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CONTENTS



1. A Letter from Grandma LaDere . . . 1
2. Rachael Avery 11
3. Surprise Homecoming. 23
4. The New Caseworker 33
5. Birthday Party 43
6. The Visitors 53
7. Mother. 63
8. Libby and Brenda 71
9. Piano Lesson. 83
10. Ms. Kremeen 93
11. Family Meeting. 105
12. Running Again 115
13. A New Friend 125
14. Grandma LaDere to the Rescue . 137



A Letter from Grandma LaDere

LIBBY reached into the silver mailbox and pulled out the stack of mail. Rex, the big black-and-tan collie, pressed tightly against Libby's bare legs. She shook her head at him as she closed the mailbox lid. "It's too hot, Rex. Why don't you lie down in the shade?"

He panted and wagged his tail as he stayed beside Libby all the way up the long driveway to the big house.

Libby frowned as she looked around the yard. Goosy Poosy usually ran to anyone who walked outdoors. Where was he? Then she saw the family's pet goose under a lilac bush, trying to hide from the heat. Libby was glad she could walk into the air-conditioned house

to cool off instead of lying under a lilac bush. She patted Rex and once again told him to lie down in the shade; then she walked into the cool back porch. Thankfully, the family room felt even cooler.

“Any mail, Elizabeth?” asked Vera, looking up from a book she was reading as she sat curled up on the end of the couch.

“A big pile, Mom.” Libby handed the mail to Vera, then stopped, her hazel eyes wide. “You called me Elizabeth!”

Vera chuckled. “That’s your name, isn’t it?”

Libby looked down at her bare toes and felt all long arms and legs. Yes, Elizabeth Gail Dobbs was her name, but Vera had called her Libby from the first day that Miss Miller had brought Libby to the Johnson farm to live.

Vera caught Libby’s hand and squeezed it. “I didn’t mean to embarrass you, Elizabeth. I just decided that since Chuck and the boys call you Elizabeth, I will too. It’s a beautiful name.”

Libby was glad that Vera hadn’t added “for a beautiful girl” because she knew she was tall and skinny and ugly. Libby looked at Vera and smiled. “I like to be called Elizabeth.”

“I’ll try my best to remember. Libby is a

nice nickname and I like it, but since you like *Elizabeth* more, I'll call you Elizabeth." Vera looked down at the pile of mail and Libby sat cross-legged on the floor in front of her.

Maybe she'd have a letter from Mark McCall again today. Libby locked her fingers together and leaned forward expectantly.

"Here's a letter for you, Libby." Vera grinned sheepishly. "Elizabeth. I've never seen this handwriting before."

Libby's heart beat faster, and suddenly her hands felt too sticky to touch the white envelope. Maybe the letter was from her real mother. No! Oh no! It couldn't be from Mother!

Slowly Libby opened the letter and lifted out the single page with just a few words written in a strange, uneven handwriting. She looked at the signature at the bottom of the letter. Her hazel eyes widened and her heart leaped. "Mom! It's from Grandma LaDere! My very, very first letter from my real grandma!"

Vera's hand fluttered at her throat. "What does she say? I'm sure you're glad that she finally answered your many letters."

Libby read the few words. She cried out in

terror, her heart racing until she could not breathe, her hands stiff and frozen on the letter.

Vera slipped to the floor beside Libby and cradled her close. “Don’t be frightened, honey. You are right here with me and nothing can hurt you.” Gently she eased the letter from Libby’s fingers and read it aloud: ““Elizabeth Gail, Marie got home two days ago. She is coming to get you. I wanted to warn you.”” It was signed “Ruth LaDere.”

Libby watched the color drain from Vera’s face. Vera was frightened too! Vera must think Mother would be able to come here and take her! With a moan Libby flung her arms around Vera and buried her face in Vera’s neck. Mother would not get her away from the Johnson family! She was part of them now, after all these months.

“Calm down, Elizabeth,” said Vera softly as she held Libby tightly. “I was startled and frightened for a minute, but not anymore. Now listen to me. Your mother cannot take you away from us. The court put you in our charge. Are you listening to me, Elizabeth? You are safe.”

