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- Téa Leoni

Lifelike Creatures

Rebecca Baum



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NOT FOR RESALE

Lifelike Creatures

Rebecca Baum



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To my mother, Linda, who taught me to cherish
creativity and the arts.

Tara

1.

The secret of cigarette smoking revealed itself to Tara Saint-Romain a few weeks before she turned fourteen. She was crouched on the roof of the cavernous old house she shared with her mother, woozy and raw-throated from hacking her way through her first Winston Reds, swiped from the pocket of her mother's bathrobe.

It had taken all her stubbornness, and a flood of acrid tears, to get it right. But now, as she gazed at the luminous drift of night sky, with a chemical hum in her veins, she finally understood her mother's pack-a-day devotion.

Her eyes landed on a single bright star, floating at the fringe of her tangle of dark curls. As she exhaled, sending smoke spiraling up and out, she imagined some trace of her left with her breath, even as her body stayed firmly rooted to this place, and the heavy, familiar earth of Terrefine, Louisiana.

"Tara?" Her mother's voice seeped into her awareness.

"Coming!" She skimmed the night sky once more, then ducked through her bedroom window.

Her mother was downstairs in the kitchen, her eyes locked on the TV, where a fleshy, tentacled mass quivered on the face of a doomed space traveler.

"You watching that again?" Tara asked, stepping into the sweltering room. "Must be the hundredth time." The oven door hung open, belching heat across the worn linoleum. She switched off the knob and flung open the back door, then propped the box fan in the window above the sink.

"Don't, Tara. I'll catch cold." Her mother clutched at her robe, drawing it closer.

"If I'm going to make us something to eat then the oven has to be off. Unless you want me to die of heat exhaustion."

“I don’t want you to die.” Her mother’s rheumy gaze found Tara.

“Well, then...” Tara examined a can of red beans while resting her slender frame against the counter. “You don’t realize it’s broiling in here ’cause you’re stewing in it.”

Tara ladled beans and pork sausage over rice and carried two plates to the table. She studied her mother between bites, wondering if she was starting to resurface through the murk of whiskey and pills. Tara had become skilled at ferrying the two of them across these times, intuiting whatever was needed to keep this shadow of her mother from harm until they were safely on the other side. She made sure the bills got paid or put off, and that they didn’t starve. She chased away the Pentecostals and the insurance salesmen, gassed up the lawn mower, and flipped the overpowered breaker switch. Invariably, her mother reemerged. It was just a matter of waiting it out.

They ate in silence, with the night air winding through the kitchen, until the alien beast was ejected from the ship. “Do you ever think about traveling to outer space?” Tara asked, as the credits rolled.

“And get my face sucked off? No, thank you. If there are aliens, you can bet they’re just as twisted up as people. Better to stick to the demons you know.” Her mother rattled the ice in her pink cup. “Can I get my bedtime drink? I’m ready to go upstairs.”

Tara splashed Jim Beam into the cup and topped it with root beer. “Thank you, baby.” Her mother wrapped her in a flimsy hug and Tara tried not to recoil at her sharp, unwashed smell. She watched her mother climb the stairs, pale fingers gripping the railing, her lank hair a spill of muddied gold down her back.

“The window,” her mother called from the top step.

“I know, Mama. I’ll shut it.”

The road slipped beneath Tara’s bike tires in an unending pattern of asphalt pancakes and potholes. To her right, the bayou plodded along, flashing sunlight at each lazy curve. She’d arisen early, ahead of the pounding August heat, intent on exploring a pile of furniture and appliances that someone had illegally dumped a mile away in a barren field. She had her eye out for a working toaster. As she swerved to avoid the crushed remains of a turtle, the road and the earth beneath it seemed to shudder.

Startled, Tara skidded to a stop. She became aware of a vigorous gurgling and traced the sound to a curious pocket of bubbling brown water just off the bayou bank. As she considered investigating, a shock of moving air and color blew past—accompanied by an ear-shattering whistle—almost toppling her and the bike. She steadied her bike and sighted two fast-moving bicycles on the road ahead, beneath a pair of unknown boys. The two didn't even bother to look back.

