

← CHAPTER 1 →

Laura's alarm was ringing, the shrill sound reverberating through the empty corners of her room. Laura did not stir. It was Monday—there was nothing to stir for. Yesterday her alarm had not rung, but she had been up before dawn. In the cold, gray light she had pulled her comforter around her shoulders and written in a glorious frenzy of inspiration until her cat, Samson, had strolled in, mewing for breakfast. Then she had put on several sweaters and gone out into the old orchard to watch the sun rise.

But that was yesterday. Today she had to go back to school.

Today vacation was over.

“Laura!”

Laura opened one eye. Her father was standing in the doorway, tying up his old checked bathrobe. There were shadows under his eyes, and his voice was tired.

“Turn off the alarm. It’s time to get up.”

“I don’t want to get up. I don’t want to move.”

Laura buried herself beneath the bedcovers and closed her eyes tightly. She heard her father crossing the room. Before she had time to get a firm grip on the comforter, however, he had whipped it off.

“Let us, then, be up and doing,” he declaimed, waving the comforter in the air.

“With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labor and to wait.”

Laura groaned. “I don’t want to labor,” she muttered, rolling off the bed.

Her father dropped the comforter onto the floor. “Neither do I,” he replied, his voice tired again. “But I have an article to finish, and you have things to learn.”

Laura scowled at him and headed for the door. Other people didn’t have fathers who quoted poetry at them first thing in the morning, she thought as she stumbled down the long hallway to the bathroom. Their fathers probably never quoted poetry at them at all. And if they did, it would be some silly little rhyme, not Longfellow. Most fathers had probably never heard of Longfellow.

She grimaced at her reflection in the mirror, trying to flatten the unruly curls that fell over her forehead. None of the other girls at school had curls like that. Their hair was long and straight, and their eyebrows—Laura leaned forward, staring at her own dejectedly—were fine and shaped, not thick and dark. Other people were normal and had normal families; they did ordinary things and lived in ordinary houses. Laura felt tears welling in her eyes. If only they were back in Melbourne, snug in their little row house. Nobody had stared at her there. Nobody had called her weird. She squeezed out her soap and started scrubbing her face, wishing she could scrub away all that difference.

When she came into the kitchen, her father was slumped at the table, cradling a cup of coffee in his hands. He had been working late into the night again—she had seen the light glowing in the study when Samson had woken her at three in the morning, wanting to play. She felt a twinge of guilt for making her father get up. Journalists always had deadlines to meet, but now that he was freelance, her father seemed to have to work so much harder than before.

“It’s all right; you can go back to bed,” she said, pouring some muesli into a bowl.

“Sadly, I can’t. The article is due this afternoon. If you’re sure you’re awake, I’ll get back to it.”

“I’m sure.” Laura opened the fridge and took out the milk, sniffing it to make sure it was not rancid. It often was.

“You’re not going to sneak back to your room?” her father persisted, rising.

She made a face at him. “Of course not!”

After he had left, she wandered over to the window and stood staring at the wild rosebushes outside as she ate, wishing forlornly that it was Saturday again and not Monday. Wishing that it was the beginning of vacation, not the end. Wishing that something terrible (but not *too* terrible) had happened and that the school had been closed for a long time, possibly forever, and that she would never have to go back.

When she had finished her breakfast, she crept into her parents’ bedroom and climbed onto the bed beside her mother. “I don’t want to go to school,” she said.

Her mother reached out an arm and drew her under the blankets, shoes and all. “Why not?”

Laura snuggled into the bed. “I want to stay home with you.”

“I’m sorry, honey bear — that’s not possible.”

Laura squirmed down farther, her head almost buried under the covers. “Some people don’t go to school. They do their lessons at home.”

Her mother stroked her hair softly. “That’s because they have very clever parents who can teach them math and science.”

“I don’t want to learn math and science.”

“Yes, you do. You just don’t know it yet.”

“I don’t! And you can teach me writing and art and geography and history.”

“Not well enough.”

Laura gave a little snort and burrowed deeper still into the bed, until her head was completely covered. She could feel the warm darkness seeping through her, blotting out the morning. If only she could stay there, hidden and protected, for the rest of the day.

“Aha. Caught!” Her father suddenly pulled back the blankets. “It’s time for you to leave. I knew you were planning to slip back to bed.”

“I was not!” she retorted. “It just happened.” She did not move, however.

Her mother sat up and reached for the clock. “It’s a quarter past eight. If you don’t leave now, you’ll be late.”

Laura pictured Miss Grisham standing by the

office, handing out late passes. The image was chilling. Miss Grisham was her least favorite teacher; she always looked at Laura suspiciously, even though Laura never did anything wrong. The thought of having to approach her made Laura scramble off the bed. She collected her bag, called a reproachful good-bye to her parents, and pushed open the kitchen door.

The garden was shining in the morning light. Enormous pink flowers covered the sprawling hydrangea bushes down the side of the house and, around the front, the red camellias were still blooming beside the stone steps, their petals bright against the glossy green leaves. The garden called invitingly, as did the old orchard behind the house, about to burst into leaf. Laura looked toward her tree house nestled in the branches of an old apple tree, then turned and clumped along the driveway to the huge cast-iron gates, stopping briefly to glance back at the house before setting off down the hill toward the high school. Behind her, she could feel the imposing facade looming in all its shabby grandeur.

