Chapter 1

Princess Ebony

Shelby Shayne had a dog of her very own! An eensy, teensy black Pomeranian named Princess Ebony. She'd just brought the puppy home today. The tiny black ball of fluff sleeping in her arms stirred as she gazed lovingly at it. Even seeing it, she almost couldn't believe it. Her own dog! "Thank You, God," she whispered for the millionth time.

Bedtime was approaching. Shelby yawned and started down the hall toward her bedroom, carrying Princess Ebony. Suddenly she stopped, wondering where her "baby" was going to sleep. She'd talked about letting it sleep with her, but she wasn't sure. She retraced her steps to the living room.

"Auntie," she said, dropping to the couch beside Aunt Rachel, "do you think my puppy could sleep with me?"

Aunt Rachel held out her arms for the one-pound baby. "Of course, she can sleep with you," she said, stroking the tiny body. She cuddled the tiny creature for a moment, then got up and handed it back to Shelby. "Maybe we should put a towel over the sheet, just in case." She smiled up at Shelby as they hurried down the hall. Although Shelby was only eleven years old, she towered over her aunt by several inches.

Shelby found an extra-large towel on the bathroom shelf, folded it in thirds, and arranged it on the bed. Climbing in beside it, she carefully placed the puppy on it. The puppy curled up on the towel totally content.

"You won't roll on her, will you?" Auntie asked.

"I hope not. That would kill her." Shelby peered up at her aunt, who stood beside the bed. "Do you think I will?"

"No. You're a quiet sleeper, and you awaken easily. Just remember the puppy while you sleep. And if she wakes up, you'd better take her to the papers we put in the bathroom." Auntie leaned down and kissed Shelby on the cheek. "Have a good night. If you need me, just call."

"I guess you aren't sleeping with me tonight?"

Aunt Rachel shook her dark head. "I'm afraid it'll be sort of crowded if I try to get in there too." Then she smiled. "But if you need me, be sure to call. We'll think of something." She kissed Shelby's cheek again and quietly left the room.

Shelby had been living with her aunt and uncle in their beautiful new home in Veneta, Oregon. She'd been with them about four months - ever since Mom had died. Shelby'd had some bad nightmares, so Auntie had slept with her a lot.

Shelby pulled the puppy close. She could hardly believe she had a puppy of her very own. She'd prayed so hard - and this tiny baby was God's answer.

After Mom died, wanting a puppy had become an obsession. She'd thought of nothing else and prayed for a dog constantly. Then God had performed what seemed to Shelby like a miracle, finding this puppy for her. It had to be the cutest and sweetest dog in all the world!

"Thank You, Father," she whispered as she snapped off the light. She'd just thanked Him a half-hour ago during family worship. She must have said "Thank You" a million times already, and still it didn't seem enough. She fell asleep in a happy glow.

Suddenly Shelby awakened. Wondering what had awakened her, she felt something at her side. The puppy stirred and struggled to its feet. Grabbing her light robe and the dog, she rushed to the bathroom. She carefully put the puppy on the newspapers on the floor. "Potty," she said softly. She repeated the word about a dozen times, and the puppy made a tiny little puddle on the paper. Shelby could hardly believe it! She almost had her baby potty-trained already. Telling the tiny animal what a good girl she was, Shelby wadded up the paper and spread another.

After washing her hands, she carried the puppy back to bed. Then she crawled in beside it. The puppy rolled to its round little back and began chewing on Shelby's fingers. The tiny animal chewed so gently that Shelby fell asleep while it played.

The dog awakened Shelby three more times during the night, and each time it did its "thing" on the paper.

"She didn't mess up her towel even once," Shelby reported in the morning. "But I feel sort of tired."

"Did she cry much?" Uncle James asked.

Shelby had forgotten all about that possibility. She shook her dark blond head. "She didn't cry once. Just wiggled until I took her to the bathroom. When I brought her back, she always snuggled down and fell asleep again."

"Well, come and eat breakfast," Aunt Rachel said. "It's almost time for you to go to school."

Shelby sat down to a steaming bowl of oat bran with brown sugar and milk. As soon as Uncle James asked the blessing, she dug into the cereal. Then a thought popped into her mind. "Who's going to take care of Princess Ebony while I'm gone?" she asked.

Auntie smiled and held up her left hand, toast and all. "I guess I'm elected," she said. "I'll just make her a bed in a nice box and put it beside my desk. She can sleep there until you come home." She reached over and patted Shelby's arm. "Don't worry, kiddo, I'll feed her lunch. And, yes, I'll be sure to give her exactly as much Science Diet Puppy Food as Emil said. We want her to grow healthy and strong." Emil was the man they'd bought the puppy from.

Having no other choice, Shelby got herself ready and ran out to the road. She'd walk to the end of Marina Drive to catch the bus on Ellmaker Road.

"Wait, Shayne. Wait up." Shelby stopped when she heard Molly's voice. Molly, just a few months younger than Shelby, lived across the road. Shelby stood about six inches taller, and Molly looked about the same number of inches wider. Her blond hair was much lighter than Shelby's. And every time Molly made the s sound, she lisped. When she said "Shayne," it sounded like Thayne."

