

Sam's Storm – *Betsy Byars*

'I AM IN PAIN!' Sam yelled at the top of his lungs.

There was no answer.

'I am in great pain!'

Again, no answer. The only sound in the big empty house was Sam's sigh.

He looked down at his red, swollen fee, propped on separate pillows. He realized that he now knew the exact meaning of the word 'throb'. His feet throbbed. He had five hornet stings on one, and four on the other. And they throbbed.

'I am in pain and agony!' he yelled, even though there was no-one to hear him. The entire family had gone to see a 75-pound snapping turtle Mr Johnson had pulled out of his fishing pond.

He had watched them drive away, his cousins in the back of the truck, laughing and excited, his grandparents in the front.

'You're sure you don't mind being left alone?' his grandmother had asked.

'I don't mind,' he had answered, in a way that should have let he know he minded a lot.

'We'll be back in less than an hour.'

'Don't worry about me.'

'Here's some lemonade and cookies if you get hungry. Here are two aspirin in case your feet hurt.'

In case they hurt! he had wanted to yell. What do you think they've been doing all day? I am in agony!

'We'll be back before the thunderstorms' his grandmother said.

Every afternoon since he'd been at his grandparents' farm, they had had thunderstorms – big, powerful storms with booming thunder and streaks of lightening. The only one who hated the storms more than Sam was his grandparents' big black dog, Bull.

'Now, you're sure you - '

'I'll be fine!'

Actually, it was amazing how little sympathy he was getting. His feet were as big as balloons. His toes like sausages. Each hornet sting was a white welt in the red, swollen flesh.

And yet, because it was his own fault, because he had gone out in the yard barefoot, nobody seemed to care. How was he to know hornets made nests in the ground? How was he to know he could be stung, and that, while he was hopping in fear and pain from one foot to the other, he could be stung eight more times?

His cousins had known, but they were farm kids. He was from the city.

He heard scratching at the screen door. 'Bull', he called. 'Is that you?'

The only time Bull ever wanted to come into the house was when a storm was coming. Bull, his grandfather said, was better then the weatherman at predicting storms.

'When that dog wants in the house, you can bet a storm's coming. And the more he wants in, the worse the storm's going to be.'

'Why is he so afraid of storms?' Sam had asked.

'He blew in here one night during a storm. That's the way we got him. We went out one morning, and the yard was covered with wood, buckets and stray chickens, every kind of thing. And under the front steps was Bull. Since that day, he hasn't been able to abide a storm.'

Bull barked at the front door.

‘I’d let you in,’ Sam called. ‘But I’m in agony!’

Sam glanced out of the window, to the east the sky was bright blue, the clouds white.

‘Anyway, there’s no storm in sight, Bull’ he called.

Bull was not comforted. His face appeared at the window, for a huge, strong dog – that was how he got the name Bull – he could look terrified. His tongue was lolling out of his mouth, drops of saliva were dropping onto the sill, his eyes bulged, his whole body trembled.

At that moment, a long, low rumble of thunder came from the west. Bull threw back his head and howled.

Suddenly Sam was uneasy too. Maybe, he thought, I am sitting here looking at this patch of blue sky, thinking there is no danger, while behind me.....

He glanced quickly over his shoulder. Through the hall he could see the edge of the dining-room window. The sky there was black.

He turned and met Bull’s pleading eyes. ‘Stop looking at me like that. I can’t do anything.’

Bull barked twice, the last bark ending in a howl.

‘I’m telling you, I’m helpless.’ He broke off to listen to the newest roll of thunder. The sound was moving closer. This storm was coming faster than usual.

‘Now you’re making me nervous,’ he told Bull.

The dog had put his huge paws against the screen and began to dig. Slits opened in the screen. There was another roll of thunder. Bull dug faster.

‘Stop it!’ Sam yelled. But Bull was beyond hearing any command.

