

## **Chapter 1**

“Larry and I are getting married,” my mom announced.

We were at the small kitchen table in my Aunt Fay’s apartment. My aunt was across from me grading her students’ homework. She’s an eighth grade teacher who also taught summer school. I was eating pancakes and almost choked when I heard the news.

“*What?!*” Aunt Fay asked, dropping her pen. “You’ve only been seeing him for a few months. If things are still good after a year or so, *then* marry him. Right now seems too soon, Geneva. You’re not pregnant, so why are you rushing?”

Aunt Fay was right. It was too fast.

Larry Taylor and Mom started seeing each other May of my freshman year at Lincoln High School. Now it was only

August. During the whole time, Larry hardly said a word to me when he came to pick up my mother. A few times, he gave me a quick handshake, but only when Aunt Fay was watching.

"I'm *not* rushing," Mom replied. "Larry thinks it's the right time, and I think it'll be good for me and Ben to be on our own instead of depending on you for everything. Besides, Larry's already found us a place. We're moving in two weeks."

*Two weeks.* I couldn't believe it. I didn't want to go anywhere. I liked living with Aunt Fay, reading her books and eating stacks of buttery pancakes after church on Sundays with the sun shining right into her living room. It was better than any place Mom and I ever lived in, but I couldn't say that. I couldn't even speak, I was so upset.

Aunt Fay wasn't happy either. She kept shaking her head like she did whenever something bad happened in our neighborhood. I knew why.

Our neighbor Jackie knew Larry from high school. I'd overheard her telling Aunt Fay about him one night back in July. She said people used to call Larry "The Big Hurt" for all the

fights he'd gotten into at school.

*"I wouldn't be surprised if he did time somewhere, the things he and his friends used to do,"* Jackie admitted after seeing him pick up my mom one night. *"But that was fifteen long years ago, Fay. People change,"* she had said. Aunt Fay just grunted. They didn't know I was listening.

No matter what anyone said, Mom saw no problems with Larry. She ignored Aunt Fay's advice. Two weeks later, she made me dress up with a shirt and tie like we were going to church. Instead, we went down to the municipal building and got in a line with a bunch of other people. Then an old judge called us into a stuffy conference room, and my mom and Larry were married.

Just like that, I had a stepfather. He didn't look at me the whole time.

The day after the wedding, Mom and I packed our stuff into cardboard boxes and plastic trash bags. Larry came over around noon with a stocky, dark-eyed guy named Donald. Within minutes, they crammed all our things into the back of an old pickup they'd borrowed from somewhere. They left without even

saying goodbye to Aunt Fay.

Mom and I followed behind them in Larry's car, and we drove to a rundown row house on Union Street, all the way on the other side of the city. On the way, she dropped another bomb on me.

"You're gonna have to switch to a new school, Ben. It's called Bluford High. Don't worry. Aunt Fay says it's a good school, and Larry says it's no big deal."

*What does Larry know?* I wanted to say, but I kept my mouth shut as he and Donald quickly unloaded our stuff. They barely talked except when Larry told him what to do or where to put things.

"You get the top floor," Larry grunted to me as I walked into the house for the first time.

He and Donald carried my mattress and old bureau up a narrow stairway that led to the third floor. I followed them, lugging up an old folding chair and a card table.

We entered a small room with a cracked window that faced out onto busy Union Street. The walls were a faded blue, streaked in some places with brown water stains from leaks in the ceiling. A larger back room was empty except for a rusty attic fan mounted in

the window. It made a clicking noise when I turned it on and worked only at slow speed.

I spent the rest of the day unpacking and trying to make the dreary room feel like home, but I kept hoping that Mom would change her mind and move back in with Aunt Fay.

It didn't happen.

The next day, I learned Larry's house rules.

It was mid-afternoon, and I was on the couch watching TV when I heard someone unlock the front door. Mom was working her usual shift at the day-care center and wouldn't be back for hours. I figured Larry, a plumber's assistant, had the same schedule. But when he came through the door, I realized I was wrong.

"How's it going?" I mumbled to him. It was our first time alone in the house.

"About time we had a chance to talk," he replied, shouldering past me to the kitchen. He came back a second later with a cold beer and grabbed the TV remote that I'd left on the couch.

"There are gonna be days when your mom and I get back from work and

wanna just hang out by ourselves. Maybe Donald and some of our friends will come over too, and we'll need space of our own. We're not gonna want a kid around." he paused to drink some beer. "Now you got a nice room upstairs where you can hang out, and I expect you to use it. You with me, *Benny*?"

Making me leave Aunt Fay and move into the beat-up house was bad, but now Larry was trying to boss me around too. I couldn't keep my mouth shut.

"My mom's paying half the rent here so this is *my* place too," I blurted out. "And my name's *Ben*, not *Benny*," I added.

Larry snapped. He slammed down his beer and leaped out of his chair, grabbing me by the shirt. I'm five-eight and weigh 140, but Larry was at least six inches taller than me. His arms were solid like the black metal pipes in Aunt Fay's basement. He held my collar so tight, I almost couldn't breathe. For a second, I was helpless.

