



By Deborah Bedford

## Prologue

It all began with that crawly bad feeling, the one that even young children have when they know they're being followed.

Tansy Crabtree scuffed her way along the sidewalk between the school-bus stop and home, sending black pill bugs and chunks of cement skittering with her footsteps, the weight of her backpack jouncing a pleasant rhythm against her back.

Only a count-to-ten before, and her thoughts had been sailing off in as many directions as the bugs and stones she sent flying with her feet. She'd been thinking how she might get to go out and play after she finished her reading-packet worksheet. She'd been thinking how she liked it best when her grandma used these purple hair ties to fasten the top and bottom of her braided pigtail, because then it stayed tight and felt like thick rope. She'd been thinking she liked the idea of trying a cartwheel. She'd been thinking how Dennis Lund had kept slurping from the water fountain the whole time they'd counted one-Mississippi two-Mississippi, and they'd gotten all the way to nineteen before he stopped to breathe.

Tansy had come off the bus the way she always did, her arms swinging loose and wide with her steps, walking heavy on her heels, slapping the pavement happily with white-and-pink Pay Less sneakers. She plopped a crumpled baseball cap sideways on her head, flicked her pigtail over her shoulder, and headed toward the corner.

Steps later, Tansy began to feel afraid about the car.

The bus had driven away and Erin Hamm, her newest best friend, had turned the corner on Meriweather Road four houses back. The person driving seemed to be going slow now that Tansy was alone. Tansy hurried a little, and the car sped up. She walked slower slower and the car didn't pass. Out of the corner of her left eye, even though she didn't dare turn and look, she could see a tire and a gray fender with rusty dents the shape of fingernail moons.

Her mouth got that taste in it like dry straw. If she'd been a year older, maybe eight or nine, she might have known how to run away or scream or hide. But all she knew to do was to go forward without stopping, fighting to breathe, her book pack growing heavier each time it slapped her taut spine.

At the edge of the street, the car came so close behind her that she could hear its wheels crackling over gravel. Someone started twisting down a window. "Hello," and, for one fearful moment, she allowed herself to glance up across the seat at the man's pointed features, his bedraggled brown hair, his shiny forehead. He bent low to look over the passenger seat at her. "What's your name?"

*Not telling.*

Up ahead, she could see that Mr. and Mrs. Lester had left their green trash barrel sitting square in the middle of the sidewalk beside their driveway. Yesterday had been trash day, and the Lesters almost never got around to putting their bin away on the same day. The lawn had just been mown; she could tell by the sweet, grassy smell, the paperlace wheel-tracks along the pavement.

"You *do* have a name, don't you?"

She didn't like the man's tangled hair pulled back in a ponytail, his gnarled beard that pointed down from his chin like an arrow. His lips were very red, and wet.

He swigged some water out of a bottle. She could see the white pearl snaps on his Western cuffs. "Tansy. That's your name, isn't it? Purple Tansy, like the weed."

She missed a step.

"You are Tansy, aren't you?"

She shook her head, no. She kept going, walking straight toward the trash bin, until she reached it. She put the bin between herself and the curb, and felt a moment of safety for it.

"Will you talk to me?"

Tansy twisted her wrinkled ball cap from the side to front-and-center. This time, she said it aloud. "No."

"You won't talk? But, you just did."

Up ahead loomed the turn-off to her street, marked by a tall cedar that poked into the sky like an exclamation mark, the jutting corner of the pink brick house that belonged to the Simms. If she could just make it that far, she could drop everything and run to the back window where Lavinia Simms was always sitting this time of day, working on her toile painting. Tansy knew she could make it that far for help before someone jumped out of the car and grabbed her.

Then again, she hadn't realized there was anyone else in the car. The young woman must have been leaning over into the backseat, or rummaging on the floor, or stooping down to hide. Suddenly there she was in the frame of the open window, white-faced and large-eyed, clutching at the chrome from inside the car. Her yellow-white hair was cut in violent, thin layers, and her violet eyes were smudged with mascara, filled with fear and wonder, as big around as teacups. "Tansy, honey. Wait a minute. I got you a present."

"I don't know who you are."

