



JALA
and the
WOLVES

by Marti Dumas



Jala and the **Wolves**

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Cover Art by Marie Muravski
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ISBN-10: 150780542X
ISBN-13: 978-1507805428

For Jala, who inspires me.

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Chapter 1

A Not So Ordinary Girl



Once there was a little girl. Jala was her name. By all accounts she lived an ordinary life. She had a mother and a father, a sister and a brother, a bunk bed, a fish named Oscar, and seemingly thousands of tiny toys that liked to lurk about and lodge themselves in her mother's feet. Her life was wrapped in a cloak of

love so warm and snug that Jala often had difficulty seeing past the end of her nose.

That's not to say that Jala was blind. She could see perfectly well. But as is often the case for 6 year-olds who are well-loved and well-cared for, Jala had plenty of time to get bogged down in details that less fortunate children would happily overlook. Her hair, for instance. It was long and tangled easily and took hours to be combed out properly. Just the thought of getting her hair combed was enough to worry Jala to tears and she lived in constant fear of it, like a boogie monster waiting to gobble her up. She much preferred wearing her hair in its natural state—standing wild and free, twisting in all directions—but even then her mother

insisted on smoothing down the edges and that was a bother, too.

Then there was her brother. She loved him. She knew she did. But every time he got praised for doing two-year-old things in his two-year-old way she couldn't help wishing that she could get so much attention for blowing her own nose, or saying "love" instead of "wuv," too.

But her brother and the imminent threat of hair-combings were nothing compared to the food. Jala was ALWAYS hungry. Always. No matter how many meals she ate, she always seemed to have room for another. Her parents would give her firsts and often gave her seconds, but whenever she asked

for thirds all she got were sharps looks and explanations about how she is a girl, not a hobbit, and there is a difference between being hungry and just wanting more food to eat. This frustrated Jala to no end. That and the fact that her parents refused to let her eat her meals from a dog-dish on the floor, nor did they allow her to pretend to be a dog while eating from a dish on the table. (That last part they'd only let her do for two weeks before they made the "No Animals in the Kitchen" rule.)

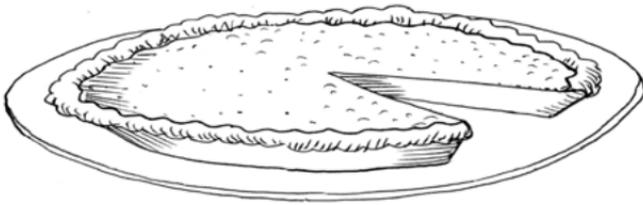
What Jala didn't know, and what no one could tell her, was that she was exceedingly special. To be sure, everyone knew she was wonderful. She was kind and caring and deeply loving. Everyone knew she was

smart. She had been reading everything in sight since she was 3 and gobbled up facts about animals that stumped most grown-ups. Everyone even knew she was beautiful. With her gorgeous face, dark, almond shaped-eyes and long slender legs she was as elegant and lovely as any Degas ballerina. Those things made her special, but no one, including Jala, knew quite how special she was until the day before the feast.

Jala and the Wolves

Chapter 2

Breakfast



The day before Thanksgiving dawned bright and cool. It never got truly cold where Jala lived, so the cool days brought her almost as much joy as a snowfall. It meant she could wear her favorite lollipop-striped tights without her legs getting all sweaty and itchy. It also meant she could watch her warm breath hanging in the air, a favorite pastime of hers.

Cool weather also meant that it was finally autumn and the Thanksgiving feast might be as close as the calendar promised. True, her teacher had been talking about Pilgrims and Native Americans and cornucopias for the last couple weeks, but teachers talked about a lot of things a lot. So until she walked down the long hallway that ran the length of their house and stepped out on the front porch in her bare feet to check the weather for herself, she couldn't be certain Thanksgiving was truly near. But there it was: a cool breeze and the icy stab of cold concrete on the soles of her feet.

It was autumn alright, even in New Orleans, and for Jala that meant only one thing. Pie. Bean pie to be exact. Don't go

turning up your nose at it, either. Bean pie is perfectly delicious. If you're the kind of person who likes pumpkin pie or sweet potato pie, bean pie will be right up your alley. Jala had been dreaming about its sweet, cinnamon-y goodness ever since the previous Thanksgiving, which is odd when you know how much of a carnivore Jala usually was.

Jala's family was not exactly vegetarian, but her parents had waited to introduce meat to her and her brother until they were each two years old. At almost 3 her brother still refused the stuff, scraping the breading off chicken with his bottom teeth and leaving the flesh to be thrown away. Not Jala. When she was almost 3 she would

eat as much meat as her parents allowed, sucking the bones when she could get away with it. She loved meat so much that once she even asked for a bite of her father's lamb in a Lebanese restaurant. Her father, not really wanting to share, had reminded her that lambs were baby sheep and that sheep were her favorite animals at the time. Undaunted despite her love of sheep and creatures of all kinds, Jala took a bite anyway and uttered the following rather irreverent noise in response:

“Mmmm-baaaa.”

