

Chapter 1

A New Home

Shelby Shayne watched a huge eighteen-wheel semi truck drive off the road. It ran up the front steps and across the porch. Then somehow the monstrous vehicle crashed into the living room and ran over her mother.

The next thing Shelby knew, she was sitting straight up in bed, screaming.

She'd had another nightmare. A moment later, Aunt Rachel sat on the edge of her bed. "Oh, Shelby, I'm sorry," Auntie's soft voice whispered. She held Shelby close, caressing her tear-streaked face and long, dark blond hair. "I'm here, love." Laying her face against Shelby's, she said nothing for a few moments. Finally she raised her head. "I love you, Shelby," she murmured. "I love you with all my heart. But God loves you even more, and when you hurt, He cries.

She closed her eyes. "Dear Loving Father, You know how Shelby hurts. Please help her feel Your love and peace. I ask in Jesus' precious name, and thank You for hearing and answering my prayer." Then she slipped into Shelby's bed and snuggled close.

Shelby'd had lots of nightmares in the last month. In each one, Mom had died - one way or another. She'd died in real life too.

Shelby cuddled close to Auntie, still sobbing quietly, and tried to turn off her head. But the thoughts came anyway. Why hadn't she called 911 right away when Mom got that awful headache? She had called when she couldn't wake Mom. But by then it was too late.

Everyone had told Shelby it wasn't her fault - doctors, nurses, paramedics. With a cerebral aneurism that massive, they said, nothing could have saved Mom. Shelby wanted to believe them more than anything in the world. But maybe they were just trying to make her feel better.

A sweet peace came over Shelby, and she fell asleep cuddling close to Auntie. Later she started dreaming again, but Auntie held her tight, asking God to fill Shelby with His love and peace. Right away she felt His presence again, and the nightmare went away. Auntie and Uncle had been teaching Shelby about God's love and care since she came to live with them a month ago.

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The next morning Shelby opened her eyes to find the sun shining into her bright yellow-and-white room. "I have to go now," Auntie whispered. "Why don't you sleep a while longer?" She dropped a kiss on Shelby's forehead and tiptoed from the room to make Uncle and Sandy's breakfast.

Shelby pulled the covers up to her throat and looked around the large, sunny room. Moondust, her big gray teddy bear, sat under the window on the bright yellow carpet. Mom had made the bear for her last Christmas. She smiled. Dusty was much too large to take to bed, but she loved him anyway.

Casting a quick glance around the room once more, she smiled again. She still could hardly believe she had such a beautiful room. And it was all hers! She'd shared a bedroom with Mom in their tiny apartment in Addison, New York. They'd even shared the bed. But after Mom died, her brother and his wife, James and Rachel Gobel, arranged for Shelby to come and live with them in Veneta, Oregon - a town about one hundred miles south of Portland.

She jumped up and straightened the snowy white comforter. Now the yellow chicks marching around the edge had a straight path to walk on. Next she dashed to the bathroom for a quick shower. Fifteen minutes later Shelby slipped into her chair at the table.

"Well, if it isn't my favorite eleven-year-old," Uncle James said. "Just in time for the blessing too."

Shelby smiled at him. Even with his silver-gray hair, he looked young and lively. His bright blue eyes sparkled behind his plastic-rimmed glasses. "I'm eleven and three-fourths, Uncle," she said. "That's almost twelve." She bowed her head and listened as Uncle James said grace. He asked God to bless the food and thanked Him for letting Shelby come to them.

"Hey!" Aunt Rachel said, filling Shelby's juice glass, "want to do some shopping today? I got the day off." She giggled. "How'd you like to get some school clothes?"

Shelby laughed at her dark-haired, dark-eyed, plump aunt before she took a sip of orange juice. Uncle James, an architect, worked in Eugene, about twelve miles east of Veneta. Aunt Rachel worked on a computer in her bedroom. She did resumes, manuscripts, high-school and college kids schoolwork - whatever anyone wanted typed. "Sounds nice," Shelby said, "but it's barely August. The way I'm growing, I'll be two inches taller by the time school starts."

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Shelby's seventeen-year-old cousin Sandy - tiny, dark, with enormous black eyes - laughed too. "Please don't grow much more, Shelby, or I'll look like a Munchkin beside you." Sandy put a bit of jelly on her toast, then turned to her mother. "Are you sure you remember what eleven - oops, twelve-year-old girls wear, Mom? I work the late shift tomorrow, so the three of us could spend most of the day." Sandy worked as a grocery bagger at the local supermarket. She laughed. "Maybe I could get started on my shopping too."

Auntie looked at Shelby. "Whatta you think, kiddo?" She dropped one eyelid in an exaggerated wink. "If you wait until tomorrow, you'll have two people to battle before you get the clothes you want." She passed the scrambled eggs to Uncle James.

Shelby really didn't want to go clothes shopping at all. It would make her life here seem even more real. And she desperately wanted to wake up and find herself in New York with Mom. But that couldn't be. Never again.

Auntie, Uncle, and Sandy had flown back to the funeral. Afterward they'd gathered up everything Shelby needed or wanted. Apologizing to Shelby, they'd sold or given away the rest of Mom's things. Then they'd all flown back to little Veneta, Oregon, together.

Besides all that, Shelby'd never really been clothes shopping before. She and Mom had been too poor for that. They hadn't had money for lots of clothes. When she and Mom had shopped, they'd bought a pair of jeans and three T-shirts.

The clinking of silverware brought her back to the present. She shook her head. "I don't care, Aunt Rachel. If I really have to go, it might be more fun if all three of us went."

