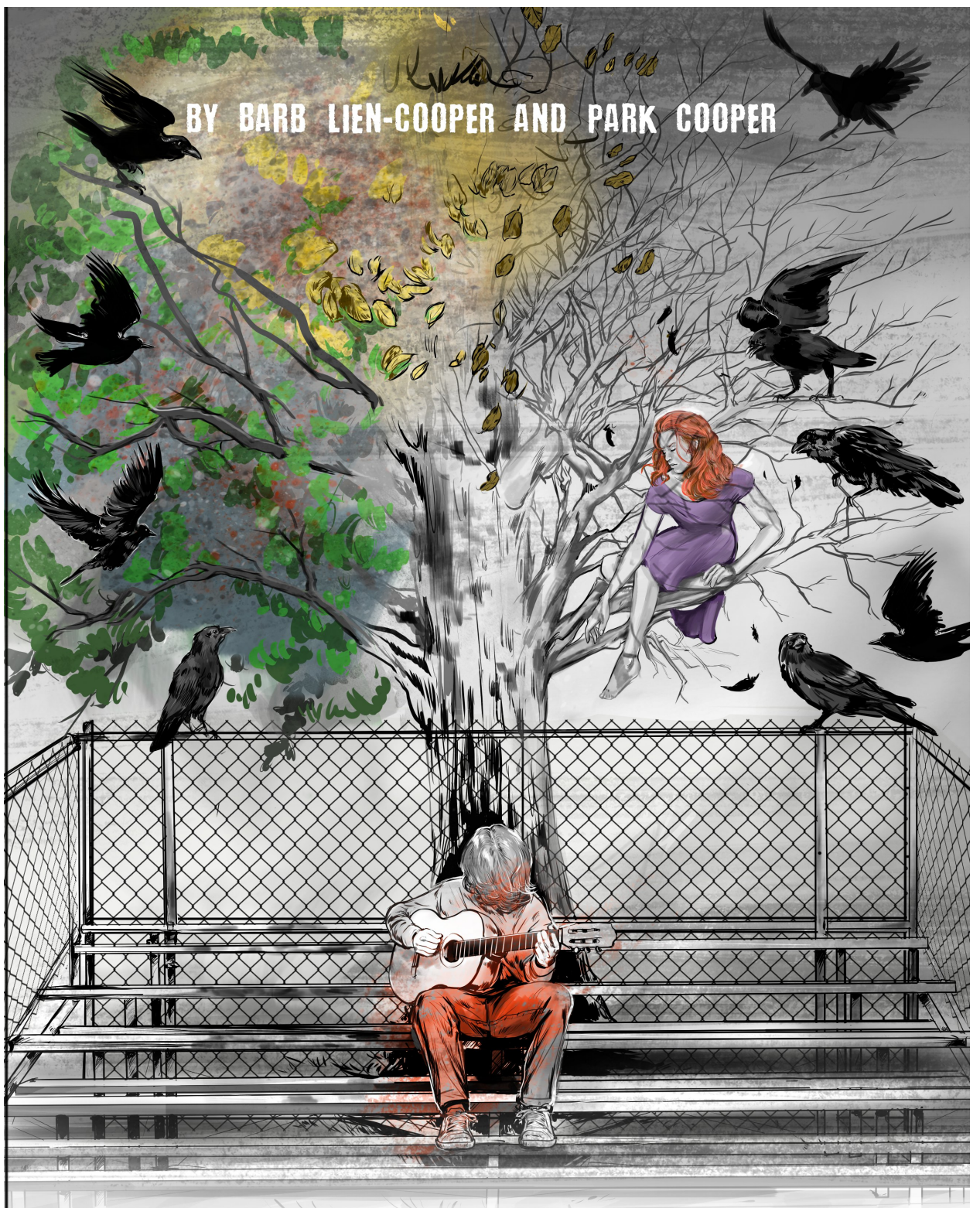


BY BARB LIEN-COOPER AND PARK COOPER



SONG TO THE SIREN
A LOVERS' CONCERTO

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ISBN

(print) 978-1-987884-63-0

(ebook) 978-1-987884-64-7

PRAISE FOR SONG TO THE SIREN (Book One):

“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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Chapter 1

On a late summer's day, Reed Sinclair sat with his friend Pete MacNamara on the porch swing that hung at the front porch of the MacNamaras' house.

