Carousel paper was written by a student named James Haley. Carmichael had given it an "A" and had written, "Keep it up, Jimmy," under the grade.

According to Carmichael's watch, it was just past 4:30. Time to go home--if he could find out where home was.

A knock on the door made him look up as a young girl with a punk haircut and dancing blue eyes poked her head in. "Finished, Dad?"

"Just about," Sam replied. "Let me sort these out."

Entering, she dropped an armload of books on the corner of the desk, and flung herself into the chair across from Sam. "God, this was a long week. Miss Matheson wants our chem assignments first thing on Monday. I swear, Dad, she's a hag. Homecoming weekend and she wants us to do chemistry. I bet you didn't give a big assignment."

"I don't think so," Sam managed.

"Will you help me with the chem assignment?"

"I'm an English teacher," Sam reminded her.

"But you studied chemistry in school, didn't you?"

"Yes, but it's been awhile since I was a student." It was always hard to deal with someone whose name he didn't know, and this outgoing girl with the jagged hair and the purple vest would be the first to notice if Sam slipped out of character.

"Christy? Is your dad going to drive you home?" Another girl, this one darkly pretty, paused in the doorway.

*Thank you*, Sam thought. At least he wouldn't be completely at a loss for words this time around.

Christy nodded. "Need a lift, Neets?"

Sam wondered what kind of a name that was, and was spared the necessity of addressing the girl when she said, "Kevin's taking me. Where's Jimmy tonight?"

"Football practice," replied Christy with a grimace. "After all, tomorrow's Homecoming."

Neets grimaced in return, waved a casual hand at Sam and said, "Good night, Mr. Carmichael. Are you coming to the game?"

Sam nodded. "Maybe I'll see you there."

When the other girl had gone, Christy started to tidy Sam's desk maternally. "Come on, Dad. You'll be here all night if I don't drag you away. Besides, I'm making my special goulash tonight." She handed him a tweed jacket. "It's Friday night. Let's blow this pop stand."

As Sam slid into it, she picked up the top report. "Jimmy's paper," she breathed. "Another 'A'."

"It's a good paper," Sam replied, taking it away from her. From the pride in her tone, Jimmy must be Christy's boyfriend.

"The Carousel?" Christy read. "What's it about, Dad?"

"It's his paper. If he wants you to read it, he'll show it to you." Sam gathered up her books and a briefcase that was sitting beside the desk. "I'm ready."

She took the books from him. "Chemistry," she grimaced and led the way out of the office.

Sam followed her to an '85 Ford Escort. Now, how to get home without looking like an idiot? An idea occurred. "Want to drive?"

"Are you serious? You hardly ever let me drive." She snatched the proffered keys and darted into the driver's seat before he could change his mind.

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Christy babbled all the way home, about chemistry and football and Jimmy Haley, and Sam let her talk, encouraging her when she fell silent. From her ramblings, Sam realized they were a two member household. Something about her 'two of us against the world' attitude conveyed that point. At least Sam didn't have to deal with a wife, though playing a single parent wouldn't be easy. He wondered why he was here.

They lived in a sprawling old house that had been built around the turn of the century for a much larger family than him and Christy. Liking the wide porch that ran all the way across the front of the house, Sam didn't at first notice the boy slumped in the porch swing. When he rose, his posture suggested uneasiness and misery, and Christy squeaked, "Jimmy!"

"Hi, Mr. Carmichael," Jimmy said, avoiding Sam's eyes. "Hi, Christy."

"Why aren't you at practice?" Christy demanded, darting forward and grabbing his arm.

"Because I don't want to play." He sounded bold and defiant and melodramatic. "I'm tired of going in circles."

Recognizing the allusion to the carousel story, Sam led him back to the porch swing and sat down beside him, turning to face him. "Take your books in, Christy," he said. "And start dinner. Make enough for Jimmy."

Her eyes wide, she went without arguing, though her footsteps lagged and she looked back over her shoulder until the door closed between them.

"What's this about, Jimmy?" Sam tried to sound sympathetic. He suspected the real Bill Carmichael knew a lot more about Jimmy than Christy realized, and not just because Jimmy had not protested her exclusion from the conversation.

"Mr. Carmichael, I'm going to run away from home."

Sam realized the flat defiance in Jimmy's voice was a test. This could be difficult.

"Tell me about it, Jimmy," he urged gently.

A sudden movement behind the boy announced the arrival of Al, the project observer. Frowning a little, Al studied Jimmy's bent head, then he circled the porch swing and looked at his face. Sam suspected he already knew about Jimmy, that the boy was the reason for his leap. He wished he could question Al before he went much further. But having encouraged Jimmy to talk, he couldn't stop him now. He shot a questioning look at the hologram.

"Sam, this kid needs help," Al burst out. "Listen to him."

*Listen to him? I couldn't encourage a runaway, not when I was a teacher at his school. I was probably here to talk him out of running away. Al was right, he needed help. He needed someone to listen and understand whatever his problem was and help him resolve it. I nodded at Al and turned back to Jimmy.*

"I've had enough, Mr. Carmichael," the student cried. "Football, classes, work in the store, the same things over and over. You read my paper. That's what it's like, Sable going round in circles. I'm not getting anywhere. I'll never get anywhere."

It had dawned on Sam already that the assignment had become personal for Jimmy, but he hadn't realized just how personal. "I know it seems that way sometimes," Sam began carefully. "It feels like circumstances have slipped out of our hands and we can't control our own lives. It's much worse while you're still in school, at the mercy of parents and teachers. But it doesn't always stay like that."

Al made a faintly impatient sound. "This kid doesn't want platitudes, Sam, he's got a real problem."

"But that's no answer," Sam continued as Jimmy's face closed away from him, proving Al right. "And it doesn't help you now. You're a good student, and on the football team. Christy would probably wring my neck if she heard me, but you mean a lot to her."

Jimmy smiled faintly. "Christy's the one bright spot in this whole mess, Mr. Carmichael. But she's just a kid. She's happy. I don't think anybody who's happy can really understand. Christy is just too inexperienced, and I can't burden her with it."

"Then burden me," Sam encouraged. "Not that it's a burden to listen to you, Jimmy. What is it? You've got a bright future in front of you."

"Future," Jimmy scoffed. "I don't have any future and you know it."

"Your writing..." Sam began.

"Writing!" he spat and turned away. "What writing? It's all right when it's schoolwork, but it's stupid stuff, all of it."

"That paper I read today is a long way from stupid stuff," Sam argued.

"My dad says real men don't write stories."

"Some people feel that way," Sam replied. "But if men didn't write stories, there'd have been no Hemingway, no Faulkner, no James Joyce. No Shakespeare."

"I can't write like that," Jimmy mumbled.

"Not yet, no. You don't have the background, the life experience. But you've got a spark of something that could turn into a real gift."

A momentary glow lit Jimmy's eyes. Then he shook his head. "No. Dad says he doesn't want any son of his being one of those weird intellectuals. I've got a job at the plant as soon as I get out of high school. Making furniture." He added quickly, "It's an honest craft. I'd be doing something worthwhile," as if he had tried long and hard to believe it.

"But what about college, Jimmy? Is it money?" Sam cast an enquiring look at Al, who spread his hands helplessly.

"Keep listening, Sam. He needs to say it."

"No," Jimmy continued. "I've been offered a scholarship. It's mostly because of football, and I like football. But *he* likes football. If I took it, it would only mean I was validating his values, and I can't. He might let me go to college, to play football, though he would rather I went into the business. But he won't let me major in English."

"Jimmy, in a few years, you'll be an adult and you can do whatever you like."

"Ah, Sam, that's no answer," Al protested and Sam shot him a helpless look, knowing that but not sure what was expected yet.

"Jimmy, if you like, I could talk to your father. Would he listen?"

"To an English teacher?" Jimmy grimaced expressively. "You couldn't, Mr. Carmichael. He would never listen to you. If Coach Green talked to him, he *might* listen, but Coach Green doesn't care about anything but how far I can throw a pass." He sagged into a small, miserable heap and wouldn't meet Sam's eyes.

"I want to talk to your father anyway," Sam insisted. "You're not happy. Anyone can see that. He might have different dreams than you have, but fathers do sometimes. He can't live your life, though he might try."

"Try," scoffed Jimmy, his face bitterly sarcastic. He rose uneasily and hovered on the edge of running.

"Jimmy, wait. I know you're upset, but don't decide tonight. I know from experience that decisions made

when you're upset are usually the wrong ones. Let me drive you home and talk to your dad."

Hopelessness ran across Jimmy's face. "He won't listen."

Al's expressive grimace and Jimmy's despair struck a spark in Sam and he said gently, "Jimmy, does he...beat you?"

The boy shook his head. "No. He used to spank me when I was little, but he hasn't even done that in years. He doesn't *need* to spank me."

"There are other kinds of abuse, Sam," Al said darkly. "I know."

