

Every Tuesday, Rosaline and her friends meet for storytelling hour. Then the kidnapper in Rosaline's story merges into reality and is after them. Now, she must get to him in her story before he gets to them in real life.

What the Storyteller Brings

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ISBN-13 978-1-60145-205-4

ISBN-10 1-60145-205-5

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Printed in the United States of America.

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2007

Cover by Kymberlee & John Hoskins-Hinchey

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Robyn Y. Demby

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1

Kidnapped

Khara rushed through her homework. Trying to concentrate on her tenth grade studies was extra hard that day. "History," she muttered. But half an hour later she was out the door with a sandwich in her hand.

The fresh blue expanse of sky overhead, mixed with the anticipation of storytelling hour, made Khara feel electric. Her walk was peppered with briskness as she treaded along the grassy side of the road. Sidewalks hadn't made it that far out in the boonies. Waving at Cherrelle and Janice, she joined them at the railroad tracks. As soon as she reached her friends, she pushed Cherrelle halfway into the street. Cherrelle looked alarmed and darted back to the side of the road. Khara ran ahead of them so that her friend wouldn't do the same thing to her. She knew that Cherrelle, who could outrun anyone in Deep Creek High School with the agility of a gazelle, could catch up to her within seconds, yet she simply chose not to that afternoon. Khara turned around and walked backwards until they caught up. They strolled past a freshly-cleared piece of land where a brand new house was being built.

"Why would somebody want to build a house way out here?" Janice asked.

"Who knows?" Cherrelle said. "But man, that's gonna be a big one."

"Maybe some celebrity is moving into our neighborhood."

"Yeah, that's a fantasy! And speaking of which, what do you think Roz's storytelling hour will be about this week?"

"We'll all stow away on some big ship on its way to Egypt and meet the captain of the football team, the captain of the basketball team, AND the captain of the wrestling team in the desert!" Janice giggled.

"Yeah," Khara laughed, "they'll all happen to be just passing through on Arabian horses and say, 'Hey, want a ride?'"

When the girls made it to Rosaline's room, they settled down, casually talking about the school day. Rosaline was pleasantly reminded of how much Cherrelle appreciated the birthday gift from her as she saw a small, gold watch hanging from her neck.

"Did you see the way Jimmy Veagin looked at me today?" Rosaline rolled her eyes to the ceiling.

Sipping from a glass of juice, Janice smirked. "No, but we noticed the goofy way you looked at him."

"His eyes." Rosaline ignored her. "He looked at me briefly but I saw something in those beautiful brown eyes. Do you all think he notices me? I mean, what if he likes me but just won't say anything?"

"Not Jimmy Veagin." Cherrelle shook her head. "Not only is he too fine, but he's a junior. Those types of guys never notice us. They go for the popular girls." Her habit of tossing out brutal honesty from time to time annoyed Rosaline. It did nothing for her hopes. Why couldn't Cherrelle just play along and say something nice, regardless of whether she believed it was a fantasy or not?

Khara frowned. "Well, really, it's usually the easy girls who get all the fine ones, and if sex is what it takes to get a boyfriend, he's not worth having."

"There you go again, Khara, being logical." Rosaline threw an orange peel at her cousin. "We all know that anyway, so don't worry. I won't do anything sleazy, but imagine if me and Jimmy were thrown together under wild circumstances. Just think—I was sitting at the lunch table with you guys one day. I felt strange, like something was going to happen." Rosaline squinted her eyes as her imagination began to pour out amongst the girls in the room, who were ready to listen to another adventure of Rosaline Gavalon's:

Unlike the gym or auditorium, the school cafeteria wasn't a cavernous room given its own privacy by the erection of walls. The lunchroom offered an element of surprise for anyone who may have been looking for it. A person could turn the corner and there it was: an open space supported by thick brick beams that rose majestically from white tiled floors to the ceiling. Although large and accommodating, it gave one the impression that maybe the contractor forgot to add a cafeteria in the blueprint of the building and as an afterthought; perhaps he had some workers hurriedly situate several chairs and tables together. There was no need for the florescent lights that lined the ceiling, for the expansive windows that made up the east wall of the cafeteria let in natural light. I loved natural light. It gave a fresh liveliness to the atmosphere that electric light could not offer.

My eyes wandered two tables away and rested on Jimmy Veagin, who was sitting with his back towards me. I admired those tight, soft-looking brown

curls, smooth skin, and broad shoulders. Just gazing at him had become a favorite pastime of mine lately, but whenever he came near me, I erupted into a fit of heart palpitations and frazzled nerve endings. Out of the corner of my eye, I was distracted by several vehicles pulling up to the building. No one else seemed to notice them as I gazed out the windows.

"Roz! Wake up! I was asking you about the game. Can we catch a ride with you in that pretty red car?" Janice and Khara nodded their heads in agreement.

"Yeah," I said. "But who's gonna pay for the gas?" They all seemed to think that my question was pretty funny since my only answer was a few snorts and giggles. We continued eating and talking until I decided to venture to the other side of the cafeteria and see what was going on. As I quickly walked away from the table, I threw a self-conscious glance over my shoulder to see that Jimmy, the guy I had been admiring, was frowning at me. He must see the vans, too, I thought. He rose from his table with a lunch tray and came in my direction. Getting nervous, I pretended that I didn't see him. Then my nervousness suddenly changed to confusion as I watched men with stockings over their faces and carrying guns, rush to the doors. I screamed, everyone in the lunchroom looked in my direction, and these men burst inside. Throughout the confusion, shouting, and shrieks of fear, one of the men pointed at me saying, "That's her."

Fear froze me as I stared in bewilderment at my accuser. I backed away from him and turned to run. Instead, I crashed right into Jimmy and flattened the tray he was holding between us. Crushed peas, leftover French fries, and spilled milk stained his shirt as his tray clattered to the floor. Nothing prepared me for the blow across my head that would have connected me to the floor had not Jimmy reached out his arms with lightning speed and caught me. Men with guns surrounded the lunchroom. They were grabbing people and hauling them out of the cafeteria doors. I was still leaning against Jimmy's chest and could feel his heart pounding. Thoughts were swimming through my mind: *Who are they? Where did they come from? Why are they here? And why do they want me?* My mind was slipping away and everything slowly turned black as I slid from Jimmy's arms onto the hard floor.