Idly, Pete watched his sister Samantha jumping rope on the house's front sidewalk.

The summer's day was *not* perfect, as adults always think children's summer days must surely always be. The air was muggy and hot, teasing at a summer's rain that wouldn't come to pass.

All that summer days like that were good for was waiting for the Minnesota mosquitos (Minnesota's real state bird, as the joke sometimes went) to make the summer nights as hard to bear as the occasional muggy days.

"Be grateful for summer vacation, Reed," Reed's father had told him just the other day. "When you're grown up, you'll regret taking your childhood for granted."

Grownups sure love to romanticize childhood, Reed thought to himself. *To them, it's all dandelion wine and roses...*

Reed was one of those unfortunate, gifted boys who read a lot, knew a lot, and understood just enough about life to make him distrust all the platitudes adults so often used.

Reed only trusted Hal, his dead brother, who had died in the early days of Vietnam.

It was natural that Reed's thoughts turn to Hal, because Hal had just shown up sitting on the steps of the MacNamaras' front porch. "So, that's Samantha, huh?" Hal said, looking at Sam. "Even though she's two years younger than you, I see that she'll be a teenager too, in another year, give or take..." Hal was lanky and All-American, with a short military buzz-cut and a sort of dead expression that he always seemed to wear whenever Reed saw Hal, ever since Hal'd been killed. Hal was wearing a button-down short-sleeved shirt and light pants. Apparently, Bloomington, Minnesota summer days

such as the scorcher the city was suffering through at that moment were too much for even a ghost like Hal to bear without a short-sleeved shirt.

Reed looked where Hal was looking, at Sam. Sam's light-brown hair was usually cut short, by her own preference, but her bangs were just starting to fall into her eyes—wide-set and blue—*but* one couldn't really tell that at the moment, because those bangs were too busy bouncing around from her jump-roping. Sam had recently had a minor growth spurt, and was wearing a pair of cut-off jeans, which had grown a little too short since the previous summer, as well as a faded old Minnesota Vikings t-shirt that had been mercilessly washed so often that it was lilac rather than Vikings purple. After Pete had said that lilac was “a girl's color,” Sam insisted on making the shirt her own.

Reed glanced over at Pete for a second. It wasn't something he did very often, especially when he could be looking at Sam, but just for a moment, Reed wanted to check and see if Pete—and therefore Reed himself—had grown up all that much lately. The answer was, yeah, kind of—it'd just been so slow that Reed hadn't really thought about it. But Pete *was* finally growing out of his baby-fat stage, getting to look a little more like an athlete, though he wasn't an athlete at all. Pete didn't put all *that* much effort into anything, really. But he had gotten a bit taller and more awkward compared to last summer, it was true. Pete and Sam had a trace of family resemblance to one another—Pete's face was a little wider, and his eyes were just a little squinty, somehow, at least when compared to Sam. It tended to give Pete a look like he was always feeling skeptical about everything.

Then Reed leaned forward a little, and glanced at his reflection in the glass of the window behind Pete. Yes, the same was true for himself, too. He didn't look like Hal—Reed would never quite share Hal's clean-cut, All-American, masculine good looks, especially considering how much Reed hated getting a haircut, let alone the kind of summer buzz-cut currently worn by both Pete and Hal's ghost. Reed took after his mother more—her blond hair, and his eyes were her slightly deeper shade of blue, making them slightly darker than Hal's. But like Pete, Reed's face was thinning slightly, making him look... Reed didn't know how to describe it. The phrase *more beautiful than ever* didn't cross his mind, although it crossed the mind of practically every girl his age who looked at Reed these days. Reed, however, had no awareness of that. So, *yeah, a little older, sure enough*, he thought instead, and then his mind moved on to other things.

“How does she get the energy to jump rope in this heat?” Pete asked.

