

## **Praise for the Bluford Series:**

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“One of my friends told me how good the Bluford Series is. She was right. Once I started reading, I couldn’t stop, not even to sleep!”

— *Bibi R.*

“I love the Bluford books and the stories they tell. They’re so real and action-packed, I feel like I’m inside the pages, standing next to the characters!”

— *Michael D.*

# Survivor

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**Paul Langan**

**Series Editor: Paul Langan**



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*For the 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys  
who are survivors*

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## **Chapter 1**

“Oh my God, Tarah! Check out this picture!” yelled Rochelle Barnes, Tarah Carson’s twenty-year-old cousin. Rochelle sat on the rumpled lime green couch in Tarah’s living room, leafing through an old photo book.

“Can we stop with the pictures already?” Tarah protested, eyeing the stack of old albums piled on the floor. Her cousin kept flipping the pages as if Tarah hadn’t said a word.

“Look at this one!” Rochelle said with a cackle. “Your braids look crazy, girl. And look at all them beads! Remember how we used to wear ‘em back in the day?”

“You wore braids too, Aunt Tarah?” asked Kayla, Rochelle’s four-year-old daughter. Even though she and Tarah



were cousins, Kayla had always called Tarah her aunt.

"That's right, Kayla. I wore 'em just like you," Tarah said, gently resting her hand on the little girl's shoulder. She didn't want Kayla to know that she hated looking at old pictures of herself, especially the ones Rochelle had grabbed.

"Here's another one," Rochelle said, pointing to a photograph. "See how much you and Aunt Tarah look alike, Kayla? You almost look like you could be sisters." The little girl smiled shyly and ate one of the grapes Tarah had given her as a snack.

Rochelle and Kayla lived with Tarah's aunt Lucille in a small stucco house a few blocks away. Nearly every weekend, usually Saturday mornings, Rochelle and Kayla walked over for a visit. Often, Rochelle would leave her daughter there for a few hours so she could get her shopping done. Tarah didn't mind. She loved playing with her little cousin or taking her to the park not far from Bluford High School, where Tarah would start eleventh grade in another month.

Looking at the stack of photo albums next to Rochelle, Tarah wished she could go for a walk right now. Anything

to get away from the old pictures and the haunting memories they triggered.

"You gonna look through *all* of them right now? That's gonna take hours," Tarah complained.

"So? It's not like you're goin' somewhere. School's out, and you don't work on Saturdays." Rochelle snapped the first album closed and grabbed a second one.

Tarah knew her cousin was right, but she also knew which pictures were inside the smudged maroon album with the split corners. It had been hidden in the back of the cluttered hall closet where Tarah buried it years ago. She felt an uncomfortable twinge in her stomach as Rochelle plopped it on her lap and flipped it open. It was a collection of photos she didn't want to see.

"I don't wanna spend the whole day looking at them old things," Tarah huffed. "Let's take Kayla for a walk. We can look at those later."

"No, go through them *now*," urged Tarah's mother, Clarice Carson, as she emerged from the bedroom and sat down heavily on the couch. Mom worked as a corrections officer and was one of the toughest women Tarah knew. "You been dragging your feet with this for

months. I asked you to do this, like, five times already. The reunion for Aunt Deborah is in two weeks. She's my great-aunt, Tarah. My grandmother's sister. She's the only one from her generation we got left, and she's turning ninety. At this point, she don't want presents, but you know how she is about family. I figured we'd gather pictures of everybody and give them to her. She's gonna love 'em. But we need to get started on it *now!*" Mom insisted.

The twinge in Tarah's belly grew into a dull queasiness. Her stomach had actually been bothering her on and off for weeks, ever since her mother started pressuring her about the reunion. But it got worse this morning when Rochelle called to say she was coming over to look through the old photographs.

"Ooh, here's a good one," Rochelle chimed in, holding up the book so everyone could see. "It's got everyone from our side. Everybody looks good, too, except for you, Tar. You ain't smiling at all."

