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Justin wished there was some way to undo what they had just done, but there wasn't.

*Like going off a diving board, he thought.*

*Once you're moving, nothing to do but keep going.*

**So he did.**

ALSO BY ROSA JORDAN  
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2006-07 Chocolate Lily Award (Canada) nominee  
2005 Silver Birch Award (Canada) finalist  
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JORDAN

# THE GOATNAPPERS



ROSA JORDAN

author of *LOST GOAT LANE*



ISBN 978-1-56145-400-6

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**W**hen Justin Martin becomes the first freshman in almost twenty years to make the high school's varsity baseball team, he is convinced his problems are all behind him. All he needs now to make his happiness complete is a bicycle so he can ride home after baseball practice. To earn the money for the bike, Justin sells Little Billy, one of the family's beloved baby goats.

And that is where things begin to get complicated. Justin's siblings find out that the new owner, Mr. Grimsted, is horribly mistreating Little Billy. Is there anything Justin can do to save the poor animal? Then, when a red sports car appears in the Martin's driveway one afternoon, is it bringing emotional upheaval for



the entire family, the tempting lure of adventure for Justin, or both?

Author Rosa Jordan plunges her memorable, well-drawn characters into unexpected circumstances—sometimes frantically comic, sometimes heartrending—and invites readers to cheer them on as they struggle to sort out what is right and where their loyalties lie.

PEACHTREE  
ATLANTA

THE  
GOATNAPPERS

THE  
GOATNAPPERS

ROSA JORDAN



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*To my mother, Carmaleta, who knows everything about  
raising kids—two-footed and four-footed.*

—R. J.

# Contents

1—Sudden Changes . . . . .	1
2—Cattle Auction . . . . .	13
3—Pet Parade . . . . .	18
4—So Long, Little Billy . . . . .	26
5—Charlie . . . . .	33
6—A Dark Place . . . . .	43
7—Driving Lessons . . . . .	47
8—The Old Place . . . . .	51
9—The Plan . . . . .	56
10—Goatnappers . . . . .	61
11—Crime Number Two . . . . .	67
12—Suspects . . . . .	73
13—The Invitation . . . . .	77
14—Charlie’s World . . . . .	85
15—Trouble from All Sides . . . . .	95
16—Complications . . . . .	104
17—The Spread Factor . . . . .	113
18—Brad’s Situation . . . . .	119
19—The Chase . . . . .	122
20—Luther’s Decision . . . . .	127
21—Booker . . . . .	132
22—The Deal . . . . .	136
23—How Grown-ups Think . . . . .	142
24—Getting It Together . . . . .	147
25—Booker and Mom . . . . .	152

26—Grimsted Revisited . . . . .	155
27—The Mall . . . . .	161
28—Another Goodbye . . . . .	168
29—Friends . . . . .	173
30—Traveling with Mom . . . . .	179
31—Booker’s World . . . . .	184
32—Justin’s Decision . . . . .	191
33—Later, Alligator . . . . .	200
34—Families . . . . .	206

# SUDDEN CHANGES

Justin waved goodbye to his friend Brad and sauntered toward the school bus. Children from the elementary school on the other side of the parking lot pushed and shoved to get on the bus. It was Friday, and the kids were even more rowdy than usual. Justin’s brother Chip, a second grader, was right in the middle of them. Their thirteen-year-old sister Kate waited until the scramble was over, then she climbed on.

Just about everybody was on the bus by the time Justin got there, which was the way he liked it. Most of his friends either rode their bikes home or hitched a ride with someone who had a car. It bugged Justin to be nearly fifteen years old and still riding the bus, but what could he do? It was more than an hour’s walk from his house to school, and he didn’t have a bike.

He glanced at Kate as he walked down the aisle of the bus, figuring he could tell by her expression if she’d heard the news. But she was looking out the window, her straight blonde hair swung forward so he couldn’t see her face. None of Kate’s friends rode the bus either, which was why she was sitting next to Lily Hashimoto. Lily had only started riding the bus in January, when her family bought the big house across the highway from Justin’s family’s farm and opened a plant nursery.

She was seven but so small you'd think she was a five-year-old.

