

**1** LAURA ALLEN HURRIED to the vacant table in the George Washington Carver High School library. She dumped her armload of reference books down with a thud and hoped that the tall stack of books would be enough. Mr. Mason, her Western Civilization teacher, was very demanding, and she wanted to do a good job on the big research paper he expected exactly one week from today.

Laura's hands shook as she opened her notebook. She sat down and stared angrily at her small, trembling hands.

'Why am I such a mouse?' she demanded silently. Other sixteen-year-old girls enjoyed high school. They didn't worry constantly about grades. Laura was a good student. Why couldn't she just relax?

Laura knew that part of her worries were due to her father. Joe Allen was demanding too. He expected his daughter to excel in school—and in everything, for

that matter. Laura sometimes felt he expected too much.

'Do your best, Laura, and then some' he'd say. 'That's how you go places in this world'.

Laura and her father had lived alone for almost a year now. It didn't seem possible to Laura that her mother had been in the hospital in Crescentville that long. But after her mum's breakdown, a hospital seemed to be the only choice.

Laura worried about her mum, alone and so far away. When would she come home? Or would she? The last time Laura had visited her mother she had looked so weak, so vulnerable. Would she ever fully recover? Or was she doomed to spend the rest of her life in hospitals?

And Laura worried about another thing too. Did the constant fear she experienced indicate something? Would *she* fall apart like her mother?

'Hi', said an unfamiliar voice behind her. Laura looked up to see a boy with fine features and wide-set eyes approaching her table. Laura judged he

was a sophomore like her, but she'd never seen him at Carver before.

'Hi', Laura said uncertainly.

'I'm Todd', said the smiling boy.

'I'm Laura', Laura said. Meeting new people was another worry Laura had. She never quite knew what to say. Besides, Derek didn't like it when she spoke to other guys.

'I couldn't help noticing you look troubled. Is something wrong?' Todd asked.

Laura was surprised at the question. Why would a stranger be concerned about her?

'Well, I have a paper to write for Western Civilization—on the Middle Ages'. Laura nodded toward the stack of books and then glanced around for Derek. 'I'm supposed to find examples of poetry about life in that period. But there's just so much information. I'm not sure where to begin'.

Todd smiled with an understanding that surprised her. 'Here. I've got something that might help you'. He opened his book bag and lifted out a huge book.

'This is an annotated version of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. You're welcome to borrow it if you'd like'.

'Wow', Laura said, 'that looks perfect!'

'You can keep it as long as you need it, Laura,' Todd offered.

'Thanks! You're a lifesaver!' Laura said. 'I was really nervous about finding the right materials'.

Suddenly Todd reached out and gently put his hand over Laura's.

'Have no fear', he said, looking straight into Laura's eyes. Then he turned and walked away.

Laura stared after him. How did he know that fear of everything had her tied up in knots most of the time? How could he know?

'Hey, Laura!'

Laura turned to see her best friend, Callie Taylor, weaving her way through the maze of library tables and carrying an armload of books.

'I can't believe Mason's only giving us one week to do this paper,' Callie complained, dropping her books next to Laura's and plunking herself down in a