"Like you never took a bad picture, Rochelle," Tarah grumbled, uncomfortable with everyone staring at the old photo. "I seen a few of you smiling with them big ol' buck teeth you used to

have, but you don't see me pointing it out to everyone."

"You mean like what you're doin' right now?" Rochelle snapped. "Why you gettin' so upset? I'm only saying what I see. Look." Rochelle held the photo album out to her.

"Can I see?" Kayla asked between bites of another grape.

Tarah didn't want anyone to look at the picture, let alone Kayla. She knew Rochelle's description of her face was right. She could still remember fragments of the day when the family gathered in Municipal Park to celebrate her aunt Linda's wedding. Relatives had come from all over to be there, and they would spend the sunny afternoon barbecuing and listening to music. Tarah knew it should have been fun, and for most people there, it was. She had heard them talking about it for years. But it was a day Tarah never mentioned—and tried hard to forget.

"Yeah, you don't look happy, Aunt Tarah," Kayla said, inspecting the photo.

"I had a stomachache that day," Tarah replied quickly, getting up from the table and heading to the kitchen so no one would see her face. Just being

near the pictures made her feel edgy and uncomfortable all these years later.

"It's true. She did," Mom added, rubbing Kayla's back. "Couldn't get her to talk or smile at all that day. She spent the whole afternoon in the shade with Aunt Deborah. Good thing she was there, too, 'cause I couldn't keep my eyes on her with all them cousins runnin' around. It was like a circus that whole weekend. Gonna be like that again in two weeks. We're expecting over eighty people!"

"For real? Are you serious?" Rochelle exclaimed.

"Mmm hmm. Maybe more if people bring friends. That reminds me. Tarah, is Coop comin'? And what about Darcy and her sister?"

Tarah hadn't told her boyfriend, Cooper Hodden, about the party. In fact, she hadn't mentioned it to anyone. Normally, she loved cookouts and being with her friends. But this gathering was different. From the moment Mom first mentioned the guests that might come, Tarah felt uneasy. Those feelings had grown so strong that she had tried to block the whole event from her mind.

"Yeah, I guess they're coming," Tarah answered.

"You *guess*?" Mom asked. "You mean you didn't tell them yet? Girl, when were you plannin' on askin' them? The party is almost here, and we need to know how much food to make. Lord knows, that Coop can eat," her mother said.

"I'll text him right now," Tarah said, relieved for an excuse to retreat to her bedroom, where her phone was charging.

"Here's another one that might work," Rochelle announced before Tarah could leave. She held up the book again so everyone could see it. "I think it's the best one. You're next to Aunt Deborah, Tarah, and you don't look that upset. See?"

Tarah leaned over to stare at the picture. A crowd of relatives stood in front of a stretch of trees. Aunts and uncles, some of them now deceased, smiled back at the camera. In front of them was a bunch of kids, including Rochelle, whose large toothy smile was visible from halfway across the room. Tarah spotted herself in the middle of the picture, standing right in front of Aunt Deborah. The old woman's hand rested gently on Tarah's shoulder as if she was trying to support her.

"Look how little you were," Kayla

said, gazing at the shot. "You're my size, Aunt Tarah."

It was true. Tarah noticed that the top of her head barely reached Aunt Deborah's chest. For a moment, she was struck to see how small she once was, not much bigger than the kids she watched at the daycare center where she worked over the summer. For a split second, Tarah imagined Kayla standing in the picture where she was, enduring the same pain. The thought made her cringe.

"And look how skinny we all were, too," Rochelle cackled, breaking her thoughts. "Would be nice to be that skinny again."

"Well, not *that* skinny," Mom huffed. "Y'all are fine the way you are."