The slits in the screen were lengthening, soon the screen was in ribbons. Bull began to pry through. He jumped in, hit the floor, and without pausing ran for the chair where Sam sat.

In one leap, Bull cleared the footstool and was on Sam’s lap. The pain jarred Sam’s feet.

Tears came into his eyes. ‘Get down!’ he moaned, but Bull was curled into a ball of fear. His soft, pleading eyes looked up at Sam.

With a sigh, Sam gave in. Getting Bull off his lap would be more painful than letting him stay. ‘All right, but be still.’

Actually, it was comforting to have the big dog on his lap. He rested his arms on Bull’s trembling shoulders. ‘I know how you feel, pal, because I don’t care for storms either.’

There was another crash of thunder. This time the sound echoed from cloud to cloud, as if it were building force. Bull tried to bury his head under Sam’s arm.

At that moment, wind swept through the house, blowing through the open windows.

Upstairs, a door slammed. Outside, branches blew against the house.

‘We ought to go to the basement,’ he said. Every afternoon his grandmother listened to the storm, judged it, and said, ‘Well, it’s not bad enough for us to go to the basement.’

‘This one,’ he told Bull, ‘is bad enough for us to go to the basement.’

Turning sideways, he dumped Bull on the floor. Bull waited in a crouch, tail between his huge legs, ears flat. Then he crawled under the nearest table.

Sam slipped off the chair and landed hard on his knees. He too waited, crouched in pain.

Slowly, he straightened.

‘Come on,’ he told Bull. The dog only trembled harder.

Sam crossed the room, grimacing with pain, and grabbed Bull’s thick collar. ‘Come on.’

Bull pulled back, bracing himself, not wanting to leave the safety of the table. ‘Come on!’

The floor was slick and well waxed, and Bull slid out. Sam dragged him through the hall.

Through the front door, Sam saw the blackest sky he had ever seen in his life. Drops of water the size of marbles began to pelt the porch. The old oak tree groaned in the wind. Sam

struggled down the hall, dragging Bull with him over the slick floor. Outside, an oak limb crashed against the house. Glass shattered.

At last Sam's hand closed around the knob to the basement door. He pulled, and in a rush Bull slipped past him, down the steps, and behind the water heater. 'Thanks for waiting,' Sam said.

He crawled down two steps, and the wind slammed the door behind him. He was in darkness now. He felt his way down the stairs, step by step, like a small child. As he got to the bottom, he heard a noise overhead, a crash so loud it seemed like the whole world had been split apart. He covered his head with his hands and waited for the worst.

'Sam!'

He lifted his head.

'Sam?'

'I'm in the basement.' He had no idea how long he had been here, waiting out the storm – maybe an hour.

The basement door opened, and Sam looked up at his grandfather. 'Are you alright, Sam?'

'Yes.'

Behind his grandfather was a solid wall of leaves. 'What happened?'

'The oak tree,' his grandfather said, choking on his words, unable to continue.

Sam began to climb the stairs on his knees. On the top step he stopped. There was no way to get through the hall.

'The living room,' his grandfather said, pointing helplessly.

Sam was stunned. He said. 'The tree fell on the living room? What's grandma going to say. She loved that tree. She loved his house.'

His grandfather shook his head.

'It can be fixed, can't it?'

'Maybe.'

Sam heard a noise on the stairs, and he looked down. Bull was coming up. As the big dog squeezed past, Sam scratched him behind the ears. Bull disappeared into the branches.

'We'd better let your grandma know you're safe,' his grandfather said. 'You're what she's worried about.'

'I'm fine.' When he said it this time, it was true.

Bull was running around the tree, sniffing the broken branches, leaping over the leaves, wild with excitement. The huge ball of roots and dirt was as high as the porch roof.

'One thing,' his grandfather said. 'You probably saved old Bull's life.'

Sam hesitated and then said, truthfully, 'We saved each other.'

His grandfather nodded, squared his shoulders, and went down the steps.