It began as a distant rumble. As consciousness took hold of my senses, the sound seemed to swell to a roar in my ears. An occasional jolt painfully bounced my head up and down against a metal surface. I opened my eyes. Blackness surrounded me. As I sat up and my eyes adjusted to the darkness, visuals zoomed to the forefront of my mind: *men rushing out of vans, screaming, jumbled shouting, a loud noise that shook my mind and made me feel as if my brain was imploding....darkness...now this place.* Realizing that I must be in the back of one of those vans, I suddenly felt alone. Then, an instant panic took over me. I dragged myself to my knees and crawled to the double doors at the back of the van. "Help!" I wearily raised my fist against the cold metal. "Somebody help me!" I banged with as much strength as I could muster. "Please help me!" I then lay on my back and pushed at the stubborn

doors with my feet but they wouldn't budge. I got back to my knees and groped for a latch but found nothing. Frustrated tears welled up in my eyes as my voice rose to a scream and I banged furiously at the doors again. "Can anybody hear me? Please! Somebody!" This van has to stop, my mind cried. I've got to get out of here before it goes any further. Finally, exhausted, I turned my back towards the doors and leaned against them, rubbing my sore hands. That's when I noticed a crumpled figure lying in the corner. Shakily, I made it to that side of the van and turned the person over. "Jimmy!" I whispered. His lip was bleeding and his eye was bruised. "What are you doing in here?"

Looking around, he tried focusing his eyes. "I don't know. This is crazy."

"Are you all right? Do you know what's going on? I've been trying to get out of here. I've been banging and banging at these doors." He slowly sat up and pushed me away from him. I watched as he wiped the blood away from his mouth with the back of his hand. "Are-are you all right?" I repeated.

"Yeah," he answered flatly. He avoided my eyes, seeming in deep thought.

I slid over to the other side of the van and hugged myself to my knees. The van moved on. I looked at my watch. "Where are we going? What do you think these people want with us?" My only answer from him was a distracted glance. The ride went on in silence. I could feel tension in the air. Why does he keep looking at me? What could he be thinking? I couldn't stand the silence any longer. "Why would a bunch of men just burst into a school and grab a bunch of teenagers? Did you hear anything they might have said to each other?"

Jimmy shot me an irritated look. "Oh, aren't we just full of brilliant questions today? What do I look like? A—"

"Okay! Okay!" I shouted. "I just thought somebody might know something! I was hoping *you* would know something! I'm about to go crazy because I don't understand why this is happening to us! Do you care? I mean, maybe we can stick together through this. I don't know." My last words trailed off shakily so I just shut up and stared at my hands. I didn't want him to see me cry.

Jimmy only looked at me. "Touching," he said sarcastically and shook his head. "What, is there supposed to be some kind of bond here? Am I stuck with somebody's crybaby?" I couldn't believe he was acting like this. All the willpower I had built up to keep from crying was taken away by his increasing coldness. I turned my back as the tears fell and I angrily wiped them away. There was a long silence and I hoped the sound of the van drowned out my sniffles. I didn't realize that Jimmy had slid next to me until I felt his hand on me. I snatched my arm away from his touch. "Look," he cautiously placed his hand on my shoulder again. "I don't know what's going on either. I'm sorry, it's just that—"

Suddenly, the van stopped. After a moment of silence, there was a clicking noise and the doors swung open. Flashlights blared at us. "Get out," ordered one of the dark menacing figures in the doorway. He didn't seem to give us time to move, for two men grabbed Jimmy by the shoulders and yanked him

out through the doorway. Still trying to shield my eyes from the glaring circles of light, I watched him disappear with a thud. Then I was grabbed roughly by the arm and hauled out. Too petrified to make a sound, my heart pounded in my ears as my eyes strained to make out the forms that blended in with the night's blackness. All I could make out were the shadows of trees as the sound of running water reached my ears. Twigs snapped beneath my feet as we were taken to some shabbily-built cabins and then separated. The kidnapper noticed my hesitation in front of the door as I watched Jimmy being taken into the woods. "This is your room. Get in," he ordered as the top step creaked heavily under his weight and he opened the door.

I only feared the worst. "Where are you taking him?"

"None of your business. Now get in." He grabbed my arm, pulled me up the steps, and into even bleaker darkness. His hand remained firmly clasped around my arm as it seemed he was reaching for something. Yeah, like I'm gonna run now, I thought. I heard a click and the room was instantly illuminated by a bulb hanging from the ceiling. Although relieved that I was no longer surrounded by darkness, I wasn't too pleased to see such grungy surroundings. Barely large enough for one person, the cabin was thrown together with a sink in one corner and a bed against the wall. I turned towards the kidnapper and was suddenly taken aback by startling gray eyes. They contrasted against a brown complexion and thick, wavy, black hair. Either he didn't notice me staring, or he was used to people being thrown off by their sterling brilliance. "Toilet's outside," he stated as he released my arm. The floor creaked under his boots as he moved past me.

"Hey," I stopped him as he headed towards the door. I figured I might as well ask him for the harsh truth and get it over with. "Are you gonna kill us?" I tried to sound courageous yet instead, I think my voice came out timid and scared.

He studied me for a moment with those eyes. Those vivid grays reminded me of a wolf's: sharp and intense. I just wish I could read in them what he was thinking during the several seconds of silence that stretched between us. "The name's Silver," he said. And with that, I was left alone in a small cabin, out in the middle of nowhere, and scared half to death.

Knock! Knock! "Rosaline, are you in there?"

"Yes, Ma?"

"What are you doing in there? I've been calling you for the longest time and banging on this door forever!"

"Oh, I'm sorry! Hold on a minute. I'll be out."

"What's going on in there?"

"Coming, Ma!"

"Your daddy just got off work and ate supper. He wants to help you with your math before he falls asleep. You know you have that test tomorrow."

Khara stood up. "Girl, I wonder how long she'd been knocking. Does this mean we have to wait until next Tuesday?"

Rosaline shook her head. She hated it when her stories were interrupted. She also hated it when her mother would corner her asking questions about what was going on in her room. When Rosaline told her stories, they had a trance-like effect on her listeners, which was almost impossible to break. It usually took weeks, maybe even months for her to finish one story. "Coming, Mom!" she yelled. "Well, everybody, until next Tuesday."

Janice was disappointed. "But Roz, can't you finish after your dad helps you with the math? This Silver guy sounds hot! I get it—he's kidnapping you so he can force you to marry him and become part of his harem!"

Rosaline laughed. "Until next Tuesday!" she insisted.

The next day, Khara gazed across the busy hallway at Rosaline who was nervously smiling at Jimmy Veagin as he walked past her. "You know, she's got some kinda imagination."

"Yeah, it's a trip. It's like she's always in a different world. She looks at people and things in a totally different way than the average, or shall we say normal teenager does!" Janice laughed. "Think Roz will be a writer one day?"

Khara and Rosaline were cousins. These two girls, along with Cherrelle and Janice, had been friends ever since elementary school. They shared a unique sort of friendship. Living further away from the more densely populated neighborhood where most of the students lived, they didn't fit into the social world of teenagers that involved going to after-school games, other functions, and visiting other kids' houses. Their parents weren't able to afford many clothes, so keeping up with the latest fads was out of their reach. These differences, made obvious by their judging peers, made these young women feel left out. So they just had their own little group. After school, they would get together and talk about boys, clothes, dances: a life they never felt part of and only talked about in Rosaline's room. But they did feel a part of the strange and exciting stories that Rosaline would tell every Tuesday, which was storytelling hour after their girl talks. Rosaline would let them share in the excitement as she included them and other people she knew in these tales of adventure.