Before Sam could do more than stare at Al in shock, Jimmy began edging toward the steps. "You don't understand, Mr. Carmichael. I know you mean well." He shrugged then, giving up abruptly. "Oh, hell. Talk to him, then. You'll see."

"Go in and tell Christy to hold dinner and I'll run you home."

As soon as the boy entered the house, Sam spun on Al again. "What's this all about, Al?"

"I haven't got it all yet, Sam. It's September, 1986 and you're in Little Falls, Wisconsin. You're here to help Jimmy. That kid's on the verge of an explosion. Carmichael doesn't remember much of anything, but he told me to help Jimmy. That much survived the Swiss cheese process. That's an abused kid, Sam."

"But he says his father never hits him--do you think he was covering it up, Al?"

"Nah. His dad doesn't beat him. He's on the football team. Somebody'd notice bruises in the locker room if he had any. There're other kinds of abuse, Sam, and sometimes they're even worse than fists."

"What do you mean?" Sam wasn't sure if his memory was blocking out Al's answers or if he'd never known. He did know about abuse, the forms it could take. His sister had experienced it as had a girl in one of his previous leaps. But they'd had the marks to prove it. Yet sometimes Jimmy flinched as if words could hurt him more than blows. "Tell me, Al," Sam insisted.

"That boy's father has expectations that Jimmy's never going to fill," Al said seriously. "And he lets Jimmy know it every chance he gets. I bet you anything, Sam, that Jimmy's a straight A student. He's quarterback on the football team and probably homecoming king. He overcompensates like mad and does everything he does 110%."

"I got that impression already."

"And why, Sam? Because no matter how much he does, his father's not satisfied. He can never live up to that ideal, so it gets to be like beating his head against a wall. Everything he does is wrong. His father finds fault with it all. When he tries to please him, his father ignores the effort. When he makes a little mistake it gets magnified out of proportion. I betcha, Sam. You just watch his dad when you take him home and see if I'm right."

Sam looked at Al seriously. "How do you know so much about this? You grew up in an orphanage."

"Doesn't make me ignorant, Sam," Al said brightly. "Here he comes."

Jimmy returned, picked up his books and braced his shoulders as if standing before a firing squad. Maybe Al was right. He looked like he'd rather die than go home.

Jimmy was silent in the car except to point out directions, and Sam was glad. He had nothing more than platitudes to offer Jimmy as yet. He was still feeling his way, and he couldn't help wondering if Jimmy's dad as a big, bluff macho type who couldn't understand a son who wanted to write stories. Misunderstandings could grow out of such differences until the rift became too wide to see across, let alone attempt to bridge.

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The boy's father didn't match Sam's preconceptions at all. He wasn't big and macho. He was small and wiry with a taut face and intense dark eyes, and when Jimmy appeared cautiously, he all but leaped at him and grabbed him by the arms.

"Where the hell have you been, boy? Your mother's been worried sick. Bob Green called a little while ago and said you'd skipped practice. You sick, boy? Lousy timing, right before the big game." He didn't sound like a monster, at least not yet.

Jimmy flinched at the touch, though Sam could tell it wasn't tight enough to hurt. "No, I'm not sick, Dad. I--I just didn't go to practice."

"Oh, you didn't go to practice?" Haley's face darkened with sarcasm. "I put out money for football for you and you throw it away. Why didn't you go to practice? Is that too much to ask?"

"Jimmy's feeling a lot of pressure," Sam explained, stepping forward. "I'm Bill Carmichael, his English teacher."

"His English teacher? Rules say he has to take English--I don't want any son of mine being illiterate. But it doesn't say you've got any right to interfere between me and my son."

"I'm not trying to interfere, Mr. Haley. I'm trying to help Jimmy. Sometimes a third person can make it easier to talk."

"Is that it? Or are you still encouraging him to turn into a writer? You think he can support himself as a writer? Not a chance? Not for years, if ever. I want him to have something solid behind him, something real. Telling stories is for kids and women. Not for men."

"A great many men have proven you wrong," Sam told him quietly. "Do you read much? What about Louis L'Amour. Zane Grey? Robert Ludlum?" He drew a blank each time and gave it up as a bad job. "There's no guarantee Jimmy will ever be a successful writer, and most of them have other jobs in the beginning until they can make it on their own. But the background he can get in a good college would help him when the time comes."

"Waste of time, when he's going to work in my factory when he gets out of school, that's if the pros don't want him."

"The pros?" Jimmy echoed in disbelief. "I'm good, but I'll never be good enough for the pros."

"Not with that kind of defeatist attitude, you won't. You have to tell yourself every day that you can do it. You can do it. You can do it." He patted Jimmy on the shoulder. Jimmy flinched. "I've seen you do things because you tried. Your grades. You can work if you don't let yourself get tied up with telling stories."

"But..." Jimmy looked perplexed.

A thin faced woman appeared in the doorway and made a vaguely polite welcoming gesture at Sam. Her husband saw her and waved a curt hand. "Not now, Lillian. I'm busy."

"I'm sorry, Jack. Listen to your father, James." She looked once at her son, her eyes dark and unreadable, then she turned and left the room.

Haley took a deep breath and rose to his full height, balancing for a moment on his toes, probably in an automatic attempt to look taller. "Now get over there and finish practice. I told Coach Green you'd come in and work out as soon as you got home. You're not that late. I'll drive you over."

"No."

"No?" Haley stared at Jimmy in disbelief. "Are you actually defying me?"

"No, Dad. I don't mean to defy you. I never wanted to play football. I just want to write. But you never listened to me. You wouldn't try to understand."

Bolstered by Sam's presence, he went on quickly, trying to explain how hard he'd worked to please his father. "But that can't work," he finished. "Because no matter how hard I try, I'm not you. I'm me. I'll have to do it my way some day."

"Some day when you're not living under my roof and wearing the clothes I buy you and eating the food I provide," Haley snapped. "You've always disappointed me, boy. You'll break your mother's heart when she hears this. I'm your father and I tell you right now, you're going to football practice and you're playing in tomorrow's game."

"Football's not a requirement," Sam insisted. "It's not something necessary to graduate. I think Jimmy's old enough to decide for himself whether he wants to play."

"And old enough to run around with that jailbait daughter of yours, tempting my boy away from--"

"That's not true," Jimmy flashed, driven still closer to the breaking point. "Christy's not like that. If you'd just meet her, you'd see."

"I don't want you seeing her any more. She interferes. She and her father are cut from the same cloth. You're no longer welcome in my home, Carmichael. Come on, Jimmy, we're going to practice."

Sam found himself on the steps moving toward his car. He couldn't push it any further yet, and while he didn't approve of Haley's attitude and thought his treatment of Jimmy wrong, he couldn't understand what might be done to change the situation. In the eyes of the law, Haley had done no wrong. Sam couldn't report him for child abuse. But the hopeless despair in Jimmy's eyes as his father steered him to the station wagon made Sam resolve to do something.

"Was it bad, Sam?" Al appeared beside him in the passenger seat.

"Yes, but I'm not sure how. Jimmy's father and Jimmy don't see eye to eye, but Jimmy will be free in a couple of years."

"Will he, Sam? Do you think the old man will ever let go?"

"How do you know so much about this anyway, Al?" Sam asked suspiciously.

Al waved a dismissive hand. "Never mind that, Sam. You hear a lot of stories in an orphanage. I knew a kid like Jimmy once. But that's not the point. Ziggy's been working on this and he's got it pinned down. It's a lot worse than I thought."

"You mean Jimmy's father beats him?" Sam asked unhappily.

"No. Worse, Sam. Tomorrow night, after the big game, Jack Haley, Jimmy's father, is found murdered. Jimmy ran, Sam. They said he did it."

Jimmy? Commit murder? Oh, come on, Al."

"He was arrested for it, Sam. He was tried and convicted and he's serving a prison term today. Sometimes, when people push you hard enough and long enough, the only solution is to push back. That kid's close to the breaking point, Sam. He's a big explosion waiting for somebody to hit the detonator."

"I know. But what can I do, Al? I've been forbidden the house. I can't go back there."

"Maybe you should have encouraged Jimmy to run away."

"Wait a minute, Al. You're assuming that Jimmy really did kill his father. Ziggy says he ran. Maybe it was because he ran that they suspected him. Maybe someone broke in and killed Jack Haley while he was gone."

"Possible, Sam. Except for one thing."

"What thing?" Sam was certain he wouldn't like the answer.

Al looked at him sadly. "Jimmy confessed."

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Christy hung up the phone when Sam came in. "That was Anita--you know, Neets, from school. She said Jimmy didn't go to practice and everybody's having fits. Was his dad mad?"

"Pretty mad," Sam admitted. "What do you know about all this, Christy?"

"Just a little. Come on and eat. I've kept everything warm." She waved him into the dining room and into a chair and in a moment she was back with a bowl of goulash and a plate of garlic bread. "Start in and I'll get the salad," she urged, and Sam dished up a plate for himself.

"Ah, that looks good, Sam," Al remarked, bending over the table. "I bet it smells as good as it looks, too."

"No goulash for you," Sam told him with a grin.

