

## *Chapter 1*

EXUBERANT STUDENTS, most still wearing their graduation caps and gowns, poured out of the high school auditorium and down the steps toward the welcoming arms and beaming faces of parents, grandparents, friends, and other well-wishers.

“You did it!” parents cheered. “We’re so proud of you!”

“Congratulations!” others called out. “You’re on your way. You’re ready to take on the world!” Jubilant voices filled the street as the commencement crowd veered off in various directions, heading to parties, special dinners, or other celebrations honoring the graduates.

Slowly, the crowd thinned until Lauren—a petite, bright-eyed, slender female student, her long brown hair swirling around her shoulders—stood alone on the high school steps. No family members or friends were there to cheer for her. Nobody offered her words of congratulations, bouquets of flowers,

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gift cards, or positive affirmations about her future.

Nobody.

She gazed out at the deserted street, shifted her diploma from one hand to the other, and picked up the shabby backpack sitting at her feet.

Lauren ambled down the steps and glanced around hoping someone—anyone—might show up to be happy with her.

Nobody did.

She swung the backpack over her shoulders and trudged down the street by herself. Still wearing her graduation gown and grasping her cap and diploma, she walked away from the relative safety of the school. About a mile down the road, she turned into a run-down area of the city dotted with old trailers and small, poorly maintained homes and yards.

Lauren headed toward a small house with paint flaking off the window sills. She hurried through the overgrown weeds and past an old, beat-up pickup truck parked at the side of the house, its bed filled with junk. The house's front windows faced the street and were covered with cheap, dirty-looking curtains in various forms of disarray, concealing the view inside.

Lauren stopped cold before she reached the

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front door. The sight that greeted her caused her expression, already sullen, to fall even further. Two large plastic trash bags and some schoolbooks sat piled on the doorstep.

*What! What's going on?*

Lauren ran up the porch steps and heard the faint sounds of music coming from inside. She tried to open the door, but it was locked, so she banged on it with her fist.

“Why is my stuff out here?” she yelled.

Nobody answered.

She stepped back and looked up toward a window as she thumped on the front door again. “Jade! Jade, I know you’re in there! Let me in!”

Jade, Lauren’s foster mom—a disheveled, haggard woman in her early forties—pulled back the curtain on one side of the window. She peered out at Lauren, then quickly closed the curtain again, blocking her face from Lauren’s view. A few seconds later, the music’s volume increased.

“Come on, Jade! Open the door!” She pounded harder and louder, certain Jade could hear her, even above the loud music. “This isn’t funny,” she railed.

She ran to the side of the house where the gate was usually open.

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It was locked too. Lauren beat on the gate, but it didn't budge. "Jade! Please, Jade! Let me in."

She heard the sound of a window creaking open out front, so she ran back to the front porch.

Jade was still hiding behind the curtain, but she spoke coarsely. "Foster care cut me off. They're done paying me for you, so you're on your own now."

"What?" Lauren said. "No! I— What are you talking about? Where am I supposed to go?"

"Not my problem," Jade said. "You graduated high school. Use your smarts to figure it out. Just grab your stuff and go!" She slammed the window shut. The curtain fluttered and then drooped and hung motionless. Jade was gone.

"No . . . Jade, wait!" Lauren's eyes welled with tears as she banged on the door even harder, rapping her knuckles until they bruised. "I hate you!" she yelled toward the window, knowing Jade could hear her.

"I'll report you!" Her chest heaved as she recalled the abusive treatment Jade had heaped on her. Lauren endured it only because she was at Jade's mercy and forced to obey her foster parent's orders. "I'll tell them how you treated me like a servant. I'm going to go tell them right now!" she yelled, hoping

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her threat might motivate Jade to let her inside. Lauren beat on the door with her palm.

The voice inside the house snapped, “Stop with that noise or I’ll call the cops on *you!*”

It wasn’t that Lauren’s time in Jade’s “care,” her most recent stop along the foster system’s “orphan train,” had been pleasant or even comforting. Far from it. Jade made her do all the dirty work around the house, while she sat watching television. Lauren was used to it. She’d been down that road before, since the time she was eight years old.

She banged on the door one last time, then stepped back, her shoulders drooping in despair. She knew all too well that Jade had the advantage, that the state’s financial assistance ended when a foster child turned of age, and she was on her own. That was just the way the system worked. Many former foster kids were on the streets. She’d heard the stories. Some turned to prostitution just so they could afford food. Others resorted to robbery or selling drugs to survive. Many didn’t survive for long.

