

**Just Call Me Sam**  
**By**  
**Michael M. Alvarez**

I had read about the missing girl in Sunday's paper. It was three days later, and the police still had no leads.

There were six other people in the small Arroyo Café: a family of three, a security guard, probably on his way to the nearby mall, and two guys in Arizona Diamonds baseball caps. And, of course, me, Nick Madrid, private investigator.

Outside, it was a clear, cloudless January day. The kind of day described in the Tucson Chamber of Commerce brochures. I recognized the missing girl's mother from local TV interviews as she walked in. I gave her a slight nod.

"Mr. Madrid? I'm Alison Crawford."

"Please, call me Nick." I shook her hand. "Still no word about Samantha?"

"Oh, Sam," she corrected me quickly. She hates to be called Samantha. She'll be fifteen next month." She fished into her maroon handbag. "I thought you might need a picture of Sam."

Sam was a younger version of her mother: blonde, blue-eyed, with an intelligent gaze. "Please tell me anything you feel might be important," I said.

She took a deep breath. "Her father and I divorced several years ago. Perhaps, if I had tried harder to work things out with Rob...."

"Was Sam involved in anything at school that caused you concern?"

“No. Not that I know of. Sam’s best friend, Rachel Sutter, might know something.”

“It would be helpful if I could see Sam’s room.”

“I’ll write down my address. You can come over anytime.”

“Where does Sam’s father live now?”

“He’s still in town. Would you like his address as well?”

“Yes. What does your ex-husband do?”

“Rob dabbles in stocks, and he spends a lot of his time at the local casinos.”

I stood. “I’ll be in touch.”

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We were downtown, sitting in the Cup Café at the Hotel Congress. I had ordered a BLT and iced tea. Andy was devouring the Gila Monster, which is a large meatloaf sandwich. Andy managed to eat whatever he wanted, never exercised, and yet never gained a pound. I hated him for his amazing metabolism.

“So the Crawfords hired you?” said Sergeant Andrew Saccio. He is a homicide detective with the Tucson Police Department and my best friend.

“I only spoke with Mrs. Crawford,” I said. “So what can you tell me about the Crawford girl’s disappearance?”

“Samantha Crawford and her friend Rachel Sutter were at the Tucson Mall on Saturday. Samantha’s father had dropped them off earlier that morning.” Andy paused to sip his iced tea. “Robert Crawford had agreed to meet the girls at the Food Court at three o’clock, but at around one-thirty, he received a panicked call from Rachel, informing him that she and Samantha had gotten separated for a few minutes, and she couldn’t find her.”

“Crawford called the police?”

“Yes. A couple of TPD officers, along with mall security searched the mall, with no luck.”

“Is Robert Crawford wealthy?”

“He’s not ‘Bill Gates’ rich, but he made a lot of money right before the tech bubble burst. There’s been no ransom demand.”

“Does Crawford have any enemies?”

Andy shrugged. “According to an informant on the street, Crawford owes the loan sharking Romero brothers two hundred thousand dollars.”

“I’m going to check out Samantha’s room, and then talk to Rachel Sutter and Sam’s father,” I said.

Andy stood and smiled. “You got lunch, right?”

“As usual, yes.”

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Alison Crawford’s two-story house was near the University of Arizona. Not much of a front yard, a tall mesquite tree sat alongside the right side of the house that was in dire need of a new paint job. The front door did have a nice diagonal, colored glass panel, with a tarnished brass knob and an oversized doorbell button.

“Hello,” Alison Crawford said, as she opened the front door. “Sam’s room is on the second floor.”

In Sam’s room, there were posters of music performers and candid snapshots of Sam and her friends were carefully pinned with tiny pushpins across the wall above her bed. There was a computer on an oak desk.

There were three picture frames on top of the dresser. Two were of Sam and a man whom I assumed was her father. The third picture was of a much younger Sam, with a dark-haired girl. They were poking their heads out of a swimming pool.

I turned on the computer and did a quick scan of her computer files and Internet activity. I found nothing important.

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I called Andy to get Rachel Sutter's address.

I met Rachel's mother, got permission to talk to Rachel in her room, with the door wide open.

I immediately recognized Rachel as the dark-haired girl in one of Sam's bedroom photos. "Hi, Rachel, my name is Nick. I'm a private investigator. I'd like to ask you some questions."