“She’s eleven years old—going on twelve—that’s how,” Hal said, although of course Reed knew that Pete wouldn’t hear dead Hal’s voice.

Reed just shrugged at Pete’s comment.

“...It pisses me off that this fall Sam’s going to be going to our junior high,” Pete said, still not really loud enough for Sam to hear.

“Why? Sam’s fun,” Reed said.

“Because she’s my little sister, who always wants to hang out with us...” said Pete.

Reed tried to think about the reasons why Sam’s class was going to be transferred over to the junior high. It had something to do with “capacity” and the number of births, or something about the ranking of the junior high sports teams, or something else that only adults really cared about. Basically, the district was going to build a new school or two, but they wouldn’t be ready for a year, so in the meantime they were going to put Sam’s sixth grade with the seventh and eighth-graders, and then move everyone around again in the new schools when they were ready the year after that... but it was just too hot for Reed’s brain to bother thinking about the details.

“...Actually,” Hal said, “it’s Sam I feel sorry for. She’s only going to be in the sixth grade, and you and Pete and your friends are already teenagers...”

“Sam can handle herself,” Reed said.

Pete gave Reed a look. As sometimes happened with Reed, Reed’s response to Pete’s statement didn’t quite seem to perfectly connect up to what Pete had been saying right before.

Sometimes Pete even wondered if Reed was talking to someone else, someone Pete couldn’t see.

The idea made Pete shiver, in spite of the hot, damp air.

Sam stopped jumping rope, turned, and waved at Reed.

Reed smiled and waved back at Sam.

“I know a new jump rope rhyme,” Sam said.

“*God, no, not another damned rhyme,*” Pete said quietly to himself.

“I wanna hear it,” Reed yelled.

Sam beamed a happy smile.

“Why do you encourage her? She’s so annoying,” Pete said, loud enough for Sam to hear this time.

“I am not!” Sam yelled.

“The rhyme, please...” Reed said to her.

Sam began to jump rope again, and as she did, she loudly recited: “The *moon* shines *bright*, the *stars* give *light*, and little Nanny Button Cap will *come* tomorrow *night*... the *moon* shines *bright*, the *stars* give *light*...”

“That’s dumb,” Pete said loudly.

Sam stopped jumping rope. “No it’s not—little Nanny Button Cap is a little fairy, who only comes out at night, and...”

Reed gulped.

Hal turned and looked over at Reed. “Maintain, little brother,” Hal told him. “It wouldn’t look good for you to be obvious about you being afraid of fairies.”

Reed slowly shook his head.

“Not that you *are* afraid of fairies, exactly,” Hal added. “You’re afraid of a *particular* fairy, and I certainly can’t blame you for that. It’s not the Button Caps or the Tinkerbells of this world, but a fairy with beauty and teeth and hungers a child can never understand...”

Reed was about to say something—but Hal disappeared.

Sometimes, Hal did that. It didn’t mean anything, necessarily.

Except sometimes, it did.

Sometimes, when Hal disappeared, it meant that *she* was nearby.

Once, before he'd died, Hal had spoken to Reed about the scary redheaded fairy woman in the picture their father kept in his study: La Belle Dame Sans Merci. Hal said that her name meant that she was "the pretty lady without mercy," and added: "I think there's a little of Belle in every woman. A belle dame will someday come after me. And she'll come after you, too. So be careful, little buckaroo. Women will only break your heart."

Hal had seemed to be joking around... but when he died in Vietnam, Reed came to realize that Belle had gotten him. And Reed had seen Belle a few times since then—often peeking out at him from behind trees, watching him...

Reed heard the black birds cawing in the trees, although he couldn't exactly see them. Their cries, to Reed's ears, cut through the boredom and the wet heat of the summer air, as if to say, *You're not safe, even in the boring, hazy days of your youth.*

During moments like that, when Reed heard his dead brother or heard the souls of the dead, disguised as black birds crying in the non-existent wind, time worked differently for him than it did for other people. Reed could lose moments or even hours when he walked away from the fields of reality that most people knew...