Libby pulled free and leaped to her feet, her chest heaving. “I am not safe with Mother

so close again! She will take me again. I know she will!" Libby stared around the room as if her mother would walk in any minute and steal her away. Libby jumped in fright as Susan walked in from the kitchen.

"What's wrong?" asked Susan, staring from Vera to Libby with a puzzled frown. "Are you in more trouble, Libby?"

"Susan!" Vera frowned at her and shook her head.

"My mother is coming to take me!" cried Libby, pressing her hands to her heart.

"Grandma LaDere said so!"

Susan's blue eyes widened in alarm, and she clapped her hands to her gaping mouth. Her red-gold hair hung long down her slender shoulders and back.

"Susan! Elizabeth!" Vera grasped each girl by an arm and led them to the couch. "We're going to sit down and talk about this. You're both too frightened to think." She waited until all three of them were seated on the couch. "Marie Dobbs cannot take you, Elizabeth, unless the court awards her custody of you. I don't believe they'll do that because of how she treated you in the past. Remember just after you came to live with us, Marie Dobbs wanted you to spend Christmas with

her. She didn't even stay for an answer. She went to Australia without another word. Maybe she told her mother that she was going to visit you without having any intentions of doing it."

"That's right, Libby," said Susan, nodding until her hair swirled around her head. "Your real mother won't come here. She hasn't so far. Why would she now?"

Libby shrugged, suddenly feeling cold. Her teeth chattered and she huddled closer to Vera. Dare she believe what Vera and Susan were saying?

Thunder crackled loudly and Libby jumped.

Ben burst into the room. "Mom! I just heard a severe-weather warning on the radio."

Vera jumped up and nervously pushed her blonde hair back from her face. "See to the animals, Ben. Susan and Libby, you'll have to help."

Libby pushed herself off the couch; her legs felt like rubber. How could she go outdoors and work? Maybe Mother was hiding in the barn or behind the chicken coop!

"Libby!" Vera shook Libby gently. "You must help. You don't want the animals to suffer, do you?"

Libby could not force herself to move. She

heard Ben ask what was wrong with her. Susan's voice seemed to come from a long way off as she answered Ben.

"You will not faint, Elizabeth!" Vera's face seemed to float in front of Libby. "Have you forgotten that you have a heavenly Father who cares for you? He loves you, Elizabeth! He will protect you!"

The words seemed to sink deep inside her, and Libby lifted her head as strength began to flow through her. In the past she had had to fight Mother by herself. Now she had the Johnson family and she had her heavenly Father.

"Susan and I will take care of everything by ourselves," said Ben.

Libby could see his concern for her in his eyes. She reached out and took his hand, then smiled weakly. He stood just a little taller than she did. His hair was very red and hers ordinary brown. "I can help, Ben," Libby said.

Thunder cracked again.

Ben grinned and squeezed Libby's hand. "We'd better hurry. We don't want to get caught in the rain."

Libby rushed outdoors into the wind. Already the temperature had dropped. Light-

ning zigzagged across the sky and thunder continued to roll.

“I’ll take care of the chickens and Goosy Poosy,” shouted Susan as she ran toward the chicken pen.

Anxiously Libby looked around the yard. Was her mother hiding behind one of the large trees in the front yard?

“Get Snowball, Elizabeth,” called Ben against the wind.

Snowball! She was afraid of storms. Libby raced to the horse pen for her white filly. She could not leave Snowball outside in this storm.

Wind whipped Libby’s short hair back and pushed her blue blouse against her thin body. She dare not think about Mother right now. The animals had to be put into the barns.

Frantically Libby worked with Ben and Susan till all the chores were done and all the animals were safe. The rain fell just as they ran back into the house.

Ben fought to hold the door open until Libby and Susan ran inside. The wind blew even harder and bent the trees until they were almost doubled over. Rain lashed against the windows.

Libby pressed her hands tightly against her heart. The storm outside echoed perfectly how she felt inside. Mother was home! Mother wanted to take her back!