

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.