At first, the time "blips," as Reed sometimes thought of them, were terrifying to Reed. Reed's current opinion of them, however, was: *Some things, you've just got to get used to.*

Reed blinked.

Sam was no longer skipping rope. She wasn't anywhere in sight at all. Reed wanted to ask Pete where Sam was, but he didn't want Pete to look at him as if Reed'd lost his mind. "I mean, Sam's okay, for a kid sister," Pete said, "but that's the thing, Reed. She's *just* a kid. We're teenagers now."

Distantly, Reed still heard the crows in the trees. He ignored their noisy, insistent cries. "What's so damned great about being a teenager?" he said to Pete. "I mean, Sam gets to play, and we're stuck here on a porch, wondering what the hell to do with the rest of our summer."

"Well," Pete started to say, "there's—"

"—Lectures from our parents that we need to do something productive with ourselves..." Reed said.

"There's—" Pete tried again.

“—Our voices starting to break at awkward times so the other kids laugh at us,” Reed said.

“True, but there’s—”

“—Having to use under-arm deodorant,” Reed said.

“Yeah, I get you,” said Pete, “but you’re forgetting one thing.”

“Okay, what?”

“Girls. *We get to start dating girls*,” Pete said triumphantly, as if dating was the secret answer to wining every philosophical debate ever.

Reed shrugged.

“*Girls*, Reed. *Girls!* When we all went to the swimming pool together last week, didn’t you see the girls in their bathing suits and French bikinis?”

“Nah, I was too busy playing Marco Polo with Cecil and Samantha,” Reed said.

“Well, Cecil and Wally sure noticed the girls—Reed, you gotta start getting interested in girls. I mean, all the girls were interested in *you*—every girl I *talked* to wanted me to introduce them to ‘my cute friend,’ meaning you. The girls all got real jealous that you spent more time with Sam than you did with them. One girl said to me, ‘How can he play chase-me games with that child? She’s flat-chested—she’s not even a teen yet.’”

“A few curves don’t make a girl interesting,” said Reed. Pete looked like he *very* much disagreed. “A girl who doesn’t mind when you grab her and throw her in the water, that’s my kind of a girl,” Reed continued. “You throw Sam in the water, she shrieks with delight and tries to splash you back. You throw a teenage girl in the water, she starts complaining that you wrecked her hairdo.”

“My point is, you gotta start growing up and talking to *real* girls, and not just to my tomboy sister,” Pete said.

“Sam *is* a *real* girl. She’s my pal, and that’s all I really want from anyone right now,” Reed shrugged.

“She’s a *kid*—I’m talking about girls our own age. Don’t you want to start dating?”

“I’d rather start a band,” Reed said.

The birds stopped cawing. The leaves on the trees shook a little, as they do when a change in the weather is just about to break.

“Reed, be serious,” Pete said.

Starting a band? Reed thought. *That idea just came to me... but, honestly... it’s what I’ve always wanted, isn’t it? When I heard Hal play guitar, right before he went to Vietnam, didn’t I honestly think, “Hey, yeah, that’s what I want, too?”* Reed looked at Pete. “I’ve never been so serious in my life,” he said.



A few weeks later, Pete and Reed stood outside of the school auditorium, waiting to be admitted. “Man, the end of summer really flew by...” said Pete.

“Well, that’s because we were doing something productive. Our band’ll be the best band in town, maybe even in the state, if we keep going,” Reed said.

Pete frowned. “Uh, yeah, but, Reed... that was fine for summer, but with school starting, maybe we should...”

“We should practice even harder,” Reed said firmly.

“...Reed, it’s hopeless. I play cello, not a real electric bass. Wally doesn’t even have a drum set, and Cecil only has his sister’s old acoustic guitar. We gotta wait until we’re older if we...”

“—I’ll find a way,” said Reed. “I always do.”

“Can’t we just be kids?” Pete asked.

“Pete, you’re the one who always says that we’re not kids, we’re teenagers,” Reed said.

Pete sighed. There was no talking to Reed when Reed became obsessed with something.

