

SONG TO THE SIREN



BY BARB LIEN-COOPER AND PARK COOPER

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Praise for Song to the Siren

“As soon as I jumped into this book it was hard to put down. When I wasn’t reading it, I couldn’t wait to pick it back up again and often found myself thinking about Reed. The authors [made] this . . . fascinating, creepy, and heartbreaking all at once. Reed has earned a spot in my [list of] favorite characters. He is broken, flawed, but still so caring. I finished this book days ago and I still think about his character. That’s how much I love the guy. The ending was hauntingly beautiful and moving . . . Rating: 5 Stars”

–Indie Book Addict

“Captivating, entertaining, and thoughtful . . . SONG TO THE SIREN is a must-read paranormal and mythological story. From the utilization of the indie-rock scene as a setting to emotional character growth and the mystery of ‘Belle’ . . . one novel readers won’t want to miss. Rating: 10/10”

–reviewer Anthony Avina

“It’s old school, with a lot of the creepiness appearing in the shadows . . . Could we be witnessing a mental breakdown and delusion, or are we seeing something truly supernatural? Honestly, this book could appeal to the romance crowd equally as much as it could to any lovers of quiet horror. What it is, is a damn good story. It is engaging, entertaining . . . well-written . . . You really could suspend disbelief and think this was a true transcript from a real magazine or documentary. I, for one, thoroughly enjoyed it.”

–kendallreviews.com

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[Song to the Siren, Book Two: A Lovers' Concerto](#)

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Content Guidance

This novel explores difficult aspects of psychology and mental health. An important character may or may not struggle with issues involving self-harm and suicide-- those who remain after he is gone discuss in great detail *if* he did these things to himself, or if he instead may have had some sort of stalker who wished him ill.

However, whatever the answers to those questions, others in this character's life did sometimes have tragic events happen to them, and the story at times involves certain themes of parental neglect (partially tied to alcohol dependence), at least one incident of suicide, parental and family deaths, and two incidences involving animal death (which are *not* explicitly witnessed nor described in the story). Still, please read with care.

Chapter 1

If I reply to this email, thought Samantha, I'll have to tell them what really happened. The whole thing. The slow way. Because if I just came out and tried to explain the truth to them all at once, they'd... She stared at the email that was waiting, on her computer screen, for her to reply to it...

Dear Ms. MacNamara... it began...

Samantha frowned. *What **would** they do... if I really tried to explain what happened back then? What would **anyone** do? It's why I've never told a single living soul...*

She looked up above her monitor, at the wall of her home office, at the framed photograph of a handsome young man holding a guitar. His long blond hair was flying around as he played. He was smiling at the camera, at the person taking his picture... In the background was the rest of the band, with the drum set that bore the stylized logo of the Big Carnival. "Am I really sure I want to be interviewed, Reed?" Sam asked the young man in the photo. "Music press people, diehard fans, even people I trusted, I've never told anyone about... what happened. It's amazing that after all of these years, people are still interested in you and the Big Carnival."

She sat for a minute, as if listening for a reply that she knew would never and could never come... and then she sighed. "I'll do it for you, Reed darling..."

Sam spent several minutes typing out a frenzied reply to the email. Then she went back and re-read the most *provocative* part of what she had written: I loved Reed Sinclair, but he was taken from me by another woman. It wasn't someone made of flesh and blood—I could have handled that—but a woman made out of spirit... and hatred. She was someone who hungered for more than Reed's blood. Belle hungered for Reed's sanity. She took his mind, and then she took his life. The news reports back in the day said that Reed's death was a suicide. But I was there. I know everything. Reed Sinclair's death was cold-blooded, premeditated murder.

Sam began to giggle. The giggle turned into the type of raw, painful laugh a person laughs to try to avoid crying.

It didn't work, though. Sam couldn't help but let her laughter turn to crying anyway, as she'd cried so many times over Reed...

She took a few tissues from a nearby box, and dried her eyes. Then she began to delete her reply. She watched with grim resignation as every word was destroyed by the backspace key. When she was finished, she looked at the blank box where her initial response had been.

Then she clicked on another window, and looked at the information she'd found when she looked up the two young men who'd sent her the email. Ryan Torres, and Brandon Hawkins... They seemed like nice enough Midwestern boys... Brandon was about four inches taller than Ryan, with light brown hair and blue eyes... Ryan was on the thin side, but he was sort of wiry, too, like the sort of young person who might've run track in high school... In the first picture she'd found of both of them from one of Ryan's many social media profiles, they were posing together and making zombie faces in front of a revival-house showing of *Night of the Living Dead*. In the second picture, the thumbnail of which was right below the zombie one, they were holding up two different Big Carnival albums, each young man wearing a gleeful expression on his face...

