

1. Runaway

The girl looked worriedly up into the dark sky when she heard the first roar of rolling thunder. The thick humidity weighing down the night air foretold the coming storm and with one hand she reached under the old baseball cap she wore and wiped beads of moisture from her forehead. With a frown, she impatiently looked again at the streetlight waiting for it to change so that she could cross the busy street.

"Hey there, girl...what you know good?" a gravelly male voice said from behind her. The man seemed to have appeared from nowhere and when the girl felt his feathery light touch on her elbow, she turned to look at him, his shadowed features seemed ominous to her. Her surprise swiftly changed to fear once she saw the red-rimmed, faded brown eyes of the old white man. With a gasp, her mouth fell open, and she shuddered at his wide grin with its many dark gaps where his teeth should've been.

Truly scared now, the girl quickly pulled in her elbow, and in her haste to escape the gray-haired man began to step into the crosswalk with no thought of the oncoming traffic. Right at that very moment, as if in conjunction with her need to cross the busy intersection, the red walk-light changed to green and she took off across the street. Without one glance backward, she began to run, darting in and out of the crowds of people walking down the avenue, she ran faster and faster.

Suddenly a huge fork of lightening split the dark sky directly in front of her and the steamy night was lit brightly for a moment. Then seconds later an explosively loud clap of thunder shook the ground, followed by subsequent low rumblings in the distance which only added to her alarm. The smell of the imminent spring rain wafted into her nostrils. Sensing that the downpour would begin at any moment, instinctively she began to look for shelter.

Ahead the girl spied a small alleyway and with a quick furtive glance over her shoulder to assure herself that she wasn't being followed, she disappeared into the darkness of the alley.

She gathered several pieces of heavy, stiff cardboard scattered around a large metal trash bin in the alleyway, along with some thick plastic and a large corrugated box. Quickly she built herself a makeshift shelter in an area behind the garbage container.

Moments later, in response to the howling wind, she huddled in the corner of the box and tucked her head between her knees. The rain started to pummel her shelter. Her small body was paralyzed with fear, at least until another loud roll of thunderclap caused her to jump involuntarily. When the heavy rain finally began to drip into her cardboard coverings, she could be brave no more. Tears began to fall one by one from her eyes, and she sobbed from fear and frustration.

The girl's thoughts wandered back to the home she'd left behind, and to what he had tried to do to her before she'd run away tonight, and suddenly her tears flowed even more

profusely, only now she cried from anger, too. Forgetting about the storm, the girl harshly wiped her wet eyes and her runny nose, and as she rubbed her damp hands on her pant legs she vowed aloud, "I don't care what I have to go through, I will never go back there again! Never!"

2. Night Visitor

Tamara Britton sat straight up in the bed. She tilted her head sideways and listened. Suddenly fully alert, she threw her legs over the side of the bed and slid her feet into her fuzzy slippers. She grabbed her robe from the end of the bed, wrapped it around her and tied it quickly as she walked down the long hallway towards the front door.

"Who could this be?" she whispered to herself. She glanced over at the wall clock when she walked past the living room and noted that it was almost 3 o'clock in the morning.

At the front door she peered through the peephole and looked directly into the worried face of her co-worker Lynnette Moore. The woman was accompanied by a fair-complexioned, scowling, skinny girl who looked to be in her early teens.

Lynnette Moore and Tamara had worked together for the last seven years at the Care for Kids Agency. Both women worked in the Child Protective Unit which offered a wide variety of services for children and their parents. Counseling and other services were available for families struggling with domestic issues. The more structured Stabilization Services, whose goal was to keep families intact, helping parents at risk of losing their children to Child Protective Services. Tamara worked in Stabilization while Lynnette was a field caseworker for the Foster Care Division.

Taking a deep breath, Tamara tightened the belt on her flowered terry robe, unlocked the deadbolt and then opened the door wide.

"Hey, girl...what you doing?" said Lynnette saucily, as if she had just stopped in for a casual visit and it was not the wee hours of the morning when most folks were sleeping.

"Hi Lynnette," she replied, and following the woman's lead she made no acknowledgement either of the lateness of the hour or the unexpectedness of her visit.

Then, in what seemed to Tamara to be a strange manner of self-introduction, the young girl accompanying Lynnette clicked her tongue loudly, put one hand on her hip, and looked at both women as she said derisively, "...Excuse me, but do we have to stand in the hallway?" Her gaze locked on Tamara, and with disdain apparent on her small face she added, "...what's up with the housepitality?"

With a slight raise of her eyebrows, Tamara wordlessly slid to the side of the doorway while gesturing with one hand for them to come inside. "Housepitality?" she mouthed to Lynnette as the young girl came forward.

"Go 'head Ms. Thang," said Lynnette to the girl who then rolled her eyes at both of them, turned her head dramatically and sauntered into the house. Once inside, she ignored them and immediately began to check out Tamara's house thoroughly. Turning, Lynnette stared at Tamara meaningfully, shook her head, and then breathed out heavily through flared nostrils. Stepping close to Tamara she said in a low voice, "She's my new case, just got dropped off tonight.Runaway."

