

# Chapter One



REGAN CHECKED THE street behind her to make sure no one was looking at her. She ran into the alley, stopped at the fallen gate, picked her way through a backyard littered with bags of trash, twisted pieces of bicycles, rusty grocery carts, and broken glass. Blackberry vines and white-flowered morning glory were slowly eating it all up.

She climbed through a broken window into the abandoned house, picked her way past the lumps of human waste on the old wooden floor, up a broken staircase and out another window. Then she squatted on the roof of the porch, in the shadows, just under the overhang of the roof to watch the street.

She was watching for her mother. Watching relieved the ache for a bit. Someday very soon, her mother would walk down this street and Regan would see her. The front door to their apartment building was across the street. Regan hated their stuffy small apartment, with its smell of mouldy carpets. It didn't feel like home at all without her mother there. It was easier to sit here, where she could see everyone but no one could see her.

She knew just how it would be. She would see her mother coming; she would come down off the roof and run across the street. Her mother would throw her arms around Regan. "Baby," she would say, laughing, "I missed you too much."

And then they would go for fish and chips or fried chicken and her mother would explain everything and the world would be right-side-up again.

Three weeks ago her mother said, "Wait for me, I've got a chance to make some real money. I'll be home soon, back in two, three days. There's food for that long. Don't skip school." She had dressed in her best clothes, with her red high-heeled shoes. She had pinned up her long red hair and put on some silver earrings. And left, in a cloud of perfume and scent from her hairspray. And then she hadn't come back.

Regan had waited and gone to school and watched the street until she ran out of money for food. Then she began scrounging for food. She got up and dressed and went to school every day and came home and tried not to panic. She pretended everything was fine. Her mother had left before.

And she had always come back with a story and a purse full of money.

So this afternoon, yet again, Regan watched the street. She didn't have anything else to do. It was a grey Sunday and she sat far enough under the overhang of the roof to stay dry if it rained. Two grey squirrels fought in the huge maple tree beside the house; they ran up and down, over the branches, leaping from branch to branch.

She had been here many times before, but today when she had come in the alley, the trees had orange fencing around them. She knew what this meant. Very soon, bulldozers would push the house over. Enormous trucks would back up; everything, splintered and broken would be dumped, crashed and smashed into the back of those trucks, and then a new building would rise on this spot and no one would remember this house at all.

Except her. Once, Regan thought, the house must have been beautiful. Once it had housed a family. She could tell by what was left of it, by the sheen of the wood floors under the dung and rat turds, by the carved ornate banisters on the broken staircase, and by the air of dignity that still clung to the house despite its age and disrepair. She wished she could write an essay for English class about it. She would like to imagine a story about the house and about the life in it, a life with a family that had a mother and a father and a lot of food, food that was rich and warm and cooked in a house that smelled of love. Even a dog. A dog that had a lot of food

as well. She had wanted to try sleeping in the house but she knew it wasn't safe, couldn't be made safe, and so, she didn't.

Down on the street, cars and people continued to pass in a steady stream. Men wheeled jangling, clinking shopping carts full of cans and bottles to the depot on the next block. Most of the men she had seen before. Old Annie went by with her own cart heaped with blankets and garbage bags stuffed with her treasures. She was on her way to the church for dinner, and this reminded Regan of her own hunger. Hunger she lived with. Some days she could push it away, keep moving but today wasn't one of those days. She was hungry enough—almost—to stand in line at the church with Annie, to accept a bowl of soup and a bun and a little packet of crackers. If she stood with Annie, Annie would talk to her, pretend they were together and no one would question her age. They would give her food.

But then Annie would start muttering to herself and people would look at Regan, and she wouldn't be able to eat her soup and dry bun fast enough and get out of there. No, she couldn't face it today. She could go up the hill to the grocery store that left food out at night, the store that didn't lock its dumpsters. She'd have to wait until dark, but then she could bring food back to the apartment and eat it all by herself. That's what she would do.

Or she could just wait here. Go on waiting for her mother. When her mother came, Regan would tell her about waiting. And her mother would be pleased that Regan had been so

enterprising and independent and hadn't asked for a handout or help from anyone. Her mother believed in independence. Eventually Regan even slept a little, crouched on the roof, her arms wrapped around her knees. She had stayed awake, reading, late into last night, in order to keep the silence of the dark apartment at bay.

She woke with a start. It was really raining now and getting dark. It would take her an hour to walk up the hill to the dumpster with food and then an hour back and she would be soaked when she got home. But she was hungry enough that it would be worthwhile. She started to stand up, and then stopped. Two people were yelling out in the alley. They were behind a tree and she couldn't see them, but she could tell it was a man and a woman. She didn't want to get caught in anyone else's argument; she'd seen enough of those. There was always something going on in the street and she knew enough to stay far away from that kind of violence.

Eventually the man grabbed the woman by the arm and pulled her, still screaming, down the alley and out to the street. In a few minutes, a police cruiser went by. When everything was quiet, Regan climbed off the roof, went out through the yard and trudged up the street on her way to get some food.

The next morning, she woke early in the dark cold apartment. She could hear that it was still raining. She curled under the covers, still cold. It had taken hours for her to get warm after