The first time Laura had seen the house, she thought it was enchanted. Looking up at the long elegant windows, with their small balconies and

intricate wrought-iron decoration, she thought she had never seen anything so beautiful. She couldn't believe that they were going to live in such a fairy-tale world. Everything had been exciting then: moving to the country, finding the house, her parents quitting their jobs. "We are going to live in a castle and follow our dreams," her mother had said.

But it hadn't turned out like that. Not for Laura, anyway. She looked out over the town, spreading before her, brown and dry. The houses were all modest, sensible houses with modest, sensible gardens. Not like hers, she thought, not at all like hers. And the people in them were modest, sensible people who had lived there all their lives. Not like her. Not at all like her.

She glanced at her watch and began to walk faster. The train tracks ran through the town, crossing the road at the bottom of the hill and passing a small weatherboard house with a vegetable garden in the front yard. As always, Laura scanned the garden to see if Mrs. Murphy was outside, watering her plants.

Mrs. Murphy was the only other person in town who was different—as far as Laura could tell. But she was not different like Laura's family was different. She wore socks instead of stockings and cardigans

over cotton dresses, even in winter, and sometimes muttered to herself while she worked. Laura always said hello to her because she thought that she should, but she never stopped. She already felt isolated enough; she did not want to be known as the girl who talked to Mrs. Murphy. Today there was no sign of her, thankfully, and Laura breathed a sigh of relief.

Then she hesitated. Something had caught her eye. A movement, nothing more, but it did not seem like Mrs. Murphy. Laura squinted. Someone had come out the back door and was putting trash in a can.

A boy.

Laura stared. What could a boy be doing at Mrs. Murphy's house? She had never seen anyone else there before. Ever. She watched him stop, look idly around, and then wander back inside. Strange, she thought, as she shifted her bag to her other shoulder and continued on.

A group of older boys was hanging around the gate when she arrived at school, their bags blocking the path. With a sinking heart, Laura recognized them as the kids who hung around the bike shed, smoking. For a moment she considered hurrying on to another gate but realized that she would have to pass them

anyway. She looked around anxiously for someone she knew, but no one was in sight.

One of the boys nudged another and jerked his head in her direction. “Here comes the kid from the haunted house,” he jeered. “Seen any dead people lately?”

The others started laughing, and Laura hurried by. When she reached the locker room, she was relieved to find Janie Middleton and Kylie Jackson unpacking their books. She smiled at the girls and walked into class behind them, feeling almost as if she was one of their group.

“Have you finished the math homework?” asked Kylie as they all sat down.

Laura nodded.

“It was hard, wasn’t it?” Kylie frowned as she unzipped her pencil case and began arranging her pens on the desk.

Laura nodded again. Actually, she had found it easy, but she was not going to say that out loud—not when she knew that Kylie Jackson had found it difficult.

Mr. Parker strode into the room, a pile of papers under his arm, his bicycle clips still clamped to his legs. Without waiting for the stragglers to take their

seats, he began handing out work sheets. “I suggest you begin right away,” he said. “I’ll be collecting these at the end of class. Those who haven’t finished can see me at lunchtime to explain why.”

Laura finished early and was gazing out the window, her chin cupped in her hands, dreaming of the dragon book she was writing, when Mr. Jameson, the principal, came into the room. He was followed by a tall boy in oversize shorts and a too-small sweater. The boy glared defiantly at the class, and they looked warily back at him, taking in his roughly cut hair and the way his fists were clenched by his side.

“This is Leon Murphy,” said Mr. Jameson. “He’ll be joining 8A. I am sure you will make him welcome.” Kylie giggled, and Mr. Parker fixed her with an angry frown.

That’s the boy I saw, thought Laura, staring. He must be Mrs. Murphy’s grandson—but why would he be staying with her? At that moment his eyes flicked over her, and she felt her face redden. Furious with herself, she looked away to the patch of blue sky she had been dreaming in just a minute ago.

“Leon, come and sit down here next to Peter,” she heard Mr. Parker say as Mr. Jameson left the room.

“Peter, I want you to look after Leon and show him around.”

There was an undercurrent of stifled laughter, and the boy behind Peter poked him. “I can’t, sir,” said Peter. “I’ve got soccer practice at lunchtime.”

“Mike, then.” Mr. Parker turned to a large boy who was busily working on his assignment. Mike jumped. He opened his mouth, then closed it, nodded, and went back to his work. The boys in the back row sniggered again, and when Mike reluctantly led Leon from the room at the end of class, one of them called out, “Fatso and Skinnybones.” Mike flushed, but Leon just continued walking as though he had not heard.

Leon was ahead of Laura when she came through the gate after school. He was running his hand along the fences, his shoulders slightly hunched. Laura slowed her steps so that she would not overtake him, and when she arrived at Mrs. Murphy’s house, he was already inside.

The front door was open, however, for the first time that she could remember. Looking down the dark hallway, she saw a heavy curtain hanging in the middle and shivered, wondering what was behind it.