Cecil Ryder walked up to them. Cecil looked just a tiny bit like he could be Reed’s cousin, though he wasn’t. It was certainly easy to tell them apart—Cecil’s hair was even shorter than Reed’s brand-new haircut, and he was roughly an inch taller. The biggest difference, though, was that he was just less fidgety than Reed—he had less nervous

energy. “Hey guys,” Cecil started to say, “what—ooh, look over there, there’s Cathy Murphy,” he suddenly announced.

They all looked over at where he was looking, at where a girl with long brown hair was standing with her friends. Cathy wore a very pale blue dress with a white collar that was—well, the dress was *just* long enough not to get her in trouble with any teachers or vice-principals who might see her—although it sure wasn’t even a quarter of an inch *longer* than that, either. It certainly gave any boy that looked at her a nice look at her legs, which were—no one would deny—great. “She’s so popular,” Cecil sighed. “She’s out of our league.”

“I’ve never seen her before in my life,” Reed said.

“Of course you have,” Pete told Reed. “She’s the girl who had the cherry-red French bikini at the pool.”

“Really? I didn’t notice. I went to the pool to play, not to ogle girls,” Reed said.

“She’s so pretty...” Cecil sighed.

Reed shrugged.

“Anyway, what with all this stuff where they’ve rezoned the school district or whatever, Cathy’s going to our school now,” Pete grinned. “Isn’t that great?”

“Big deal,” Reed said.

“Well, I hear that she’s pretty fast, if you know what I mean,” Cecil said.

“Fast? How?” Reed asked.

“Well, look: first, a French bikini! That’s fast right there,” Cecil said.

“I don’t see how...” Reed started to say.

“—And I saw her with her friends once? And she actually *tried to smoke a cigarette*,” Cecil said.

“So? We tried smoking a cig once, and we all started coughing,” Reed said.

“Well, she did, too, but, Reed, she *tried* it. That’s fast,” Cecil said.

“I heard that she’ll let a boy kiss her on the second date,” Pete said.

Reed just gave Pete a look. What the hell was wrong with his friends? *We used to talk about things that mattered*, Reed thought. *A girl let a boy kiss her? So what?*

“And she wears actual pantyhose,” Cecil continued, “and a skirt that’s a half-inch shorter than other girls, and she wears makeup and perfume.”

“She’s totally a fast girl,” said Pete.

“Oh, look, there’s Sam,” Reed said.

“Big deal,” Pete said.

“Your sister *is* kind of cute,” Cecil said.

“Ewww, please. That’s kind of sick,” said Pete.

Reed looked at Sam and the other sixth-graders. Here in junior high, they all looked a little lost—it was slightly too big of an experience for them, and they all looked a little scared.

“Why would you even be interested in Sam?” said Pete. “She’s a baby. She’s got short hair, and she isn’t—isn’t girl-like at all!”

“I just said that she’s cute, that’s all,” Cecil said.

Sam turned, saw Reed, and smiled a big smile, that brought sunshine to the cloudy day outside the school. It was a smile just for him, and Reed cherished it. He smiled and waved back.

“Reed, don’t wave at my kid sister,” Pete said.

“What? You’re nuts. Sam’s our friend. I’m supposed to ignore her? Are you crazy?” said Reed.

“We’re teenagers now, Reed,” said Pete. “If we hang out with kids like Sam, we’ll be laughed at.”

“Sorry, Reed, but this time, he’s right,” said Cecil. “This is our second year of junior high, and we have our reputations to uphold.”

“Cecil, we have no reputations, good or bad,” said Reed. “We just kind of blended into the background last year.”

“Yeah, well, that’s my point. We can start over,” said Cecil.

“Don’t ruin us, Reed,” Pete said.

“Go screw yourself,” Reed said.

Then, quite deliberately, he went over to talk to Sam. “Hi, Sam,” Reed said.

The sixth-grade girls near Sam giggled. A teenage boy was talking to one of them! It was so cool!

“Hi, Reed,” Sam said.

“How you gettin’ on?” he asked.

“Ugh. No one talks to us because we’re new here, which is unfair,” Sam said.