"Sure...okay." Rachel slowly fingered the MP3 player she was holding in her right hand. It looked new.

"Sam's mom told me you and Sam were best friends"

Rachel nodded. "Since second grade. I sat next to her. When the teacher was doing attendance the first day, she asked if Samantha was present. Sam raised her hand. And then she wrinkled her nose at me and said, 'Just call me Sam.'"

"Can you tell me exactly what happened when you and Sam got separated at the mall on Saturday?"

"We were looking at some jeans. Sam's cell phone rang. She answered it. When I looked around she was gone. I looked for her all over, but I couldn't find her. I got scared and called her father."

“What happened after you called Sam’s father?”

“Sam’s dad and I looked around for Sam at first...but then he called the cops.”

Her dark eyes drifted to the floor.

I noticed a cell phone on the bed. “Do you have the same type of cell phone as Sam?”

“Sam’s father bought her a fancy one. It’s got some satellite thing in it...a chip or something.”

I thanked Rachel. I found her mother in the kitchen. “Nice little MP3 player Rachel got for Christmas.”

Mrs. Sutter looked at me, confused, and then nodded. “Oh, that thing. No, we didn’t get it for her. When I asked her about it, she mumbled something about one of her friends giving it to her because they had gotten a newer one, or something.”

Not likely, I thought. I recognized the type of player Rachel had as the newest model on the market.

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“Mr. Crawford, my name is Nick—“

“I know who you are,” he snapped. He was about to unlock the front door to his house. “My ex-wife called me. Aren’t the police handling this?” Crawford was tall, with a permanent scowl on this face.

“I’d like to ask you a few questions about what happened at the mall.” I paused as the front door swung open; he nodded to me, so I followed him into the house.

“Let’s go into my study,” Crawford said.

Crawford fumbled with a cigarette. “I was upset, of course. I figured Sam might have had another argument with her mother and was just trying to put a scare into her with her little *disappearance*.”

“Do you remember what time you received Rachel’s call?”

“Yes, it was around one thirty.”

“Did you and your wife argue a lot when you were still married?”

Crawford nodded. “We weren’t the only ones arguing all the time. After Alison realized that I wanted a divorce, she and Sam argued constantly. I even saw Alison smack Sam in the arm once.”

“Have you ever struck Sam?”

“Of course not.” He gave me a hard look. “I don’t appreciate your insinuation.”

“Sorry. I had to ask.” I stood to leave and headed for the study doorway, where I paused. “By the way, do you think Sam’s disappearance might have anything to do with the money you owe the Romero brothers?”

His cigarette almost fell from his lips. “What? How did you—no, of course not! That’s my private business. And I would like to keep it that way, understand?”

“Fine with me.”

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I called Andy. “Need a couple of favors, *amigo*.”

“Shoot,” Andy said.

I asked Andy to check on a couple of things and then I headed back out to Rachel Sutter’s home. On the way to Rachel’s house, Andy called me back on my cell phone.

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“Rachel, I spoke with Sam’s father and he confirmed that you called him around one thirty last Saturday. However, the police checked calls received on Sam’s cell phone. She got a call at twelve o’clock from her home number.”

“So what if Sam and her mother talked on the phone?”

“Did Sam go to meet her mother?”

Rachel frowned with indecision. Then she looked up at me with watery eyes. “*She* made me promise not to tell....”

“Sam?”

She shook her head. “No, not Sam. Her mother. She made me promise not to tell anyone about...about what really happened.”

“What happened after Sam got the call from her mother?”

“Sam’s mom came to the mall and picked her up. Sam told me that she and her mom had some things to talk over.”

“What time was that?”

“About noon. Sam’s mom came back to the mall about forty-five minutes later and told me that Sam was at home. She’d decided not to come back to the mall. She asked if I wanted something to eat. We went to the Red Robin for burgers.”

“Did Sam ever tell you about her mother hitting her when they argued?”

Rachel bit her lip. “Not long after Sam found out that her parents were getting a divorce, Sam told me that she and her mom would get into these ugly fights...I think her mom would hit Sam sometimes.”

I had asked Andy to check Alison Crawford's recent credit card purchases.  
"Sam's mom bought you that MP3 player, didn't she?"

