

Chapter 1

Academy Freshman

Between downtown Vancouver, Washington, and the southwest slopes of steamy Mount Saint Helens sprawls a wrinkled patchwork of farmlands and towns too small to be called cities. One of these communities clusters around an academy campus.

A few years ago, as cows ambled out to rain-soaked pastures nearby, Becka Bailey wriggled from a car, then climbed the brief steps to Friendship Walk.

“Well, here goes!” she whispered. Waving to the elderly Mr. Allen, she watched his Chevy pull away and creep back up the street. His parting words still echoed in her ears: “I’ve taken you to school just this first day. You’re on your own, though, the rest of the time, no matter what storms come our way.”

She had managed a grateful nod, realizing how significant it was for Mr. Allen to drive the car, this spry senior citizen who pedaled a bicycle everywhere.

Clutching her umbrella, the girl parted the drizzle before her and ventured along the wide walkway, feeling her heart thud with every footstep. Ahead the formidable walls of the administration building loomed into the gray morning, those same walls, she knew, where her father had been schooled years before. But that thought offered little comfort to the girl. Today she was simply Becka Bailey, a freshman, a stranger - and all alone.

Wearing a slate-blue jacket to protect herself against the weather, she continued her march, avoiding any direct looks at the few students sprinting by. At last she reached some double doors, poked her head inside, and met the amused face of...

“Hannah!” The name escaped her like a fervent prayer. “Am I ever glad to see you!” Becka hugged the girl warmly, then stood back to survey her childhood friend, the short black hair, the laughing eyes of beryl green. Hannah Bryant and her

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family were members of Becca's home church, some ninety miles upriver.

Before Hannah could reply, her cousin, Sally, came bounding up the stairs from the secretary's office. "I'm ready to go!" she puffed, then beamed at Becca. "Hi! Don't I know you?"

Hannah answered for her friend. "You remember Becca Bailey. She lives way up on Underwood Mountain."

While Sally's "Oh!" rang out liltingly, Becca regarded the serene, heart-shaped face, so different from her cousin's. It was framed by a mass of nut-brown hair that curled gently to her shoulders. Sally's round sympathetic eyes seemed to peer straight into Becca's thoughts, as though she could sense the uneasiness there.

"Who are you boarding with?" she asked.

"The Aliens."

"Too bad there isn't room in our house for you too. Hannah's living with us." Then Sally laughed good-naturedly. "And you know how much space she takes up!"

Hannah reddened with pleasure. "Yeah, but Becca, you're welcome to visit any time you like." Pausing, she asked, "What are you doing here so early anyway? Freshman classes don't start till after lunch."

"I've got a job in the library," Becca explained, then glanced at her watch. "That reminds me, I'd better get up there or I'll be late to work."

The girls parted, leaving Becca feeling properly welcomed and a little less fearful of her new surroundings.

Up the stairs she wandered, along the roomy hallway, where a few masculine teacher-voices filtered out to her. When the hall ended at a pair of windowed doors, she pushed one open and stepped inside.

A dark, lean, handsome man glanced up at her from behind a counter. "We're not open yet," he began.

"Uh, I'm Becca Bailey."

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“Oh, yes!” He offered his hand at once. “I’m Mr. Shaw, the head librarian, among other jobs. Have you met Liz Martin yet?”

To the shake of her head, the man explained that Liz would work as a library assistant that semester also. “She’ll come at ten,” he noted, glancing around at the spacious, book-lined room that opened into several side offices. “Becka, I hope you won’t mind working a lot of overtime today. We’ve plenty to finish before we’re ready for students.”

“That’s fine,” the girl said happily, reminding herself that the longer she worked, the more money she earned to help with her tuition.

Mr. Shaw began familiarizing her with daily tasks and set her to shelving some new publications.

In no time Becka relaxed, feeling at home among her old friends - books.

A few hours later a large girl, under a puffy mound of soot-black hair, entered the library. She walked directly over to Becka and appraised her while sheltering her own thoughts behind thick, dark lashes.

“Hello!” she said crisply. “I’m Liz.”

Becka introduced herself, then asked a few questions to encourage the girl to talk.

“I’m a freshman and preacher’s kid,” Liz replied, almost apologetically. “We live only a block from the school and church.”

