

## Linda Roberts

The boy slunk out the door and shuffled across the lawn. The brown grass crunched under his boots like there were leaves instead of blades. But the lawn was clear and flat. Bare. Bare as the black sky. Lila dipped her head out of the window and perched her tiny elbows on the sill. The boy had disappeared into the shadows beyond the sleepy, winking light on the porch. A voice piped up, soon joined by his. Lila slid out the window and crept down the roof. A ladder laid waiting against the edge.

### **A Quick Reflection:**

Lila wished the ladder hadn't been there. She wished it hadn't been so easy to follow the boy. She wished her curiosity had taken her to bed and tucked her in instead of dragging her out.

She walked on the crunchy grass with bare feet. Bare as the white moon. The voices of the boy and the other person were whispers. The shadow enveloped Lila. The sleepy, winking light reached its yellow fingers out to her, a warning. Lila pushed away its hands and followed the boy. Just a stone's throw from the house was the edge of the forest. He had gone deeper into the forest than ever before. Lila could hear her parents' voices. Don't go there. Don't go too far. Don't go. She clambered up a tree close to where the boy had stopped. The boy had crawled into its tangled mouth. He was speaking with someone, a girl. She had blond hair that looked white when moonlight was poured on. Her bare shoulders glinted like fallen stars. The boy was close to her. Close enough to breathe the same breath. They were speaking as if the trees might have been eavesdropping. Lila lowered herself on the tree. Who was this girl?

### **Who was Linda Roberts?**

Linda Roberts was the reason for Lila's suffering and loss. She would pull every last joy from Lila's eyes. She would wrench her out of her home and leave her broken.

To be fair, the boy did not know this as he met with Linda that night. All he knew was that she pleaded for help, and he could give it to her. He spoke with kindness and a gentle voice. She speared his words with venom and a sneaky glare. Her tongue was like a serpent. Her tongue betrayed her beautiful face. While she was building herself up, she tore others down. She left battlefields bare and hearts smashed. The boy asked her about meeting them on the road to church the next morning. They would drive past her, but stop. The parents would feel their compassionate souls brimming over, and they would help. The boy took her pale hand in his. She flashed her eyes and agreed so softly. How could the boy refuse? She clasped his hand like a trap. Her mouth smiled, but her heart sharpened its claws. They separated. The boy ran back to the house, boots turning whatever grass was left to dust. The girl stayed. Lila wanted to go back to the house. Linda was scaring her. She could see all of the bad, rotten, evil things in her. But if she climbed down, she would be seen. Those snakelike eyes would grab her and turn her inside out. The girl spoke.

"I can see you, Lila," she said. Her voice was as pale and cold as her skin.

Lila screamed and dropped out of the tree, a frightened leaf. Her season had ended. Linda rushed in on her. She grabbed at her, her own way of telling Lila to get up. Lila howled like a wounded animal. A leaf. An animal. Lila was a creature of the forest. Linda was the unsuspected predator. She held Lila on the ground and pulled the belt from her waist. It was

a strange sight; the serpent girl holding the writhing belt. So many tongues. She tied Lila's hands to the arch of a tree root.

"Goodnight," she said. She slithered away, barely heard even on the grass remains. Lila could see the winking light flicker for a moment, then go out. Lila was alone with the forest.

### **Lila's Last Thoughts**

What had the boy done? Why had he planned to save her? What was he saving her from? Did he know that by saving Linda, he was tying her up to a tree? He was tying her up with a scaly belt and leaving her in the moon-washed woods.

The belt rubbed Lila's bare wrists. The moon was sleepy, winking in the leaves' silhouettes. Animals growled and roared for innocent bones. Their breath held in the air, their scent musky in the earth. They padded on calloused paws.

"I know you're there," they said.

They came close, teeth bare. Bare as the open air. The moon did its tiresome job and painted the fur white.