Tarah rolled her eyes. She didn't want to talk about her weight, especially not now. No matter what Mom said, she knew she was heavy. Her hips and backside were what some called "thick," and men occasionally hollered about the "junk in her trunk" when she walked home from the bus stop. Most of the time, she was able to ignore the comments, the way she ignored the stink in the air after the bus passed by. And when the insults got to her, she had learned from Mom to

mask the hurt behind a joke or a quick insult of her own.

*"Never let them know they got to you or they'll just keep coming,"* Mom once said when Tarah was in second grade and a boy made her cry by calling her "jelly belly" at recess. *"And if you need to, go on and give 'em a taste of their own medicine. Most of them will leave you alone once you do that."*

Tarah had followed Mom's advice for years, and for the most part it had worked, allowing her to hide behind her jokes, her smile, and her loud cackling laughter. As she got older, she discovered she could hold her own in almost any crowd. At Bluford, this skill earned her respect and friends in different cliques, though there were still some who dismissed her or looked down on her. Tarah had learned to ignore them, too, and for a time she almost forgot the deep wounds from her childhood. But all that ended—shattered by the picture sitting in her cousin's lap: a photo of a skinny little girl about to cry.

"At least you don't look angry or mean in this one," Rochelle added.

"No," Kayla said, inspecting the picture as if it were a puzzle she was trying

to solve. “You look scared and a little sad. How come, Aunt Tarah?”

Tarah wished she could rip the book away from them and burn it. She had wanted to do it years ago, to turn the photos to ash and erase any proof that the time had ever happened. It was what Mom did after Dad left to go back east when Tarah was a toddler. She had pulled out every picture of him and acted as if he never existed. Tarah wanted to do that, but she knew the pictures in this album were precious to her mother, especially the ones with the older relatives. Aunt Deborah was the oldest one left.

“I don’t remember, Kayla,” Tarah lied. “That was a long time ago.”

“I don’t know either,” Mom said, “but that’s certainly not how you usually were—or are. You may have been many things over the years, child, but scared is not one of them.”

“It’s true! That’s why Coop always jokes that he’s scared of her,” Rochelle teased.

“If he knew what’s good for him, he *would* be scared of her. My girl don’t suffer no fools,” Mom said with a laugh, giving Tarah a proud smile. “Me neither.”

“Can you all please talk about something else?” Tarah said, doing her best to smile along with them. But inside, she felt exposed and vulnerable, like the child in the picture. She knew why she was so upset so many years ago, though no one else did.

Not her mother.

Not any of her many cousins.

Not her best friend at Bluford High School, Darcy Wills.

Not even Cooper Hodden.

“*I was scared that day, Momma,*” Tarah wanted to say, though she kept her mouth locked shut.

There was no way she would admit what happened the night before Aunt Linda’s wedding, years ago, when many of her relatives were staying at her house. That night her uncle Rudy, a teenager at the time, had sat next to her on the sofa while the adults were in the other room cackling and laughing. She still recalled the odd way he had watched her and how he volunteered to babysit her and the younger cousins while the rest of the relatives went out celebrating. She could still remember the creak of his steps as he crept into her bedroom later that night after she had

changed into her pajamas.

Rudy had taken the photo. Tarah could still see him in his baggy army-green shorts and black T-shirt standing behind the camera and eyeing her menacingly. Kayla was right to see fear in the picture, Tarah thought. She *had* been terrified.

*"I was afraid he'd hurt me again, Momma,"* she wanted to say, though she had decided long ago never to tell her or anyone else the truth. Ever.

It was a decision she revisited, a poison she had swallowed back down over the years whenever someone pulled out the old photographs and made her look at them.

"Oh my God, remember this guy?" Rochelle blurted. She had flipped the page and was looking at another photo. "What was his name? Uncle Rufus, right? I remember him. He was too young to be our uncle. He looks so handsome."

Tarah's stomach twisted. Her hands began to tremble, the way they did if she went all day without eating. She could feel Kayla staring at her, and she wondered if the little girl could tell she was upset.

"That's your Uncle Rudy, Rochelle,"

Mom said. "He was only about Tarah's age there."