Becka turned her attention to the chores at hand, working alongside the other girl until time for lunch. By that time Liz’s cautious reserve had melted somewhat, and Becka felt they had a lukewarm - but promising - friendship in the making.

Dodging muddy puddles and spray from passing vehicles, Becka trekked up the street to the Aliens’ mobile home for lunch. The meal was an awkward mixture of stilted chitchat and uncomfortably long silences as the elderly couple and the teenager tried to become better acquainted. The Aliens had taken Becka in at the last moment, providing a temporary home until she could find more permanent quarters.

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When the girl turned up late for her first class that afternoon, Mrs. Jenkins didn't seem to mind. This was home economics, a subject Becka had eagerly anticipated. She already knew how to sew and relished the thought of making her own clothes, but the girl realized she still had lots to learn in the kitchen.

Becka didn't actually learn much that first day, however. Mostly the teachers explained what to expect from each class. Besides home economics, she had signed up for typing, English, algebra, physical education/health - and Bible with Elder Finlander, who had begun his opening day class with a wornout joke.

Out of politeness Becka and a few others had laughed, but assorted groans welled up from several of the "unrefined" males in the room.

Becka stared with fascination at the teacher. He seemed squarish in form, with a pleasant face. Despite the stale joke at the onset, Becka guessed here was a minister who would welcome hardy discussion and challenge. "I can't wait!" she mused.

That afternoon she also tried out for choir and arranged for piano lessons with Miss Runyan. Then later, just as Becka finished replacing a textbook in her locker, Hannah and her cousin appeared, all smiles.

"Since we have very little homework tonight," Sally ventured, "how would you like to come over to our place and help us make cookies?"

"I'd love to," Becka replied. "I'll have to phone for Mrs. Allen's permission, though."

She placed the call from the school and got her caretaker's blessing on the cookie-baking project. "But remember, Becka, your parents don't want you out after dark unless you have an escort."

"I know," the girl said with hidden annoyance. To herself she thought, "Why does my mother still have to think of me as a little kid?"

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Resentment walked along with Becka that afternoon. “Mom won’t even let me ride in a car with another teenager yet!” she complained to her friends, mimicking her mother’s voice in a singsong tone: “All drivers must have at least four years’ experience is the rule.”

“How tragic!” Hannah exclaimed. “That means, when my aunt loans me her car to visit the mall, you won’t be able to come along.”

Becka sighed heavily. “That’s what it means.”

Sally’s soft voice cut into their conversation. “Becka, I would guess you’re the oldest in your family.”

Becka bobbed her head. “Yes. My brother Kurt is two years younger.”

“Well, you’re in the same spot as my older sisters were,” Sally observed. “My folks were pretty strict with them, but by the time I came along they had eased up considerably.” She giggled. “It’s just a matter of where in the family order you’re born, I guess.”

Becka made a wry face and resigned herself to her “family order,” taking comfort in the fact that she was, perhaps, paving a smoother path for Kurt.

Later, people traffic - an endless stream of Sally’s relatives who lived nearby - flowed in and out of the kitchen while the girls baked. Because each visitor sampled the oatmeal-raisin rounds, not many cookies remained by the time Becka took up her coat to leave.

Saying goodbye, she trudged off into the early evening, lifting her face to the hazy sky. The rain had stopped momentarily, she noticed - maybe long enough for her to reach the Aliens’ without a good soaking.

The tiny town wrapped serenely around her as she shuffled up the street - the square, quaint houses with flowered yards, the fathers driving home to their families, a few children parking their bikes. Becka could see inside kitchens where aproned women labored over stoves. “What a peaceful place!” she breathed. “Why would my parents ever distrust it?”

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Resentment crept back into her. “Such silly little-girl rules!” she scoffed.

That night Becca lay awake a long while, listening to the steady patter of rain overhead, an occasional car splashing by, then a siren wailing off in the distance. “This is a peaceful place,” she repeated to herself, “but it’s not as peaceful as Underwood Mountain.”

A wave of homesickness swept over her as she tried to recall the nightly song of the giant firs that cradled her mountain home. Only an occasional coyote or barking dog would pierce the quiet there.

She wondered about her brother, how he was surviving without her. Kurt was, indeed, one of her best friends. They had to be friends, growing up in such a remote area.

Just then Becca felt something batlike swoop down out of the darkness and cover her face.