Chip and his best friend Luther were in the seat ahead of Kate and Lily. All Justin saw of them was the backs of their heads, Chip's a mess of floppy blond curls and Luther's a tight mass of black ones. They were on their knees in the seat, turned around to give Lily a hard time. They hadn't got used to the fact that such a little girl could run them ragged in soccer.

Justin plopped onto the backseat of the bus among the sixth- and seventh-grade boys, in the place next to the driver's side window, which was more or less reserved for him. He barely noticed the younger boys, even though his own best friend, Brad, was a seventh grader. Brad threw the trickiest baseball in the entire school, and it was a well-known fact that if you could catch Brad's throws, you could catch anybody's. Justin was pretty sure that he was such a good fielder because of all the time he spent practicing with Brad.

Justin stared out the window, oblivious to the smaller houses and vacant lots as the bus passed through the edge of town and the cornfields that lay beyond. The images he saw were inside his head: Justin easily catching balls and winging them to the catcher. The umpire calling one out after another. The whole school cheering each time his throw reached home plate before the other team's runner. Justin's fingers squeezed the baseball in his jacket pocket, itching to throw it, hard, fast, and far.

The bus made several stops before it pulled up at a dirt road called Lost Goat Lane. The Martin farm was on the corner, across from the Hashimoto house and nursery. Further down Lost Goat Lane, out of sight, was the Wilson farm where Luther lived with his mom and grandparents.

Kate and Justin followed Chip, Luther, and Lily off the bus.

The seven-year-olds raced down Lost Goat Lane, turned in at the Martin driveway, and cut across the side yard to the goat pen. The triplets, born only two months ago on Christmas Eve, ran up and down the fence bleating a welcome. Kate stopped to give the triplets' mother, Sugar, a couple of carrot sticks she had saved from lunch. Lily dug into her pocket and pulled out some corn chips for Honey, the littlest of the triplets and therefore Lily's favorite. Luther favored Little Billy because he looked exactly like Old Billy, who belonged to Luther's grandfather. Little Billy was pure white, just like Old Billy. Chip was feeding Go-Girl, the triplet Kate had given him for Christmas.

"Yuck!" Kate made a face at the squishy mess Chip was offering his little goat. "What's that?"

"Salad," Chip said. "Go-Girl loves it, especially with French dressing."

Justin walked past the goat pen, half-listening to the chatter of the younger children, but mostly lost in his own thoughts. He was halfway to the house when he just couldn't hold his excitement in any longer.

"Yahoo!" he shouted, flinging the baseball high into the sky. "I made it!"

Kate ran to catch up with him. "You made the team? Really?"

"Yes, yes, yes! I am SOOOO GOOD!"

He threw the ball skyward again. It came down *splat!*—a perfect catch in his well-worn, as-good-as-magic baseball glove.

"But how? They never put freshmen on the varsity team!" Kate exclaimed. "At least that's what the kids at school said when I told them you were going to make it."

"Nope," said Justin. "Not since seventeen years ago, when Booker Wilson made it his freshman year."



"You think it's because Booker gave you his old glove?" Kate asked.

"That and the fact than I'm the best ballplayer this school has seen since Booker graduated."

If Kate agreed, Justin didn't hear her. He was too busy leaping into the air, turning circles, running and jumping, catching imaginary fly balls, all the way to the house.

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"Ouch!" Justin said, as he lifted pasta from the stove to drain it, hot steam billowing up into his face.

"Move over," Kate said, elbowing Justin out of the way so she could get to the stove. "Chip, put glasses on the table and sit down. That's Mom now."

Justin heard their mother pause on the back porch to kick off her muddy boots. He glanced up as she pushed open the screen door. He caught his breath. It wasn't just that she looked tired; she always looked like that when she got home from the dairy. She looked upset, like something was seriously wrong.

But when his mother saw the table, her worried expression vanished. "My goodness!" she gasped, her face breaking into a wide smile.

Justin, Kate, and Chip watched as she took in the big bowl of white spaghetti and another of red spaghetti sauce sitting on the red-and-white checkered tablecloth. A salad at every place added a touch of green, and in the center was a bouquet of yellow daffodils.