"Yeah, ain't it the pits."

"What did you say?" Christy returned with two small bowls of salad, crispy lettuce and tomatoes and grated eggs.

"I said it looks wonderful," Sam told her. "You're a great cook."

"And I'll make some man a wonderful wife?" She made a face at him as she poured Italian dressing on her salad. "That's old fashioned, Dad. We'll share the housework when I'm married, just like you and I do."

Sam grinned at her. "You said it, not me. Cooking's a useful thing to know."

"Says the vending machine king," muttered Al irrepressibly. "Never took time away from your work to perfect the art."

"I'm a good cook," Sam told Al. "I learned when I was a kid."

"Back on the farm. I know. You've told me a million times," Al groused, and Christy nearly echoed him.

"On the farm. That's what you said. Grandma must have been a world class cook."

"Grandma was a chef," Sam corrected her. So he and Bill Carmichael had one thing in common.

"What about Jimmy, Christy? I probably shouldn't be talking to you about him, but you know him better than I do. Does he have a lot of trouble at home?"

"Well, not the kind of trouble you think of when somebody talks about bad parents, not really," she said thoughtfully, around a mouthful of lettuce.

"Chew with your mouth closed," Sam muttered automatically in his best parental manner.

She stuck out her tongue at him. It was not a pretty sight. But she finished chewing obediently before she continued. "Jimmy's dad doesn't understand him at all. I know kids always say grownups don't understand us. I say it, too. But most kids don't really mean it, other than the fact that we want different things than our parents do."

"But it's different with Jimmy?" Sam persisted.

"A lot different. For instance, Jimmy's best friend at school is Brian Willis."

Sam looked at her blankly.

"Dad, you know Brian; he's in your 4th period lit class. Brian Willis."

"Oh, Brian," Sam said vaguely. "And Jack Haley doesn't like that?"

"I don't think you even like it. Dad," she reminded him impatiently, "Brian's gay."

"Jimmy isn't," Sam pointed out. "Or he wouldn't be dating you."

"Of course he's not, but you know how some people are. Guilty by association. If Brian's gay, some people will think Jimmy is, even if he's dating me and is the football team's star quarterback. Mr. Haley lives in the dark ages."

"There's no reason why Jimmy and Brian can't be friends. They're both interested in English."

"That's *why* they're friends, because they've got something in common. But some people are real jerks about it." She glowered at the invisible bigots. "Brian's a great guy, one of the nicest kids at school. But some of them razz him and treat him nasty. Honestly, Dad, he isn't even in a relationship. He just knows he's gay and isn't ashamed of it. I think that's pretty decent. Why do people have to get on his case just because he's different?"

"I like this girl, Sam," Al announced. "She's got a good attitude. Her dad must be a pretty decent guy."

"I hope you hold onto that attitude, Christy," Sam told her seriously. "Don't be afraid of people just because they're different. If we weren't all different, it would be a very dull world. But tell me about Jimmy now. Someone I know, someone whose opinions I value, says that Jimmy is an abused child, though not physically. Do you think that's true?"

Plainly Christy had never considered it in those terms before, and she opened her mouth to make a sharp denial only to gasp and fall silent. "Maybe," she said in a small voice. "Maybe it's abuse to be told you're worthless so often you start believing it. Maybe it's abuse to be given a set of impossible expectations and to force yourself to live up to them when you never can. His dad makes sly little digs at him all the time. He covers them up but if you pay attention, you start to get mad. I said he wasn't being fair to Jimmy and he heard about it. He's had it in for me ever since. He's always telling Jimmy I'm not worth his time, and that I...fool around. And I don't," she burst out. "It isn't that I don't want to. Jimmy and I--" she dropped her eyes to her plate. "We've come close a couple of times. But I'm only seventeen. How do I know what I'm feeling is real? Especially when I know Jimmy's more than a little messed up. I want him to--" She broke off. "Am I embarrassing you, Dad?"

"A little," Sam admitted. "But I'd rather you talk to me than keep things from me."

"That's what I thought. I've been thinking about it, Dad. I decided that it wasn't right because Jimmy needs love so badly and I don't want to be a lifeline. I'll be there for him and I do love him, but..."

"I understand, Christy, and I think you're right. Jimmy's so mixed up now that any more complications would be too much for him to handle. I'm not just saying that because I want to protect you, either. I'm saying it because it's true."

"I know." She smiled at him. "I do love you, Dad. Anita's mother would have kittens if Neets tried to talk to her like this."

Sam wasn't surprised. He tried to picture the expressions on his own parents' faces if he'd come to them with something like this when he was seventeen.

Al was listening intently, but saying very little, and Sam turned suddenly to look at him. Al's eyes were dark and brooding. Something was obviously bothering him. This leap was bringing something back for him, something he didn't want to remember. Something in the orphanage, probably. Al had hated it there enough to run away a couple of times, but Sam couldn't remember the details, if he had ever known them.

Now, feeling Sam's eyes on him, Al looked up, grinned brightly, and waved his cigar. "Go on," he said sweetly. "I'm enjoying this. Sam Beckett's guide to teen sexuality. The blind leading the blind."

Sam glared at him but could say nothing while Christy was there.

"What will Coach Green do about Jimmy, do you think?" he asked.

"I don't know. You know him better than me. But I think he'll let Jimmy play. He's not a bad guy, and Jimmy likes him. When he came in before you took him home, he said one of the worst things was disappointing Coach Green."

That gave Sam some hope. He resolved to phone the man after dinner.

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Apparently the house rule was that whoever made dinner cleaned up after it, giving them alternate free nights. Once Christy had lugged the dirty plates into the kitchen, Sam turned to his friend. "Now what, Al? I feel so helpless here. There's got to be something I can do."

"Talk to the kid's coach, first of all."

"I will. But I can't see Jimmy as a murderer."

"Can't you, Sam? Everybody can be pushed past their limits. Nobody ever said it was premeditated murder. I'm not sure I can see him doing that either. But in the heat of the moment, even you could kill somebody."

Sam winced. Since he'd started leaping he'd already been forced to kill, and though it had never been murder, it had never stopped hurting either. His first victim had told him it would only get easier, but while the act did, in a way, living with it didn't. Sam rarely had much time for quiet introspection, but that was good, because there were more dark memories than he'd like to remember.

Looking at Al now he saw a similar look in his friend's eyes and wondered how many people Al had been forced to kill in his life. Some of them were faceless, from the war, but there was too much knowledge in Al's expression. He understood.

"Right now Jimmy's the one who matters. You're right about him, I think. Christy sees it, too. I guess I just can't understand how a father could treat his son that way."

"Not everyone's as lucky as you were with your dad, Sam," Al told him flatly.

"I know that. But I can't help thinking that Jack Haley simply doesn't understand and is one of those people who can't see past his own viewpoint."

"Even so, Sam, Jimmy's suffering from it, and it's pushing him over the edge. You've got to help him."

"I know. But what do I do?" He looked at Al helplessly. "Haley won't let me in his house, and he certainly won't listen to me elsewhere. Give me a clue here, Al. You're the one who understands it." As soon as he said it, he knew it was true. Al's experience wasn't secondhand. He'd been through something like Jimmy had already and Sam must have been blind not to realize it. In Jimmy's overcompensation, his doing everything to the hilt was a faint echo of Al's persistent drive.

"Oh, Al," he breathed. "God, I'm tramping around with heavy boots. If you want me to back off..."

But Al squared his shoulders much the same way Jimmy had before he faced his father. "No, Sam. Maybe it will make you understand. I don't know if you can otherwise. You came from a happy home. You had a family who loved you. Jimmy doesn't have that. His father probably doesn't even love himself."

Sam suspected that was true. He was probably pushing Jimmy to become everything he'd wanted to be, everything he'd tried--and failed. The dreams of Jack Haley would live again in his son--and if Jimmy couldn't live up to that impossible standard, then Jack Haley would make sure he knew he was worthless.

Sam looked back on what he remembered of a normal happy childhood and felt a kind of guilt for having it when others didn't. "What should I do, Al?" he asked helplessly.

Al shook his head. "You have to stop him, Sam."

"What did you do?"

Al hesitated, and for a minute, Sam thought he would refuse to answer. Then he turned his back on Sam and started pacing up and down. "Ah, Sam, it was a long time ago. I was just fourteen, three years younger than Jimmy. It was rough in the orphanage. But there was one person the kids all loved. He was a *priest*, Sam," Al burst out as if he still felt the betrayal. "Everybody loved him and he loved them all--except me. No matter what I did, it was never enough for him. I couldn't please him, not when I got the best grades in the whole place. I was too small for football and basketball." He grimaced. "He used to call me the runt of the litter--when no one was listening. If anyone was around, it was a joke--and everybody thought it was funny, except for me."

Sam winced. This was worse than he had thought.

"I went out for boxing," continued Al, still avoiding Sam's eyes. "And I was good at it, Sam. He used to push too hard. We'd practice and he'd keep on coming. I was just a kid. He'd make it look like an accident when he hit me, like he'd mistaken the distance and hadn't quite pulled his punch. Never anything that would really show, either.