“Well,” her parents shrugged, “she's not a vegetarian,” and continued with their meal.

Jala was not one of those kids who hated vegetables. Even so, bean pie was one of the few plant-y things that held such a high place in Jala's carnivorous heart. Needless to say, the Thanksgiving feast with its whole roasted turkey, chicken and sausage gumbo, and the promise of at least 2 (maybe 3) bean pies made Jala's heart flutter in what could only be called a dance of joy. Meat followed by pie? How much better could it get?

So after slipping on her candy pink tights and a dress of an entirely different color, Jala made her way to the kitchen to see if the Thanksgiving feast was already in bloom.

Sure enough her mother was there, standing at the stove making what looked suspiciously like cream of wheat and not pie at all. There wasn't even a stray bean on the floor to indicate that a bean pie might be in the oven, but did that deter Jala? Not in the least. In her mind cool day=Thanksgiving=pie. Simple math. All she had to do was find it.

As soon as she entered the kitchen area her keen nose picked up the faint smell of cinnamon hanging in the air. It was the slightest smell. Hardly anything to notice at all. Another, less fortunate child would have paid it no mind at all because she would have been worrying about something truly sad like how to stay safe, or how to get

warm, or how to find a place to sleep. But Jala, being a fortunate child, didn't have to worry about such things and therefore had the freedom to smell the smell in the first place and the audacity to hope that it came from a bean pie, perhaps cooling somewhere she could not see it. Jala was very good at hoping for things even if she wasn't always very good at telling people what she hoped for.

She approached cautiously, sliding on stockinged feet like a predator stalking its prey. Asking mothers pesky questions while they are cooking is not always a good idea. Sometimes it gets you sent away without your question answered, or sent to your room without any books to read. If Jala had

truly taken a moment to think about it she might have even worried that she might be told she couldn't have any bean pie at all. But the thought of the pie was so alluring that that last bit didn't occur to her and she stalked a little closer.

“Good morning, mama,” she said, testing the waters.

Her mother looked a bit tired, but glanced up from the cutting board with a warm smile and responded,

“Good morning, baby.” She was cutting Gala apples into thin, half-moon slices before plopping them into the cream of wheat, so she only glanced at Jala before returning to her cutting. “Did you sleep

well?” her mother asked without looking up again.

Definitely cinnamon, Jala thought. And butter. And a sweetness. Was it brown sugar? Perhaps agave? She wasn't certain which, but there was definitely a sweetness in the air. Jala was so distracted trying to untangle these lovely smells that she forgot to answer her mother's question entirely and said this instead: “I'm hungry.”

Jala wasn't really hungry. It was morning and she hadn't eaten yet so for her that meant breakfast—hopefully a special breakfast. Her mother was silent for a few moments, and when a grown-up who likes to talk as much as Jala's mother is silent

that's never a good sign. Jala, too tangled up in hope to recognize this, repeated herself.

“I'm hungry, mama,” she said again. That boldly hopeful part of her envisioned the scene playing out like this:

Jala's mama: You're hungry baby?

Jala: [nodding eagerly] Yes, mama!

Jala's mama: I can't let my baby be hungry, not even for a moment! This cream of wheat is not ready yet, so would you take... [Reaching behind her and producing a plate of bean pie with a flourish] this instead?

Jala: [nodding eagerly and clapping hands

with excitement] Oh, yes! It's what I've always hoped for! Thank you, mama!

Jala's mama: In fact, bean pie is so healthy for you, you could have it for breakfast EVERY DAY if you like. Would you like that, Jala...?

Unfortunately for Jala that is not how the scene played out at all because she had managed to strike upon three of her mother's most deeply held pet peeves at once.

Pet Peeve #1: Stating the obvious. For Jala's mother, Jala saying she was hungry was like jumping into a swimming pool and then saying you're wet. Duh. You didn't

need to say that.

Pet Peeve #2: Children who have never missed a meal acting like there is the real possibility they might not be fed. Since there are plenty of children in the world who must **actually** worry about where their next meals will come from, Jala's mother felt it was conceited and spoiled for well-fed children to do this.

Pet Peeve #3: People (especially Jala) ignoring her questions.

By the time Jala could see the annoyance brewing in her mother's eyes, it was too late to turn back. She had already said it. Twice.

So the scene actually played out like this.

Jala's mama: Jala, did you notice that I am already making breakfast?

Jala: [nods]

Jala's mama: Do you think that telling me you're hungry will make the breakfast be ready any faster? Or were you thinking that I might feed everyone else breakfast, but forget to feed you?