“Please, Jade,” she pleaded. “I’m sorry. I’ll do more chores around the house. I’ll do whatever you want. Jade, I’ll do anything. Anything you want. Anything you tell me to do. Please. Please, don’t

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make me leave.”

No response.

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Lauren’s mom had given birth to her when she, herself, was quite young and not ready to take on the responsibility of raising a baby. Then her husband abandoned her, and she struggled to make ends meet as a single mother, taking any job she could find. But she loved her daughter and was determined to make a life for them.

Then one day when Lauren was eight years old, she and her mom were baking cookies in their small apartment. Lauren had been capturing the fun by snapping pictures with her new Polaroid camera.

“*Ooh, that’s going to be a good one!*” she’d gushed as a photo developed right before her eyes.

“*You and your camera!*” Lauren’s mom said with a smile.

Lauren moved next to her and held the camera in front of them. She pressed the button, and the camera flashed. A Polaroid selfie.

“*Now we’ll have one with both of us in it,*” Lauren cooed. She shook the photograph to make it process faster, then showed it to her mother. “*I love it! I love*

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*you, Mama.”*

*“And I love you, dear. Come on, now. Let’s have some fun.”* Mama set the temperature on the oven. *“What kind of cookies do you want to make?”*

*“Chocolate chip?”* Lauren pretended to beg.

*“Yes, chocolate chip,”* Mama agreed. She pulled a large mixing bowl out of the cupboard, and she and Lauren began adding the ingredients—eggs, flour, sugar, vanilla, and chocolate chips.

When everything was mixed up just right, they scooped portions of the cookie dough onto a large baking sheet. Shaping each of the cookies so they would all be the same size, they placed the clumps of dough in neat rows until the pan was full.

*“Wait, Mama,”* Lauren said. *“I want to get a picture of the cookies before and after, but I need more film. I’ll be right back.”*

She ran upstairs to get more film. That was when she heard a loud crash from the kitchen.

Lauren raced back downstairs, only to find Mama lying on the floor, and the sheet of cookie dough scattered all over the kitchen.

*“Mama!”* Lauren cried.

But Mama didn’t respond.

Lauren crouched beside her mother, then

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quickly stood up and stepped back, her eyes wide with fear, as her hands flew to her face. She screamed. *“Mama! Wake up! Mama, please. Oh, God, please help us. Mama, come on.”*

But Mama lay silent on the floor amid the mess of cookie dough.

Lauren picked up the photo of the two of them, her last photograph of Mama and her together. She never found out what had happened to Mama. Someone said heart attack at the hospital, but that didn't explain why she and Mama had been having fun together one minute, and the next, Mama was gone forever.

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Following Mama's death, since Lauren had no grandparents and didn't know her father, social services placed her in a shelter, and then another, and another. Eventually, the authorities transferred her to a foster home.

Once she was in the system, Lauren bounced around to a series of foster parents. Most possessed noble motives in trying to help, but Lauren was often unruly and difficult. As she grew into her teens, she

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seethed with anger. She wanted her mother back. She was mad at her father—whoever he was—and at life itself. She often lashed out at the very people who were trying to help her and lost her placement with one set of foster parents after another.

Before long, it seemed the only foster families willing to receive Lauren into their homes were those with questionable motives. They received a monthly stipend from the state meant to help pay for the foster child's needs, including food, clothing, school supplies, and other essentials, but all too often, the adults pocketed the money and the foster kids received little or none of the benefits.

The last few families with whom Lauren had lived treated her as an unpaid babysitter or maid. Some of the adults were verbally or physically abusive. Some scrimped on food, often allowing Lauren to go hungry, especially during the summer when school was out and there were no free breakfasts and lunches provided in the school cafeteria. Even when school was in session, on more than a few weekends, Lauren didn't eat after the Friday school lunch until she returned Monday morning. All the while, her foster parents received money from the state to purchase food for her. Other foster parents insisted Lauren

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wear worn-out, far from stylish clothes. She didn't notice so much during her early teens, but as her body matured, dressing in Ms. Rummage Sale duds was downright embarrassing.

Lauren hated her existence and trusted no one. She had long since closed off her heart to love, choosing instead to keep up her guard as a protective shield to avoid feeling the hurt of rejection again.