She had already figured that the young girl was a new case of Lynnette's since she knew that field agents sometimes had children placed temporarily with them until a more permanent home with a foster family could be located. These kids had usually just been removed from their families' homes or were runaways and had been brought in by the police, which could explain the young girl's foul mood.

Tamara closed the door, and together she and Lynette watched the girl as she slowly proceeded through the house, stopping at tables to pick up small knick-knacks, examine them carefully and then, with a twist of her lips, put them back down. Finally when she seemed to have finished scrutinizing Tamara's home, she walked over to the couch and with a loud plop sat down hard.

It was only then that she noticed the two women looking at her. "...What ya'll looking at? Ya'll act like you ain't never seen a person befo!", she said haughtily. Then she closed her eyes for a long moment and rolled her neck. Clearly angry, she propped her head up on one hand, and with a deep scowl on her young features she avoided their gaze.

Lynnette looked at Tamara and rolled her eyes, made a face and then said with feigned sweetness, "...Sienna, honey, this is Tamara. Remember, I told you about her."

The girl turned her glare to Tamara and looked her slowly up and down from her head to her feet and back again, "...So, I don't care nothin' bout no Tamara."

Lynnette made another face and ignoring the girl's rude comment continued cheerfully, "Tamara, this is Miss Sienna Larson."

Tamara said nothing as she really looked at the young girl closely for the first time. To have such a bad attitude, the girl was actually a pretty little thing, small boned and petite, with reddish, naturally curly hair that was pulled into a tight curly ponytail high on her head. A spattering of freckles covered her nose and her cheekbones. Long black eyelashes framed her small dark eyes that turned upwards on the ends, and her small pink lips were bud-shaped but tightly drawn in anger.

Noticing Tamara's curious stare, the girl snapped, "...Look, I don't know who you think you lookin' at, but I am not the one!"

Surprised by the girl's unexpected anger, Tamara turned away quickly and silently, but gave Lynnette a long questioning glance.

Seething now and unable to hold her temper any longer with the teen, Lynnette, who was not short on sassiness herself, held one hand up to Tamara as if to forestall her comment, and said angrily, "...Girl, I don't care where you been and who did what to you, but you do not talk to grown folks like this. I have had all I'm gonna take of your smart mouth tonight! Now, what you do is sit there and shut your mouth while I talk with Tamara in the kitchen."

The teen's face reddened and she appeared ready to retaliate verbally, but then wisely she seemed to reckon within herself that Lynnette was in no mood to be trifled with. Through turned-up lips she made the loud clicking noise with her tongue again, and then mumbled under her breath as she set her head in her hand hard and turned her eyes away from the two of them.

"Come on, Tamara, let's go talk where we can have some privacy," Lynnette said as she gently pulled her co-worker by the arm toward the kitchen. It frustrated her that her co-worker was not more assertive in standing her ground when people disrespected her or made her angry. Actually, sometimes Lynnette thought it was a little strange that Tamara was so reserved all the time. It wasn't as if Tamara was actually afraid, but instead it was almost as if she were powerless to respond when people pushed her around like the girl was doing.

Not me, Lynnette thought spiritedly. I'm not taking any crap from anybody!

After one more furtive glance over her shoulder at the young girl perched petulantly on her couch, Tamara sighed and followed her friend into the kitchen.

Lynnette was already seated at the table in Tamara's small kitchen area with a bright smile plastered on her face. Helpfully, pulling out the chair next to her and patting the seat with her hand she said to Tamara in a voice laced with sweetness, "..C'mon, girl, sit down. I know you tired, and I know that it's late and I woke you up. I'm so sorry."

Tamara glanced at her co-worker skeptically now. During the several years they had worked together she'd grown to know Lynnette well, and she was aware that once that 'sugary' tone was in her voice...she wanted something. By now she'd seen her use that tactic enough times on other people to recognize it for the manipulative strategy that it was. In fact, it was becoming clearer by the moment that tonight Lynnette wanted a favor from her. Thinking about the pouty-faced young girl sitting on her couch in her living room, she was quite certain

Lynnette's request was going to be something that she did not want to do.

Lynette raised one French-manicured finger to push her micro-braided hair away from her face as she fixed her wide-eyed stare on Tamara. She batted her eyes dramatically several times before speaking, another clear indicator to Tamara that she was about to ask for something. She said breathlessly, "...now, Tam, girl, I know that you are wondering why I came here this late at night and stuff."