"That's about the prettiest supper table I ever saw," Mom exclaimed as she slid into her place at the table. "Where'd the flowers come from?"

"Luther's grandma sent them." Kate went around the table pouring out glasses of goat milk.

"Is this a special occasion?" Mom asked.

"You tell her, Justin," Kate said.

"I made the team," Justin said, hiding his smile behind a big swallow of milk.

"The varsity team?"

"Yep." Justin was beaming, unaware of the big white mustache on his upper lip.

"Now that is something worth celebrating! A toast to our soon-to-be-champion!" Mom held her milk toward the middle of the table and they all clinked glasses. "That is the best news I've had in a long time!"

Grinning, they dug into the spaghetti. After he had cleaned his plate once and started on seconds, Justin mentioned what was on his mind. "Thing is, Mom, there's practice nearly every day. I'll miss the bus and have to walk home."

"It's not that far." Mom smiled. "And after tomorrow, no calves to look after."

"Yes, but...well, I was thinking...if I had a bicycle—"

Suddenly the strained look he had seen on Mom's face was back. All of them saw it now, and stared at her, more worried than she was because she knew what was wrong and they didn't. Nobody noticed that a small black boy had come up on the porch and was standing there quietly at the screen door.

Mom laid down her fork. "This is something I didn't want to worry you with until I figured out what I was going to do." Mom's voice was thin and tight, like she was trying not to cry. "But maybe it's better to tell you now, when we've got something else to make us feel good." She sat there for what seemed like a long time, stirring spaghetti around on her plate. Finally she said, "I lost my job at the dairy."



Justin was stunned. For a minute nobody said a word. Then Chip spotted Luther outside the screen door.

"Luther!" he yelled. "Come on in."

"Can't," Luther called back. "Mama says I'm not to go inside when folks are eating supper."

"I'm done," Chip said. He hadn't eaten half of what was on his plate. "He can come in, can't he, Mom?"

"Might as well," Mom said with a sigh. "It's not as if this is going to stay a secret."

"What secret?" Luther asked, pulling the kitchen stool up next to Chip. "You want me to leave?"

"No," Mom gave him a sad smile. "That's okay, Luther. I was just explaining that I've lost my job. It's not a secret."

"What happened?" Justin asked. He couldn't believe Mr. George would fire Mom. She'd worked at the dairy four years, and she hadn't missed a single day—not even Christmas!

"Mr. George has sold the dairy," Mom explained.

"Sold it?" Kate exclaimed, like she didn't know what that meant. "Why? I thought he said he wasn't going to retire for a long time."

"That's what I thought, too," Mom said. "But apparently somebody made him a good offer, and his wife wants to move to Fort Myers to be near their grandchildren. She talked him into accepting it."

"Can't you go on working for the new owners?" Justin asked.

"I just met them today," Mom said. "Turns out they have a big family, with several grown kids. They won't be needing any hired help." Mom swirled the spaghetti round and round on her fork, playing with it the way she didn't allow them to do.

"What's going to happen to us?" Kate asked. She looked scared.

"Nothing, providing I can get another job right away. I haven't been looking because I'd just assumed I could go on working there."

"My grandpa's got a job," Luther piped up.

All heads at the table swiveled toward Luther. He looked at them with big, dark brown eyes from behind thick-lensed glasses that made his eyes look even bigger.

"Your grandpa?" Mom echoed. Mr. Wilson had been retired for years. As far as they knew, he had plenty of work to do around his own small farm.

"He waters plants at Lily's dad's nursery. And keeps them trimmed and stuff like that." Luther turned his big serious eyes up to Mom. "Mr. Hashimoto offered Mama a job, too. Cashier."

"Ruby's gone to work there?" Kate cried in dismay.

"Really?" Mom asked. "Your mother's working at the nursery, too?"

"No..." Luther wasn't looking at Mom. He was looking at the door.

His mother Ruby was frowning through the screen. "Luther!" she snapped. "What did I tell you about visiting when people were in the middle of a meal?"

"It's okay," Mom said quickly. "I invited him. We're done eating." She got up and held the door open for Ruby. "Except for dessert. Come on in and try the key lime pie Kate made for our special occasion."