As Rosaline headed towards her locker, she bumped into Cherrelle. "Just saw Jimmy!" she giggled. I was picturing him being roughed up by big men with stockings over their faces and couldn't help but laugh. He probably thinks we're talking about him. If he only knew the real deal! This is a trip!"

Rosaline suddenly felt her face warm. "There he is, Cherrelle, coming up behind you! Sssssh!" They both turned their backs to him as he strolled past, then burst into hysterical laughter. Rosaline quickly got her books, slammed her locker shut, and they both hurried off to the cafeteria.

"I can't make up my mind what I want to wear to the dance Friday," one of the girls who was standing in line in front of Rosaline said to her friend.

"Well, I'm wearing my new purple pumps Mom just got me. All I need now is some beige ones and I'll have a pair for every outfit. If my mom doesn't get me those shoes by Christmas, I'm calling my dad in Florida," another said.

"Speaking of not being able to make up your mind, I can't decide who I'm going with," said another girl.

"What time does the dance start?" Rosaline summoned up the nerve to ask the most popular, beautiful girl in school after listening to their conversation.

"Nine o'clock—" Lana Brandon muttered without letting the interruption break the flow of their conversation. "—Derek can dance but he's starting to get on my nerves. Steve is all right but he ain't the smoothest guy in the world."

Rosaline laughed. "Steve is cute, and he dresses kind of nice, too." Her voice trailed off when she noticed the disinterested looks on the girls' faces, as they made it quite obvious that they didn't want her in their conversation. She tried to hide her embarrassment in front of Cherrelle by turning to her with a forced smile. "So, are you going to the dance?"

Cherrelle gave her an incredulous look. "Since when do we go to school dances?"

After getting their food, Rosaline spotted Khara at a corner table a short distance away. Scrolling over to sit with her, Rosaline slightly stiffened when one of the girls made a comment which she was sure was meant for her.

"Look at her shoes." Rosaline's observer didn't even attempt to whisper as Lana Brandon's friends placed their trays on their table and Rosaline walked by. A burst of laughter followed as Rosaline avoided looking at them. Cherrelle, who was walking ahead of Rosaline, apparently didn't hear them, for if her quick-tempered friend had heard the comment, she was sure Cherrelle would have challenged the snide remark with a fiery retort. Rosaline had a sneaky suspicion that the girls were well aware of this, for they had waited until Cherrelle was out of earshot before making their verbal observation. Due to a scene involving someone bumping into Cherrelle and making her drop her books one day, it didn't take long for the students at Deep Creek High to get word that this girl should be approached with caution. Usually, when Rosaline met someone, they were polite until she got to know them and see their true colors, but Cherrelle seemed a little backwards to her when it came to social skills. Instead of beginning with a polite stage, she was abrasive until she got to know a person. It was the tough exterior that she formed against strangers that was hard to get past. Yet Cherrelle was passionate about many things, and once she became a friend, she would do anything for those she cared about. Still stung from the words of one of Lana's friends, Rosaline stared at her plate as she slowly sat down at Khara's table.

“Hey. What’s up?” she mumbled to Khara.

Glancing up from her food, Khara could see through Rosaline’s forced smile and asked her what was wrong.

Now that she was a safe distance away, Rosaline peered at the table of pretty, well-dressed girls. “You ever felt like you didn’t fit in?” she asked. “I mean, don’t you wish that people wanted to be like you, like being popular, having a cute boyfriend who all the girls wanted, or having someone come up to you and say, ‘Where’d you get that skirt? That’s cute.’ You know, maybe being the best dressed or something?”

Khara paused before demolishing a French fry and cut her eyes at Lana Brandon’s table. She raised her eyebrows in disbelief. “You want to be like those conceited things over there?”

Rosaline let out an exasperated sigh and leaned back in her chair. “It’s like when she talks everyone pauses. It wouldn’t hurt to be noticed every once in a while. People seem to find me so uninteresting. They look right past me.”

“Well, I’m listening to you with bated breath,” Cherrelle said dramatically as she struggled with opening a pack of ketchup. “Being in your presence is overwhelming me right now!” If Rosaline wasn’t so intimidated by Cherrelle, she’d snap at her and tell her to be serious. Her sarcasm got on her nerves sometimes.

“If you were like them,” Khara said, “I wouldn’t tell anybody you were my cousin. And you know what? They talk about each other behind their backs. It’s like they’re not even good enough for each other! Dorks.”

Rosaline looked alarmed. “No, we’re the dorks!” She was frustrated that she had only four pairs of pants to wear to school. Because her parents couldn’t afford nice clothes, it bothered her that she couldn’t dress the way she wanted to. Nice things would get her noticed and make her popular. “Clothes are everything!” Rosaline said. “You ever seen a popular person who couldn’t dress?”

Khara thought for a while. “Lisa Turnkee.”

“Lisa Turnkee is a basketball player! You know how everyone is about sports. I’m talking about someone who has no talent and no athletic ability. Now look at Lana Branden. Okay, she’s pretty and everything, but do you think that she’d be noticed if she didn’t have such beautiful clothes? The latest hairstyles? People are impressed by nice looking things.”

“I’m not,” Khara said. “You’re the one who’s all impressed. I don’t see what the big deal about clothes is anyway. It’s stupid and it takes too long to get dressed when you’re into all that. You have to worry about accessories to match with this outfit and that outfit. If your hair is perfect, that makes you freak out even more if something happens to it. Spending so much money on clothes is a waste.”

“But it’ll make me feel so much better—build my self esteem.”

“Jeans and a T-shirt will suit me just fine.”

The side of Cherrelle’s mouth jutted out as she chewed on a mouthful of hamburger. She always dressed as if she were ready to do something that involved athletic prowess at a moment’s notice. “And I believe in practicality.” Cherrelle shifted and easily swung her foot onto the table. With a thumping noise, she let her foot rest beside her tray to show off a very impressive track shoe. “I believe in nothing but comfortable, sporty shoes. My dad doesn’t care about cost. He considers it as an investment. We talkin’ scholarship, baby! And you see this yellow streak?” She moved her hand along the side of her shoe as if she were advertising it in a commercial. “Makes me run faster.”

“Whatever!” Khara giggled. “Roz, you’re too materialistic. Just because we’re not cool or beauty cuties doesn’t mean we’re dorks. Being cool, the best dressed, or even the most beautiful will not make you a better person.”

Rosaline’s mood lifted a little and she smiled, sighed, and her dark brown eyes gazed at the ceiling. “Well, we’re all going to grow up and live in Paris anyway. Yeah, we’re going to speak French and have French husbands and beautiful Parisian children.”

Khara wrinkled her nose and stared at her. Now where did that come from? she wondered. I have the weirdest cousin. She smiled and continued eating her food. “What a dreamer.”