She looked back up at the photo of Reed. "I can't hit them over the head with the whole truth. I'll have to just lead them on a little. A... a warm, charming... *evasive* reply, but not to the point where anyone would realize it..."

She nodded a tight, determined little nod, and resumed typing. Dear Ryan...



"She really said she'd do the interview?" Brandon asked.

"Yeah. We've got Samantha MacNamara for our documentary," said Ryan. "Sam Mac. I am not kidding. This is really gonna happen."

“How’d you get her to agree to talk to us? I mean... *us*? Sam Mac never talks to *anyone* about Reed and the Big Carnival.”

Ryan gestured at the computer monitor behind him, on the desk crammed with books on film, charging cables for a variety of electronics, Green Bay Packers memorabilia, and even some things like deodorant and mouthwash. Every inch of space in the very small apartment he and Brandon shared was filled, and if anything got knocked over, it often knocked something else over, too. “I obsessed for hours over what I was gonna say to her—I mean, this was Sam Mac! —but finally I just explained, y’know, that we’re two documentary filmmakers who got crowdfunding for a documentary about the band...”

“‘Documentary filmmakers?’ So you didn’t tell her that we’re just two guys who graduated from college a couple of weeks ago.” Ryan made a face that was just uncomfortable enough to confirm Brandon’s theory. “Ryan...”

“Have we *started* making a crowdfunded documentary? Yes. Therefore, we’re documentary filmmakers. My *point* is, I told her how important the project is to us, and how much it would mean to the Big Carnival fans out there if she’d talk about the BC, blah blah blah...”

“...And she said yes?”

“She said yes!”

“...Lemme see the email!”

With a few careful maneuvers of his computer’s mouse, Ryan brought up the email for Brandon.

Brandon read:

Dear Ryan:

It’s wonderful to hear that the Big Carnival still have an enthusiastic fanbase after around four decades...

I sometimes have a hard time talking about the band. As I’m sure you’re aware, the Big Carnival’s bass player was my brother Pete, and Reed... well, Reed and I loved each

other very much. It's heartbreaking to me that my dear brother and my darling Reed aren't alive today to see how much their band still means to their fans.

I am more than willing to participate in the documentary. But I have two conditions:

First, I'd like you and your friend Brandon to be my guests at my house in Bloomington. There's plenty of room here, since my parents and my brother are no longer with us. I know that you guys must be on a tight budget, so staying here, instead of at a hotel, might help out with your money worries.

The second condition is that you allow me to tell you the *whole* story. You must film everything. I have never talked to anyone about Reed and the band, and I have a lot to say about both matters.

I warn you that the story I am going to tell you is... a bit odd. You may or may not believe a word of it. But I feel that it must be told.

If these two conditions are agreeable to you, please email me back at your earliest convenience.

Take care,

Samantha MacNamara

"...What does she mean by 'a bit odd,' d'you think...?" Brandon asked.

"Well, y'know, you've read about Reed online..." said Ryan, "about the drugs and the deaths and the tragedies that surrounded the Big Carnival... And some of those deaths and tragedies are what kept the band from becoming more than a cult favorite... I figured 'odd' meant she's maybe gonna give us the inside scoop on all that crap—which is just what our documentary needs."

"Yeah... yeah, okay..." Brandon looked at his roommate. "So we're really gonna get to meet her?"

"We're really gonna get to meet her."

"...What's the next step?"

"I write her back and say that yes, we accept her conditions, I tell her when we think we'll be there, and then we drive there—and I say that we go right away. We don't

wanna give a recognized artist like Sam Mac so much time to think about this that she changes her mind, do we?”

“*Hell* no. Email her back and say that we can be there tomorrow...” Brandon opened his cell phone, tapped it a few times. “Wait, are we talking about Bloomington, Indiana?”

“No, this Bloomington is, like, a suburb of Minneapolis.”

“Well that’s even better, Madison to Minneapolis is about four hours. I’m gonna go pack.”

Ryan turned to reply to Sam Mac’s email. *Should I **ask** her about what she meant by **a bit odd**?* he wondered. *Nah, we’ll find out when we get there,* he decided.

He started typing his reply email.



“...I’m nervous as hell about all of this,” Brandon admitted to Ryan the next day. “I mean, here we are standing on Sam Mac’s doorstep...”

“She seems like a really nice lady, so just play it cool, okay?” said Ryan. “Now, deep breath... You ready?”

“...Ready.”

“Okay, I’m ringing the doorbell...”

About 15 seconds later, Samantha MacNamara answered the door.

Brandon was surprised. Somehow, he’d wrapped his mind around the idea that he was going to meet the slim, serious-looking artist with the short hair from all the Big Carnival photographs—what few there were of her in front of the camera instead of behind it—but it hadn’t sunk in that she would be much older now.