"I heard." Ruby flashed Justin a dazzling smile. Justin grinned and ducked his head. Ruby was in her twenties, and she didn't look like anybody's mama to him. She didn't look like somebody who had just walked over from the next farm, either. Even wearing jeans, she looked great.

"I called Booker and told him," Ruby said, sitting down next to Justin.

"You called Booker?" Justin was surprised, and pleased. "What did he say?"

Booker Wilson was a genuine hero. Everybody knew he was the best baseball player ever born in their town, but it wasn't until last fall that Justin had learned that Ruby's brother was more than just an outstanding athlete. After college Booker had gone into the army, and his unit was sent to the Gulf War. While on a mission, he had stepped on a land mine and got his feet blown off. That kept him from playing pro ball, but it didn't keep him from becoming a baseball coach at a college up in Atlanta.

If Justin hadn't met Booker when he was home visiting his family last Thanksgiving, Justin would have given up and dropped out of baseball first semester. But Booker had encouraged him to stick with it. He'd believed in him so much that he gave Justin his own glove, the very one he'd played with in Triple A.

"Was he surprised I made the team?" Justin asked.

"Not a bit." Ruby grinned. "He said, 'I told you that boy was a natural.' He wanted to know if you're ready for a new ball glove."

"No way! Tell him I'm going to keep using his old glove till I'm a hundred years old!"

While Justin and Ruby talked, Kate served the pie.

Mom sat down and looked across the table at Ruby. "Luther said Mr. Hashimoto offered you a job."

"He did," Ruby replied. "But the candy business that Kate and I started before Christmas is booming. We have nearly thirty orders of Valentine candy to get out, and then there's Easter coming up. Plus, I'm pretty sure Brenda's Boutique will take some of my clothes designs—if we ever get them off my sketch pad and into actual clothes."

"But a regular job—" Mom started.

"Not for me," Ruby interrupted. "I'm just not a regular enough person."

"Mrs. Martin lost her job at the dairy," Luther told his mother.

"Really?" Ruby cocked one eyebrow. "What happened, Betty?"

"Mr. George took the offer on the dairy," Mom said glumly. "And the new owners aren't planning to keep any of the old workers."

"Well, woman, what are you waiting for? Get on the phone and call Mr. Hashimoto! I know the job's still open, because when I went by there today, he and his wife were arguing. I heard her tell him he had better make up his mind whether he wanted a traditional Japanese wife or a cashier at the nursery, because this was the last week she was going to be both."

Mom let out a halfhearted laugh. "I don't know—"

"Go on, Betty," Ruby urged. "It won't hurt to call him."

"At home?" Mom asked.

"The sooner the better," Ruby insisted, pushing her toward the phone in the hallway. Then she turned to Kate. "I came down here to ask if you wanted to come up to the house tonight to help me wrap the rest of the Valentine candy. Can you?"

"Sure!" Kate agreed, cutting her eyes over at Justin.

He didn't wait for Kate to ask whether he would trade dishwashing nights with her. He just went to the sink and started running the water. He was in such a good mood that he didn't even mind taking an extra shift.

Mom came back into the kitchen, her face shining.

"Well?" Ruby asked. "What did he say?"

“He said, ‘Mrs. Martin, I think you have saved my marriage. If you want the job, it’s yours.’ He didn’t even ask if I had any experience.”

Ruby grinned. “I guess experience isn’t as important as having somebody you can trust handling the money. Who could be more trustworthy than a neighbor with three kids, four goats, and a flock of ducks? It’s not like you could slip away in the middle of the night.”

They all laughed at the idea of Mom trying to sneak off in the middle of the night with three kids, four goats, and a flock of ducks.

“Okay if Kate stays over at our place tonight?” Ruby asked. “We might be up late, getting all the candy orders ready to take to town tomorrow.”

“All right,” Mom agreed. “And since Luther is going to the cattle auction with us in the morning, maybe he’d like to spend the night here?”

“YEAH!” Chip and Luther cheered together.

Ruby started to protest. “He doesn’t have his pajamas or—”

“He can wear mine,” Chip interrupted.

“Please, Mama?” Luther asked in his most cajoling voice.