Jala: [standing silently, unsure of what to say]

Jala's mama: When the cream of wheat is ready, I will call you. Go back to your

room, Jala.

Jala never even had a chance to say that what she really wanted for breakfast was bean pie (which was probably for the best since this would have struck pet peeve #4: asking for junk food before you have eaten any healthy food) because her mother gave her such a withering look that all she could do was retreat to her room.

Once there, Jala checked to see if the coast was clear. Her mother had not told her she couldn't read while she waited for breakfast, but she also hadn't said she could. Jala didn't want to take any chances so after looking over her shoulder to see if the hallway was empty, she closed her

eyes and put one ear up so she could really listen. Besides her sister snoring from the bottom bunk and the clink of the spoon in the cream of wheat pot, the house was silent and the coast seemed to be clear.

When she opened her eyes again that's when Jala noticed there were two things out of the ordinary in her room. The first thing was that one of her favorite books, The Wolves in the Wall by Neil Gaiman, was on the dollhouse rug that lay in front of her bunk bed. She didn't remember it being there when she had climbed down the bunk bed ladder that morning or when she came back to get dressed, but there it was on the floor.

Her sister was still sleeping. She had just gotten in from her other home in Georgia late the night before, so she would probably be sleeping for a while. Besides, being 12 years old she was an unlikely candidate for taking a picture book off the shelf and dumping it on the floor. That was more her baby brother's style. But the house was way too quiet to say he was awake, so Jala just assumed The Wolves in the Wall had been on the floor the whole time.

Glancing over her shoulder to make sure there was still no one watching her from the hallway, Jala snatched the book up and turned to head over to her comfy reading corner to enjoy it.

That was when she noticed the second thing. Her reading corner was very different than it had been. This she was certain of. The cushy red ottoman had been replaced with a sky blue bean bag chair, and in front of it hanging in a most improbable place beneath the windowsill was a looking glass.

Jala and the Wolves

Chapter 3
The Looking Glass



Jala could tell the looking glass was magical the moment she saw it, and that did not surprise her one bit. Why? Why, her mother was magical, of course. That had been obvious to Jala for years. How else could her mother always know what she was thinking before she said it? And how

else could her mother have produced so many snacks, juice boxes, warm sweaters and first aid supplies at exactly the right moment? Her mother had done magical things so many times that Jala had ceased to be amazed by it.

No doubt about it, this mirror was definitely her mother's handiwork. After all, slipping into her room to make it lovelier while Jala was on the front porch checking the weather was exactly the kind of thing her magical mother would do. So far from being alarmed by the presence of this mirror, Jala was eager to test it out. If her mother put it here it must be safe and besides, Jala and her mother had read Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking

Glass... twice, making Jala something of an expert on such matters.

The mirror was perfectly firm to the touch so, having no white rabbits to follow, Jala sat down on the conveniently placed bean bag and gazed into the mirror pondering various ways to make it work. All Skippyjon Jones had to do was bounce on his big boy bed to make himself (he was a Siamese cat) look like a Chihuahua in the mirror and begin his adventures. But Skippyjon was only pretending and that was just a fantasy book. This was real life.

When Jala looked into the mirror, all she could see was her regular face surrounded by messy, morning hair. This was true even

when she was bouncing. Clearly getting to the magic in this mirror took more than just looking at it or jumping around.

After a few more minutes of puzzling Jala decided not worry about it. Undoubtedly her mother would tell her the trick of the mirror at breakfast. Then they could go on a mother-daughter adventure together before anyone else had even woken up. All she had to do was wait to be called and not get in trouble in the meantime.

The thought of having a private adventure with her mother was so delightful that Jala almost forgot how hungry she thought she was and nestled herself deeper into the sky-blue bean bag chair to read The Wolves in

the Walls and wait for her mother to call her.

Jala loved wolves. She had started out playing at monkeys, then progressed through several different species of the cat family before she had finally settled into the canines. It started with sheepdogs, but it wasn't long before sheepdogs led to wolves. There was something about the howling that appealed to her. And the moon. The moon? Yes. The moon. Over the top of her book she imagined she could see the moon hanging full and round in the mirror. But it wasn't her imagination. The fullest, roundest moon she had ever seen hung over a rocky ledge, the base of which was surrounded by a deep pine forest.

There was a white wolf standing on that ledge. The wolf was standing so still that Jala had almost convinced herself that the whole scene was a picture, when, with a sudden flash, the wolf turned to look at her. Their gazes locked. The only thing Jala could think of was how much the white wolf's eyes looked like her sister's hazel ones. But there was another flash and the wolf's eyes went from hazel to the darkest, truest brown there was and Jala felt herself falling and not knowing when she would stop.