"I think it was a kind of power trip. Maybe he knew I didn't buy all the sweetness and light he was dishing out to the other kids, because it was as phony as a three dollar bill. A few of the older kids avoided him, but I didn't realize they'd probably been through it, too. He got off on making people cringe and feel small."

Sam's too vivid imagination presented him a picture of the young Al trying to weather the storm alone, because he would never have confided in anyone that he was being picked on. He was the type who stood up to the worst that life could give without complaining, so well that most people probably didn't realize he was bleeding inside. This leap had brought it all back to him in vivid technicolor, and Sam called down curses upon the head of that priest who had used his authority to cause his best friend pain.

"What did you do?" he asked softly.

Al turned to face him again. Sam wished, not for the first time, that Al was here in person. If anyone looked like he needed a hug right about then, Al did. The memories had made his eyes too bright, and he dropped them, avoiding Sam's look and turned away once more. "The usual. I ran away. I used to make a game of it."

Sam knew. Al had mentioned escaping from the orphanage on at least two occasions.

"I stayed away for three months and when I came back, he'd been transferred to a parish on the other side of town," Al finished.

"D'you think somebody found out?" Sam asked. "Maybe one of the other kids told them why you'd gone."

"I don't know. Nobody mentioned it and I never asked. You learned not to ask too many questions in places like that, Sam. I bet Jimmy doesn't ask many questions either. He probably keeps a low profile at home and hopes his dad won't notice him."

Sam thought so, too. "But I still don't know what to do, Al." He had a firm urge to ram Haley's teeth down his throat, partly for Jimmy and partly as a surrogate for that priest of so long ago. He couldn't help Al except by understanding and caring. But maybe he could help Jimmy.

"I know what you'll have to do, Sam. You'll have to go over there tomorrow night and make sure it doesn't happen."

"Were you talking to somebody?" Christy came back, stopping dead and staring at Sam. "You look terrible. Is something wrong?"

"Nothing I can change," Sam replied. "Sometimes I wish I could go back in time and make things different for people."

"The way you're doing, Sam," Al reminded him.

But he couldn't go back in time to help Al. It had happened before he was born, and he couldn't return that far, even if he hadn't made a firm rule that they weren't allowed to try and influence their own lives.

"Not good enough," Sam muttered, and Christy looked at him strangely, glancing over her shoulder as if she expected to see someone standing there.

"I hope she's not psychic, Sam," Al muttered uncomfortably.

But Christy wasn't. "Have you called Coach Green yet?" she asked.

"I figured practice would be late. I'll call him now."

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Bob Green came to the phone surprised. "That you, Carmichael? Mabel said it was you. What's wrong?"

"Jimmy Haley. He came over this afternoon and said he was quitting the team."

"I know. His dad brought him back before practice was over. He's not quitting after all. He's gonna play tomorrow night." He heaved a sigh. "You know, Bill, if the team didn't need him so much, I'd half like to tell Haley to leave his kid alone and not push him so hard. Jimmy's a great kid, one of the best, but Haley's got him so nervy he jumps like a scared rabbit whenever anybody talks to him."

"Do you think he's too upset to play?"

"Probably--but he'll do fine once the game starts. What's up, Bill? I know he goes with your daughter, so you see more of him than I do outside of school. When Jimmy didn't show up for practice, Ben Ramsey said he heard Jimmy had run away."

"I think he was considering it. I tried to talk him out of it."

"I hope so. But you don't sound very happy about it."

"I'm not sure I did the right thing, Bob."

"What else can you do? Any kid will do worse as a runaway. There're always people waiting out there to take advantage of a runaway kid. Next thing you know, they'll be into prostitution, drugs, all kinds of vices, and there go all their choices. At least Jimmy's still here where people care about him."

"Not at home, Bob," Sam told him seriously. "Not at home."

"Aren't you going overboard just a little? Haley might be a bully, but..."

"Bullies get off on power," Sam reminded him. "I think Jimmy's suffering from abuse, emotional abuse."

Green was silent a moment, then he sighed as if to concede the matter. "How do you prove something like that, Bill?"

"If I knew, I'd be doing more than I have so far, and so would you. Just keep an eye on him. Don't push him too hard."

"Push *him*?" Green laughed without amusement. "Nobody pushes that kid half as hard as he pushes himself."

More confirmation of the pressure Jimmy felt himself under. He sighed sadly and asked, "Did you ever wonder why?"

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There was no real help in that quarter, though Green cared what happened to Jimmy and would treat him well. But to Jimmy, people who treated him well were like islands in a vast ocean of indifference and cruelty. He was on the verge of falling apart.

Al stuck around, offering tidbits of advice. The next morning, he was there by the time Sam and Christy sat down to a breakfast of Sam's bacon and eggs. Al looked at the meal with regret.

"Ah, Sam, this looks great. I wish I could have a plate of it. I wish I could even smell it. She looks like she really knows how to cook."

"I did it," Sam told Al out of the side of his mouth. "We take turns."

"*You?*" Al shook his head, his enthusiasm for the breakfast dropping radically. "Maybe I'll pass then."

Sam grimaced expressively and made an aborted lunge at his friend, turning it into a reach for the pepper when Christy raised her eyes from her plate to stare at him in surprise.

"I know you've got to grade all those papers sometime today," she remarked. "But you're coming to the game tonight, aren't you?"

"Wouldn't miss it. What are you doing today?"

"Well, there's the pep rally this afternoon. You really ought to come to that, too."

"Will Jimmy be there?"

"The whole team will."

"Then I'll attend. I can always grade papers tomorrow."

She paused, the fork halfway to her mouth. "If I weren't such a nice, well-adjusted kid, I think I'd be jealous of Jimmy." She grinned to take the sting out of the words. "But I know you're doing it for him. You're really worried about him." That made her think, and she narrowed her eyes and studied him so intently that Sam was half afraid she could see past Bill Carmichael's looks to Sam Beckett underneath. "Do you know something I don't?"

Sam caught Al's interested eye and looked back. "Not really. I'm just afraid Jimmy's riding for a fall and I want to be there to catch him."

"You think he'll have a breakdown?" she asked, worried.

The question alarmed Sam, because Christy would never have thought of it without some motivation. "Do you?" he countered.

"I don't know. But sometimes he's really on the edge. Once in awhile he'll talk wildly. Not very often. I think he knows it scares me and he tries to treat me really well, protect me from the harsh reality of life. But, like, one time, we were watching a TV movie about a battered wife who finally turned on her husband and killed him, and Jimmy started going on about how easy it might be." She put her orange juice down and raised horrified eyes to Sam. "You don't think..." She couldn't even say it.

"I hope not, Christy. That's what I'm here for, to stop it if he does."

"You *do* think it," she cried, her eyes dark with fear. "Oh, Dad, no."

"Jimmy wanted to run away, not to hurt his father," Sam reminded her. "He's decided to play tonight. But if he says anything to you about running away, or anything that sounds like goodbye, I hope you won't think you're, uh, squealing on him if you tell me about it."

"Squealing?" she echoed with mild amusement as if scorning the out-of-date slang. Then she shook her head. "No, I won't hold out on you, Dad. Not for something this important."

"Good. I couldn't ask for more. I'm a lucky father, Christy."

She grinned. "No, I'm lucky." She finished the orange juice, looking a little self-conscious at the open

admission of affection and the seriousness of their discussion. "I've got to meet Neets this morning. Do you think Jimmy will be all right?"

"I think the best thing you can do for Jimmy is treat him the way you always do," Sam told her.

"That's right, Sam. Give him something nice and normal. When I was his age, somebody like Christy would have been..."

Sam grimaced and muttered, "Oh, come on, Al," as Christy picked up her plate and carried it through into the kitchen.

"What, you wouldn't have noticed a little number like Christy in high school?" He paused, took another look at Sam and shook his head pityingly. "I forgot who I was talking to. When you were Jimmy's age..."

"I was in M.I.T." Sam reminded him. "A social life was the least of my problems."

"A fact for which I've tried to compensate since I've known you."

Sam regarded his friend affectionately. "I've appreciated it," he admitted, serious for once.

"Appreciated what?" Christy asked, returning to the room.

"You taking your plate out."

"Oh. You sounded like it was something really important."

"I've got five million papers to grade and I've got to try to talk to Jimmy's father again. Every little bit helps."

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When Christy had gone to meet her friend Anita, Al turned to Sam, who was clearing the table. "You're gonna try talking to that nozzle again, Sam?"

"I have to, Al. He has a furniture plant. He can't very well toss me on my ear in front of his employees and customers. He won't like what I've got to say, but maybe he'll listen."

"I wouldn't count on it, Sam. He might hear your words, but he won't believe it. That kind of slimebag thinks he knows all the answers already."

"Not deep inside, he doesn't," Sam returned. "I think he's covering up his own inadequacy."