*Get your hands off me!* I wanted to say. But I couldn't speak.

"Don't you *ever* talk back to me, *Bennyboy*," he growled. "And if you don't get upstairs and outta my sight right

now, you're gonna wish you never met me."

He shoved me against the wall, and I scrambled away from him. Without a word, I raced up the stairs to my room and tried to lock my door to keep him out. But the old door barely fit in its frame, and I had to ram it shut. It seemed crazy to lock myself in the room, but what else could I do? I didn't want Larry anywhere near me.

About an hour later, I heard the front door slam. I looked out my window and saw Larry get in his old Dodge and drive off. It was past lunchtime, and I was hungry. I figured he'd gone back to work and would be out for hours, so I went downstairs to get something to eat.

Aunt Fay had bought us groceries to take with us when we moved, so the kitchen was already stocked with food. First I had a big bowl of corn flakes, and then I made a cheese sandwich. I was pouring myself a glass of orange juice when I heard a car door slam outside. I looked at the clock. It was way too early for Mom to get home.

My stomach sank.

I put my glass down on the counter and darted toward the stairs. I was

halfway there when the front door opened. It was Larry. He was carrying a Budweiser twelve-pack. I wanted to get up the steps before he came in, but I wasn't fast enough.

*"What are you doing here?!"*

Larry's voice boomed through the living room, and his face twisted in anger.

"I just wanted to get something to eat," I said, trying to calm him down. "I'm going back to my room right now." I moved toward the stairs, but Larry stepped in front of me, putting the twelve-pack down.

"When I want you upstairs, you *stay* upstairs!" he yelled.

"But I—"

*Whap!* Larry cuffed me hard in the jaw with the back of his hand, snapping my head back and splitting my lip. I could taste the blood in my mouth as I stumbled away from him, stunned.

*Just get to the stairs,* I told myself. I could hear him following me.

I got to the first step when Larry kicked me with his heavy black work boot. The impact slammed against the back of my leg, and I spilled forward on my face, smashing my arms against the hard wooden stairs.

*“What are you doing?!”* I yelled.

“You’re gonna learn to listen to me, one way or the other,” he growled, kicking me again in my hip and my backside. I scrambled upward as if my life depended on it. I couldn’t believe I was in this nightmare.

Larry kept coming. I reached the second floor landing, sprinted down the short hallway, and raced up the third-floor steps. But I could hear Larry’s heavy footsteps behind me. I managed to shut and lock the door to my room, but Larry was there pounding on it just seconds later.

“Open up, or I’ll knock it down!” he yelled. I heard him crash his full weight into the door. The rotting frame began to split and crack. I had no choice but to open it up. Larry stood there, his eyes blazing like a madman’s, his heavy fists opening and closing.

I had nowhere to run and no idea what to do. I backed away from him but tripped over my mattress and fell. He stepped forward, his heavy boots just inches from my face. If he kicked me now, he’d break my ribs or worse. I never felt so helpless. I winced, bracing myself for the next impact. But instead

of hitting me again, Larry stood over me glaring down.

“I want *respect*, Bennyboy. Don’t you *ever* come down after I tell you to get upstairs. You hear me?” He nudged my shoulder with the thick square toe of his boot.

“I hear you,” I said, my voice just above a whisper. He went on about how it was his house but he was cutting me a break this first time. Then he strode out of my room.

When Mom returned home later that afternoon, I could hear her and Larry arguing. Then I heard her climb the stairs to their second-floor bedroom. I knew she was changing out of her work clothes. It’s what she always did after she got home. A few minutes later, I heard her flip-flops slapping against the wooden stairs that led to my room. I stayed on the mattress as she walked in and sat down on the folding chair.

“Ben, don’t be giving Larry a hard time,” she said. “When he gets home from work, he needs time to himself. Just do what he says and stay out of his way.”

I looked quickly at my mom and then turned away, my lip still swollen from

where he'd backhanded me.

I knew Mom was tired. The weariness in her voice told me she'd had another long day at the daycare center. Maybe someone called out sick, or the kids were acting up again, or a parent got upset about something. I'd heard all the stories she'd told Aunt Fay. And with our move to Union Street, things were harder. Mom's bus ride now was almost an hour long, but I didn't care. None of that made what Larry did right.

"It'll be okay, Ben. Just give him some time," she said. "He's not used to having a kid in the house. I know he'll come around. You'll see."

"But this is our house too," I said, not even looking at her. My eyes started to burn.

"He and I are paying the rent, not you, Ben. You've got to make the best of our situation. We want to make this work."

My heart sank at her words. Mom wasn't going to stand up for me. She'd married Larry, and if push came to shove she was going to take *his* side, not mine.

I closed my eyes and forced the tears back. My mother put her hand on my shoulder, but I shrugged it away. She

sighed, frustrated at me. Seconds later I heard the slap of her flip-flops fade as she slowly went down the stairs.

I stared at the ceiling for hours then, watching dark shadows stretch across my room in the dimming sunlight.

They were like the bars of a cage.