It was Tuesday again, and the smell of freshly-cut grass filled the late summer air. As the girls walked down the street, they slowed down and gazed at the grand new house that was being built in their neighborhood. Everyone who lived on that street had waited in anticipation, anxious to see who their upper middle-class neighbors were going to be. “Let’s go inside,” Cherrelle suggested, her voice filled with mischief. Her energy always made her ready for an adventure.

“No,” Khara continued walking as the girls slowed down. “Somebody might get hurt.” Mature beyond her years, Khara usually thought things through before considering anything new and unfamiliar. More content with analyzing and observing from the sidelines, she would scold herself during the rare times she let the girls influence her into any situation that held a questionable outcome.

“We’re not gonna touch anything,” Rosaline said as she and Janice followed Cherrelle across the heaps of bricks and uneven ground towards the almost finished house. They waited at the doorway as Khara carefully stepped her way amongst the building materials. A scowl had crossed her face.

“I hope we don’t get in trouble,” Janice whispered, her voice brimming with excitement as her eyes darted about. She was the scary one with larger than life reactions and usually the first one to disappear when trouble

sprouted. The girls peeked inside. The smell of sheet rock and brand new wood filled their nostrils as they stepped into the house and gazed in awe at the size of the room that surrounded them. A wrought iron staircase reached to another floor above them. As they explored the house, they wandered into each room, picturing themselves living there with their future families.

"My husband's gonna build me a house like this," Khara sighed. "He's gonna be a big-time minister with his own TV program and have this huge church right down the street and every Sunday people are going to bring food over and we'll have this fancy Sunday feast," she said all in one breath.

"Well, I'm gonna fill my house with five kids. And of course my husband's going to be able to afford it because he'll be a lawyer and he'll take care of us all," Rosaline said.

"But can he afford to add an addition to fit that big ole head of yours?" Cherrelle asked.

"Shut up."

They followed Cherrelle into the next room which was smaller. A comfy picture window overlooked a back yard that was bordered by towering gum trees and pines. "This is gonna be my husband's music room," Cherrelle announced. "He's gonna be a famous jazz musician with all these CDs out and I'll be too stuck up to speak to any of you."

Rosaline was standing in the doorway and heard a sliding noise. Instinct told her to look around and make sure she wasn't in the way of anything falling but before she could turn around, a board that had been leaning against the doorframe broke its fall by whacking her across the back of her head on its path to the floor. "Ouch!" Rosaline exclaimed.

"You okay?" Janice rushed to her. "Oh no, are you bleeding?" She began fussing over her.

"See, I told you this wasn't a good idea," Khara said as she dragged the board away from the doorway.

Rosaline was still rubbing the back of her head as they made it down the stairwell. Janice was annoying her and she had to shrug her off. "Janice, I'm not gonna die. Get off me!"

"You might have a concussion or something! That board whacked you pretty hard!"

"We should be more worried about that board," Cherrelle said.

"You have some nerve," Rosaline said. "Your head is so big that it has its own satellite system."

"Your head looks like a water tower," Cherrelle retorted.

"Your head is sooo big, if you bent down to pick something up, you'd pass out and wake up in China."

"I think Roz got you with the satellite system," Khara said. "That was a good one."

"Yeah, she got me," Cherrelle laughed. "But I have more. And I'm gonna get you when Jimmy's around!" Rosaline wasn't sure if it would be so funny then.

"Hey, Roz, where did you leave off last time?" Janice was laughing as she seated herself on the bottom step of the staircase. She jumped when she thought she saw a spider by her foot. Janice was known to make a spectacle of herself when insects, especially flying ones, came within a foot of her personal space. Running from bugs seemed to take up most of her free time and energy during the summer months.

"It was the guy with the silver eyes who left you in that raggedy cabin," Khara said as she sat down also.

"Yeah," Cherrelle added, "but they took Jimmy off into the woods first to kill him."

Rosaline laughed. "Oh, you have my story all planned out, don't you?"

Cherrelle's eyes widened innocently and she shrugged her shoulders. "I mean, for what other reason could they be taking him into the woods?"

They were all silent for a moment as they eyed each other. "Maybe the kidnapppers are all flaming faggots," Janice finally decided.

"Gross!"

"Nasty!"

"Eeww!" were the various responses until everyone burst into laughter.

"Oh, be quiet, everybody! Let's try to keep things decent." Rosaline could only shake her head from side to side. "At least in the beginning," she added with a mischievous smile. Suddenly her voice changed and a serious expression altered her demeanor.

"Get up!" That familiar voice cut the silence of my shabbily-built quarters. Confused, I opened my eyes to sunlight streaming past an impatient Silver who stood in the doorway. "Get up," he repeated.

I groggily looked around me. Where am I? Who is this man? But then the memories flooded back as I recalled last night's ordeal. "What's happening? Where's Jimmy?" I asked.

"Come on, move it. We've got some traveling to do today."

I slowly raised myself up and sat on the edge of the bed, trying to clear my head. "Okay, okay." I raised my hand up against him as he came towards me. "I'm getting up!"

"No, don't worry about your sneakers," he said as I reached for them.

"Huh?" I gave him a baffled look. What's the hurry? I wondered, but decided against asking any questions as I obediently followed him with half-shut eyes out into the sunlight. Rays of light peeped through the towering trees as I squinted. Just as I suspected, we were in the middle of nowhere. The few cabins I could see appeared silent and old, making me wonder how many storms they had withstood through the years. As we made it to a wide

dirt path, I saw a group of people standing in the distance up ahead of us. As we neared them, I breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of Jimmy who looked even foggier than I felt.

"Roz!" I was shocked to see Janice's plump figure running towards me. The sun bounced off her curly, disheveled hair. "Are you all right? I lost one of my earrings." She fiddled with her ear as she started to search the ground.

"Janice, Janice," I gently took her by the shoulders, "don't worry about your earring."

"Yeah, maybe the cops found it and they can trace us back to here. Why haven't they gotten here yet?" She started to cry. She was too distraught to realize how ridiculous it sounded for the cops to be able to find us by a lost earring, but in the state I was in, it did shine a glimmer of hope. How can a bunch of thugs take over the school, grab whoever they want, and just waltz out without even getting chased by the police? It all happened so easily, and too fast. I was shocked to see Cherrelle and Khara too. I recognized quite a few people from the school. There were about fifteen of us.