"You're probably right, Sam, but five minutes talk from his kid's English teacher won't convince him of that. Years of psychoanalysis might, but he'd have to want it. If you know what's good for you, you'll act like you never heard of psychology."

Remembering the cocky look on Haley's face, Sam decided Al was right.

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Haley's Furniture had a retail store in downtown Little Falls and a plant on the outskirts of the Wisconsin town. Sam telephoned the plant, to find it only ran one shift on weekends and that Mr. Haley worked mornings at the retail store. He was hardly likely to make a scene in front of customers, so Sam girded himself for battle and went there.

Haley himself was writing up a sale when Sam arrived. Al appeared through one of his invisible doors in the center of the store and looked around with interest, taking note of the dark look on the owner's face

when he spotted Sam.

The customer departed, leaving Sam, the invisible AI and one other sales clerk in the showroom. Haley turned to the man and said, "Take a break, Les."

"But I just had a--"

"Take another. I've got private business with my kid's teacher."

"Thanks, Mr. Haley." A paperback book was already out of his pocket before the back room door swung shut behind the man.

"You again," Haley said with heavy disgust. "You don't quit, do you? Do I need a restraining order to keep you off my property."

"I just want five minutes of your time, Mr. Haley. I need to talk to you about Jimmy."

"Encouraging my son to run away. Not that the ungrateful little turkey needs encouragement. He always was a coward."

"Jimmy's not a coward, Mr. Haley. Under normal circumstances, I'd guess he's a very bright kid who does better than most people at everything he tries. His grades prove it. Straight As. He's quarterback on the football team. That doesn't get handed to kids on a platter. It takes effort and talent and plenty of hard work."

"I see that he works, believe me. No son of mine will be called a shirker."

"Except by you?" Sam asked. "Everywhere I go, people sing Jimmy's praises. Coach Green thinks he's a great football player. I think he writes the best papers in my class. Christy thinks he's wonderful. In fact, the only person I know who continually finds fault with Jimmy is you."

"That's because if I didn't, he'd glide through life with no effort at all. Just like his mother, the kid takes the easy way out. No drive. No ambition. Wants to write books." He sneered. "I want my son to be a man."

"Your son is already a man," Sam insisted. "You don't want him to be a man. You want him to be the same kind of man as you, and that isn't going to happen."

Haley sucked in an infuriated breath. "You trying to say my kid is one of them funny ones. You know, queer?"

"If you mean gay," Sam interpreted, steaming with rage at Haley's intolerance, "then the answer is no. Jimmy's not gay, Mr. Haley. He has a friend who is, which is not the same thing."

"I already told him, I don't want him running around with that pansy. He's got a reputation to maintain."

"He's got a life to live. You won't always approve of his friends. Did your father always approve of yours?"

That stopped Haley for nearly five seconds, then he shook his head. "You leave my old man out of this. Jimmy's living in my house, eating the food I buy and the clothes I provide. When he's earning his own money and living in his own house, if he wants to run around with pansies and fruits, I can't stop him. I can't keep him from writing silly stories. But by God, I can stop him now. I have to show him what's right. I don't beat the boy. No one can say I do, so if that's what you've come here for, you can turn around and tuck your tail between your legs and get the hell out of my place."

"That isn't why I came. I know you don't beat Jimmy with sticks, or your belt, or even your hand. He says so and I believe him. I think you beat him with words."

Haley looked like he was about to have an apoplexy. "Oh, so now I can't discipline my own son. Next thing you bleeding heart liberal teachers will be saying is that we should let our kids do whatever they like, whether it's good for them or not. Jimmy wants to smoke pot, I should had him some and say, 'here, son, try it and make your own decision?' Bullshit." His voice rang out furiously. "I'm not one of those mealy mouthed folks who say their kids have to find themselves. I'll see that Jimmy gets a damn firm basis

before he goes out in the world."

"I agree with you in principle, that kids need to be taught a code of behavior and values. But I don't agree with your methods. A child should be encouraged, not degraded. That's what I meant when I said you beat him with words. He thinks he's worthless now. He's working harder than any kid in school just to win a good word from you. You've pushed him so hard he almost hates you--and he blames himself for that, as if the fault is in him."

"It damn well is. I never asked for a weak, sniveling pansy son who can't stand up for himself unless I'm on him every minute of every day. Don't you think I've got better things to do than to nag the boy all the time just to make sure he does his schoolwork, goes to football practice. You see how he slacked off yesterday?"

"I saw a kid at the end of his rope," Sam insisted, realizing he wasn't even beginning to get through. "I see a kid who doesn't begin to understand what love is because he's never experienced it. I see an abused child."

Haley's fist lashed out so quickly that even with Al's startled and urgent warning, Sam had no time to duck. He reeled back into a reclining chair and nearly took it over backwards, one hand going up to his aching jaw.

"You son of a bitch, you got a hell of a nerve coming in here and telling me I abuse my kid. You try that again and I'm siccing my lawyer on you."

"Hit him, Sam!" cried Al. "Don't let the bastard get away with it."

"I can't hit him, Al," Sam said reasonably. "I'm bigger than he is."

"You're a fine one to talk," Haley shouted. "Talking to someone who ain't even here. Or are you wearing a wire? My God, I ought to break you in two!"

"You might be bigger than he is, Sam," Al reminded him. "But Bill Carmichael isn't. Don't let him get away with it. Show Jimmy there's someone who's not afraid to stand up to his dad."

"Show Jimmy that violence is the answer?" Sam asked. He didn't like the idea of using his fists to settle the problem.

"Leave Jimmy out of this. It's between you and me," bellowed Haley.

He dove at Sam and grabbed him by the lapels, pulling him out of the recliner and swinging back a fist to pound him again. Suddenly there was no longer a choice. Sam flung up an arm to block the punch.

"That's it, Sam. Keep your guard up," Al coached excitedly. "Now use your left. Come on, Sam. You don't have to wipe the floor with him. Just show him you won't back down. Everybody else around him backs down. Let him learn the rest of the world won't."

Haley kept coming, his fists swinging in a frenzy. So caught up was he in his blind rage that it affected his accuracy, luckily for Sam, who took a couple of blows on his forearms and one or two on his shoulders and chest.

"Come on, Sam. Let him have it!" called his cheering section. Al bounced around behind Haley throwing mock punches of his own. "Like this, Sam. Give it to him."

Sam reeled back from another blow to the face, this one catching him on the cheekbone. If he hadn't rode with it, it would probably have knocked him to the floor, and as it was, he would have a bruise. But it was the last straw. Sam remembered that he'd once leaped into a boxer, and using what he'd learned then, he planted a solid blow to the face that sent Haley reeling. Jimmy's father went down hard and didn't get up.

"You can dish it out, but you can't take it," Sam told him contemptuously.

Haley struggled to get up, sagged back again. "I'll get you for this," he muttered threateningly.

"You started it," Sam replied. "I'm willing to stand up in court if need be and state my case. I'll do it for Jimmy's sake."

"I'll see you lose your job," howled the bully.

"You might try." Sam hated the thought of losing Carmichael's job for him, but he couldn't yield to Haley. If he gave so much as an inch, it would be a triumph for the man. It was bad enough to think that he might take his defeat out on Jimmy.

"I'll get you. Someday when you've forgotten about it, I'll get you for it."

"Try it, sleazebag," Al threatened. "Just try it. Tell him, Sam."

"Tell him what?" Sam wondered. "Haley, you push so hard that eventually someone will push back harder than I just did. You can only get away with it so long."

"Get the hell out of my place before I forget myself and get my gun."

"That'd solve everything, wouldn't it?" Sam asked. "I've said what I came to say. You're not listening. If I have to, I'll report you to the Human Services for your treatment of Jimmy. They're not stupid. They'll make sure he's not mistreated. If anything happens to him, they'll know why."

"You try it and you'll pay."

Al leaned close to Haley and glared into his face. "You'll regret it one day, and I, for one, am gonna enjoy it. Come on, Sam, this place makes me sick."

"It makes me sick, too," Sam agreed and followed Al. He wanted to go home and put something on his bruises before they became too noticeable.

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When Sam--accompanied by Al--arrived at the afternoon's pep rally, he was sporting dramatic bruises on his cheekbone and chin. Under Al's amused direction, he had tried to conceal them with daubs of Christy's make-up, but the attempt had not been entirely successful. Several students gave him covert glances, whispering in excited speculation.

He encountered Christy hanging on Jimmy's arm, accompanied by Anita and her date, a tall young man with shaggy blond hair. "Hi, Mr. Carmichael," they all called, and Christy waved and yelled, "Hi, Dad."

Then she stopped dead and dragged Jimmy over. "Look at you," she cried in astonishment. "You look like you've been in a fight!"

"Have you, Mr. Carmichael?" Anita asked, awed.

"Not really a fight, Anita."

"Not really?" The blond boy chuckled. "I'd hate to think what a real fight would look like. Or is the other guy worse?"

"Kevin," admonished Anita.

"I'd say the odds were even, Kevin," Sam admitted.