Ruby had a hard and fast New York City way of speaking—she and Luther had lived there until last summer, when they’d come to stay with her folks—but she had a soft side, too. Justin had noticed more than once that inside Ruby was as sweet as her own candy. One smile from her son could set her purring like a mama cat. He didn’t have to turn around from the sink to know she would say yes to whatever Luther wanted to do.

After Ruby and Kate left, Chip and Luther went to Chip’s room to look for pajamas, leaving Justin alone with the sink full of dirty dishes. Normally, because of the hours their mom worked, the kids did the cooking and cleaned up afterwards. But tonight, Mom picked up a towel and started drying.

Justin debated about bringing up the subject of a bicycle again. She hadn’t really let him finish before. He shot a quick look at her. Some of her dark blonde hair had come loose from the braid she wore at work and was curling around her face. She looked a little more relaxed now, and the worry lines had vanished. She was also humming, which was a good sign.

“Mom? About the bicycle...”

The humming stopped abruptly, and the worried look came back.

Justin hurried on before she could say anything. “I was thinking about Little Billy. Do you think maybe I could sell him for enough to buy a bike?”

Mom shot him a surprised look. “You’d really consider selling him? After all, Kate did give him to you for Christmas.”

“I already talked to Kate about it,” Justin interrupted quickly. “She knows I love him. But the thing is, I *need* wheels. She said as long as Little Billy goes to a good home, it’s okay with her if I sell him.”

Unfortunately, just as Justin said that, Chip and Luther burst in.

“Sell Little Billy?” Luther asked in disbelief.

“You know, Justin, maybe that’s not such a bad idea.” Mom looked thoughtful. “He’s related to our goats, so we can’t use him for breeding. He’ll have to be sold eventually anyway.”

“You can’t sell him!” Chip howled.

“He’d hate being sold!” Luther added. “He’d have to leave his family.”

Mom knelt down so she could look Chip and Luther straight in the eyes. “You know, boys, farm animals have a job to do, just like people. A year from now, Go-Girl and Honey will be giving milk. But Little Billy, well, he’s a billy. So we have to think of what he’ll be good for.”

Then, because she obviously didn’t want to talk about it

anymore, she stood up and said, "If you boys want to go to the cattle auction with us tomorrow, you'd better get your bath right now. And then to bed."

"But, Mom—"

"I said it's time for your bath. Now go on, both of you."

Justin was relieved that the conversation was over. Mom understood that at this point in his life a bike was more important to him than a pet goat, no matter how cute the goat was. If he wanted to sell Little Billy to buy a bike, it would be okay with her.

## CATTLE AUCTION

Justin was loading the calves into the back of his mother's pickup when Ruby and Kate passed the end of the Martin driveway. Between them pranced Old Billy, who was hitched to a homemade cart filled with boxes of the handmade chocolates. Justin had been doubtful about his sister and Ruby's candy business at first, but he had to admit that they seemed to be making a go of it. He waved at them as they turned onto the highway toward town.

Justin closed the tailgate and climbed into the back with the calves. Chip and Luther peered through the sideboards at the frightened animals.

"It's okay, Blackie," Chip crooned. "It's all right, Baldy. Don't be scared, Buck. You're going for a nice ride."

"Get in, boys," Mom said. "No, not in the back. Up here with me."

Chip and Luther climbed into the cab next to Mom, then got up on their knees and turned backwards so they could see the calves through the rear window.

"Sit down, you two," she ordered. "And fasten your seat belts."

As Mom drove slowly toward the auction grounds, Justin stroked the calves to calm them down. He liked them, but he

wasn't sorry to see them go. It had been his job to feed and water them night and morning. Now that he would have ball practice after school, he was glad that chore wouldn't be waiting for him when he got home.

Justin had been to the cattle auction with Mom a few times before, but he still couldn't understand the auctioneer. The man spoke so fast that his spiel came out sounding like one long word. Even when he went on for five minutes, he didn't seem to take a breath until the last word, which he said in a super-loud voice: "Sold!"

They had to wait through the sale of several horses and a lot of cattle before the Martins' calves came bawling into the ring. Justin couldn't keep up with the auctioneer's steady patter. He had no idea what the first or final bids were. All he heard clearly was the crash of the auctioneer's gavel on the podium and the words, "Sold to Number 75!" Justin glanced at Mom. From her smile he could see that she was satisfied with the price.