"So, so touching," a harsh voice cut through Janice's crying. "Hi, I'm your tour guide for the afternoon and my name is Sharky. As soon as everyone says hi to each other we can get on with our day, now can't we?" I glared at the owner of that voice, wondering if he were responsible for the dull ache coming from the knot on the back of my head. With black hair and a thick mustache, he looked as if he were Hispanic. Heavy-set with a slightly protruding belly, this man stood at about the same height as my five foot eight inch frame. "What are you looking at, woman?" He glared back at me with black, evil eyes. "Get your butt over here." I tensed. The last thing I wanted to do was go near him. I just stood there watching him as Janice's fingers tightened on my arm. Sharky rested his gun across his shoulder and put his hand on his hip. "Do you have a hearing defect? Get over here! I want you to pass out these boots and backpacks!" Sharky pointed to backpacks and hiking boots that lay in a pile beside him. After more hesitation, I finally made my way over to the pile, watching Sharky cautiously as I neared him. He was suddenly forgotten when I noticed that each pair of boots had a name on them!

"What's wrong, Rosaline? You can't read?"

I swung around to see Silver smiling at me. Bewildered, I stood there with my mouth open. "How—how did you know our—"

"Let's just say we're organized," Sharky smiled. "Now will you get moving? We have places to go."

I issued everyone their gear and after donning our boots, we all began our hike through the woods. I thought about Silver. What will happen if I ask him questions? If Sharky hears me quizzing him, what would he do? Sharky was behind me but I couldn't tell how close. Maybe we'd stop after a while, and then I could get close to Silver and see what I could find out. He didn't seem as crazy as Sharky. As a matter of fact, none of the other kidnappers seemed as crazy as Sharky. The man was dangerous, and I made a mental note not to cross him.

An hour passed by. Then two. The late summer air clung to me like bloated whispers of heat against my sweaty skin. I could hear water in the distance as a clearance in the trees up ahead came into view. Ahhh, that water will feel good on my hot skin, I thought. And my mouth was so dry. I licked my lips and could taste the salt from the beads of sweat that had formed above them. As we neared the edge of the trees, a beautiful river emerged before us. Sunlight glistened over moving water which rushed between the parted forest and disappeared around a bend in the distance.

Dropping our backpacks, we hurried to the edge of the river where we quenched our thirsts. The smooth rocks shimmered beneath the water's moving surface as I cupped my hands in its cool, clear depths and dipped my face in it, letting the water splash down my neck and dampen my sweaty shirt. This feels so good, I thought, repeating the motion over and over again. After satisfying my thirst, I turned and spotted Silver who had made his way to a fallen tree. He let his gun drop to the ground. Removing his backpack, he revealed sandwiches he had been carrying. We almost toppled him over as we rushed him and grabbed the food he was passing out. Many of the girls wolfed the sandwiches down before even finding a place to sit. I spotted one of the many large rocks that rested on the river's edge and sauntered towards it. It looked like a good place to relax so I sat down, leaned my back against it, and began to eat.

The kidnapers were situated a tight distance from the rest of the group, far enough to set themselves apart, yet close enough to hear and see what was going on and keep an eye on us. With his hands resting on the rifle he had placed across his lap, Sharky had seated himself on the same tree that Silver was leaning against. A ragged sphere of roots and dirt formed one end of the tree. It appeared as if it had been snatched out of the ground from a past windstorm or maybe even a hurricane. The other kidnapers had dropped their backpacks near both men. One kidnapper was almost as dark as the rich soil that clung to the roots of the tree. He leaned against the drying wood and as he fiddled with the strap of his rifle, muscles strained against the even blacker T-shirt that he wore. With massive shoulders that tapered their way down to a narrow waistline, he looked like a triangle. Another kidnapper, who was of Asian descent, sat on the tree as he swung his legs back and forth. He seemed to have a quiet demeanor and looked at people as though he knew what they were thinking. This guy's eyes were too close together. I couldn't decide whether he was ugly or not. Another kidnapper, who was about Sharky's height, was a white guy who had golden blond hair with even lighter streaks. He looked too hyper and his eyes darted around like he couldn't wait to kill something. He pushed the Asian guy and almost knocked him off his perch. The Asian gave the white guy a warning look. He wasn't in the mood for playing. My eyes slid back to Sharky only to notice that he was watching me.

Khara, Cherrelle, and Janice came and sat beside me. "My feet hurt," Khara said after she had taken one of her boots off and was rubbing her toes. "Look at Miss Cutie Tootie with her bunch over there. She refused to wear

those boots, took her heels off about three miles back, and now Miss Homecoming's feet are bleeding."

"Bleeding? Oh, man, what are they gonna do?" I couldn't help but feel sorry for Lana Branden. Even though it was her own stubbornness that caused her problems, I had always envied her with her nice clothes. It amazed me that she had a pair of heels that matched every outfit, yet I didn't envy this girl today. "Isn't there something they could wrap around her feet?" I asked.

"I don't know if those guys even care," Cherrelle replied. "I doubt she'll make it even if she decides to finally put those boots on because it won't keep those cuts from hurting. Isn't she the dumbest—"

"Look," Khara cut in, "all I'm worried about is where they're taking us. What do you all think is going to happen?"

"We're gonna die," Janice pushed black, curly hair away from her face. "I mean, the cops haven't even gotten here. It's like nobody even cares what happened to us."

"Don't say that!" Khara snapped as she noticed the tears well up in Janice's eyes. "They wouldn't bring us all the way out here just to kill us for no reason. It just doesn't make any sense."

"Well, whatever the reason we've been kidnapped," Cherrelle replied, "I'm not sticking around to find out. It could be anything. They could be selling us as slaves or forcing us into prostitution. They could even be taking us to some crazy hideout where illegal experiments are being made on humans."

We were silent for a moment as these realizations struck us. I knew some of these thoughts were already running through our minds but to actually hear these words being spoken sent a chill through me. I gazed at a waterfall at one end of the river. Water spilled feverishly across staggered boulders, splashing into the river to feed its current. My eyes followed the direction of the flow where I could see the river curve and disappear into green pine trees. This beauty had a danger to it. What was up ahead for us?

"We're getting outta here." I detected a familiar note of stubbornness in Cherrelle's voice and it disturbed me.

"It's dark!" Rosaline couldn't believe they were all in that big empty house for so long.

Cherrelle looked at her watch, yet couldn't tell what time it was. "Glad I got my homework over with," she muttered. As they all headed out of the house, she laughed. "You girls wouldn't believe this, but my feet hurt. Feels like I've been doing too much window shopping."

"You mean too much hiking!" Khara chuckled. They looked behind them to see that Janice was still sitting on the stairs, frowning. "Hey, Janice, what's the matter?" Khara asked.

Worried eyes settled on Rosaline. "You're not gonna kill any of us off, are you?"

"Well," Rosaline gave her a sidelong glance, "that depends."

"Depends on what?" Cherrelle playfully blocked the entrance of the door so that she couldn't get outside.

"Lunch for the rest of the week! Your treat, of course!" Rosaline slid past Cherrelle and ran away as the other girls chased her. All except Khara. She wasn't about to twist her ankle on all of that uneven ground.

2

Escape

That next Tuesday, the girls were walking from the neighborhood convenience store. They had just crossed the railroad tracks when they saw the new house in the distance they had always admired. It was finally finished and as they neared it, they saw a lanky boy about their age sitting on the porch. He looked bored. He didn't notice them because he was concentrating on the other end of a stick as he tried working it under a square piece of newly-laid turf.