"Even?" echoed Al in disbelief. "His eye's swollen shut by now unless I miss my guess. Wait till Jimmy sees his old man. He'll guess who you've been fighting right away."

"Who'd you fight, Mr. Carmichael?" Jimmy asked, impressed.

"It was just a difference of opinion, Jimmy," Sam hedged, avoiding the boy's eyes. But Jimmy was nothing if not perceptive. His mouth dropped open and he stared at Sam in considerable disbelief. "My dad?" he

guessed.

"Did you?" Christy asked, staring.

"There's no reason to talk about it," Sam said uncomfortably. "You kids better go find your seats?"

Christy's look told Sam he would be extensively questioned the next time she got him alone, and Jimmy's eyes held astonished respect. Maybe Al had been right about fighting after all. Perhaps Jimmy needed to see that someone could stand up to his dad. He might not yet be able to understand that it took more strength to walk away from a fight.

"Jimmy?"

The boy halted. "Did you hit him, Mr. Carmichael?" he demanded.

"Only once. I'm not sure it wasn't a mistake. Fighting never solved anything. All I did was make him angry. I decided to try talking to him again. He wouldn't listen. Would you like me to talk to the Human Services people?"

Jimmy stared at him in horror. "No!"

"It might be for your own good. I'm afraid I might have made things worse for you."

Jimmy shook his head solemnly before he turned to follow Christy and the others. "I don't think you could have done that," he said and caught up to Christy, draping his arm around her shoulders. Kevin threw a question at him and Jimmy said something that made the other boy laugh, but as they started to climb into the stands at the Tigers's stadium, his shoulders slumped a little. He was worried.

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Al arrived for the game as if he were going to an Ivy League game a couple of decades ago, armed with a pom pom, a cushion to sit on labeled 'U.S.N.' a flask of something undoubtedly alcoholic and a small pair of binoculars. He was wearing a garish sweater that Sam suddenly remembered that Tina had knitted for him. Al had once pointed out every dropped stitch with a kind of pride.

"I wish everybody could see that getup," Sam told him out of the corner of his mouth.

"So do I, Sam. I worked hard to get ready for the big game." He turned his binoculars on the cheerleaders, who were going through an elaborate routine which involved some gymnastics. He had half expected Christy to be a cheerleader, but she wasn't. She and her friend Anita were gathered with a group of other girls whose boyfriends were on the team, and she spared a wave for Sam when she saw him climbing into the stands.

"Hi, Bill." The gorgeous woman who called his name and waved at him made Al stop dead in his tracks. Casually dressed in a sweater and jeans, she was in her mid thirties and evidently alone.

Or not. "I was beginning to wonder where you were," she said, scooting over to make room beside her. "You said you'd call if you couldn't make it and I hadn't heard from you."

Sam cast an urgent look at Al, who whipped out his computer link and began to punch buttons.

"I've been running late all day," Sam stalled.

"And you had a very dramatic visit to the furniture store," she remarked with restrained humor, leaning forward to inspect his bruises. "Oh, Bill, I never would have thought it of you."

"Her name's Carol Miller, Sam," Al put in quickly. "She and Bill are dating. She teaches French at Little Falls High. She could parlez-vous to me any time she had a mind to."

Sam groaned, which Carol chose to take as a response to her comment.

"But he deserves worse," she added. "There have been times when I've wondered if I had grounds to report him to somebody. But there was never anything concrete enough."

"You mean everybody knows that Haley bullies Jimmy and no one has ever done anything about it?" Sam demanded hotly.

"You know him better than anyone, Bill. What have you done?" She squeezed his arm apologetically. "I'm sorry. You've done more than any of us. You've taken the time to listen to him. You've shown him that a male authority figure doesn't have to be a sadistic monster. You've encouraged him as much as possible. I hate to think what Jimmy would be like now if he hadn't had you these past few years."

"It's not enough, Carol."

"No, but sometimes we're limited in what we can do."

"The game's gonna start, Sam," Al interrupted, cutting short his ogling of Carol and the cheerleaders to study the teams warming up on the field. The band marched forward to the edge of the field and began to play the school song. Around them, everyone stood up, and Sam rose belatedly to join them.

Unhampered by the fact that he didn't know the words, Al sang along, catching the lyrics from the people around him. He did it with great enthusiasm and total disregard for the melody and the key. Sam laughed, enjoying Al's enthusiasm, as he always did. When he was in the blackest funk, Al could pull him out of it.

Sam sang along, too, using his ability to think fast and to extrapolate, helped by the fact that the Little Falls Tigers had adapted the melody, if not the lyrics, of "On, Wisconsin."

The game was actually very good for a high school game, both teams at the peak of their form. Jimmy Haley was one of the best high school quarterbacks Sam had ever seen, almost as good as the kid Sam had once leaped into, almost as good as Sam's own brother Tom. He seemed to know without hesitation where his receivers were, and he completed every pass he threw in the first quarter. Sam could imagine Christy's pleasure.

He couldn't help wondering if, somewhere in the stands, Jack Haley was sitting glaring at his son and projecting dissatisfaction, while Lillian Haley sat beside him, afraid to express any pleasure in her son.

The Tigers were leading 14-13 at halftime. Sam and Carol strolled around talking to students and parents, trailed by Al, who seemed moved to comment on everything he saw, notably any pretty girl who crossed his path.

Naturally, he was the one to see Jack Haley first.

"Oh, no, Sam, you don't want to go that way."

Sam put up a hand as if to cough. "Why not?" he asked.

"Your sparring partner is coming. If I were you, I'd zip over that way." He pointed. "Not that he doesn't deserve a fat lip to go with his black eye, but this isn't the place."

Sam suspected he was right. The last person he wanted to see was Jack Haley, though he'd have to watch him later. He'd already talked to Christy, who was going to the Homecoming Dance with Jimmy after the game. Sam had instructed her to call him if anything happened. He was pretty sure Jimmy wouldn't try to take his father out in front of his girlfriend. She had looked puzzled at the request, but fortunately, she trusted her father enough to agree. She was even more worried about Jimmy than Sam was, and she didn't have Sam's advance knowledge.

Sam meant to follow Jimmy when he dropped off Christy after the dance, even if he had to force his way into the Haley household. He was sure there was a better solution, but he could hardly go to the police and tell them that Jimmy was going to shoot his father tonight.

So he pulled Carol in another direction and Al urged them on until they were safely away from Haley and his wife. Sam had one glimpse of them before a crowd of kids in Tigers sweatshirts pushed between them. Haley was wearing sunglasses.

The second half didn't go quite as well as the first. Kevin Danner, Jimmy's friend, fumbled a pass and the next play Jimmy was thrown for a loss. They had to punt, and that gave the other team a great shot at a touchdown. They rolled down the field like a tidal wave and soon it was 20-14.

After that, no one scored for a long time. It wasn't until after the two minute warning that the Tigers got possession and began a series of plays that might lead to a score. As the clock ticked away, Jimmy faded back to pass. The receiver was in the clear, in the end zone, and it looked like he just might make it, but the ball whizzed over the receiver's head. Incomplete.

"I don't like that, Sam," Al said knowingly in his ear. "His dad's gonna make him pay for that one, you can bet on it."

"I know," Sam muttered in return, feeling sick for Jimmy's sake. He could imagine the expression of desperate determination on Jimmy's face in the huddle.

There were only five seconds left on the clock. Time for one more play. The crowd went still, tense and anxious, only the cheerleaders on the sidelines moving and shouting. It was as if everything had faded away, everything but Jimmy, out there alone as the play began, ducking aside to avoid being tackled, waiting, waiting, waiting as the clock ran out, the crowd hung breathless with anticipation.

The pass was dead on. The minute it left Jimmy's hand, Sam knew that nothing could stop it. Beside him, Al was jumping up and down and yelling like crazy, flinging his pom pom into the air, where it disappeared until he caught it again. The receiver had only to put out his hands and let the ball smack neatly into them. A tie.

The point conversion was anticlimactic. It was smooth as silk, leaving the final score 21-20. The Tigers had won. Fans mobbed onto the playing field, and Sam, caught up in the rush, went too, taking Carol's arm to prevent their separation. Al charged along, and it was disconcerting to see people continually running right through him in the press of the crowd.

Some of Jimmy's teammates had been lugging him around on their shoulders, chanting cheers and yelling, "We're number one!" They lowered him to the ground as Sam watched, and he saw disaster strike even before it happened.

"Oh oh, Sam," warned Al. "Here comes trouble."

Jack Haley surged out of the crowd and pushed his way to his son's side. The boy's teammates pulled away, evidently intimidated by the man.

"You utter incompetent fool," Haley bellowed. Anyone in the vicinity could hear his every word and most of them stopped to listen. "What do you call that ludicrous pass you threw? You might as well have given away the game. If it weren't for your teammate who caught that second try of yours, you'd all be hiding out in the showers. I never thought I'd see the day when a son of mine would let his team down so."