“Screw ‘em. I’ll talk to you as long as you want,” Reed said.

The other girls gasped. The blond boy’d said “screw ‘em!” He was *so mature!*

“My mom made me get a wardrobe full of dresses for school,” said Sam. “Isn’t that the stupidest thing you’ve ever heard of?”

“Well, if you think that’s bad, my dad made me get a haircut,” Reed said, turning his head so she could see.

“That’s so unfair!” said Sam. “I wish parents would stop telling us what to wear and how to grow our hair. My mom wants me to grow mine out, but I won’t. It’s not *her* hair, after all...”

The other girls just stared. Sam and the blond boy were talking like they owned the world. They didn’t care about parents or anything else. Didn’t they know that adults controlled your life? That if you got in trouble with the adults, you were toast?

Then Reed punched Sam in the shoulder and said, “Stay strong, kid.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I will,” Sam said.

Reed walked away from the girls. As he started going back to his friends, a jock tried to pick on Reed. "Talking to babies, huh? You must be a baby yourself," the jock said.

"At least I'm comfortable with who I am, which is a lot more than I can say about you," Reed said.

The jock—Jim, Reed vaguely remembered his name was—looked stunned that Reed'd talked back. "Take that back," Jim said.

"Sure, if you take back that crack about me talking to babies," Reed said.

Jim blinked. He'd never seen life as a give-and-take proposition before. "I don't have to take anything back," he said.

"Look, I've been in the principal's office for fighting bullies more than once, usually because I win," said Reed. "Not 'cause I'm strong, but I'm fast and I fight dirty. The adults don't care if I lose, but if I win, they yell at me, and I don't like being yelled at. And if I had to fight you, well, I think we'd both be pulled into the principal's office, 'cause I figure we'd both be about equally good. My dad would yell at me for fighting, and you might get suspended from sports before you've even started the year. You don't want that any more than I want my dad yelling at me."

Jim tried to process the information, but wasn't having much luck, so Reed kept talking. "You're not a natural-born bully, Jim. You're a jock, and a pretty damned good one. You can be a hero of junior high, or you can be an asshole that no one likes. No one likes bullies, but everyone likes heroes, y'know? And if you're dumb enough to fight me and *I* happened to win, you'd never live that down, since you're a jock and I'm just some skinny kid. So how about each of us, you and me, just pretend that the other doesn't exist, okay?"

"Uh... okay?" Jim said.

"Fine. Good luck with football this year," Reed said.

"Uh, thanks," said Jim.

Reed went back to his friends.

"What was that?" Pete asked.

"I had a nice talk with Jim," Reed shrugged.

Everyone started moving. Reed, Pete, and Cecil went into the auditorium. “Hey, where’s Wally?” Reed asked. “Is he ill?”

“Nah, he didn’t do well last year, so he’s in remedial classes,” Cecil said.

“That means we can’t hang out with him any more,” said Pete. “It’d hurt our reps to hang out with the stupid kids.”

Reed looked at Pete. “Man, you want me to avoid your sister because she’s younger than us, and now you want me to avoid our old friend Wally? Have you no sense of loyalty?”

“Junior high’s tough,” said Pete. “Why make it any tougher by—”

“I’m gonna go find Wally,” said Reed.

After walking around for a bit, he saw Wally, awkwardly waiting to get into the auditorium by standing with a bunch of kids who were all obviously smaller than him—more sixth-graders, because Wally was trying to avoid anyone he knew, Reed realized. Wally was about nine inches taller than all the other kids around him, and, well, he weighed almost as much as any two of them put together, since sixth-graders don’t really weigh all that much. Wally had, it had to be admitted, not a lot of chin, and he also had a messy shock of dark brown hair that kept threatening to fall into his eyes. It was something Reed had noticed when they first met each other at a very young age—Wally’s parents didn’t care enough to take him to get haircuts very often either, just like Reed’s parents. The difference with Reed was that Reed’s father started wanting to force Reed to get his hair cut as soon as his father had started feeling that Reed’s appearance, as he got older, reflected on his own parenting... or perhaps it was that he wanted Reed’s hair cut short the more Reed wanted it long. Either way, Wally’s hair was of average length in back, but it was messy everywhere else.