"Don't speak. He looks like a nerd," Cherrelle blurted out.

Khara shook her head and laughed. "You're being mean," she said. "Hi!" She waved in his direction and he looked up.

When he didn't wave back at them, Cherrelle said, "See?" So the girls decided that the new kid on the street was some stuck-up rich kid who thought he was too good for the people in his own neighborhood.

"Where'd you leave off?" Khara asked later when they settled down in Rosaline's room.

"We were on this long hike, which Lana Branden made in her heels. We were trying to figure out why we got kidnapped, and Cherrelle was talking about escaping," Janice said.

"Cherrelle," I cautioned, "we don't even know where we are. If we run off, we might as well be dead. We'll get lost in this wilderness! They might shoot us first if they see what we're up to anyway. Get that crazy thought out of your head."

"Oh, you'd rather be sold into prostitution?"

"You don't even know what's going to happen to us!"

"You want to wait and see?" Cherrelle earnestly leaned towards me.

"Look, I'm not gonna say I'll do it with or without the three of you because we're all going to do this together. I just have to think of a plan—"

"Yeah, a plan to get us killed. You've got to be—"

"Shut up!" Khara hissed, "You two want them psychos over there to hear what you're talking about?" She redirected her attention to Janice, whose eyes were filled with tears that threatened to spill down her full cheeks at any second. "And Janice, crying will get us nowhere so you have to pull yourself together!"

"Gather up everybody," Silver's voice startled us. "We've got a good distance to travel before building a camp for the night. Sharky, get 'em started. I'll be right back." Silver disappeared into the woods and Sharky started barking out orders to everyone.

"You heard the man!" he yelled. "You are the slowest-moving idiots I've ever seen in my life!"

"I can't go any farther," a shaky, hesitant voice spoke.

"What?" Sharky shot a crazed look at Lana Branden who was sitting down holding her feet. "What's the matter with you? Get up!"

"My feet are killing me. I can't handle it," Lana cried.

"Get up, stupid! Maybe if you'd put those boots on, your feet wouldn't be all messed up! Why do you think we gave you those things? What's wrong?" He came towards her. "You too cute to wear 'em?"

"Don't yell at her!" Lana's friend protectively draped her arm around her shoulder. "Can't you come back and get us?"

"No!" Sharky slammed his gun to the ground. "The only way we'd leave you here is if you were dead!" He paced the ground for a few seconds, his frustration obvious, then he stopped and faced the two girls. He was suddenly calm as he stared at Lana in thought. "Okay, we'll leave you here," he smiled. "Just as I suggested." Sharky glanced at the large, dark and massive kidnapper who was shaped like a triangle. "Go ahead, Cedric."

"Nooooo!" Lana screamed when she saw Cedric raise his rifle. "I'll walk!" She clumsily stood up, wincing in pain.

"See," Sharky said, "all you are right now is a burden to us. You're like a horse with a broken leg. Kill her, Cedric."

Cherrelle poked my arm with her elbow. "We can't just stand here and watch this!" she whispered loudly. My mind searched for ways to stop this as Cherrelle continued, "We can jump these guys! It's sixteen of us to their six!"

"What about the guns, Cherrelle?" I asked as my voice trembled. The sharp click of Cedric's gun not only promised everyone that he was serious, but it also reminded me of how helpless we were. He steadily aimed it at Lana.

Sharky snapped around at the sound of our voices. "What? You want some too?" All I wanted to do was run at that moment. Just run like crazy into the woods away from these sick people and away from this horrible ordeal.

Sharky stalked towards us. I shrank away from Cherrelle as he grabbed her by the front of her shirt and hissed: "Please believe this: I'm a very smart man who's acutely aware of everything that goes on around me and you're a very stupid girl who has a head full of plans, now don't you?" He shoved her away from him so hard that she hit the ground with a grunt. I ran to Cherrelle and tried to help her up but she angrily snatched her arm away from me and got up on her own, brushing her clothes off and glaring at Sharky with loathing in her eyes. "Now if any of you people have any crazy ideas," he shouted, "I suggest you calculate how fast a bullet can hit you between the time I SEE you THINK about escaping and the time you actually start running. It doesn't take but a second to figure that out." He watched Cherrelle silently for a moment. "Don't think about it," he spoke in a low voice before turning and walking away.

"You can't just shoot her!" Lana's friend sobbed as Sharky came towards them again. Lana huddled against her.

"Yes, we can." Sharky said simply, as if they did this all the time. He seemed to enjoy putting fear into people. He sat down beside Lana and roughly grabbed her hair, pulling her head back. She winced in pain. He started to whisper something in her ear but instead glared at her friend, Tyra, who clung to her. "Get off!" He wrenched her arm from around Lana's shoulder, roughly pushing her away. Pulling Lana's head towards him, he whispered something to her again. Lana's terrified expression changed to disbelief, but she seemed to calm down a little. Sharky continued whispering in Lana's ear, then watched her closely. He finally let go of her hair, and after a long hesitation, Lana's eyes dropped to the ground and she nodded her head. Sharky smiled and looked at Cedric. "Hey, get those rags out of your backpack and wrap her feet. This will last her for a while until we can think of something else."

"What's going on? I thought I was supposed to catch up with you all." Silver reappeared from the surrounding trees.

Sharky stood up slowly. "Oh, we had a slight problem but everything's all right for now."

We continued hiking for what seemed like forever. My feet were aching, but I dared not complain. I just wanted to blend in with everyone else and stay out of Sharky's way. Finally, we stopped at sunset and set up camp while Silver and Cedric gathered wood and started up a fire. I found canned food in my backpack and drank water from the canteen. "He's been pretty friendly to her lately, don't you think?" I commented to Janice as she rummaged through her own backpack.

"Yeah," Khara answered me instead. "Look at him now." We watched as Sharky cleaned Lana's cuts by dabbing alcohol on her feet. "Since he threatened to kill her he just suddenly changed."

"I know one thing; it had something to do with what he was whispering in her ear," Janice remarked.

"Maybe they're not allowed to kill us and he was having himself some fun," I said with a slight glimmer of hope. "He seems to enjoy scaring the mess out

of us and bullying people around."

"Well," Khara shook her head, "I'm not going to take any chances. Don't believe that he throws around empty threats. He just might surprise us during one of his temper tantrums." We watched Sharky as he skillfully re-bandaged one of Lana's feet.

"Where's Cherrelle?" I looked around and spotted her a short distance away sitting on top of her sleeping bag with her knees drawn up to her chin and arms wrapped around her legs. "Cherrelle, you all right?" I asked as I approached her. No response. She just stared straight ahead as if I weren't there. "Cherrelle, I just wanted to beat him down when I saw him rough you up. I'd do anything to get a hold of one of those guns—"

"Roz," she interrupted me, "it's tonight. We're outta here. Tonight."