"Let his team down?" It was Jimmy's friend Kevin, hot with outrage. "Jimmy saved the day for us, Mr. Haley. Joe Montana couldn't have topped that last pass and you know it."

"He had to make up for the one before," Haley pressed on.

"Somebody hit him just as he threw it," Kevin went on doggedly. "You weren't out here, Mr. Haley. I saw it. You didn't. Jim was great! You ought to give him his due."

"If I did that, I'd be ashamed to show my face in this town," Haley spat. Turning back to Jimmy, he said, "You may as well go off and enjoy yourself. You never think of anything else anyway." Turning his back on his silent son, he said sharply, "Come along, Lillian. Let's get out of here."

His wife joined him and allowed him to take her arm, but she wore the expression of a woman who has just taken a bite of a lemon thinking it an orange. Sam wondered if she would find the nerve to challenge her husband once they reached their home.

There was a buzz of talk as if everyone had realized they'd been eavesdropping and wanted to conceal

the fact. Al ran a few steps after Haley, made a very obscene gesture in his direction and concluded his demonstration by kicking the man in the seat of the pants. Sam wished Haley could have really felt it.

When Al turned, he still appeared furious, but he wasn't looking at Sam. His eyes came to rest on Jimmy, who stood without speaking, staring at the ground. A moment later, Christy raced through the crowd and flung herself at him.

"Jimmy, you were wonderful!"

He pushed her away, and she reeled back, staring at him in disbelief. "Jimmy?"

Kevin said something to her under his breath, and she turned in the direction he pointed. When she looked back at Jimmy, her eyes had softened with concern. She tried again, speaking to him quietly. His teammates began to disperse and Jimmy put his arm around Christy's shoulder, listening to her urgent words.

"My god, the man's a pig," burst out Carol.

"You got it, angel," Al told her. "He's really low, Sam. You gonna let him get away with it?"

"I'm not going to let him get away with ruining Jimmy's life," Sam told Al.

"But what can you do, Bill?" Carol asked.

"I'll think of something."

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He had just ushered Carol into the Escort when Christy came racing up to him. "Dad! Wait, Dad."

"Look out, Sam, this could be it," cautioned Al.

Sam caught the girl by the shoulders. "What is it, Christy. Where's Jimmy?"

"He told me he was sorry but the dance was off tonight," she explained, the words falling over each other in her haste. "He went for his shower, but he looked like he was in a big hurry. I asked him what was wrong, and he said he had something to do and he didn't want me involved in it. I've been looking for you everywhere."

Sam and Al exchanged worried looks. "You've gotta stop him, Sam," cried Al. He had empathized with Jimmy from the beginning, and now he looked grim and worried. He identified with Jimmy's crisis so strongly that Sam was afraid he would take it personally if this leap went wrong. Sam wondered if he'd ever tried to get revenge on the priest back in the orphanage who had given him such a bad time.

"Carol," Sam said to his date. "I have to go after Jimmy. I'm afraid this will get out of hand."

"Yes, go," she urged. "I'll find my own way home. Don't worry about me. I always knew you wouldn't let Jimmy suffer. If anyone can help him, you can." She leaned forward and kissed him briefly. Sam realized that Bill Carmichael was a lucky man.

"What about me, Dad?" Christy asked. "Can I come with you?"

"No!" He modified the hasty denial. "No, honey. You go with Neets and Kevin for now. They won't mind."

She went reluctantly, and Sam didn't wait to watch her go. Instead he hopped into the Escort and drove off as fast as he could through the dispersing crowd. A moment later, Al popped into the passenger seat beside him.

"Hurry, Sam," he cried. "You gotta stop Jimmy."

"Does anything happen to Bill Carmichael?" Sam asked. He wasn't worried for himself so much as he

was for the body he inhabited and the man in the waiting room. No danger would keep him away from Jimmy tonight.

Al pulled out the link and pushed buttons. "Nothing I can find. I don't think he was there, Sam. He might have known Jimmy was in trouble, but he didn't know what we did, so he had no reason to go to Jimmy's tonight. Come on, Sam, step on it."

"It won't help any if I get a speeding ticket." But Sam pressed his foot down on the accelerator anyway.

The Haleys' street was quiet, but lights glowed at their front windows. One car, a blue Chevy, was parked in the driveway, and Jimmy's old Ford stood at the curb outside.

"He's there already, Sam. Come on, you've gotta hurry."

"What do you want me to do?" Sam asked as he shut off the car? "Just go bursting in? What if I'm too early? Jimmy would only wait till I've gone."

"I'll go see." Al vanished. Sam used the interval to creep up close to the house and conceal himself in the shadows of the shrubbery. He hoped a nosey neighbor didn't phone the police.

"Sam!" Al appeared beside him so suddenly he jumped. "Get in there, Sam. But go quietly. The front door's not locked."

Sam obeyed. No one noticed him. The front hall was deserted, but he could hear voices coming from the den. Following the sound, he sneaked forward, wondering if he should have brought some weapon of his own. No, that wasn't the answer.

"...sick and tired of your screwups, boy," Jack Haley was berating his son. "It's been a long time since I had to beat you, but by God, you humiliated me tonight in front of all my friends. I can't have that."

"I didn't humiliate you, damn it," Jimmy cried with uncharacteristic defiance. "I won the damn game for you and you don't give a shit. Well, neither do I give a shit about you. I've tried and tried and nothing I do for you is good enough. So maybe I'll just leave and you can pretend you never had a son."

There was a sharp crack of sound, that of a hand hitting flesh.

"Sam," exploded Al from the doorway. "Sam, he slapped him. That dirty slimebucket slapped Jimmy. Get him, Sam. No, wait..."

Sam edged up to the doorway and poked his head around the corner. He could see Jimmy, one hand to his cheek, his eyes bright with pain and rejection, Haley, hot and red faced and furious, a hand raised for a second blow. Beyond them both, Lillian Haley, that faded rabbit of a woman, took three sharp steps to the desk, pulled open the drawer and plunged her hand into it. When she took it out, it was clutching a small pistol.

Neither her husband nor her son noticed her as she raised it, steadying one hand with the other. "Jack," she called in her normal, faded voice.

Her husband ignored her. "Shut up, Lillian. Let me deal with this ungrateful brat of yours."

Jimmy flinched. "Hers?" he echoed, a new horror filling his eyes. "Not yours?"

"I wouldn't claim you," Haley spat. "Who knows what she was up to when we got married. I never wanted a kid in the first place, but it wouldn't have been so bad if you'd been worthy of me."

"Shut up, Jack!" spat Lillian, projecting fury into the lackluster tone of her voice.

Startled out of his spiel, Jack Haley flicked a sideways glance at her and froze.

Jimmy turned too and saw the gun. His eyes widened in even greater horror. "Mom, no! Mom, don't! He's not worth it, Mom."

"No, he's not worth it," she replied. "He's not fit to live, and neither am I. I spent years listening to him put

you down because I didn't have the guts to stand up for you. You ought to hate me for it, but you were always a good boy. You always did your best and beyond. I love you, Jimmy. I won't let him treat you this way any longer."

"Mom, don't."

"Sam!" cried Al, reading from his link. "*She's* the one who killed Jack Haley. Jimmy took the rap for her. She tried to insist it was her fault, but he had the gun and his were the only prints on it. They thought she was trying to protect him, but it must have been the other way around. He wouldn't let his mother go to prison for him. Sam, you've got to stop her. Shooting Haley will destroy all three of them."

Jimmy turned to his father again as if to ask what to do. The old habits are never so easily shed. But in turning, he saw Sam in the doorway and something flashed in his eyes.

"You're a bully and a coward," he told his father. "I never had the guts to stand up to you, but that was wrong, wasn't it?" He turned to his mother. "Don't shoot him, Mom. If you do, I'll have to take the blame for it. I won't let you go to prison."

"Do you think I'd be around to go?" she asked him gently. "What life do I have, Jimmy? I love him, God help me. But I love you more. I'll take him away for you, but there'll be nothing left after that." She aimed the gun at her husband, whose face had drained of color.

"Lillian, you're insane," Haley babbled. "You don't know what you're doing. Put down the gun and I promise you things will be different. You want me to leave the kid alone. Well, hey, I won't lay a finger on him. My word on it."

"That's not good enough, Jack. You gave me your word before. Besides, you'd take it out on both of us without touching us. Words are your weapon because you're not man enough to fight fair. I can't stay with you, Jack. I think I should kill you because you don't deserve to live." Her hand tightened on the gun.

"Mom, don't!" pleaded Jimmy. He jumped between her and his father, and for a horrified moment, Sam thought she would fire anyway, but at the last moment, she jerked the weapon up.

"Go for it, Sam. Any longer and they'll all be dead," urged Al, but Sam wasn't sure. His presence had given Jimmy strength, and he halfway hoped that Jimmy could resolve this on his own.

Jimmy took the gun from his mother with infinite care, as if afraid it would go off or that he would hurt her in the process. She didn't wilt, as Sam had half expected, but stood facing her husband with a show of defiant strength. She'd needed it tonight.