Not that she looked *bad* now. Really, she was very well-preserved, for being over 60. Her hair wasn’t dirty blonde anymore—her hair was still short enough that it didn’t reach even halfway down her neck, but now the color was somewhere between gray and

a shining silver. The wrinkles she had were deep, but very few. What kept Brandon from speaking at first, though, wasn't shock at her being old, nor dignified, but the look in her eyes. *Sharp*, he thought. *Smart*. And... something else. Not hostility, nor caution, nor weariness, but... a kind of guardedness. Perhaps not against him and Ryan, but...

When he thought about it, that quality of being on guard had been there even more in the photos of Sam Mac from the old days, too.

What did she have to be on guard against, then? Brandon wondered.

But although, when the door had opened, Ryan had seemed struck by the same things as Brandon, Ryan recovered faster. "Hello... we're here about the interview, ma'am," Ryan said.

"So, you're Ryan and Brandon... You're so young!" *At least she doesn't make it sound like she thinks we're too young to be filmmakers*, thought Brandon.

"Yes ma'am, that's us," said Ryan. "May we come in?"

"Of course. Would you like me to show you to your rooms, or do you want to start work right away?"

"We'd like to start right away," said Brandon. "We have a ton of questions I want to ask you about the band."

"Well, set up your equipment, and let's get started," she said. Ryan and Brandon stepped inside, and Brandon—who already had most of his equipment hanging off of him, such as the folded-up tripod, and some lighting stuff—put all his stuff down in the living room that was visible from the front door, and started getting ready. "Would you rather be in the den?" Sam asked, gesturing to a doorway. "Maybe you think the light would be better in there? It has more windows..."

Brandon went and looked through the open doorway, into the wood-paneled den. Over their shoulders, Ryan looked too. "Mm, no," said Brandon, "it's tempting, with all those great photos and stuff on the walls, but I like the color of the walls in here better... it matters, since the floors are all hardwood... and there's plenty of photos on the walls in here, too. Not surprising, since, y'know. Photographer."

"Yeah," said Ryan. He walked over to a large bookcase. The left side of the top shelf had all of Sam Mac's photography books: *Early Work*, *Looking Back*, *The Colors of Samantha*

MacNamara, Looking Forward, Sam Mac's New York... the rest of the shelf was books about photography by other people, and so was the shelf below it... but the middle and lower shelves were full of books about other things... *Monsters of the World, Legends and Magic, Folk Belief, The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat, Irish Myths and Legends, Folk Tales and Ballads*, a Gaelic dictionary, *The Complete Guide to Vampires, Celtic Folklore, The Pre-Raphaelite Movement, The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics, World Mythology, The Fey of Ireland, The Life of Biddy Early, The Fairy Folk and You* by Cricket Hawthorne...

Well, after all, Ryan mused, *just because there aren't any books about the Big Carnival, why should every book in the house be about photography?* He started looking at the various photos on the wall. The one near him that interested him the most was a picture of Reed Sinclair that he'd never seen before... It was Reed next to a statue... of Sherlock Holmes? *From when they lived in London*, Ryan thought. It was a color picture... it looked like it'd been raining, and Reed's blond hair was pushed back out of his face and somewhat plastered to his head—

“—Ryan?” It was Brandon. Ryan looked over to his right. “We're ready.”

Sam was sitting in a tall, very cushioned chair, upholstered with solid, off-white fabric, perfect for filming her in. Another chair had been moved facing her, but off to the left, out of the way of Brandon's camera. Ryan sat in that one, leaned forward... and his eye was caught by another photo.



Ryan: Is that a picture of your brother Pete and Reed Sinclair?

Sam: The one there on the coffee table? Yeah, that's Reed and Pete in that picture, back when they were kids. Pete looks really different from his Big Carnival photos, doesn't he? But you can still tell it's him... the main difference is just that his hair's so short, but most boys were like that then... but look at the wide little nose, and the big eyes... you can't tell from the photo, but his hair's the same medium brown he had all his life... except a little lighter from all the time playing outside... and you also can't tell that that plaid shirt he's wearing is blue, but I remember it because I was wearing it myself a

couple of years later—I was such a tomboy that I wanted to wear all my brother’s hand-me-downs...

Ryan: Your brother has a black eye in that picture.

Sam: Yeah, but you can see that Pete’s smiling, and so is Reed. They’d had their first fight, but, you know how little boys are... that’s how they became friends.

Ryan: How’d the fight happen?

Sam: My family had just moved here to Bloomington, which is one of the oldest suburbs of Minneapolis. Pete was about eight years old. We didn’t know anyone, because we were new to the area. I was two years younger than Pete. I was one of those pesky little sisters that liked to tag along with their brothers. But Pete hated that, so I was stuck sitting on the porch, reading a picture book. Pete was roaming the neighborhood with the new camera our parents had bought him. I wanted a camera, too, but I was told, as I so often was, that I was just a kid. Ugh.