Khara found herself standing in the bathroom stall the next morning fiddling with a stubborn safety pin on her corduroy pants and getting frustrated. "This material is too thick," she mumbled to herself, trying to push the pin through where she lost the button. This is taking too long and Mrs. Brown is going to send someone to come and get me, she thought. Khara had to excuse herself from math class when she felt the button to her corduroy's pop and her math teacher had graciously supplied her with a safety pin. Khara continued fussing to herself until she heard someone come into the bathroom.

"So, Tyra, tell us. What's the big secret?"

"Do you know that skinny, dark skinned girl who lives out in the boonies?"

"Who? Rhonda? RayAnn? Something like that. I know her name begins with an R."

There was a pause and Khara instinctively jumped on top of the toilet. She held her breath as Tyra checked under the stalls to make sure that no one else was in the bathroom.

"Well," Tyra continued, "Lana called me this morning before I left for school. I don't know if she told you all this but she's been having dreams about that girl."

"What kind of dreams?" one of her friends asked matter-of-factly.

"It's not like the same dream over and over again. She dreamed that we all got kidnapped or something. And then it's like the next week the kidnappers made us hike through the woods, and they were going to kill her."

"You mean the same dream but continued?"

"Yep," Tyra said.

"Well, why didn't Lana come to school today?"

"She had to get stitches yesterday. Her brothers were in the house throwing a football. When she heard glass shatter she ran into the dining room to see what happened. After coming around the corner at the end of the hallway, she stepped in it."

"Ooooh, I know somebody's in trouble. I bet her brothers won't be seeing daylight for years!"

"She had to get seven stitches in one foot and three in the other," Tyra added. "I'm going over to her house after school."

"Girl," her friend exclaimed, "I'm coming with you."

In history class, Cherrelle poked at Janice from where she sat behind her. "So what did your ma say when you came in so late last night?"

"She didn't freak out like I thought she would. I guess because she knew where I was. I just got a lecture about being up too late on a school night."

"Yeah," Cherrelle whispered, "my mother doesn't like me to be walking home that late. Man! We've never been *that* bad when it came to forgetting the time!"

"Cherrelle? Is there something that you'd like to share with the class?" Her history teacher suddenly stopped lecturing and the whole class focused their attention on two embarrassed girls.

"No. Is there something interesting *you'd* like to say to the class?"

Whenever possible, Cherrelle attempted to reserve her bluntness and sarcasm for her friends. No consequences were involved then, yet this time, her embarrassment didn't make it possible to process her words through her brain before they shot out of her mouth. Within three minutes, she was in the principal's office.

Later on that day, Janice, Rosaline, and Khara were waiting at her locker with anxious looks on their faces. "So, Cherrelle, what happened?" Khara asked before she could even get to her locker.

"He let me off," she told them. "At first, I didn't know if he was going to start yelling at me or what. He starts going on and on about how disrespect for teachers is not tolerated. He let me off with another warning. Said he never wanted to see me under those circumstances again."

"Another warning?" Khara queried with one eyebrow raised.

"Long story," Cherrelle replied quickly. An awkward expression made her look as if she wanted to change the subject. The girls studied Cherrelle as her eyes darted around until she found a sudden interest in pulling some loose papers from her notebook.

Rosaline shook her head from side to side. "I knew that mean streak of yours would get you in trouble and I'm surprised that it didn't happen sooner." Cherrelle looked offended. She hated it when people called her mean.

"Oh! Hey you all, check this out. I meant to tell you, Lana Branden's got stitches," Khara piped. Cherrelle looked relieved at the shift to another subject.

"Oh, really?" Janice raised her eyebrows.

"Yeah," Khara said. "I heard she stepped on some glass and got ten

stitches."

"Wow. You know, she probably dropped a bottle of perfume on the floor and ran around screaming, stepping all in the glass," Rosaline snickered.

"And probably refused to get stitches until her mother promised to buy her some new perfume," Janice added.

"And let's hope she didn't spill any and stain her blouse before dropping the bottle!" Cherrelle added.

Rosaline rolled her eyes to the ceiling. "I know! Maybe she went hiking in her purple heels!" Rosaline laughed loudly, slapping Cherrelle on the arm. Cherrelle laughed even louder than she as they drew attention to themselves.

Cherrelle covered her eyes with the back of her hand and faked an English accent. "Oh! What an emotionally traumatizing evening for dear, sweet, Lana. Shall we send her flowers?"

Khara wasn't laughing.

Rosaline's smile disappeared when she saw one of Lana Branden's friends walk by. As Tyra passed the group of girls, she stared at Rosaline with an unsettling expression on her face. "Why is she looking at me like that?" Rosaline frowned. "Did you all see that?"

Khara waited until the girl passed by before speaking up. "I was going to tell you this too but all this excitement with Cherrelle—"

"Tell me what?"

"I was just getting ready to come out of one of the bathroom stalls this morning when Lana Branden's friends came into the bathroom," Khara began. "That's when I found out about Lana getting stitches. They were talking about her not being able to make it to school. Then they were all silent and Tyra started looking under the stall doors." Khara laughed shakily. "That was my cue to stand on top of the toilet!"

"What? Did she see you?" Janice watched Tyra disappear into the bustle of students.

"No, she didn't."

"Well, what happened?" Cherrelle asked excitedly.

Khara leaned towards the girls and continued in a hushed voice. "She had a dream. She's been having these weird dreams lately, Roz."

"So?" Rosaline laughed. "Why're you looking at me all crazy like that for? What does this have to do with the way Tyra just looked at me?"

"The tardy bell's about to ring," Janice warned. "We gotta go!"

"No!" Khara grabbed Janice by the arm. Everybody looked at each other, confused at Khara's sudden intensity. "I think you all need to hear this! Tyra told her friends that Lana had some crazy dream about you, Roz. About us! Being kidnapped! Hiking through the woods with some man trying to kill her!"

"Wait a minute, are you serious?" Rosaline drew back in disbelief.

"No way!" Cherrelle's voice could hardly be heard above the shrill ring of the tardy bell. But the girls couldn't move. The bell only rang on deaf ears as Rosaline, Cherrelle, and Janice stared at each other in disbelief at Khara's amazing story.

As Tuesday rolled around again, the girls sat in Rosaline's room. It was a mild September day and although it was early evening, the day still held a crispness that made the girls tempted to sit outside. Ever since Khara told them what had happened, they'd been trying to figure out what was going on. "I still think the girl has ESP or something," Khara said.

"Maybe she sleepwalks," Cherrelle remarked.

"Maybe she doesn't!" Janice said. "Maybe she was really sneaking around this house listening in on storytelling hour."

"Right!" Cherrelle frowned. "Like Miss Homecoming has nothing better to do than to ride way out here with her buddies and eavesdrop at Rosaline's bedroom window! That sounds just as crazy as that ESP story!"