Tara hammered down on her pedals, quickly overtaking the smaller boy and entering into a neck-and-neck sprint with the other. When she was near enough to note his crooked grin and how it faltered as she closed in on him, a cramp seized her hamstring. Her leg shot outward and the seat slammed into her crotch. She steered the speeding bike onto a strip of soft dirt and managed to maneuver a controlled wreck.

"You're a son of a bitch," she growled at the older boy. He'd circled back and was now eyeing her, his forearms resting on his handlebars. His head was overly big, capped in short waves that nearly matched the deep honey of his eyes.

"You're a badass," he replied, admiring the whorl of fiery scrapes on her calf. "And almost as fast as me."

Tara kept her face frozen, masking the throbbing between her legs, as she righted her bicycle and hobbled toward the road.

"Why are you limping?" the younger boy asked. He was small and wiry, with shell-pink lips and glaring dark eyes. "You hurt?"

"Go to hell," she said, pedaling one-legged while her hamstring unwound.

"Girls shouldn't curse," he called after her.

Bike tires crackled on the sunbaked road as the boys fell in behind her. "You live in that old house back there, right?" the older one asked, catching up to her. "I'm Gerard, and that's my brother Louis. We're your new neighbors."

Tara ignored the boys, pedaling until she reached the barren field and the pile of abandoned junk. As she moved through the refuse, inspecting power cords and chipped furniture, Gerard peppered her with questions. She maintained her wall of silence until he approached her with a nearly new blender. Her frown softened as she took it from him. When he again asked her name, she relented.

Each day for the next two weeks, Tara met up with the boys. She

learned that Gerard was fourteen, heading into tenth grade, and Louis was twelve. They'd moved to Terrefine because their father worked for Mid-South Petroleum, a company that also employed a good portion of the town. They'd lived in four other places, relocating whenever their father was reassigned.

Gradually, she began to crave the curt compliments that Gerard occasionally tossed her way, often at the expense of Louis.

"You're way more mechanical than him," Gerard remarked when she quickly identified the reason for the scraping on Louis's bike. When she yanked an inch-long splinter from the pad of her big toe, he laughed. "No way Louis could do that himself." She looked away to hide her smile.

Tara managed to avoid any mention of her mother until the end of the second week, when she took the boys crawfishing in a flooded field. She and Gerard were alone, harvesting the wire and cloth nets, while Louis sulked nearby. She'd snickered when Gerard first arrived wearing brushed white cotton shorts. Now they hung low on his waist, soaked and muddy.

"How'd you learn all this stuff?" he asked as she dumped the squirming haul into his bucket. "Crawfishing, fixing bikes, knowing what's poison ivy and what's poison oak. I don't know any of that."

"My mom," Tara answered proudly, then remembered her mother's robe-clad figure, still asleep when she'd left the house at noon. Warmth crept into her cheeks as she drove a stick into the bucket and flicked a small snake back into the water. She began to prattle, her too-eager words spilling out. "She taught me to drive too. Lets me take the truck to the Buy-U-Mart. Once she killed a rattler. Cut him in two. We still have the skull. And she's an expert camper. She'll take us all one day soon," she promised before she could stop herself.

She hurriedly reached for Gerard's bucket. "Four pounds!" she announced, joggling the handle. "Not enough for a boil. But maybe you can make a crawfish étouffée." With her heart thudding, she renewed her vow to keep the boys away from her house until her mother was well again.

"Louis!" Gerard yelled.

Louis tossed aside the stick he'd been using to hack at a nest of fire ants and hurried over.

“Take it home,” Gerard said, threading his brother’s thin arm through the handle of the bucket.

“You take it home!” Louis shot back, letting the bucket with its writhing contents fall to the ground. He pulled his collared shirt taut, examining the front. “You better not have gotten mud on me.”

“Beat it, Louis. I mean it. Don’t make me hit you.”

“Let her take it. She caught ’em.”

“Go.” Gerard loomed over his brother, whose face narrowed with fear even as his dark eyes sparked with hostility. “And take the bucket with you.”

“I hate you,” Louis hissed before trudging off, the bucket banging against his shins.

“He’ll be all right,” Gerard said, meeting Tara’s gaze. He dropped to a fallen log and began stripping the bark from a small, wayward branch. The afternoon sun cast a silken glow on his short wavy hair.

“Why you’d run him off?”

He shrugged. “Sometimes I don’t feel like hanging out with a little kid, you know?”

