

Sloan's Way

An Excerpt

by Ian Colford

In the middle of the night, a shrill burst of unearthly bawling yanked Sam from the depths of a tortured sleep. Suddenly he was upright in bed, wide awake, feverish with alarm, his exhausted brain swarming with images of catastrophe. As his dream fled from view—a dream in which he struggled to rescue his family as the earth cracked open beneath them and flames raged and horned beasts with the bright red eyes of demons swarmed in legions down deserted city streets—he focused his thoughts and energy toward identifying the source of this commotion, this new horror. In his confusion, it seemed to him that his dream had spilled into the real world and that he had finally and truly lost his reason. For a few seconds he believed the house was burning and that what he heard was actually a siren. He even allowed his imagination to tempt him into thinking that smoke floated before him in the air, and for one dire instant he saw himself in the act of rousing everyone as flames attacked him from all sides. The truth was that for weeks now he'd been living in dread of just such an occurrence, ever since someone who'd been laid off from Tarbox Inc threatened to set fire to his house and laugh as he burned. He wanted to take some measure against this happening, but really, what could he do? What reasonable precaution could he take? He could hardly afford to employ a private guard. And he couldn't remain on watch himself, vigilant at all hours. He needed his rest in order to get through the days to come, though he'd been operating on less than adequate sleep for so long that he'd nearly forgotten what it was like to be alert and at his best. A listless inertia had settled into place between any plans he'd been devising and the act of putting them into effect.

He'd done nothing. At night—a time of utter desperation—the most innocent of sounds set his heart thundering and caused him to break out in a slimy and itchy sweat. The previous night it had been a motorcyclist ruthlessly gunning the engine of his vehicle at some obscene hour. And only two weeks ago he'd let loose a horrified squawk when the motor of a car backfired several blocks away. It sounded for all the world like someone was firing bullets through the living room window. Running downstairs, like a goddamn idiot, he tumbled face down into the front hall where if anyone had in fact been trying to get at him he would have offered himself up, a dazed and ridiculous prey. It was following this embarrassment that he decided to alert the police to the fact that someone might be out to get him and when he finally worked up the nerve to call, he suggested—with the equanimity of the veteran executive—that perhaps it would be a good idea if they sent an extra patrol car along his street at regular intervals after dark. He left his name and number with the clerk and insisted that the officer in charge to get back to him about the matter. The clerk told him that he'd likely have to come down to the station. It was not, she explained, something that could be easily arranged over the phone. Two weeks later his original call had still not been returned and he'd had it in his mind to phone back this very evening. Now it was too late and it was his fault for dawdling and putting it off. He was done for.

The screaming continued as he tossed the covers aside and forced himself into the frigid night air. The temperature had dipped below the estimates of even the most pessimistic of forecasts and Sarah had heaped on extra blankets. So it was a minute or

so before he was completely free of the quilts and the bedspread and by that time the sound had receded and his sense of purpose had diminished. He tried to swing his legs over the side of the bed but was overcome just then by a seductive wave of drowsiness. He lay motionless, slipping back down the precipice toward sleep. Then the voice (for it was without doubt a child's voice) resumed its woeful wail, this time louder and more profoundly stricken than before. As he rubbed his eyes into focus, a second voice seemed to rise up in chorus with the first. He swayed to his feet and glanced down at Sarah in bed. She lay sprawled, inert, her head concealed beneath the twisted pillow, in much the same position now as when he'd come to bed the night before, actually only a few hours ago. Cautiously, momentary concern wrinkling his brow, he burrowed his hand under the sheet and placed it on her back. No need to worry. She was warm. Hot in fact. Still, she didn't move. He allowed his hand to linger on her body—the warmth was inviting. But he withdrew it after a minute when it became evident that the screaming from the next room was not going to subside without intervention. With a sigh that issued from the bottomless depths of his weariness, he pulled on his housecoat and stumbled through the darkness.

