

Chapter One

Lauren stared out the window of her new room at the street below. It seemed a long way down. She was only one floor up, but it seemed more like three. She picked at a bit of flaking paint on the windowsill and watched as it spiraled through the air toward the ground. Out on the street the moving van was parked half in and half out of the driveway, boxes and furniture stacked floor

to ceiling. Two men were trying to slide her mom's baby grand piano out of the truck.

Lauren sighed. She felt all funny inside. Empty and hollow, with little butterflies fluttering around. They'd only left Ash Creek the day before, but she missed her friends already. Her hand went to the locket hanging around her neck, closing it in her fist and giving it a squeeze.

"So we can always hang out together," Kat had said when Lauren opened it and saw the picture from their camping trip the previous summer. She'd laughed as she said it, but they'd been best friends for years, and Lauren could tell that Kat was just as sad as Lauren was.

"Lauren?" Her mother's faint voice drifted up through the floor.

"Yeah, Mom?"

"Come down here, please."

Her mom was in the dining room, where the piano was now. She sat on the piano stool, her

back to Lauren, running her hands along the keys. Lauren was reminded of the days when her mom used to spend hours and hours practicing, the music flowing from her fingers.

"There you are," said her mom, standing up briskly. "The movers will be unloading for another couple of hours at least. Why don't you take Will down to the park?"

Lauren rolled her eyes. "Aw, Mom. I wanted to get my room set up."

"You can do that this afternoon." She patted Lauren's arm. "It'll do you both good. He's in his room with your dad."

Lauren frowned as her mother raced off after the movers again. All she'd talked about lately was the move. How Vancouver was close to everything, which meant no more long drives to appointments or hospitals. How great the new school was and the amazing programs they had for Will. No one had given a thought to what it would mean for Lauren,

let alone asked her how she felt about it.

Will's eyes lit up when he saw his sister. Lauren couldn't help grinning back at him.

"Hey, Will," she said. "Want to go to the park?"

Will's smile got bigger, and he waved his arms around excitedly.

Lauren's dad looked up from where he kneeled on the floor, screwing the railing onto Will's bed. "That sounds like a great idea. Why don't you take him past the school on your way? That way it won't be so unfamiliar on Monday."

Lauren watched as her dad put Will's jacket on, then lifted him off the floor and set him gently in his chair.

"Make sure you put the brake on if you stop on a hill," he said, tightening the straps that kept Will sitting upright.

"Yeah yeah. I know the drill," said Lauren.

She grasped the handles of the wheelchair and headed out.

"So, Will, where to first? School or park?" she asked once they got outside.

"School!" said Will, pointing and nodding his head.

Lauren turned left and began pushing the wheelchair up the steep slope, grunting with the effort. She didn't stop until she reached the top.

There it was. Birch Park Elementary. Her new school, and Will's as well. Just thinking about it made her stomach tie itself into a knot.

They'd had a tour before Christmas, to meet the principal, enrol in classes and discuss Will's special needs. The place was a maze of hallways. She would have got totally lost if her dad hadn't been there. Classrooms, gymnasium, library, multipurpose room, more classrooms.

"You sure you want to go down there?" she asked Will.

Will nodded.

"Can't it wait until Monday?"

Will shook his head no.

Lauren sighed. "All right." Then she grinned. "Do you want to race?"

Will squealed and waved his arms.

"Ready, set, GO!"

Lauren gave the chair a big push to get it rolling. Then she sneaked up beside it as it barrelled down the hill. She kept one hand on the push handle to keep the chair going straight. The front wheels rattled. Will laughed, his mouth wide open in delight. He pounded his hand on the armrest.

"You won't beat me!" Lauren shouted. She ran faster, pulling ahead.

Will laughed even harder.

They were almost at the bottom of the hill, the school only a few feet away, when someone stepped through the school gate.

"Look out!" Lauren shouted.

She grabbed Will's chair, her sneakers skidding on the gravel beside the sidewalk. The chair tipped

onto two wheels, then thumped back down as Lauren dragged it to a stop.

She stood there, panting and gasping for air, and looked up to see the face of her new school principal.

Chapter Two

“Hello, Mr. Burman,” Lauren said.

“Lauren Scanlon.” The principal’s bushy eyebrows sat like a straight line on top of his glasses. “Perhaps you can explain to me what you were doing just now?”

“I—we—” She looked at Will. “We were just having fun. Will likes to race.”

Mr. Burman’s face turned a shade darker. “Do you know how dangerous that is? You could have seriously injured him. He’s not like other children, you know.”

Something tightened around Lauren’s heart. Of course she knew that. It wasn’t Mr. Burman who had lived with Will for the last six years. Lauren was the one who helped feed him and dress him and push him around the supermarket or to the playground. She was the one who hardly ever had any time with her mom and dad because they were always busy with Will. She was the one who was now facing life in a strange school so that her brother could get the help that wasn’t available in Ash Creek.

“I would never do anything to hurt him,” she said. “He’s my brother.”

Mr. Burman’s brows relaxed. “No, of course you wouldn’t, not intentionally. But you need to take care with him. He’s special.”

“Yes, Mr. Burman,” Lauren said. She waited for him to walk to his car and drive away before she pushed Will’s chair through the gate.

The school grounds were eerily quiet. Lauren and Will went slowly around the buildings, sticking to the concrete path so Will’s chair wouldn’t get stuck in the soft, wet grass. In two days Lauren would be back here. The yard would be teeming with kids, and she would be facing a new class of sixth and seventh graders, knowing no one, starting in the middle of the year.

Standing on tiptoe, she peeked through a window into one of the classrooms. It was dark inside, but she could make out a few large tables, chairs stacked next to them, rows of bag hooks, artwork hanging from the ceiling, posters on the wall, a couple of computers. Her stomach tightened even more.

“Swing!” said Will.

Lauren looked a minute longer, then grabbed the handles of his chair. “Not here,” she said. “Let’s go to the park.”

The park was almost as quiet as the school had been. The only people around were a few kids playing soccer and a gray-haired woman in a tracksuit throwing a ball for her dog.

Lauren strapped Will into the toddler swing and gave him a push, then hopped on the other swing.

“More,” Will said.

“I’m not pushing you any higher,” said Lauren. “You’ve got me in enough trouble already.”

“More!”

“No.”

Lauren turned away from her brother and stared across the field. A black cloud was fogging up her brain. Why couldn’t they have stayed in Ash Creek? Her friends were there, and her gran and Aunt Sofie. Everyone had said she was the best dancer in her