Anyway, there I was sitting when Pete ran up and said, “Come quick. Some jerk named Reed has taken my camera!” So I abandoned my book and followed Pete to somebody’s back yard, next door to our new house.

Now, you might ask yourself why we didn’t tell our parents instead of handling the matter ourselves. The answer is that if we’d told our parents, they would have done something about it. And if they did something about it, Pete would have been seen as a real chicken. Cluck, cluck, there’s the chicken who had to run to his parents to get his camera back. That simply could not be.

Ryan: Understandable...

Sam: Well, there were these three boys. They were big boys... One was kind of hefty. One was kind of muscle-bound. But the third one was skinny with long blond hair, which, seriously, *wasn’t* the fashion back then. Boys just *didn’t* wear their hair long like that. Only a really neglectful parent would let a boy have that kind of hair. But his long hair looked great on him. His eyes were grey, like the sea during a winter storm... When he looked at you, you could *not* look away... at least, I couldn’t. He frightened me, but he also fascinated me. There were grass stains on the knees of his pants. He was wearing a white t-shirt, and blue jeans, and tennis shoes, but his clothes were disheveled and dirty, like no one cared enough to get him clean clothes. He looked like

one of Peter Pan's Lost Boys in that way. In fact, except for his long blond hair, he looked like the classic animated version of Peter Pan himself, a little, because his eyebrows went up more than the average kid's, in a sort of arch that never quite came all the way down, and because of his grin... It was the same smart-alec, cocky sort of grin as Peter Pan...

Ryan: Reed.

Sam: Yes. Reed. He had... *presence*. More than that, everything about him said he was trouble with a capital T, too. And yes, he was holding my brother's camera. And he—Reed, I mean—he said... God, the first words I ever heard him speak... “Mongrel dog! You are an interloper on our land, and you must prove your courage!”

Ryan: What?!

Sam: I know! ...*Interloper*?! Can you imagine an eight-year-old kid acting like he was lord of the neighborhood and we were the local peasants? He'd been reading a few too many boys' own adventure books, or maybe he'd been watching too many adventure movies...

Ryan: [laughter]

Sam: In *retrospect*, it was funny, but it wasn't at *that* point. At that point, it felt serious as the grave. If Pete didn't get his camera back, he would have been toast with my parents. So, I said, “Hey, jerk, that's my brother's camera.” Not exactly the most original line, but I was six...

“Why'd you bring a girl here?” Reed asked, suddenly dropping his fancy talk.

“Needed a lookout,” said Pete. “If the adults catch us...”

“—You'll be toast!” I said.

Reed smiled. Then he leaned down to me a little, and said: “Can you do this job, or are you a little scaredy-baby?” He had a weird kind of smile on his face, which told me that, even though we'd just met, he'd sized me up, and had pretty much decided what kind of person I was.

“Take that back! I'm no scaredy-baby!” I said.

“Okay, that’s good enough for me. You get up in that tree, and whistle if you see anyone coming,” Reed said.

“*That* tree? It’s really high!” I said.

“Scaredy-baby!” Reed crowed.

“She’s no scaredy-baby!” said Pete.

So with that, I had no choice. Our family honor was at stake. I had to climb that tree! Reed gave me a boost up, and I scrambled up that tree like a monkey!

Reed gave one of his friends the camera, and the fight began.

Pete stepped forward to punch Reed in the face. You could see it coming by a mile, but that was part of the game. They tried to punch each other above the waist, and they tried to dodge, but they usually didn’t, but then again, they were only kids, so they didn’t punch all that hard, so it didn’t matter.

And sure enough, Reed dodged Pete’s slow punch, side-stepping out of the way. Pete took a few steps forward because he couldn’t slow his momentum in time, but finally he turned, found where Reed had moved to, and charged toward Reed again. Reed just backed out of the way, and then as Pete kept coming, Reed ducked under Pete’s fists and got behind him, and Pete had to stop and turn again.

“Foolish cur!” crowed Reed. “You persist in believing that you’re a match for—ow!” While Reed was standing still striking a pose like a scornful bandit king or whatever he was supposed to be, Pete had finally managed to connect, punching him in the arm. Then Pete socked Reed one in the shoulder while Reed was being surprised and in pain about being socked in the arm, and then they were moving, running around again.

They were both bad at fighting, but for very different reasons. *Pete*, certainly as strong as the average kid, and slightly tougher, was bad at fighting Reed because Reed could *move*. He was fast, quick, both in guessing what Pete would do next, and then at moving to do something about it. *Reed* was bad at fighting Pete because Reed wasn’t really *interested* in fighting—he wanted to *act* like he was good at fighting, always wanting to stop and say lines like he was the antihero or villain of some story that was all up in his head... but he couldn’t say cool lines and pose and fight at the same time. So he halfway made Pete look like a clumsy idiot, and he halfway made himself look like an idiot

because he wanted to act awesome more than he actually wanted to fight, and that'd let Pete get a hit or two in, and then Reed would sock Pete with a punch with no heart in it, just out of surprised reflex.