Tamara shook her head in mute agreement, with her eyes locked on her friend's. As she noticed Lynnette's attire, it began to dawn on her that she was quite over-dressed for the errand of accompanying this young girl. In fact, it did appear to her that Lynette had been out on the town, perhaps on a date or maybe even 'shaking her booty' somewhere. Now quite sure that Lynnette wanted something, Tamara was ready to dispense with this preliminary 'buttering up' tactic and get to the point. In a low, firm tone Tamara asked, "...Lynn, what is it? Is there something that you need from me? Please, Lynn, tell me what you want!"

Lynnette seemed to realize then that Tamara was growing impatient with her delaying tactics and breathed out heavily, saying in a rush, "...Okay, Tamara, I'm gonna stop beating around the bush...here's the deal. You know how it is, as a field caseworker, I've got to find a placement when a child comes to me in an emergency, like Miss Sienna out there...or I have to keep her with me."

"Right..."

"...Well, they dropped little Miss Thang off tonight and I have plans that I'm in the middle of and girl, these plans just might continue into tomorrow, if you know what I mean." Her large eyes seemed even wider than usual as she pleaded with her friend and co-worker for understanding. "Tam, I just can't have her with me this weekend."

Tamara asked with a small smile, "You have a date, huh?"

Lynnette batted her eyes and shook her head energetically. "Yeah, girl. ...actually I was in the middle of a date when I got beeped, and it's been a long time...well maybe not that long, but a sistah got to have some male companionship now and again, if you know what I mean."

Tamara knew what she meant, and although she wasn't sure that it was true she still tried to understand Lynnette's perspective.

Lynnette kept her wide-eyed stare steadily fixed on Tamara as she added quickly in a low tone, "...So, I was wondering if she could stay with you, just till tomorrow and then I promise I'll come get her and work on finding her a placement."

"...Lynn, I don't know", said Tamara hesitantly as she thought once again about the young girl's foul demeanor, "...she's a little wild it seems and she appears to dislike me."

Lynette threw her hand out in a dismissive gesture and said, "Girl, that child don't like nobody." She snickered as she continued, "She's a little hellcat and her mouth should be declared a lethal weapon, that's why she can't keep a placement.She's snappin' and cussin' out folks and stuff. Believe me Tam, what she said here is mild compared with some of the stuff she's said at other folks' houses. ...it's going to be a challenge to place her, I know. I'm sorry I can't tell you much else about her, 'cause I don't have all the paperwork; but I do know that she's not violent or anything like that."

Tamara sat and quietly looked down at her hands. "I didn't think she was violent or anything. It's just...oh, Lynn, I'm ashamed to say, I don't know if I can handle someone so 'outspoken', even for a day or two."

Lynette reached over and squeezed Tamara's hand gently. "...C'mon Tam, you really gotta stop letting everyone run over you.In fact, I think Sienna will be good for you, because eventually, girl, she'll make you so mad, you will have to say something back", she said with a chuckle.

Tamara's heart was beating really fast, and she did not want to do this favor for Lynette, but instead of saying "No" as she wanted, she acquiesced, albeit reluctantly, responding hesitantly, "...O-okay, Lynn, but you need to leave me a number where I can get in touch with you...j-just in case".

Lynette rose from the table quickly, obviously preparing to make a hasty escape before her friend could change her mind. She smoothed down the jacket of the close-fitting deep turquoise knit pantsuit she wore and her silver bracelets jangled jauntily as she waved her hand at her friend and said, "Girl, no problem. Just call my cell or beeper, you got the numbers, and if she acts up, girl, I promise you I'll drop whatever I'm doing and come get her."

Tamara rose slowly from the table and followed her friend into the hallway. She was relieved to see that Sienna had laid her head on the arm of the couch and now slept deeply, her small chest rising and falling rhythmically.

"See, girl, she's tired, and she'll probably sleep late tomorrow, too. She's been running the streets for days now so the child probably ain't had no rest. Shoot, I bet she'll sleep all day, and you won't have to deal with her very much at all," Lynette added as she made her way toward the front door.

"We'll be okay, I'm sure," said Tamara, although she certainly did not feel the confidence that her comment suggested.

Lynette's eyes were on Tamara's as she said, "C'mere, girl," and hugged her close. "Thank you, Tam, I can always count on you...you are the sweetest person I know and I will pay you back for this one day soon."

Tamara said shyly, "That's okay, we've worked together a long time, haven't we?" and opened the door for Lynette.

Lynette tossed her hair over her shoulder and replied, "Yeah, girl, and you are really a friend, 'cause you've been there for me a million times."

Tamara opened her mouth to speak but before she could, Lynnette's back was to her and the woman was off, leaving the night air fragrant with her Elizabeth Arden Splendor perfume.

Tamara watched her walk away, then sighed loudly, closed the door quietly and locked it. For a moment she stood there unmoving, her back stiff against the door, and then with another small sigh she padded quickly down the hallway. Moments later, she returned to the living room with some extra bedding, gently laid the young girl's head on a pillow, then covered her with a blanket.

She walked over to the recliner. Covering herself with another blanket, she lay listening to the young girl's quiet breathing until she fell asleep.