

CHAPTER 1

Gwen Jones squeezed out of her bedroom window onto the sizzling roof below. Even through her flip-flops, she could feel the burn of the shingles. The feebly whirring minifan on her night table was no match against the full bake of this night. Whatever relief she could find out here was better than nothing.

Some cosmic cook had slowly started cranking the temperature a week earlier, and Sage Valley was now, at the end of August, blasting at full roar. Wiping sweat from her face, Gwen lifted her gaze to a sagging second level of roof above her, its chipped tiles sparkling under the reflection of the full moon. She guessed that she had more chance of catching a late-night summer draft the higher she went, so she boosted herself over the gutter and inched up, backward and sitting. Kicking off her sliding flip-flops, her bare feet scratched the raspy roof until she was nearly at the peak.

With her knees to her chest, she sat surveying the valley. The ring of dark mountains no longer twinkled with lights from distant houses and stores as they'd done when she was a kid. In the last six months, the price of electricity had gone so high that everyone was cutting back where they could. Most people in town blamed the electricity price hike

on the fact that the electric turbines in their area were all powered by oil, and the oil price would not stop rising.

Standing, Gwen peered down over the high hedges just behind her house, to a new housing development. The yard easiest for Gwen to see belonged to the family of a guy from last year's junior class at Sage Valley High, Tom Harris. She could hardly believe they'd both be seniors when school started.

Gwen's pulse quickened as Tom emerged from his house, letting the screen door slam behind him. His appearance always managed to charge Gwen with excitement.

The dark-haired boy threw himself down hard onto the wooden bench of the picnic table in the Harris's backyard, and buried his head in his hands. He sat that way for a long while before resting his head down completely on the table.

Gwen's skin prickled with worry. What had happened to him? Usually, when she saw him out here in the evenings, he was shooting basketball or talking on his cell phone, laughing.

Something was definitely wrong.

Tom and Gwen had been in several of the same classes, but they didn't really know each other. Still . . . she'd been coming up to this rooftop since she was eleven and she had been watching him and his family in their yard at night since they moved in over a year ago. It wasn't as though she was stalking or spying on them. She was up here, and they just happened to be down there. And when they were having one of their family barbecues, it was so nice to watch them. They seemed so normal and wholesome. Not a bit like her own home situation.

Sometimes she imagined herself going out with Tom. Of course she liked his looks—who wouldn't? He could have been a model, with his

dark curls and broad shoulders. He played football, and he looked the type, tall and strongly built. But, really, what he looked like was only a small part of it. She liked imagining herself in that warm, cozy family setting, a welcome and natural part of it.

This longing confused her. It wasn't something she would ever admit to. She was more likely to mock it, even. But she had to admit, if only to herself, that part of her would have liked very much to be there.

Tonight, though, she was seeing a different picture. Tom was clearly upset. On an impulse, Gwen left the upper roof and slipped back into her flip-flops she'd left on the lower level. Climbing into her bedroom window, she hurried through the dark kitchen and let the screen door slam behind her.

Outside, Gwen crossed the small yard along the moonlit pathway into the hedges. Squeezing through, she ignored the scratches to her skin as she pushed her way to the chain-link fence separating Tom's perfect world from her very different one.

With her fingers curled into the metal web of the fence, she observed him. Tom's upper back rose and fell in a measured rhythm that looked like sleep. She'd come with the idea that they would talk like friends, but now she wondered why she thought she could help him. She could barely hang on herself.

She wanted to call to him – to ask what was wrong – but then he'd know she'd been watching him. He might not like that she'd seen him so vulnerable. Guys could be that way. She knew it from watching her older brother, Luke, fly into a rage if she ever suggested he was anything but steely and unemotional.

Almost as though he sensed her presence, Tom lifted his head. His red-rimmed eyes were swollen.

Gwen backed away slowly, once again forcing the scratching hedges to part and let her through. There was nothing she could do.

Heading back toward the old, wooden house with its warped structure and blistered paint, Gwen saw that the kitchen's too-bright overhead light had been turned on. Luke was there, pacing rapidly, talking on his cell phone. Gwen's shoulders tightened. Something in his movements told her he was in one of his states.

She paused several feet from the back door, and considered scrambling up to the low roof behind the house and getting into her bedroom that way, avoiding Luke altogether. When he was like this, he always picked a fight, and she was in no mood to fight with him.

On the other hand, why should she have to duck her own brother? She resented it. *I'm not hiding from him*, she decided defiantly.

Luke was turned toward the wall, talking. Maybe she could slip past him. But he clicked off his call and turned toward her the moment she stepped into the kitchen. "Where've you been?" he shouted, scrutinizing her with sharp, dark eyes.

Warily, Gwen assessed the situation. Luke wasn't slurring or weaving. That was a good sign. His eyes didn't seem bloodshot, either — also a positive. Ever since Leila had skipped out on them — they never referred to their mother as anything but Leila — back in Gwen's freshman year of high school, she'd been dependent on Luke, who'd been a senior back then. He made the money, though what he did to earn it, she never really knew, and was glad not to know.

"I went to Paris, but I just now flew back on my jet," Gwen snapped at Luke.

"That's hysterical," he grunted sarcastically.

Due to the rising price of gasoline, a flight from New York to Paris

cost thousands of dollars. And right now, if things kept going the way they were going, they wouldn't be able to afford the amount of gas it took to get to school. For them, Paris was as far away as the moon.

"If you're going to go out," Luke said, "turn off your fan. And your lights."

Everything counted. That was what they were learning. No matter how small, everything counted.

"I'm sorry," Gwen said. But really, the only thing she was sorry about was that she was alive in this place, at this time. And that even when she wanted to say something that might somehow make things better, she never knew how.