Suddenly, I saw a car drive up. A woman got out of it. She had a bag of groceries in her arms. I whistled a low whistle. "Lady with groceries...!" I called in a loud stage whisper.

"Shit, that's my mom!" said Reed. "Everybody scatter!" I was only six. I'd never heard any kid use the word "shit" before.

Everyone ran but me. Reed made sure to grab the camera before he ran. But everyone running off left me up in a very high tree. I was scared to come down. The ground was so far away!

I stayed up there until I really had to pee. Then, with no other option, I slowly but surely made my way down the tree. I looked up to see Reed looking down at me from his bedroom window. Behind the glass, he was laughing at me. I stuck my tongue out at him, and then I ran home.

When I got home, my mother yelled at me: "Where have you been?"

"Around," I said. Mom... it's a little hard to talk about my mother. She was... pretty when she was younger; I've seen pictures. Her hair was dark, a much darker brown than Pete or me. Slightly pointier chin than either of us. But she could be... well, I don't want to say *mean*, but... strict, certainly. I think she got that from her own mother. Pete and I got our cheekbones from Mom, but... not a lot else. She was often a very critical woman, and... well, saying she had a temper gives the wrong picture of her, but she had a short fuse.

"Well, the next time you're 'around' for hours at a time," she told me, "I'm going to punish you like I just did your brother!"

"What did Pete do?" I asked.

"He lost his camera, that's what. He's grounded for two weeks! And he has to do the dishes and the laundry and the beds! And he's going to go to bed without his supper," Mom said.

"Oh," I said. Laundry *and* beds *and* dishes meant Mom was really, *really* angry.

“Now, wash up. I made a sandwich for you,” Mom said.

I used the bathroom, washed my hands, and then sat down to eat. As I munched my baloney sandwich and some potato chips, I thought to myself, *Pete did the right thing. You don't rat on people, even if they steal your camera.* But, while I thought, I got really angry. It was *Reed's* fault that Pete was in trouble. *Pete* had done right by the boy's code of honor. Reed was a jerk and a rat! So, as soon as I was done eating, I went over to Reed's house. I was so mad I climbed that tree in the back yard with no trouble at all. Then I knocked on Reed's bedroom window.

Ryan: Why didn't you just knock on his front door?

Sam: Oh, I couldn't do that! That would have involved his mom in the whole thing. I mean, even in a short haircut and the hand-me-down jeans and t-shirt like I was wearing... Well, even dressed like a boy, I was definitely a little girl. And any mom would wonder why a strange little girl would want to talk to an older boy.

Ryan: Oh, I see.

Sam: Yeah, so Reed opened his window and helped me into his room.

His room was... it wasn't always a mess, but it was always really *cluttered*. About the only thing that wasn't too *busy* was the chest of drawers, which was just heavily wooden with brass handles... But in addition to the toys—at least two toy chests' worth—there were lots of books, just piles and piles... and he had lots of bookshelves and stuff, so it wasn't like there was no place to put them, but they were usually just piled on there... a lot of them were Hardy Boys mysteries, but he had lots of other books too... much more than Pete, who had already stopped being very interested in books, at that age... One bookend was a pirate ship, painted to look like it was bronze... the other end was gone, because Reed had broken it—he'd wondered at a younger age if it really was bronze, and he dropped it out the window to see if it would break... it was ceramic, so it did. The wallpaper didn't help. It was sort of beige, but it had these little steam locomotives on it, all smoking from their smokestacks, all rushing around to the left and right... On an endtable by the bed, next to an old portable radio, was a lamp in the shape of a cowboy on a rearing horse, and on its lampshade was also a cowboy, in a corral, riding a bucking bronco... The bed was a busy blue plaid, and over the bed was a still from a movie... I don't know which one, but I think it had Bela Lugosi as a vampire, and over his shoulder was a young female vampire, with a dead white face and full,

cruel lips, and big eyes and long dark hair. Lugosi was looking up at her, and he sort of looked alarmed. Reed had liked it, and swiped it from some movie theater...

So I was a little distracted when Reed said: “What the hell do you want?” I’d never heard a kid say “hell” before, either.

“You’re a rat and a jerk!” I said, reminded of my mission. I then explained to him about my brother and the unfair punishment. “It’s unfair and it’s your fault!” I yelled.

“Not so loud!” Reed cringed.

Oops, I’d violated the “don’t bring the parents into it” rule, because Reed’s mother yelled up to Reed: “Do I hear voices up there, Reed?”

“Just the radio, Mom!” Reed said.

