

Chapter One

Where Can I Find a Friend?

It was a hit-and-run waiting to happen. Tracy, a young woman with two preschoolers, roamed the department store, hoping to find something to fit both her budget and her image of herself before she and her husband had a third child. Though she loved her husband and her children, she longed for something she had not yet found. Shopping, cooking, and a part-time job left her little time for herself. She felt overwhelmed at times; sometimes she even felt as though she lived in a cage.

I need a break, Tracy told herself as she strolled through the misses sizes. And an adult to talk to. Tracy thought back to those days in high school when she would hang out with her friends and dream about boys they would marry and the trips they would take around the world. The freedom in those friendships had enabled her to dream. And that is what she missed, more than the dreams themselves. Her daydream caused her not to notice her three-year-old diving into the center of a rack of coats.

At the same moment, Lana, a single woman disabled by cerebral palsy, wheeled through the aisles of blouses and sweaters. She seldom shopped alone because it was difficult to get to the store. The residential facility where she lived offered only sporadic field trips to the mall, and even when a van was available, the cost was usually more than what Lana had left over from the monthly state stipend of thirty-five dollars.

The rare occasion that Lana did go shopping was usually a painful experience. When she tried to communicate with the clerks, they would either ignore her or give up trying to understand her questions. Sometimes Lana left with the wrong size because it was easier to pull something off the nearest shelf in the hope that it would fit or look nice. Or she would return home without having purchased anything at all.

On the day of the incident, Lana had promised herself this trip would be different. I'm not going to leave without the blouse I really want, she told herself. No matter what it takes.

For years Lana had lived in a world where people dictated her schedule and defined her limits. Her friends were of the medical and professional variety: a therapist to hold her while she walked the parallel bars; an attendant to help her bathe; a speech therapist to get her to talk clearly; a social worker to file the latest batch of papers with the state. They were all pleasant people, but none touched the real Lana—the Lana inside.

Kids stared at her. Strangers remained just that, parting themselves to make room for her to steer her wheelchair through. The more compassionate would sometimes step in and help but would never linger for conversation. Eye contact was limited to glances. She had long ago given up hope that the glances would change to genuine smiles, that a helper would become a friend. Like a caged lion, she accepted the bars that kept her from such relationships. She too lived in a cage.

Then it happened. Tracy's child leaped out of the coats just as Lana passed by in her wheelchair. Lana jerked back in surprise, her body thrashing in uncontrolled spasms. Her foot pushed against the floor, sending her wheelchair in reverse and knocking over the display of mannequins. Plastic arms, legs, and heads crashed down around Lana. She froze in terror and embarrassment. Her hands covered her head as if she were waiting for someone to strike her.

Tracy heard the crash and turned in time to see the last mannequin limb hit the ground. She ran to rescue the victims. A surge of emotions gripped her. Anger at her child for being involved. Embarrassment that she would be blamed for the mishap. And then fear that she wouldn't know how to handle the huddled shape she saw in the wheelchair. What do I do? she thought.

Lana peered out from under her arms. Before her stood the three-year-old. Behind him, the mother, looking confused and flustered.

"Are you okay?" Tracy whispered.

Lana nodded jerkily.

"I'm so sorry. Here, Michael," she said to her son, "you pick up the pieces and put them on the stand." The child did not move but rather stared at Lana. "C'mon honey. Help me," Tracy tugged at Michael's arm while she began picking up parts. Lana stared back at the child. She worked to say something, but Tracy's insistence with Michael cut her off.

The store clerk had come to the scene by this time. "Don't worry folks," she said to Tracy. "We'll clean up here. You continue shopping with your friend."

"Oh, she's not ..." Tracy stopped mid-sentence, afraid the words might hurt the disabled woman's feelings. Lana looked up at Tracy, acknowledging the attempt with a weak smile.

"Mommy, what's wrong with the lady?" Michael asked.

"Nothing, honey. She's just ..." Tracy didn't know how to answer. She wanted to get out of there as soon as possible.

"I'm disabled," Lana worked to say. "Ammm dish-shay-booled" is what came out. The boy stood back a little and stared at the jaws that were clenched in a big grin. He clung to his mother's legs.

"I'm really sorry," Tracy said. "Michael's never met anyone who's crippled before." Neither have I, thought Tracy. "Well, I guess we'll keep shopping. Are you okay?"

Lana nodded, wanting to say more and hoping the accident would somehow linger. But she could see that a restless baby in Tracy's walker and a rambunctious boy and a mom on a mission could not be held captive to her need for finding a blouse. And her need to find a friend.

Tracy looked at Lana. She wondered how the woman got there. Wondered if she understood much. Wondered what Lana thought of her. Tracy looked into Lana's eyes and thought she saw a glimmer of something she remembered from long ago. But seeing the jerky motions of Lana's body, the wheelchair, the strained attempts at talking, Tracy knew Lana was part of a different world. Tracy went on her way.

Nothing I can do here, she thought. I've got to keep shopping and then get home to clean and then to McDonalds... And then maybe to find a friend somewhere.

Lana made her way to the van without a purchase. Tracy walked through the aisles on her search, her face flushed hot in embarrassment for quite some time. The women never saw each other again—two caged hearts in search of a friendship that could have made all the difference to them. And all the difference to the world around them.