Molly soon walked in stride with Shelby, puffing hard. "How come you didn't wait?" she scolded. "I bet all you can think about is that dog of yours."

Shelby nodded happily. "Just about. Oh, Molly, it didn't even wet the bed once. Isn't that cool?"

Molly's feet kept hurrying toward the bus stop. Shelby thought she wouldn't answer. "I should hope so," she finally lisped. "If you're going to sleep with a dog that wets the bed, I'm never touching you again. And that's the truth."

The bus pulled up ahead of them, and they took off running. As Shelby hurried to the back of the bus, her eyes met those of a red-headed boy. "Hi, Shayne," he said.

"Hi, yourself, Shane," Shelby answered with a friendly smile. She'd met Shane Anderson at the lake near her aunt and uncle's house during the summer. Sharing a name had probably caused them to become friends. Never mind that it was his first name and her last. Anyway, he was a nice guy. And though he looked more like he should be in fifth grade, he was an eighth-grader.

"How's the dog?" Shane asked. He'd come over to see the puppy last night, but Molly had gotten there first and wouldn't let him hold it. "Did it make you crazy, crying for its mother?"

Shelby reached her seat, sat down, and scooted over to give Molly room. "It didn't cry at all," she called back as the bus started moving.

Fifteen minutes later the bus pulled up in front of the school and stopped. When Shelby jumped down from the bus, LeeAnne, her only other friend, grabbed her hand. "Hows that darling puppy?" the pretty black girl asked as they walked toward the school. LeeAnne's mother had brought her to see the puppy last night too, but Molly wouldn't let her hold it either.

"She's great, LeeAnne. I slept with her and didn't even roll over on her."

Molly nudged between Shelby and LeeAnne. "I wish you two could think about something besides dogs," she grumbled. "I suppose that's all we'll ever talk about for the rest of our lives." (With her lisp all the s's came out like th's; "suppose" turned into "tbuppotbe")

Fortunately, Molly's bad mood didn't spoil LeeAnne's enthusiasm over Shelby's new puppy. Classes soon began, and Shelby tried to turn her mind to math. But try as she might, she couldn't get her brand-new puppy out of her mind. She barely heard the teacher talking and missed most of the instructions.

She thought the day would never pass. Maybe the puppy would cry for her. What if Auntie forgot to feed it? Auntie might get upset if the dog kept her from her work. No, she wouldn't. Auntie didn't get upset easily.

Finally, after "two hundred years," Shelby hurried to the band room, feeling happy. She loved to play her flute in band. And today she felt especially glad that band was the last period of the day. She'd soon be home with her puppy, Princess Ebony.

But when she stepped into the band room, Jonathan Greenflower started yelling. "Well, if it isn't Little Orphan Annie! Hey, everyone, take a good look at her big, blank eyes!" Jon had picked on Shelby ever since the first day of school, when she'd been forced into telling the class her mother had died.

Shelby felt like turning around and running back the way she'd come, but she didn't. She held her chin a little higher and marched to her seat in the flute section.

"What did you do to your hair, Orphan Annie?" Jon yelled. "I thought it was red and curly."

Shelby's insides churned so badly she thought she might throw up, but she tried her best not to let it show. She casually opened her case, pulled out her flute, and started warming up. As she played some scales, she felt a little calmer and silently thanked her cousin Sandy. Shelby hadn't played before she came to live with her aunt and uncle. Auntie and Uncle bought the flute, and Sandy taught her a whole year's music lessons during the summer. In September Sandy went away to Milo Adventist Academy, a boarding school. Shelby missed her older cousin a lot, but thanks to her, Shelby could play as well as any of the kids.

She tried to tune out Jon's rude laugh and remarks as she listened to her flutes clear, bell-like tones.

"Jonathan Greenflower, why don't you just stick your trumpet down that big, ugly mouth of yours!" LeeAnne screamed, stopping Shelby's scale in the middle. A bunch of the kids started clapping for LeeAnne, but just then, Mrs. Beecher rushed in and wrecked it. Upset as she felt, Shelby noticed how tall and pretty Mrs. Beecher looked in her dark pants and silky gray shirt. Shelby knew she was going to be tall too. If she could end up like Mrs. Beecher, she wouldn't mind at all.

"What's going on?" the teacher asked, distributing sheets of music. "Do I rate all this applause?" No one said a word. Mrs. Beecher raised her arms, and band practice began.

An hour and fifteen minutes later Molly and Shelby jumped off the bus, and Shelby took off running. She simply couldn't wait another minute to see her new dog. She'd temporarily forgotten Molly, but feet pounding hard on the road reminded her.

"Hey, where's the fire?" Molly yelled. "Wait for me, Shayne. You aren't even nice."

Shelby slowed. "Hurry, then, Molly. I can't wait to see Princess Ebony."

Molly's smile turned upside down. She walked fifty feet before breaking the silence. "I guess you don't want me to come over then," she said. (Guess sounded like geth.) "I was hoping we could ride down to the lake."

She got the first part right. Shelby didn't want anyone to come over.