“Oh, okay, turn it down, honey!” Reed’s mother yelled.

“...That was close—you gotta leave, right now,” Reed said, gesturing to the open window.

“But what about the camera?” I asked.

“I’ll think about it,” he growled, “just get out of here!”

I climbed out the window, then back down the tree.

When I got to my house, I went in the front door, instead of the back door... I grabbed the book I’d been reading off of the porch, and went on back inside.

That evening, I snuck some peanut butter and crackers to my brother so he wouldn’t starve to death.

When I got to Pete’s room, I noticed that he had a black eye. “Wait... Mom didn’t do that to you, did she?” I said.

“Mom? Oh, nah, it was the fight with that Reed kid,” Pete said.

“Oh.” Remember, I’d been up in a tree, with only a bird’s-eye view of the fight, and this was the first time I’d seen Pete since then. “What did you tell Mom about it?” I asked him.

“I said that I got it playing. That was as close to the truth as I could say without dragging those other kids into it,” Pete said.

I nodded. Never rat, never tattle.

Early the next morning, during breakfast, we heard a knock on our front door. Mom went to answer it. I heard her say, “Oh, thank you,” and then she shut the door. She returned with Pete’s camera.

“Pete,” Mom said—and boy, did he have a funny look on his face when he saw his camera again! “—why didn’t you tell me you leant your camera to a neighborhood boy? ...You must have really made a good new friend if you let him borrow it...?”

“...I... didn’t know if you’d like me to do that...” Pete stammered, “...and...”

“Well, next time, ask permission first,” Mom said, and she gave the camera back to Pete.

Dad, who’d been reading the morning paper, set it down. “Well, I think we can lift the punishment on Pete, don’t you?” said Dad.

Dad... I don’t know. Dad seemed to me like a fairly typical father of the era. Always wore a suit on weekdays, and a button-up shirt and slacks on weekends. But that doesn’t tell you... I guess basically, I can say that even though we both got our cheekbones from Mom, Pete got his nose from Dad, and his hair, sort of, the color, and the sort of natural wave to it that Pete had, although you wouldn’t exactly notice that from any Big Carnival photos, because Dad combed his hair different from Pete, more back, which always showed Dad’s kinda furrowed forehead... This doesn’t tell you what Dad was like, though. Dad was... well, *staid*... but more than that, thoughtful. Always a little cautious in choosing his words, and that morning was no exception...

Anyway, Mom was convinced. “Going to bed without his supper seems about all the punishment he deserved,” Mom mused.

“Okay, kiddo, you’ve served your time,” said Dad, “finish your breakfast and then get ready for church.”

And... well, that was how we met Reed. I took that photo to show that Pete and Reed were now friends.

Ryan: You took it?

Sam: Yes, I did... because Reed made Pete give me the camera.

Ryan: He did?

Sam: Yeah. He said, "If not for Sammy, you'd still be locked up in your prison cell like The Man in the Iron Mask. She was no scaredy-baby... So give her the damned camera already! She earned it!"

I'm proud that I took that picture of Pete and Reed. I think that's how I got interested in photography in the first place. Even though it was just a little Brownie Hawkeye camera, it was something kind of grown-up that I could call mine.

Ryan: So that's how you and Pete and Reed became friends?

Sam: No, that's how Pete and Reed became friends. Reed and I... it took a while... I've never known what to call what we were.

Ryan: I'm not getting you.

Sam: Okay, take this example. One day, I got bored with the hopscotch game I was playing, so I went to find Pete. He was in Reed's backyard playing football with Reed and Reed's two friends, Cecil and Wally. Only Reed never called them that. It was always Cecilia and Whale-y because Cecil was such a sissy name and Wally, well, he was... overweight. Later, when Cecil became the rhythm guitar player for the Big Carnival, Reed took pity on Cecil and started calling him C.C. Rider because Cecil's last name was Ryder and his middle name was Charles.

Ryan: And Cecil put up with that?

Sam: Poor Cecil was happy just to no longer be called Cecelia.

Ryan: Oh.

Sam: Yeah. Anyway, I saw Reed and the guys playing, so I said "I'm bored! I wanna play too!"

Pete looked so embarrassed! Imagine, having a pesky kid sister who always wanted to do what you were doing. Cecil said: "No, you can't play. You're a girl!"

“That’s not fair!” I said.

“What are you gonna do? Run and tell your Mommy?” said Cecil.

“No, I’m no tattletale! I just wanna play!”

“Then go play somewhere else!” Cecil said. And then he pushed me right into the dirt.

“What are you gonna do? Cry?” Cecil demanded.

All this was going on and none of the other boys said a word. Not one word. Well, I got mad and started hitting Cecil and yelling, “I’ll make *you* cry, you creep!”