"Whatever happened to him? We ain't seen him in, like, forever," Rochelle asked.

"That's 'cause he went down south to school and stayed in Atlanta since," Mom explained. "He's coming for Aunt Deborah's birthday, though."

"Really?" Rochelle asked.

Tarah felt as if the air had suddenly been sucked out of the house. She recoiled for an instant and bumped the edge of the end table, causing a glass of soda to spill in a fizzing mess on the floor in front of the sofa.

"Girl, watch it!" Rochelle yelled, squirming away from the spill before turning back to Tarah's mother. "Are you serious, Aunt Clarice? He's coming, too?"

"Of course he is! He's family," Mom exclaimed, eyeing Tarah curiously. "I invited him to stay here again, just like old times."

The room seemed to spin. Tarah's heart pounded in her chest and temples as she rushed to get a towel for the floor.

"You see, Kayla. It's just like I told you. You're going to meet all these new people in your family. Ain't that exciting?"

The little girl smiled and nodded.

Tarah wiped up the soda, barely hearing the small talk between her mother and her cousin until she heard Mom's voice directed at her.

"You okay, Tarah? You're awfully quiet today."

"I'm fine," she said, standing up from the floor, careful to avoid her mother's gaze. "I'ma call Coop and see if he's coming to the party. I'll be right back."

Tarah retreated to her room and closed the door, careful to keep her hands close to her body so no one could see them shaking.

## Chapter 2

*Where u at?*

Tarah texted Cooper from her front stoop later that evening. She and Cooper had planned days ago to meet Darcy on Saturday night. They were all supposed to get pizza and then head to the movies. Tarah had been looking forward to going out all week, though she didn't really want to see *Zombie Storm*, the movie Cooper kept talking about.

But everything changed after Rochelle's visit. Even though Tarah escaped the house with Kayla for a while, she had been unable to shake the memories the photos had triggered. At one point, Kayla even asked her about it.

"What's wrong, Aunt Tarah?" the little girl had said, taking a break from

playing with Kelena Mason, a little girl from down the street who often visited the park on weekends with her mom, Liselle. "Don't you want to sit on the swing with me?"

Tarah had been zoning out on a bench, leaving Kayla alone on the sliding board for a few minutes.

"Yeah, Kayla. You know I always want to play with you," she said, pretending it was a normal Saturday morning in early August. But whenever she closed her eyes, Tarah kept seeing Rudy's face. And then the thoughts would blast through her head like the music from the low-riders that sometimes circled the park.

*He's coming back.*

*He's coming here.*

*I'm gonna have to face him.*

The thoughts tormented her all day, making her edgy and nervous even as she sat on the stoop waiting for Cooper to arrive. Suddenly her phone began vibrating. Tarah jumped as Cooper's text message lit up the tiny screen.

*Almost there*

A minute later, his beat-up pickup truck pulled to a squeaky stop in front of her house.

"What's happenin', T?" Cooper asked as he emerged from the truck wearing a crisp white T-shirt and sagging indigo jean shorts that hung low so that they were nearly as long as pants. "Sorry I'm late, but you know how Larry Nye is. That dude is the first to complain if you're thirty seconds late. But if you stay a half hour extra cleanin' up that garage at the end of the night, he don't say a thing. Not even a thank you."

Tarah noticed that Cooper's shoulders seemed wider and the V-shape of his back broader than just a week or so ago. The weightlifting he had been doing for the upcoming football season was already making him look bigger. Just seeing him made her feel a little better.

"I told you you're the best thing to happen to that garage. Old Mr. Nye's gonna realize that once you cut your hours this fall for football. But that's okay. Serves him right," Tarah grumbled, trying to forget about what happened earlier. "C'mon, let's go. I been stuck here all day, and my mom and cousin have been drivin' me crazy."

Cooper leaned in for a kiss, and Tarah kissed him back quickly, though she found herself holding onto him for a