Rachel's eyes welled with tears. "Yeah. She made me promise not to tell anyone that she had picked up Sam. She told me to call Sam's dad and pretend that Sam and I had gotten separated, and that I couldn't find her."

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I called Andy. "I'm pretty sure Samantha Crawford's cell phone has a GPS chip. Rachel Sutter told me that Sam's mother called Sam at noon and picked up her at the mall shortly afterwards. I'm on my way to Alison's house now."

"Okay, I'll meet you there."

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"Was there something else you wanted to ask me?" said Alison Crawford, gesturing for me to sit down.

"Just a few loose ends," I said. "Why did you call your daughter on Saturday, when she and her friend were at the mall?"

The doorbell rang before Alison could answer. She stood to answer the front door.

Andy nodded to me as he entered. "Have I missed anything?"

"I just asked Mrs. Crawford why she called Sam at the mall on Saturday, around noon," I said.

Alison Crawford, clearly not accustomed to being questioned, tossed her head back, sending a wave of blonde hair cascading across her shoulders. "Sam and I needed to talk something over, so I called and asked if she had time to come home for a while. I don't see what the big deal is."



“The big deal,” Andy said, “is your husband told the police that he’d received the panicked call from Rachel Sutter at around one thirty, when in fact Sam and Rachel had parted company since noon.”

I could tell Alison’s stolid facade was beginning to crack. “Mrs. Crawford, did you and Sam come back here on Saturday?” I said.

“Yes. Sam and I needed to talk.”

“According to your ex-husband and Rachel Sutter, you and Sam have had some pretty heated arguments,” I said.

Alison made a dismissive wave of her hand. “Sam and I have been going through a rough time, since...well, since Robert and I got divorced.”

“Tell us exactly what happened last Saturday?” Andy said.

Alison stared at the floor, sighing heavily, and then in a slow, measured tone of voice said, “Sam and I had an argument. It was nothing worse than the ones we’ve had before. Except, well, I lost my temper and tried to reach out to Sam. She pulled away...and...” Alison choked up, as tears streamed down her face.

Andy’s cell phone rang. He excused himself.

“Where did this argument take place?” I said.

“We were standing at the top of the stairs.”

Andy had finished his call and stood quietly, listening.

“Do you know where Sam is now?” I said.

Alison shook her head.

“I do,” Andy said. “That call was from your daughter’s cell phone company.”

Andy moved closer to Alison. “The GPS chip in your daughter’s phone is still transmitting. It’s a very weak signal. The coordinates the phone company just gave me indicate that the phone—and possibly your daughter—are somewhere in this house.”

Alison shook her head violently and tried to stand.

“Please, Mrs. Crawford, you need to stay seated. I’ve requested a search warrant for your home.”

“Unless you give us permission to begin the search right now,” I said.

Alison Crawford’s face melted into a sad, defeated look. “I didn’t mean to hurt her. You have to believe me. It was an accident. We were arguing...I tried to reach out to her, and she pulled away...losing her balance and falling down the stairs. When I got to her, I could tell she was dead....”

Alison squeezed her eyes shut. “Sam is in the basement,” she said in a lifeless voice.

Andy had his handcuffs out. “Mrs. Crawford, please stand up. I’m placing you under arrest.”

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Andy and I were having coffee at the Arroyo Café.

“Damn devious of Alison Crawford to come to you in the first place,” Andy said. “What tipped you off to her?”

“Little things at first,” I said. “For example, how she made a point of telling me that her husband loved to gamble. She figured the police would check and find out about his debts with the Romero brothers.” I paused to sip my coffee. “Also, I thought it was curious that I didn’t find a single photo of Sam and her mother in Sam’s room. The place

was plastered with pictures, but not *one* of Sam with her mother. Then when Rachel told me about the fights between Sam and her mother, it all began to fall into place.”

Nick sat back. “What really bothered me was how Alison bribed Rachel to lie and call Sam’s father, pretending that Sam had just gone missing—*almost an hour and a half after Sam had left with her mother.*”

Andy nodded. “That woman did everything she could to draw any suspicion away from herself. It eventually had the opposite effect—suspicion actually pointed right back to her.”

“Funny how things work out sometimes,” I agreed.

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