Then Reed started just about peeing himself with laughter; when he finally stopped, he said, “I’ve had enough of football, anyway. Let’s play tag! I’m It!” Now, if you know the rules of tag... not the rules exactly, but the... well, no one ever *volunteers* to be It. You usually get to be It via Eenie Meenie or One Potato, Two Potato. But Reed, being Reed... well, his word was law in those days. So, we started playing tag. And because I was younger than the guys and my legs were shorter, Reed decided to go after me instead of the others. Well, I wasn’t as fast as he was, but because I was *littler* than the guys, I could zig-zag and avoid capture like crazy. So Reed ended up chasing me all over the yard. Finally, he caught me. But it wasn’t a slap on the arm sort of thing. I mean, he grabbed me up in his arms and started swinging me around, yelling, “Got you, got you, got you!”

It was a sweet moment.

Ryan: And that’s how you two became friends.

Sam: Well, that’s what I thought, but it wasn’t that simple.

Ryan: Why not?

Sam: Kids’ rules.

Ryan: What?

Sam: It’s complicated. Um, let’s see, how to explain it... One day, I was at school, and it was lunch time. My grade was going in for lunch one day, and Pete’s class was just coming out of the lunchroom... and I saw Reed with Pete. They were laughing with some other boys. I said, “Hi, Reed!” I guess I said hi to Reed instead of hi to Pete because I didn’t want to be seen as Pete’s pesky sister. I didn’t want to embarrass him

that way. I waited for Reed to say hi to me, but he just glared at me. Then someone pushed me from the back and told me that I was holding up the line. But as I went into the lunchroom, I heard one of Reed's friends say, "Who was that? Your girlfriend?"

"Her?" Reed replied. "She's a little kid... and a girl. Yuck!"

I just sat there at the lunch table. I couldn't eat. I didn't cry, though. You didn't cry at school. If you did, your reputation was toast. Then, a teacher came up to me and gave me the whole "starving children in India" speech because I wasn't eating. Schools were kind of weird back then. They tried shaming you into eating your food. They'd lecture you about how selfish and wasteful you were being if you didn't. This shitty food that tasted worse than Styrofoam, and they lectured you! That was too much for me. I said, "Then let the starving children in India eat it!"

I ended up in the principal's office because of that. He called my parents and everything. I ended up going to bed without my supper. Man, I thought I'd starve to death! But then my Mom brought a sandwich up to me. "Now, Samantha, you generally don't cause problems in school. What happened?" Mom asked as she sat on the bed.

"Don't wanna talk about it," I said. "Can I just have my sandwich, please?"

"Not if you don't tell me what's going on," Mom said.

Oh, man, what a dilemma. Rat on a friend or starve to death! But Reed wasn't really my friend, I thought. He wouldn't even say hello to me. So I took the bribe sandwich and told Mom what happened. Mom frowned. "Oh," she said.

I expected a lecture about girls and boys and how they don't always think or act the same. Instead, Mom said, "You must make allowances for that boy. His family... well, they've had their fair share of grief."

"What sort of grief?" I asked.

I got the "you're too young to understand" malarkey. But then Mom added, "But you must always try to be kind to that child, even when he isn't kind to you. Understand?"

"Yes, Mom," I said. But I didn't understand at all. In fact, it all made me madder.

I got so mad that when everyone else went to sleep, I got into my daytime clothes and snuck out of the house. I climbed the tree in Reed's backyard, and then stopped when I

got to Reed's window. I was planning to knock on it, but when I got up there, I saw that Reed wasn't asleep, even though it was like midnight or something like that. Instead, his bedside lamp was on, and he was in there reading comic books.

Suddenly, he looked up and saw me. I was so startled I almost lost my balance, but I managed to steady myself. Reed ran to the window, opened it. "Are you crazy?" he said in a harsh whisper.

"You're a rat and a fink and you're mean!" I said.

Reed got a pained look on his face. "Oh. This is about school, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is. I thought we were friends!"

"We are... uh... yeah... I mean, I guess... it's kind of funny having a girl for a friend, but you're Pete's sister, so that makes it all right... kind of..."

"Then why didn't you say hello to me?" I asked.

"You can't say hi to me at school," Reed said.

"Why not? I say hi to everyone else!"

"If I said hello to you, the other boys would laugh at me. I mean, you're two years younger than me and you're a girl and... you can't say hi to me at school."

I thought about it for a second. "You're... you're a scaredy-baby!" The thought that Reed would be scared of anything just about blew my mind.

"I'm not a scaredy-baby," Reed said gravely.

"You are! You're so scared that you'd act like a jerk to someone you call a friend. Well, you don't get to have a part-time friend. You don't get to turn off your friendship."

"Look, I'll prove to you that I'm not scared of anything," he said. He got on his window ledge, reached out his arms, and then jumped to the tree.