Haley looked shaken, but once the gun was in his son's hand, he relaxed. "Okay, Jimmy, hand it over," he barked. "Then we'll resolve this once and for all."

"Yeah, we'll resolve it right now," Jimmy challenged, pointing the gun at his father. "I couldn't let Mom kill you. It would destroy her. As for me, you've already done that."

"Sam, you've gotta intervene," Al wailed. "Come on, do something."

Sam had already realized that. No matter how much effort it had taken Jimmy to stop his mother, he was just a kid who had been traumatized all his life. No one could expect him to cope completely on his own. Sam nodded at Al and stepped into the room.

As he came in, Haley jerked around, then his lip curled. "So, the teacher's here. I should've known there was a reason for you to be so uncharacteristically brave, kid." He sneered at Sam.

"Jimmy, you don't have to shoot him," Sam said. "You don't even have to stay with him, if your mother will agree. Mrs. Haley, look what he's done to you and your son. You can get help, both of you. Go to counseling. He should go with you, but if he won't, you and Jimmy go."

She nodded. "I know. I can't stay any more, for Jimmy's sake. Jimmy's only seventeen. I'll talk to the lawyer about a separation. I'll arrange for custody."

"I'll speak on your behalf," Sam agreed, "And so will a lot of the other teachers."

"Hah," Haley barked. "Custody to a woman who threatened to kill her husband? Custody of a boy who tried to kill his own father?"

Sam stretched out his hand for the gun, his eyes catching and holding Jimmy's though he continued to speak to Jimmy's father. "If you force the issue, I'll tell them why. There were a lot of people at the game tonight who heard you making an ass of yourself out on the field. You made some enemies tonight. They'll speak their minds, too, and by tomorrow, opinion will be running strongly against you. You've pushed too hard for too long. I thought at first you were just a bully, but I realize now that you need help yourself. Jimmy, it isn't you he views as inadequate. It's himself."

"You son of a bitch!" Haley lunged at him, and for a moment, it all hung in the balance. Jimmy's hand trembled on the gun, and Al shouted, "Sam, he's gonna shoot."

Sam sidestepped Haley's bull-like rush and hit him once in the stomach. Haley went down and stayed down, clutching his gut and swearing in a breathless voice. Jimmy gasped and managed to hold his fire.

"Call the police, Mrs. Haley," Sam urged. "We want everything out in the open. No one's been shot yet. Jimmy, give me the gun."

Jimmy looked at Sam with eyes that were too bright and full of hero worship. With shaking hands, he pushed the gun toward Sam who took it and checked it carefully, then he smiled.

"Mr. Haley," he remarked, grinning. "I think you've no grounds for complaint here. No one was in danger of being shot. The safety is still on." He grinned at Al over Haley's body, and Al raised his joined fists over his head in the classic sign of victory.

Shoving the gun safely in his pocket, Sam looked at Jimmy and quirked an expectant eyebrow.

With a relieved cry, Jimmy flung himself into Sam's arms and hugged him for all he was worth.

"I'm not a carousel horse any longer, am I, Mr. Carmichael?" he asked, harking back to the paper that Sam had read--was it only yesterday?

"No, Jimmy," Sam told him seriously. "I think you chose the world."

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"So what happens to Jimmy now?" Christy asked over a mug of hot chocolate. It had been nearly three a.m. before Sam had finally returned home to find her waiting, pale and alarmed and in need of immediate answers. He reassured her quickly, answering as many of her questions as possible while she fussed around the kitchen heating milk and stirring in the chocolate. When she had finished, she carried the mugs out to the dining room table and sat down opposite Sam, prepared to hear the full story.

"Jimmy and his mother went to stay with her sister," Sam explained. "Haley didn't dare protest, not when he heard what all of us had to say. It didn't help that Haley went berserk and tried to deck two cops. He had to be forcibly restrained. I think tonight something in him finally snapped."

Christy's eyes widened. "I never liked him, but I never knew how bad he was. I only had you to compare to."

"I know," Sam agreed, inordinately flattered. "My own father was great, and it was hard to conceive of anyone being so deliberately malicious. I had a hard time realizing how bad Haley was myself. But fortunately someone I knew kept pushing at me." He caught Al's eye and smiled.

Al winked at Sam and preened himself. Now that the incident was over, Al seemed more like his usual self. He had gloated unmercifully when Haley had all but forced the police to arrest him and had been led

off in handcuffs. Sam hoped an understanding judge would realize that Haley needed help instead of simple imprisonment and would order some form of counselling for the man.

Christy took Sam's words to mean herself and she lit up. "I had to, Dad. I knew something was wrong, but it's so hard to define it. Everybody knew Jimmy's dad was kind of mean, but we never thought it was that bad. A lot of the guys were talking about what he did after the game. Kevin was furious. I think he came this close"--she held up two fingers about an inch apart--"to slugging the bastard. Uh, Jimmy's father, I mean."

"I'll allow that," Sam told her cheerfully. "It is the best description."

He sipped his chocolate and looked a question at Al over his mug. Jimmy and his mother could make a new life, but Sam was still here. When Christy wasn't looking, he mouthed, "Why haven't I leaped yet?"

Al shrugged. "I think you had to tell Christy about it," he suggested.

"So what about you and Jimmy?" Sam asked his daughter.

"You're not going to turn into the heavy father and forbid me to see him, are you?" she demanded. Then she grinned. "No, you'd never do that."

"I wouldn't. I think Jimmy needs you. But don't forget, you can always talk to me if you need to. Both you and Jimmy can."

Christy's eyes shone like diamonds in the sun. "You're great, Dad," she cried and flung her arms around his neck.

Over her shoulder, Sam saw Al watching him. "This hot chocolate is good," he said to Christy as she freed him, a little embarrassed with her display, "But think how much better it would be with marshmallows."

"I'll get them," she volunteered and headed for the kitchen.

Sam looked at Al. "Well, we did it," he said. "I know it brought up a lot of bad stuff for you, though. Are you okay?"

Al hesitated. "Yeah, Sam, I'm all right. Jimmy's gonna be okay. Nice to know that sometimes people can actually pitch in and help."

He looked rather pleased with his part in it, and Sam suspected Al's bad memories would hurt a little less now.

"What happened to Jimmy this time around?" he asked. "Did I change things for the better? Did he make it as a writer?"

Al pushed the buttons on his computer link with Ziggy. "Now this is interesting, Sam. Jimmy went to Wisconsin on a football scholarship, but he majored in English. He's written three books so far. The first one was a little slow taking off, but the last two were best sellers. He writes under the name James Hale, so if you ever see any of his books on your leaps, you can read them and see how he turned out."

Sam felt a surge of almost paternal pride. Jimmy had faced his dragons and vanquished them. He'd left his treadmill behind and ventured out into the new and unexplored territory. He was all right.

"What about Christy?"

"Oh, now, this is even better, Sam. Christy majored in science and specialized in organic chemistry."

"Chemistry?" echoed Sam in disbelief. "She hates chemistry."

"Maybe not as much as you think, Sam. According to Ziggy, she's a research." He slapped the side of the link and continued, "Chemist now. She's also married to Jimmy and they've got two kids. Bill and Todd. I think Bill is named for you, Sam. Nice work."

Sam grinned at Al. It was nice work. At times like these, he realized that quantum leaping had its compensations. He'd helped Jimmy and though Al had been forced to recall some bleak days, he'd been able to see past them. The two of them looked at each other with satisfaction and understanding.

"There's no marshmallows, Dad," Christy announced, returning with a jar of marshmallow cream in her hand. "Think this will do as well?"

Al burst out laughing.

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It was then that Sam leaped. One minute he was with Christy, the next he was balanced on top of a high stone wall in the night, wriggling his way beneath a loop of barbed wire. Spotlights traced patterns just over his head and in the distance, he could hear something that sounded a little too much like machine gun fire for his liking.

Suddenly a voice called out a warning in German, and Sam cautiously raised his head to find an armed sentry pointing a gun in his direction. Behind him, a second sentry was running toward them.

"Down, quick," urged someone in his ear. "I don't think he's seen you yet."

That voice was German, too, and Sam realized that he understood every word. He knew he spoke German: he'd learned that on a previous leap. It looked like he was lucky that he did.

The owner of the warning voice tugged on his pant leg, pulling him backwards and they collapsed into a hollowed out tunnel. There Sam faced him, an older man with grey hair and a great swooping mustache. His eyes were wary and his mouth was drawn in a grim line.

Before Sam could do more than stare, he cried, "Run. Quick! And whatever you do, stay low!"

Sam fled down the narrow tunnel, hearing the echo of intermittent gunfire sputtering away behind him.

"Another night," the man who ran with him panted in his ear. "Another night we'll get over the Wall. Another night, Rudi, and we'll be free. That's the West, Rudi. We came so close."

"The Berlin Wall," Sam breathed, realizing he'd leaped into an East German this time around at a time before the Wall had finally fallen. He must be here to help Rudi escape.

"Oh boy."