Wally looked down at the ground, embarrassed to see Reed. “Hey, Wally, I heard about the, you know, the class thing,” Reed said.

Wally looked up at Reed, relieved that Reed didn’t seem angry at him. “I tried my best, Reed,” Wally said. “I’m just not very smart.”

“No, man, never, ever say that,” said Reed. “There are many, many different types of smart. Don’t let the adults label you.”

“The whole school’s gonna label me,” Wally said.

“This is my fault,” said Reed.

“No, Reed, it’s not,” Wally said.

Reed ignored Wally’s protests. “I should have helped you out,” said Reed. “I should have tutored you. But, I didn’t, and I’m sorry.”

“That’s nice of you to say, but...”

“I’m going to tutor you this semester. I’m getting you out of remedial classes as soon as I can, okay?”

“You really think you can help?”

“I know I can. You’re my friend, as well as the drummer for my band.”

“If I *had* any drums...”

“Let me handle that. Now, stay strong, okay?”

Wally nodded.

Satisfied, Reed went back to find Pete and Cecil. If Wally didn’t want to deal with Cecil and Pete right now, Reed wasn’t going to make him, but— “—So why are we here in the auditorium instead of in class?” Reed asked as he approached Pete and Cecil.

“Who cares?” Pete pouted. “It’s not like you listen to anything *I* have to say...”

Reed sighed. “I don’t listen when you’re not right,” Reed said.

“Well, you *treat* me like I’m *never* right. You’ll listen to *Sam*, but when it comes to *me*...”

“We’re here because the senior high spent the summer rehearsing the play *The Music Man* and we’re supposed to watch it,” said Cecil. “Man, don’t do me any favors, Senior High. I’ve got no interest in musicals...”

Reed sat down next to Cecil. At that moment, Reed wasn’t too pleased with Pete.

Cecil looked pleased to be sitting next to Reed, for once. Usually, when sitting down, Reed had Sam on his right side and Pete on his left, because Reed had a particular set of priorities as far as giving friends attention: first, Pete, then Sam, then Cecil, then

Wally. The only reason Reed talked to Pete more than Sam, though, was that since Sam was younger than they were, Reed didn't have as many opportunities to talk to her.

Sometimes Cecil thought that if Pete, Wally, and himself died in a big plane crash or something, Reed would just spend all of his time talking to Sam...

The auditorium lights dimmed.

A skinny guy with glasses walked onstage. Reed didn't recognize him, so he figured the guy was the drama class teacher for the high school kids. "Testing, one, two, three..." the guy said into a microphone, and then: "Welcome, returning students. And a special welcome to the school's new students..."

"Do you think you can get yourself an electric guitar?" Reed whispered to Cecil.

"No," said Cecil. "I told my parents that if they got me one for Christmas, I'd never ask for anything again. No dice."

"Did you say that it wasn't fair that your sister had a guitar and you don't?" Reed whispered.

"Yeah. They said that *classical* guitar's an art form. *Electric* guitar's just noise," Cecil said.

"That's nothing. Pete's parents told him that he can't have an electric bass. Pete said that he could easily trade his cello for a bass and make up the difference by forgoing his allowance, but you know what they said to that? They said that orchestral practice leads to discipline and comradery, but rock and roll leads to rebellion, anarchy, disrespecting our elders, and hating our parents," Reed said.

"And I said," said Pete, hearing that Reed was talking about him, "that I couldn't exactly like my parents when they were keeping me from what I wanted to do."

"Hey, that's a good comeback," Reed said.

The drama guy they were ignoring had left the microphone, and the junior high principal—a heavyset man in his late fifties with slightly beady little eyes—had started talking, but so far he was just saying the sort of introductory stuff one would expect him to say, so the boys continued to ignore what was being said. "I thought it was a good comeback, too, but it backfired on me," said Pete, "my parents said that I was

already mouthy, and that I must have learned disrespect from that ‘troubled Sinclair boy.’”