The heat pressed down. Moisture gathered between Tara’s shoulder blades and slid, tickling, down her spine. She remembered the orange juice drip on her T-shirt and crossed her arms before scooting next to Gerard.

“You have the greenest eyes I’ve ever seen,” Gerard said. “Like Sprite-green.”

“Yours are nice too,” Tara muttered as a rose-tinged static enveloped her senses. Gerard leaned over to kiss her and she stiffened, wanting to give him something strong from which to push off. She felt the soft click of teeth and the timid glance of his tongue.

“I know a place we can go,” he said. Tara hesitated, then nodded her assent.

He led her beneath two towering pines, at the edge of his backyard, where the low branches formed a shaded cavern. He was gentle even in his awkwardness, easing off her T-shirt in silence, swatting away the gnats, spreading out his own shirt for her to lie on. She was surprised by the pleasure of his touch and how, with her eyes closed, her body felt limitless. She liked how he trembled when she ran her fingers along his skin and how her long bones curved into his.

“Don’t,” she said, when he pressed himself against her still-bruised groin and tugged at her shorts. He retreated, nuzzling against her side, his quick breath captured in the crook of her neck.

When his father yelled from the back door, Gerard leapt up and shoved her T-shirt at her. “Stay,” he whispered. “Until you hear me go in.” As she left the cover of the pines, he reappeared and slipped his prized cube of iron pyrite into her outstretched hand.

The next day, Gerard and Louis departed for a week-long trip to visit relatives. Tara was left to pedal the streets alone, endlessly replaying the kiss, the touching, the smell of dry pine needles. The air in her house felt stagnant, and her habitual patience with her mother grew thin. “What’s got up into your craw and died?” her mother asked, after Tara banged her way through the dinner preparation.

On the day of the boys’ return, she hurried to what had become their meeting place—a clearing in the field midway between their houses, fringed by a semicircle of trees. As she tramped across the rows of turned earth, she noticed dark jags of smoke and wondered if Louis had finally agreed to light the bottle rockets he’d been hoarding.

As she drew closer, she caught sight of Gerard splashing lighter fluid over a smoldering hunk of metal, sparking the flames anew. Louis stood nearby, shirtless in the heat, his small chest thrust forward. When he noticed Tara, his eyes narrowed and he nudged his brother.

She raised her hand in greeting, prepared to welcome them home, but when her gaze fell on the smoking heap, she felt her heart jerk and shudder, like a fish thrown ashore. The blackened matter at the heart of Gerard’s fire belonged to her. Though thoroughly singed, there was no mistaking the bent-tipped antenna and sloped handlebars of her bicycle.

For a moment, she clung to the ridiculous notion that the charred bones of her bicycle would resurrect itself, that the brothers would wave her over so they could explain their clever prank. *Aha! We got you!* But there was no prank revealed and no resurrected bike, only the boys’ razor-thin smirks and bright, expectant eyes as they watched her, waiting for the fruit of their labor to fall.

Tara returned for the bike at sunset, when the heat began to lift and a band of golden haze fused land to sky. The metal was still hot, but

she could bear it. When the rims stuck in the mud, she slung the frame on one shoulder and trudged down to the bayou. She eased the bike far into the still brown water, ignoring the creatures that brushed against her legs, then forced the frame below the surface.

As the bike sunk into the bayou's soft slime, releasing trails of effervescence, she parsed through her days with the brothers, roaming the woods of Terrefine, fording storm-swollen ditch waters, and raiding the cane fields to chew the sugary stalks. The whole time, the boys had been bound to each other, letting her scrape along after them like a hungry stray, knowing full well that when the time came, they would cut her loose.

She slammed her palm full force against the water. As a hot sting entered her fingers, a swarm of fresh bubbles surrounded her. She thought it was her bike, sending up its last gasp, but the bubbling intensified and with it, a noxious stink. The mellow hum of insects and frogs exploded into a throbbing chorus.

She sloshed through the gurgling water and scrambled up to the road where mosquitos fell on her, spiking her calves. Headlights flared on a faraway bridge, bouncing crazily, and a peal of manic laughter split the night. As she hurried toward the burning square of her kitchen window, her mother's face appeared, a dark oval sealed behind the glass, beckoning Tara, drawing her home.