As he tapped open the door of Sara and Julie's bedroom he began to realize with a squeamish foreboding that this sound, which had wrenched him quivering out of his sleep—a howl suggestive of deeply embedded fears and anxieties—was like nothing he'd heard before in his life. He could see that Sara had yanked the sheets loose from the foot of her bed and wrapped them around her neck, as if for protection. And her body now lay twisted, at war with the constriction. Sam was driven by a sense of piteous urgency at the spectacle of her struggle, but when he tried to steady her by gripping her shoulders, she leapt out at him with a shriek, both fists flying. The trajectory of her swing brought her bare knuckles into contact with his lower lip; and with the impact, the shock and the sudden explosion of pain, he staggered backward and was almost knocked unconscious when his back struck the wall. For a moment his legs were two wobbly sticks bearing his entire weight. He resisted

opening his eyes. The floor seemed to shudder beneath him as if the room were a circus ride cranking into motion and he guessed that the sight of it would send him into a coma. He remained anchored to the wall, probing his jaw for damage, wiggling his toes to make sure they were still where he'd last seen them. As the pain in his face swelled he grew more alert and found himself in no immediate danger of collapse, but now Sara's shrieks prevented him from moving and resonated throughout the house. A thought meandered out of a hidden crevice in his mind: *What will the neighbours think?*

He left his name and number with the clerk and insisted that the officer in charge to get back to him about the matter.

Then the light was on and Sarah was in the room.

"God damn it, Sam! Can't you even shut that child up? It's three o'clock in the morning!"

Sam watched as Sarah grabbed one of her daughter's arms and wrenched it until the screaming subsided to a whimper. Then she gave it one more twist. The girl was now awake and crying in pain rather than in fear. And the noise, though pitched differently, was every bit as deafening as before.

As the focus of his eyes sharpened, Sam watched with mounting horror as Sarah brusquely slapped her daughter's face.

"*Stop it!*" Sarah commanded and then paused in her movements long enough to take careful aim. When ready, she struck the struggling child again, her open palm against the wet crimson cheek. "Damn you, Sara! Stop this nonsense and get to sleep!"

The hand descended a third time and struck the child a solid blow across the side of the head. The straining faces of both mother and daughter glowed the same alarming shade of crimson.

"I said *stop it*, Sara! *Stop it!* Do you hear me? Stop it *now* or you'll get a thrashing like you've never had!"

It was only when she gripped the child by the shoulders and began shaking her that Sam compelled himself forward. A filmy surface had coated his tongue. He felt odd: cold and hot at the same time. Funny thing.

He took Sarah by the arm.

"My God! Control yourself, will you? Look what you're doing."

In the other bed Julie sat up watching them through wet eyes, her arms flung over her head, a slow whine issuing from somewhere within her throat.

"She was terrified! She wasn't doing it deliberately!"

As the focus of his eyes sharpened, Sam watched with mounting horror as Sarah brusquely slapped her daughter's face.

Sarah froze at his touch.

"Let go of me, Sam."

Her voice had lowered to just above a whisper and had an edge to it that was so keen he could almost feel it slicing into his flesh.

"Sarah?"

"Just go back to bed. Okay? I know what I'm doing. It's all under control. You can't be gentle with her. You can't be. I've tried. It doesn't work. Let go."

His hand remained clamped around her slender arm.

"Let go," she murmured, her tone softening. "Please, Sam. It hurts."

When he loosened his grip she ripped her arm free. Then she turned on him an icy glare.

"You only encourage her, Sam. There's nothing worse than a brat who knows she can get away with anything. She has to be taught that she can't start screaming in the middle of the night and have everyone fussing over her like she was baby or something because she's not!"

"But I've never heard noises like *that* before!" Sam protested. "You can't say that's normal. Doesn't it mean she's sick?"

Sarah rolled her eyes to the ceiling and shook her head.

"Sam, what do you think you're doing, telling me what's normal and what isn't? You're never here! What do you know about any of this? I'll tell you. Nothing. You know nothing about what really goes on around here. You just go off to work in the morning and I get to stay home with *her*. And if I've learned anything over the years it's that she doesn't have to be sick to make noises like that. She screams her goddamn head off every time I try to make her take a nap! A nap, for Christ's sake, like it's a big deal or something. I've tried to ignore it. I've done my best. In the summer I could at least make myself a drink and go sit in the back yard. I always thought sooner or later it would stop. Someday, it would have to stop. But when it didn't stop and I had to stay in the house with her I decided I wasn't putting up with any more of that shit so I made her stop, just like you saw now."