"But it has to be something," Rosaline said. "How else would she know about my stories? I'm not going to believe that this girl just dreamed up all this. There's got to be some kind of explanation."

Everyone was quiet and in deep thought, trying to make sense of it all. Cherrelle caught Janice watching the window. "Boo!" Janice jumped at the sound of Cherrelle's sudden outburst. "Look at Janice peeking through the curtains!" she laughed too loudly.

"Oh, shut up, big head!" Janice shot an irritated look in Cherrelle's direction.

"Speaking of big head," Cherrelle began thoughtfully as she suddenly attempted to hold a serious expression on her face, "I would ask Rosaline to think up something from the top of her head, but it would take a *really* long time for her to get back with me."

That even had an annoyed Janice laughing. "Your head looks like a pregnant spider," Rosaline replied. A fresh bout of laughter followed her comeback.

"Okay, okay everybody," Khara grinned. "Roz, go ahead. Just don't let anybody fall off a cliff or anything. This whole storytelling thing is getting kinda spooky."

"Okay." Rosaline started getting comfortable. "Where was I?"

"I was supposed to be escaping!" Cherrelle said excitedly as she began to get comfortable also. "And when are you and Jimmy supposed to fall in love? Isn't this what it's all about? You and him get kidnapped together and fall for each other?"

"Of course," Rosaline replied. "But you know what? It's like once I start storytelling, I don't completely know what's going to happen. I'm making everything up as I go along, but I don't feel completely in control of it. I know

this sounds strange but I feel like I'm one of you—like I'm the one listening. When you all are listening to me can you see everything? It's like a TV screen in your minds, right? And then I can almost feel—"

"Wait a minute," Janice interrupted. "You mean one of us *could* fall off a cliff?" She watched Rosaline, waiting for an answer.

"Oh, relax, Janice," Cherrelle laughed. "It's just a story! And the real excitement's just begun! Go ahead, Roz."

Twenty one people lay nestled in their sleeping bags like a circle of cocoons positioned around their blazing life force. The crackling logs of the campfire weren't the only sounds that penetrated the shadowy stillness around us. A wolf howled in the distance. The hoot of an owl permeated the folds of darkness. Something heavy moved in the trees, snapping a stick and causing one of the kidnappers to sit up and stare into the surrounding woods before convincing himself that it was nothing and then settling back into slumber. I wasn't sure who to worry about more, the kidnappers or the unseen wild animals that lurked around us. At least humans were a little more predictable. Sometimes with people, one could talk oneself out of a tight situation. Animals just acted on pure instinct. Words could not come between hunger and the need to kill.

I was so tired that I felt drugged. My aching legs and feet felt as if they didn't belong to me. I snuggled deeper into the sleeping bag. As my heavy eyelids closed, I saw a figure leaning over one of the sleeping bags beside me.

"Let's go over there," a male voice whispered.

"I don't want to," I recognized Lana's voice responding.

"You saved your life when agreeing to do what's good for you. C'mon, I'm not going to hurt you." There was a long hesitation, then his voice grew urgent. "Do you want to wake up in the morning?"

Those were the last words I heard before I fell into a deep sleep. The next time I woke up, someone was shaking me. "Roz! Roz! It's time!" Cherrelle's face was very close to mine as she whispered anxiously to me. "Get up! This is our chance!"

The surge of blood through my veins snapped me awake. My heart raced as my eyes darted about me. "What about the guards?" I whispered back.

"They're asleep!"

I crawled out of my sleeping bag. "Where're Janice and Khara?"

"Right over there." Cherrelle pointed in the direction of their sleeping figures. We cautiously made it to them with only the glowing fire giving us a hint as to where they lay. I woke up Khara as Cherrelle helped Janice out of her sleeping bag.

I grabbed Cherrelle's shoulder. "Which direction should we go?" I whispered.

"We're going to backtrack," she juted her finger in the direction we had come from. Even though Khara and Janice asked no questions, I knew they

were thinking the same things that were going through my mind: This is insane!

"Cherrelle, we don't even know where we're going." I tried one last chance to reason with her. "We can't do this!"

"Shut up!" she snapped. "I don't have time to listen to you. Let's go!"

We headed in the direction Cherrelle guided us, but something made me stop dead in my tracks. From the side of my eye, two figures emerged from the trees and I heard the unmistakable sound of Sharky's voice: "What the— stop right there!" he ordered. The four of us froze in our tracks and Cherrelle grabbed my hand. Janice and Khara were only a few feet behind us.

"Let's do it!" Cherrelle challenged. So we took off into the woods like two hunted deer. The light from the fullness of the moon guided us as we ran as fast as we could. When I looked back, I couldn't see Janice or Khara.

"We left them!" I cried.

"It's too late!" Cherrelle exclaimed. I tried my hardest to keep up with Cherrelle's lithe form. She dodged tree branches that smacked me in the face. I stepped into a hole and tumbled to the ground. "C'mon, Roz!" Cherrelle tugged me by the arm as I got back to my feet. I could feel the fervor of my blood as it pushed through my veins. My heart pounded in my ears. Just keep running, I urged myself. My mind blindly pushed me to go farther. I heard shots ring out in the darkness. My legs felt as if they had a mind of their own as they took me with amazing quickness through the darkness. I was close behind Cherrelle when another shot rang out.

"C'mon, Roz! We can lose 'em!" Cherrelle shouted, barely sounding as if she'd been running. The pounding in my ears became louder and louder. I could hear the kidnappers shouting.

"They're getting closer!" I cried. "Let's go. Let's go!" I could feel the adrenaline pumping through my veins as I almost caught up with her. I was only a few inches behind her. Another shot rang out.

"Roz," Cherrelle called back to me, "I think we're losing...URRRRGH!!!" Cherrelle's arms flailed about wildly in the air before she spilled to the ground.

"Come on, Cherrelle! We gotta watch out for these holes!" I pulled at her but she didn't try to get up.

"I can't," she gasped.

"Cherrelle," my voice rose in a panic. "They're getting closer!" I suddenly stopped pulling at her when I felt something warm and wet soaking her blouse. A wave of shock made me drop to my knees. "You've been hit."

"Get outta here." Cherrelle struggled for breath.

"No! I can't leave you!"

"Go, Roz. What good would it do w-with both of us getting c-caug-ht?"

"I can't!"

"Please! You could get help!" she sputtered. "They'll only kill you...go! Go!" The sharp sound of a bullet whizzing past my ear convinced me that Cherrelle was right, yet still reluctant, I slowly got back to my feet. I rubbed Cherrelle's blood off my hands onto my jeans. "I can't do this," I cried as my trembling legs pushed on. They felt like rubber as I started running again. The sobs

Every Tuesday, Rosaline and her friends meet for storytelling hour. Then the kidnapper in Rosaline's story merges into reality and is after them. Now, she must get to him in her story before he gets to them in real life.

What the Storyteller Brings

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