As she entered her upper teens, she grew into an attractive, smart, and perceptive young woman. A volcano of anger still seethed behind her pretty face, ready to erupt at the slightest crack in her emotional veneer, but Lauren learned how to play the game. She knew enough to control her temper and that it was best to be quiet and to do what her foster parents demanded. *Go along to get along.* That was the only way to stay out of their sights, to avoid trouble, and to survive.

When she failed to hold to that pattern and expressed her anger or refused to do the demeaning jobs her foster parents demanded, she landed back in the system, waiting for the next “kind soul” to take her in.

That was how she had been placed with Jade, a childless single woman and last-ditch choice by

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the foster system. Jade, too, had learned how to work the system, and Lauren was not her first foster child. She'd had a slew of kids before Lauren—all for limited amounts of time, until she got sick of them, bored with them, or they had rebelled against her oppressive demands. Jade also knew when the money ran out on each child she kept in her home. Her benevolence policy was simple: when the money was gone, so was the kid.

Lauren survived at Jade's house for most of her final year in high school simply by keeping to herself, which was no easy feat when Jade forced her to do so many gross chores around the house, whether it was cleaning the commode, scrubbing the floors, or mowing the lawn when city authorities tagged the house for the grass being too high.

Jade often punished Lauren with forced isolation. *"Just stay in your room and don't come out."* That was one punishment Lauren didn't mind. She actually enjoyed reading and studying. She was a good student and hoped an education might buy her a ticket out of poverty and open a door to more.

But now the doors were locked. All of them. And Lauren was on the outside, alone in front of Jade's house. She backed away and slumped down on

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the front steps, sobbing uncontrollably. Through her tears, she fumbled in her backpack and retrieved her phone. She pressed a button and the phone lit up. Apparently, Jade had forgotten to close the account so Lauren wasted no time. She texted a friend from school: “Can I stay at your house? Jade has locked me out.”

No response. She texted a couple other people and waited.

Eventually, she tried the front door again.  
*Useless.*

Her eyes searched her phone messages. Nothing.

The sun was already going down and the late-afternoon sky was darkening. Lauren stood and, on a whim, walked over to Jade’s run-down pickup truck. She tried the door, and to her amazement, it opened. On the floorboard she saw her ragged stuffed bunny, one of the few comforts that had accompanied her from one foster home to another. She clutched the stuffed animal to her chest, curled up on the front seat, and closed her eyes. Maybe if she could sleep for a while, when she woke up, she’d discover it had all been a bad dream.

Hours later, the sunlight bathed Lauren’s eyelids, its warm rays streaming through the truck’s

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windshield. Her eyes fluttered open and she gazed around the interior of the vehicle, trying to get her bearings. Why was she scrunched on the front seat of Jade's truck? Her sleep had been fitful and dotted with nightmares, but she must have slept at least a few hours in the darkness, because she hadn't awakened until morning. Slowly, awareness dawned on her, and she pulled herself up in the seat and slid out of the truck.

As a last futile effort, she banged on Jade's door one more time. She received no response. Lauren looked at her phone. Maybe one of the messages she'd sent the night before had evoked a friendly, welcoming response.

Nothing.

Her fingertips flew on the phone's keys: "Please respond! If I can't stay at your place, can I just leave some of my stuff with you for a while till I settle?"

Lauren removed her rumpled graduation gown. Under it, she wore torn jeans and a lilac-colored shirt. She tossed the commencement cap and gown on the doorstep, then started sifting through the trash bags Jade had put outside the front door. She found a few books and an old pair of sneakers. She swapped her dress shoes for the sneakers, stuck her bunny in her

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backpack, then looked hopefully at her phone. Still no response to any of her messages.

Lauren picked up her bags and headed off, awkwardly lugging the bags on each side of her. She trudged across the walkway of a long bridge spanning a wide river, one bag banging against the rail as traffic whizzed past. Looking out across the deep river below with the huge cityscape beyond, she pulled out her phone and pressed the name of another friend she hoped might help her.

The friend picked up but was reluctant to offer help, so Lauren hurriedly explained her situation, concluding, “Okay, look. I’m totally stuck here. Couldn’t I just sleep on your couch? Your floor? Anywhere?”

The phone suddenly went dead. Lauren stared at the screen and shook the phone in annoyance. “Great.”

She looked up toward the graying skies and yelled, “Really?”

Lauren shook her head and stared up toward heaven. “Mom was wrong about you,” she cried. “You really don’t answer prayers, do you?”