"All that tells me is that you're not scared of trees."

"I can hold on with one hand and everything..."

"Get outta my way," I said, unimpressed. "I'm going home."

He climbed back in the window. "Sam, don't be like that. It's school. You know how school is. School's different."

"Good night," I said, and I climbed down the tree and went back to bed.

I was exhausted the next day... But a few days later, I was in the school lunch line and I saw Reed. I didn't say anything. Then I saw Reed gulp a big "here goes nothing" gulp. Then he said, "Hi, Sam."

"Hi, Reed," I said.

"What, is that your girlfriend?" a boy said.

"What, is that your girlfriend?" Reed said back to the kid in a mocking voice.

"Reed likes a little kid!" the boy said.

"Grow up, asshole!" Reed said.

"Make me!" the boy said.

A shoving match ensued. Reed won, but he was taken to the principal's office.

As he was led away, Reed looked at me and winked.

I gave him a head nod.

That afternoon, Pete told me that as soon as he and Reed had come home down the sidewalk, Reed's mom had stopped them and told Reed to go to his room, and that he wasn't going to get any supper.

Well, I couldn't have that, so I waited until everyone was in bed and then I got into my day clothes and went down to the kitchen and made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Then I snuck out of the house and went to Reed's backyard. I climbed the tree, and knocked on Reed's window.

Reed opened it. "I brought you a sandwich!" I said.

"Hot damn! I was starving to death. Give it over!" Reed said.

I tossed the sandwich over to him. "Thanks!" Reed said, unwrapping it from its plastic cling wrap.

“I’m sorry I got you in trouble!”

“Oh, that!” Reed frowned as he finished unwrapping the sandwich. “Actually, I’m kind of grateful for the trouble...”

“Really? Why?”

He took a bite out of his sandwich. “Sometimes,” he said after the first bite, “to be a boy, you have to show how tough you are, so the other boys know not to bully you.”

“So... are you in really bad trouble with your parents...?”

“That’ll blow over. I mean, they only punished me because the school made such a fuss. Next time I get into a fight, I’ll do it off of school property.”

“Oh. ...Well, I... I guess I better get back.”

“Thanks for the sandwich!”

“Anything for a friend,” I said.

I got down from the tree and went home. “Good night, Sam,” I barely heard Reed call from back behind me. “Sleep well.”

Ryan: So, I’m getting the picture that you, as a tomboy, were part of Reed’s gang of friends...

Sam: Yeah.

Ryan: Did, uh, your gender...

Sam: Did it cause me any problems? Oh, God, no. Reed wouldn’t let any of his friends pick on me.

Ryan: So it made no difference at all that you were a girl?

Sam: Reed used to say, “Sam’s not a girl; she’s Pete’s little sister!”

I do remember saying to Reed at one point, “But I am a girl.”

“Yeah, but you like frogs and snakes and turtles and bugs, so you’re kind of an honorary boy. Hell, you weren’t even scared when we found that dead mouse,” Reed said.

“I was a little scared,” I admitted.

“Yeah, but you didn’t scream.”

“Only scaredy-babies scream,” I said.

So Reed treated me like one of the boys. Well, he did most of the time. Sometimes, though, he didn’t. I mean, when Pete and Reed and I watched TV together over here at this house, even when we were kids, Reed always put his arm around me. Sometimes, he’d tickle me until I was forced to say uncle. And that got Reed into trouble. Not with me, but with my parents. One time my mother came into the living room and saw Reed on top of me, tickling me. She gave him such a lecture about “appropriate male/female behavior.” Reed just nodded and said, “Yes, ma’am.” And then the second she left the room, he went back to tickling me. Later, Mom gave me a lecture about little boys and girls and how I shouldn’t allow Reed to put his arm around me or wrestle with me. I said, “But it’s just in fun.”

“Fun is how girls get into trouble,” Mom said to me.



And then... Sam stopped talking. She just stared off into space... then again, her gaze was a little high... she was probably looking at one of the pictures on the wall, Ryan figured, but he resisted the temptation to look over his shoulder.

“...I never did get in that kind of trouble,” Sam finally said. Her voice was very sad.

“And Reed didn’t exactly get in that kind of trouble, although my mother would have said he had quite a bit of fun... But he didn’t, really. Have fun, I mean. Not like people thought. And still think. If only certain things in his life had been a little less... *uncanny...*”

Ryan glanced at Brandon. Brandon gave Ryan a look that said that Brandon was also confused, thinking: ...*What...?!*

One second Sam had seemed about to cry, the next, she seemed to realize that she'd said more than she'd intended. "...Gentlemen, I've been talking for quite a stretch... When did you eat last? Perhaps we could do some more recording after lunch?"

"...Sounds great, ma'am," said Ryan, getting up.

But what he was thinking was: ...*Uncanny*...?