"Look here." She plucked something out of a red-and-white bag from Wal-Mart. And up into view came a stuffed purple bunny, loose-limbed and huge, its visionless eyes like something drawn in a cartoon. She held it by the neck and made it move its head. "Hi, Tansy. I'm your mommy. Do you want to come with me?"

Tansy stutter-stepped, the rubber toe of her sneaker catching the pavement. Her pack slipped off her arm and thudded into the grass. She didn't even realize she'd let it go.

"Now, see. I didn't mean to make you drop that. Is it heavy? Do you get a lot of homework?"

She shook her head. No.

"You didn't know you had a mommy?"

That made her stop walking altogether. No.

The bunny pushed farther out the window. "Do you like this? Here. You can have it. I bought it for you."

Tansy reached out tentatively to touch one long, fuzzy paw.

"Go ahead. Take it."

Tansy pointed toward the driver. "Who's he?"

"He's Jimmy Ray. My...friend."

"There's a code word." Tansy eyed Jimmy Ray with distrust. "I'm not supposed to go with anybody I don't know unless they know the code word."

"Who told you that?"

"Nana Nora." A pause. "My grandma."

"My my. You have a very smart grandma. But it's okay, can't you see? I just want to get to know you a little better."

"Do you know the code word? It's Nana's rule."

The rabbit pulled out of Tansy's grasp, and its head started moving again. This time, the lady made it speak with a stupid, childish voice that Tansy didn't like. The stuffed animal's head moved back and forth with the voice. "Nope, I

don't know the password. But that's okay, isn't it? For someone that's your mom?"

"C'mon, Tess." Jimmy Ray smacked the wheel of the car. "Quit farting around. Just get the kid and let's go."

"Shut up, Jimmy," she said crossly. "I don't want to scare her." Then, back out the window, "Your nana hasn't showed you pictures of me, or anything?"

Tansy shook her head. No.

"She didn't tell you anything about me?"

She shook her head. No.

On the top of the Simms's outdoor gaslight stood a rudely twisted fork of coat-hanger wire, sticking up to dissuade any bird from alighting. *This is my mockingbird discourager*, Mr. Simms had announced once when he'd seen Tansy walking by and staring at it. *Just let any mockingbird try to terrorize my Sullivan*. He'd lifted his cat from the ground and made a croaking motion with his hand against his throat. But a mockingbird stood atop Mr. Simms' discourager just now, oblivious to the twisted wire it perched on, its head lifted high toward its song.

"Are you scared?"

This time, a nod. Yes.

"You don't have to be, you know. I wouldn't hurt you."

That didn't convince Tansy at all.

If anyone had been watching out the Simms's window, what happened next came almost too fast to understand. First, the bunny fell. It tumbled out of the window in a mad purple flurry of arms and legs and ears. It smacked against the curb, facedown.

Tansy dove to grab it. Smudge-eye Girl glanced around briefly at the same time Tansy moved. No one was watching. No one.

Her door flew open. With just one stumbling step, two, she raked Tansy onto the front seat. The door slammed and locked.

Jimmy Ray reached across their laps to crank up the window. Tansy stared at the dusty dashboard in terror. "There, baby. There, baby," the large-eyed girl was crooning to Tansy. "Everything's going to be okay now, can't you see?"

"I want to go home," Tansy begged. "Please, take me home."

"Your home's gonna be with us. Me and Jimmy Ray. That'll be okay, won't it? The way it was meant to be."

Even though the lady was clutching her around the belly, Tansy squirmed until she could see close into her eyes. Those eyes—they were the same violet blue as her own, with brighter flecks of gold in their centers. As her heart

thudded, Tansy tried hard but couldn't understand what she was seeing. Tansy felt like she was staring into a mirror, staring into those other eyes.

The bunny had gotten stuck in the car door. They had to tug and yank to rescue its arm. As the car started to roll forward, Tansy began to wail.

The lady named Tess didn't even take the hair ties out or unfasten her plait before she brandished scissors and began to cut Tansy's hair.

Tansy's last view of her own street as they passed out of view of the Simms's house...and she could see her backpack lying in a tangle in the yard.