"I have to go to the office to pick up the check," Mom said. "You boys wait in the truck. I'll only be a few minutes."

Their pickup was parked behind the auction barn, near where they had unloaded the calves. The boys were halfway there when they saw their calves, or rather, the calves that used to be theirs. Chip and Luther asked if they could go say goodbye to the calves.

"Okay," said Justin. "But come right back." He headed for a nearby pen that held a restless black stallion. The beautiful horse reminded him of the one on the covers of the *Black Stallion* books he used to read. Justin wondered if, like the Black in Walter Farley's books, this one had once been a race-horse.

While watching the stallion prance around the pen, flinging his long mane back and forth, Justin could hear Chip and

Luther shouting to the calves. "Bye, Blackie," Chip said. "Bye, Baldy. Bye, Buck."

When Justin looked over, a calf was pushing its nose through the fence against Chip's hand. Just then, a battered red van with "Butch's Baby Beef: the Best of the Best" painted on the side backed up to the corral next to the loading ramp. A man with a belly hanging over his big silver belt buckle—probably Butch from Butch's Baby Beef—opened the gate at the top of the ramp so he could drive the calves up into the van.

But when he tried to force them up the ramp, the calves ran from one side of the pen to the other, then huddled on the side near where Chip and Luther were standing.

"Hey!" Butch shouted to a man in the van. "Give me a hand here." Together they finally herded the terrified calves up the ramp.

"It's okay. You're going to your new home," Luther called out to the calves, as if they could understand and this would make them feel better.

"Going to the slaughterhouse, that's where these babies are going," Butch said as he slammed the van door shut.

"Slaughterhouse?" Luther echoed.

"Yep," Butch said. "They're heading for my cold storage locker, and from there, right onto somebody's table. Folks pay top dollar for homegrown beef like this."

"You mean you're going to EAT them?" Chip cried.

When Justin heard Chip shriek in that particular ear-splitting tone, he knew it meant trouble. It had never occurred to him that the younger boys didn't know the calves were going to be killed to put meat on people's tables. He thought surely by now they understood that's what happened to calves, unless they were females who might become milk cows or breeders.

## THE GOATNAPPERS

"Me or somebody else," Butch said nonchalantly.

"No!" Chip screamed.

Butch looked surprised. "Why, don't you boys like steak? Hamburger? All-beef hot dogs?"

"No!" yelled Luther. "I'm a vegetarian!"

Butch climbed into his van and started the motor. "You're nuts, that's what," he growled at Luther. "Anybody that don't eat meat is plain crazy!"

Just then Chip picked up a handful of gravel and flung it at the van.

"Why, you little devil!" yelled Butch. "I oughta give you a licking!"

Before Justin could do anything, Chip answered with another handful of gravel. At the same time, Luther threw a rock, which fortunately Butch didn't see, because it made a good-sized ding on the side of the van.

Justin sprinted toward them. "No, Chip!"

He grabbed Chip's arm and shook it so he dropped the fistful of gravel, then caught Luther just in time to stop him from smashing the van's taillight with an even bigger rock.

"You'd better do something with them brats!" Butch belted, but he didn't stick around to see what Justin might do. He gunned the engine, and the van took off so fast the tires spun, spraying gravel all over them.

"What's going on here?" Mom came running up, out of breath. "Were you boys throwing rocks at that man?"

By then Chip and Luther were bawling like two-year-olds, noses snotty and tears streaming down their faces. Justin looked over their heads at Mom. "Nothing serious," he said. "I'll tell you later."

Mom knelt down and wiped away first Chip's tears, then Luther's. "You boys are just tired," she said. "And hungry."

## Cattle Auction

How about we stop at McDonald's and pick up some hamburgers?"

"Nooooo!" Chip screamed, the word coming out like a long howl.

"No way!" Luther sobbed.

Mom stared at them as if they had spoken in some foreign language, then looked up at Justin. "What," she asked, "is this all about?"

"They don't want hamburgers," Justin translated. "Just french fries. And milk shakes."