Uncle took off, and Auntie hurried to her computer. Sandy drove off in her battered yellow Volkswagen Bug. Shelby watched two game shows on TV and pushed the button. Why did she turn them on, anyway? All the time the programs played she just kept thinking about Mom. She ran down the hall to Aunt Rachel's office-bedroom. "May I take a walk?" she asked.

Auntie looked up from her computer. "Sure. If you go north on Ellmaker and turn right on Jeans Road, you'll walk right into the lake. There's a big oak tree off the road where you can relax. You might enjoy watching the boats." The Gobel family lived three minutes by car from the huge man-made Fern Ridge Lake.

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As Shelby jogged down the road, she wished for the zillionth time that she had a friend to spend time with. The kids at church treated her all right, but she wanted a friend like Beth.

Beth had lived in the apartment below Shelby and Mom as long as Shelby could remember. Beth's mother worked too, so the girls had spent almost their entire lives together. Whenever Shelby started a sentence, Beth would finish it. Or the other way around. They liked exactly the same food and even the same things to do.

Now she lived in the country with Aunt Rachel, Uncle James, and their daughter Sandra. They called her Sandy. Sandy was super nice but almost grown-up. Anyway, she'd soon be going away to boarding school for her last year of high school. And most of the people in the neighborhood were retired. That meant no kids.

If Shelby had a dog, it could be her best friend. She'd always wanted a dog, but she and Mom hadn't had enough money to feed one, let alone buy it.

Shelby finally reached the lake and sat under the enormous old oak tree. A cool breeze ruffled the water. Must be too early in the morning for boats, she thought, because there weren't any.

As she sat there, her thoughts wandered back to New York again. She barely remembered Dad. Only a few scenes - like him and Mom fighting. They'd fought and yelled all the time. Then he took off. She'd been only six. Shelby had told Mom she was sorry for whatever she'd done that made Dad go away. She promised never to do it again. She asked Mom to tell Dad. Maybe he'd come back. Maybe.

Mom had held Shelby close and told her she didn't do anything. She said Dad loved her very much, but Shelby knew better, because he never came back.

A high voice jerked her attention back to the present.

"Hi, do you have this place reserved? I'm Shane Anderson." Shelby looked up to see a short, redheaded, red-faced kid climb off a metallic-red bike. He shoved down his kickstand and hurried toward her, grinning.

She jumped to her feet and stood about a mile over his head. "You're Shane?" she asked, laughing.

He nodded. "Yeah. S-h-a-n-e. Is that funny?"

Oops. She hadn't meant to make him feel bad. "Not really. But I'm Shayne too. Shelby Shayne. With ay in the middle."

Then he laughed with her. "Hey, does that make us related?" But he shook his head. "No way. I keep telling my teachers I'm not related

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to monkeys.” He laughed loudly, then cocked his head. “I’m about to go swimming. Want to come?”

Shelby shook her light brown head. “I don’t have a swimsuit. Anyway, my uncle wouldn’t let me go in unless someone older is along.”

The boy nodded his head. “How old are you?”

“Eleven - almost twelve.”

“Aha, I’m older. An experienced swimmer too. I’m twelve, almost thirteen.” He waved a freckled hand. “Don’t bother telling me I look younger, or I’ll say you look like a giraffe. Are you planning to be twelve feet tall?”

Shelby sat back down under the tree. Shane dropped beside her. He found a blade of bright green grass among the drying weeds and sucked on the round stem. “Where do you live?” he asked.

“Over on Marina Drive,” Shelby said. “I just moved here from New York. I guess you live around here someplace. Where do you go to school?”

“The grade school is in Veneta, but you’ll probably go where I do. I’ll be in eighth grade at Elmira Middle School.”

If Shelby had been sitting on a chair, she’d have fallen off. That little twerp in middle school? “I’ll be in sixth grade. How could you be five sizes smaller, one year older, and two grades ahead? Come on, Shane Anderson. What’s with you?”

He shook his head, looking almost embarrassed. “Well,” he finally said quietly, “I’m a grade ahead of most kids my age, so that leaves you a grade behind.” His pained expression turned into an impish grin. “What did you do, flunk kindergarten?”

She knew he was teasing, but it got to her anyway. “I didn’t flunk anything, runt. My folks didn’t send me to kindergarten. And they didn’t start me in first grade until I was seven.”

“How come?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know.” And she’d never know. She had no one to ask. She’d never again be able to ask Mom anything. Suddenly she felt a big lump in her throat and tears squeezing into her eyes. Jumping to her feet, she started running up the trail toward the road. She turned back and swallowed hard. “Gotta go,” she called.

She ran until she couldn’t catch her breath, and then she walked. After she rested, she ran again. She arrived home in time to join Aunt Rachel for lunch.

SHELBY'S BIG PRAYER

“Did you see some boats this morning?” Auntie asked Shelby after she asked God to bless them and their food.

Shelby shook her head. “No. I met a boy, though.” Auntie looked up from her soup. “I hope you didn’t talk to him.”

Shelby laughed. “I talked to him. He’s redheaded, freckled, scrawny, and doesn’t come even to my shoulder. I can hardly believe it, but he says he’s an eighth-grader.”

Aunt Rachel looked thoughtful a moment. “I think I know the boy. Is his name Anderson?”

“Yeah. Also Shane. Isn’t that funny? We have the same name, only spelled differently.”

Auntie smiled. “I think it’s nice. Maybe it’s a sign you’re supposed to be friends. He comes from a nice family about halfway down Ellmaker Road.”

Then Shelby remembered how awful she’d felt a little while ago, remembering she could never ask Mom anything again. Hey, Uncle James was Mom’s brother. Maybe he or Aunt Rachel would know why she didn’t get started in school at the right time. But they hadn’t been all that close to Mom at the last, and it was such a little thing. Still, it couldn’t hurt to ask. She took a deep breath.