Barrie

“I was running for the door, and tripped over a twig, but it wasn’t a twig, it was the arm of a giant tree monster! It grabbed my ankle so I couldn’t get up and started dragging me to …”

“Lyssa, come *on.*”

Lyssa jerked her head around to see Chris and the others gathered by the entrance to the after-school daycare, glaring sullenly at her. “I’m almost done. Let me finish my story.”

“No, we gotta go *now.* We got karate tonight. Come on.”

Sigh. “Okay.” She climbed off the back of the chair she’d perched on and waved goodbye to what was left of her audience – most of them had dashed away the minute Chris yelled at her. Only a couple kids were left, watching, waiting to hear what happened, including a new boy Lyssa had never seen before. She took the jacket Mr. Peters held out to her, and returned his sympathetic smile. “Can’t wait to see how it ends,” he said.

She shrugged at him, following the others out the door. Avery didn’t even hold it for her, just let it go so it almost hit her in the face. “Thanks, butthead,” she mumbled.

The street and sidewalk glowed wet from a recent rain. Now the clouds had migrated to the edges of the sky, and a fingernail moon followed the sun to the horizon. Lyssa squinted in the glare. The three of them went ahead of her, not waiting, not caring that her legs were shorter and she had to jog to keep up. She kicked rocks into puddles along the sidewalk and dropped farther behind. They stared down at their Gameboys, barely watching where they walked, all their attention focused on the tiny screens. The sun had set enough that her siblings cast no shadows, just looked like shadows walking ahead of her, using the vague illumination of the streetlights to see the action of their video games. “What’re you playing?” she called out to them, hoping they’d notice how far back she was.
Chris half turned. “Hurry up.”

“My adventures are better than yours.” She jogged up closer, splashing through puddles.

“Mine are real.”

Avery snorted. “Yeah, right.”

Terry scowled at her. “Yours are just pretend.”

“Yours are just pushing buttons.”

“So?”

Lyssa didn’t have a response for that. She stopped trying so hard to keep up. The others went on, pushing buttons, sharing game tips, while she let the darkness build between them. Maybe someone would come and kidnap her and then …

“What happened after the tree monster grabbed you?”

“Huh!?” Lyssa hadn’t noticed the boy come up, hadn’t heard him, deep as she was in her resentment at her siblings. She recognized him as the new kid from daycare. She glanced around but didn’t see anybody with him, anybody waiting for him by their car at the curb. “Hey, you can’t just leave without your folks. You better go back.”

“Look. I know him.” He pointed at a trash can. Curious, Lyssa looked to see if someone was hiding behind it, but the boy tapped on a milk carton sitting on top of the garbage, on the photo under the caption, “Have you seen me?”

Lyssa never noticed kids’ pictures on milk cartons. Her family bought milk in gallon jugs. “What’s your name?” she asked the new kid. “I’m Lyssa.”

“I’m Barrie. I want to hear the rest of your story.”

Before Lyssa could reply, she heard one of the others ask Chris, “Who’s she talking to?”

“One of her stupid imaginary friends. Just ignore her.”
She glanced sidewise out of the corner of her eye. Barrie walked along beside her, smiling at her. She noticed his tiny teeth – he still had all his baby teeth. It charmed her, this perfect smile, and she started to smile back, then remembered her huge and uneven front teeth, not quite all the way in yet. She pressed her lips together and smiled awkwardly. “You’re not imaginary, are you?” she asked him in a whisper, a little worried that maybe Chris was right.

“What do you think?” he asked with a grin, then dashed behind her, pinching her hard on the arm.

“OW!” She whipped around, ready to bop him a good one, but he was gone. She looked all around, even up in the air, as if maybe he’d flown away, but couldn’t see him anywhere. The others were just getting to the alleyway shortcut, not waiting. She ran to catch up; she didn’t want to go down the alley in the dark by herself. They were halfway through by the time she entered, squinching up her nose. It smelled like rotting garbage and the bathrooms in the park. She ran hard, almost caught up with them, then tripped and skidded along the slick pavement.

“Wait!” They either ignored or didn’t hear, and kept going. She started to struggle to her feet and realized something held her ankle. She kicked at it with her free foot, flipping herself over to her back, ready to face her enemy.

“You fight mean!”

She stopped struggling. Barrie held her ankle, grinning at her. He squatted next to a dumpster, his face smeared with dirt, his eyes sparkling in the light from the streetlamp at the far end of the alley. Lyssa looked for the others but they weren’t there. Her chest tightened up with fear at the thought of going through the alley all alone. She started kicking again. “Let me go! I gotta get home!”

Barrie held tight. “But I want to show you something.”
“I can’t. I got karate tonight. I gotta get home. I’m gonna get in trouble!”

“It’ll only take a second.”

“NO!”

“It’ll be an adventure.” His eyes flashed.

Lyssa stopped struggling. She looked hard at Barrie. She couldn’t tell if he was teasing her like the others did, or if he was serious. “I can’t miss karate. I’ll get in trouble.”

He let go of her ankle. “What about tomorrow? Can you meet me here tomorrow? When the sun comes up?”

She rubbed her ankle and stood up. Her clothes were damp and gritty. She plucked at her shirt to separate it from her skin. “What do you want to show me?”

“Meet me tomorrow,” said Barrie, and disappeared into the darkness behind the dumpster.

She didn’t wait to see if he’d reappear, but dashed down the alley, running into Chris, who’d come back to see where she was. “Geez, we gotta get home. What’re you doing?”

“I fell down.”

The others were waiting under the streetlight, furiously pushing buttons. “Let’s go,” Chris told them, and they fell into step towards home. Lyssa kept pace with them this time, almost skipping.

“Chris?”

“What?”

“What time does the sun come up?”