Her mouth twitched into an expression that resembled a smile.

Sam swallowed. Something thick and lumpy forced itself down the passage to his stomach as he studied Sarah's stony eyes for traces of remorse.

"Sarah, that's terrible. How on earth could you hit your own child?" He paused to divert a swell of tears. "Why didn't you ever tell me? We could have discussed it."

She barked a pitiless laugh at him.

"Tell you? Jesus, Sam, don't be an idiot. You're so fucking naïve. You think everything's rosy and everyone's happy and life's so goddamn wonderful! But it isn't and it never was. Listen to the news, why don't you? You might learn something. I've always thought this but I'm telling you now for your own good. If you don't want to be pushed around all your life you have to learn to bully people. You'd be surprised how easy it is."

"She's only a child, Sarah! You can't treat her as if—"

"*God damn it, Sam!*" Sarah yelled with sudden fury, clenching her fists as if she would hit him as well. "What am I supposed to do? Come running every time she wants her ass wiped? If I did that

there'd be no living in the same house with her. I guarantee it. It's bad enough as it is with her whining all the time and screaming and yelling. Thank God, Julie isn't one of those. I think I'd kill myself rather than go through all that again."

She stood before him, rigid and defensive, fists clenched. He stared past her at the two beds. In the nearest, Sara lay dozing fitfully, clutching the sheets and whimpering softly. In the other, Julie sat up, paralyzed and wild-eyed. When he moved toward her she followed him distrustfully and then crawled away to the far corner of the bed. He sat beside her and brushed the hair back from her eyes. She was damp and feverish. As he drew her into his arms she began softly to cry.

"All hell breaks loose if you pamper them, Sam," Sarah announced from the doorway.

He glanced once more in her direction, trying to measure her mood. But it was beyond him. He was too exhausted.

"What's got into you, Sarah? You were never like this before."

"Nothing's 'got into' me at all. I learned what I had to do to keep myself from going crazy. It's as simple as that. You would've done the same as me, Sam. Anyone would've."

He pulled a chair from the corner and with Julie dozing on his shoulder sat down by Sara's bedside. He stroked her hot forehead.

"I just..." he began and gave up. Then he made himself look at her. "I don't understand. I really don't. I guess I must be either crazy or stupid." He paused, weighing his words with care. "I don't even know how to begin to talk about this."

"I don't know what you think there is to talk about," Sarah said, avoiding his eyes. "It's done now and it can't be undone. Whatever I did was for all our good. I'm not ashamed of it. People better than me hit their kids all the time. And you have to admit it worked. She stopped screaming. Didn't she?"

He shook his head.

"That's not the point—"

"That's not the point," Sarah mimicked rudely, making a prissy face. "Okay, Sam. That's not the point. I'll tell you what the point is. You try spending

a whole day or a whole week or a whole year shut up in the house with these two and see how much you like it. I'm going to bed."

"Sarah!" he called after her. "Come back here. I think we should talk."

"Oh, fuck you," she said to him from down the hall.

In the other bed Julie sat up watching them through wet eyes, her arms flung over her head, a slow whine issuing from somewhere within her throat.

He heard the bedroom door slam shut and after a moment felt the feathery impact of flowing air nuzzle his legs. With Julie limp in his arms he stepped with care around some toys strewn across the floor and switched off the light. He waited a minute for his eyes to adjust to this new and sobering darkness and then crept slowly back to the chair. The objects in the room were swathed in the silvery glow from the street lamp outside. A smiling doll with idiot eyes and pigtails sitting in a tiny rocker struck him as thoroughly pathetic and vaguely menacing. He tried to ignore it but his gaze fell on it again and again as if there were a chance it couldn't be trusted. Finally he shut his eyes and again placed his hand on Sara's forehead. It was damp but cool.

As soon as he realized he was falling asleep, he moved Julie from his arms and into the bed with Sara. Then he leaned back and braced himself in the chair. The last thing he could recall next morning when he turned his mind back to these events was the veiled sound of weeping coming from the next room. ■