Reed laughed, which made Pete laugh.

“Shh, that teacher over there’s looking at us,” Cecil whispered.

Reed, Pete, and Cecil sat up as straight as possible, and tried to look like they were focused on what the principal was saying.

“As you know, puberty is a strange, sometimes frightening time in a young person’s life... with a lot of... *urges*...” the principal said.

There were a few hoots and hollers from some of the boys in the auditorium. One boy yelled, “I need a girlfriend!” which led to gales of laughter and a few people yelling “Me too!”

“Quiet, everyone! Quiet!” the principal said.

Everyone quieted down.

“We must be adult about the facts of life,” the principal said. “As such, we are going to be teaching sex ed this year. Sex ed is mandatory, unless your parents object on religious grounds. Sex ed films will be shown to all the grades here.”

“The principal said a dirty word!” one boy yelled.

“Yeah, he keeps saying ‘sex!’” another boy yelled.

“Wash his mouth out with soap!” a third boy yelled.

Hoots of laughter came from all around Reed.

Reed, however, was not laughing. *Sam’s only a kid*, Reed thought. *She shouldn’t be subjected to sex ed until she’s ready...*

“Children, you are young men and women now,” the principal said. “Please show some respect.”

Everyone quieted down.

Then Reed heard some girls talking behind him. "Sex ed? We already had that at our last school," a girl said.

"They must think that we're little kids, Cathy. This school's way, way behind ours," a second girl said.

Reed glanced behind him for a second. Cathy Murphy was sitting behind him (*what're the odds of that?* he thought), talking to three or four other girls.

"They're such *children*," Cathy said.

Reed turned back around in disgust. ***They're such children?*** he thought. *We're **all** still kids! I hate people who try to be something that they're not. You're not half as grown up or sophisticated as you think, Cathy Murphy...*

Reed went back to thinking about Sam. *I want to keep Sam safe, but I can't keep her safe from sex ed. If she doesn't go, people'll make fun of her. **Wally** probably won't be able to go because his parents are super religious, and he'll probably be made fun of for that, which is the last thing he needs right now. But Sam's new here, and the last thing she needs is to get off on the wrong foot. Still... seriously? Sex ed? Couldn't they have waited another year or so before subjecting Sam to that?*

He looked around the auditorium. *Come on, brain, home in on where Sam is*, he thought. *You and she have a bond. You always know where... bingo!* Sam's class was three rows ahead of Reed's class... and, miracle of miracles, the seat next to Sam was empty.

"...The sex ed film schedule will be announced in a few weeks," the principal said. "For now, let's turn down the lights and enjoy... *The Music Man*."

The auditorium lights were turned down all the way, except for a couple of stage lights... Reed got up from his seat.

"Where're you going?" Cecil whispered.

"I'm gonna sit next to Sam," Reed whispered.

Reed, slowly and carefully, made his way to the back of the auditorium. It was the opposite of the direction he wanted to go, but he had a plan.

Reed walked up to one of the student council members who was basically acting as an usher. “Hey, I really need to go use the restroom,” Reed whispered to the young man. Reed didn’t really need to use the facilities, but it was part of his plan.

“Be quick about it,” the usher whispered.

Reed left the auditorium, waited outside for about a minute, then quietly went back into the auditorium.

As surreptitiously as he could, he passed where he had been sitting, and went to where Sam was sitting. “Hi, Sam. Did I miss anything?” he whispered as he sat down.

“Nah, just some kid reading a little biography of the guy who wrote the play,” Sam whispered.

“Oh, okay, good,” Reed said.

Silently, they watched the play.

Around the time that the cast sang “The Wells Fargo Wagon,” Reed whispered to Sam: “Are you okay about the sex ed thing?”

“Yuck. I wish they’d just leave me alone. But I’ll be okay,” Sam whispered back to Reed.

“Yeah, you will be, ‘cause you always have me here,” Reed said.

“...Can we play thumb wars in the dark?” Sam whispered.

Reed took Sam’s hand.

“One, two, three, four, I declare a thumb war!” Reed whispered.

