

A Winter Garden Blossom



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Chapter 1

I hated making new friends at school every time we moved. “How many times have I changed schools, Mom?”

She laughed. “Five times, darling. How can I forget? You remind me just about every other day.”

I nodded. “I’m just checking. I don’t want you to forget.”

“Sydney, please grab the shovel over in the corner and help me dig three holes to plant my new batches of roses.”

For as long as I can remember, Mom loved gardening. But since we moved so much the past few years, she couldn’t have a garden in the backyard. Mom enjoyed escaping into her world of flowers and vegetables so much. She often spent the entire weekend working her plot of land, always looking for ways to spruce it up, which she liked to call her paradise getaway.

“Mom, do you remember the garden you planted inside one of our tiny apartments we moved into?”

She shook her head. “Please don’t remind me. Terrible idea.” Mom missed gardening so much she planted a vegetable garden in the apartment. But we didn’t stay long enough for us to see how the experiment turned out.

“Sorry for bringing it up, Mom.”

She grinned. “What a whirlwind the past few years have been for all of us, moving from city to city, apartment to apartment,

school to school.”

The days of packing and unpacking were over. Having our own house again with a big backyard for gardening was a dream come true, especially for Mom. She could get just about anything in the ground to grow. God gave her a green thumb for sure. Everyone knew where we could find her on the weekends.

I grabbed the shovel, throwing it over my shoulder. “Mom, I have the shovel. We should plant the roses in front of the breakfast room window, so when they bloom, you can admire them as you have breakfast.”

Mom smiled. “That’s a great idea. The roses will get lots of sunshine all day from there. I’ll get the wheelbarrow to move the dirt we dig out for later use.”

“Can I start digging, Mom?”

“Sure. But please put your hat on and apply sunscreen before you start, Sydney.”

The sun glistened off the sweat on Mom’s face. I worked up a sweat, too. It was only the middle of spring, but the temperature read 85 degrees on the wall thermometer. I didn’t enjoy gardening that much, but I liked hanging around with Mom, chatting about things as she tilled the soil.

After school, I would sometimes sit on the patio by myself, staring at the rainbow of colors glimmering from the squash, tomatoes, bell peppers, lettuce, and cucumbers in the garden. It helped me to relax after a tiring day at school. We had a lemon tree—great for homemade lemonade during the hot summer days. Mom’s plans included an orange tree and a garden pond next to the patio.

“I’m so happy we’re here to stay, Mom. I didn’t realize how much I missed living in our own house, with our very own

backyard, until we moved here. We not moving again, right?"

Mom dragged a bag of compost closer to the flower bed where we were planting the roses. "Darling, as I mentioned to you many times, we're not moving again. Please stop worrying."

I tapped Mom's shoulder. "Is that a promise?"

She squinted against the sun as she looked up at me. "All I can tell you is we have no plans to move anytime soon."

I thanked God every day for keeping us safe and giving my parents a job so we could stay here for a long time. At least I knew I would finish my last two years of middle school at Winter Garden and probably high school without having to move again.

Mom never complained to us much about moving, but I never kept it a secret how it affected me, which Dad knew all too well. "Yikes! I see cobwebs, Mom. Better get the bug spray just in case Mr. Spider makes a mad dash for me."

"Be careful, darling. Don't get the spray all over yourself. It's windy."

Mom's face beamed with joy the first day we moved to this house. She couldn't stop talking about her plans to transform our backyard into a paradise. She stared out across her new backyard with her arms outstretched over her head, thanking God. I noticed a few happy tears, too. She missed pruning, watering, and all the other gardening activities so much.

"Mom, is this deep enough for the roses? I tried to make it about a foot deep."

"If you can make the holes a little deeper, we should be good to go. You're a big help, darling."

I noticed Dad peeking out the door. "Hey, Dad. We can use some help. Come join us back here."

He grinned. "It looks like you guys have everything under

control. Besides, I have a game I want to finish watching. Sorry, it's a close one." He disappeared back inside the house.

Dad had a hard time finding work back when we moved all the time. I often heard my parents talking about people losing their jobs and hoping life would get better soon. Whenever we moved to another town, Dad made sure we lived in a safe place and didn't have to worry about putting food on the table. He also wanted us to dress nicely for school and church.

I struggled to make the holes deeper. "Are things better for Uncle Charles and Aunt Mary?"

Mom grinned. "Yes, they got their jobs back, thank goodness. Darling, I know you experienced many difficulties too. But our situation is much better now. Let's be grateful."

Having to sell our old house hit Dad hard—probably worse than losing the job he worked for over 15 years. He spent a lot of time alone after it happened, staring at the television for hours sometimes. He promised to get us another house as soon as possible. My uncle and aunt would come by from time to time to borrow money and food. A lot of family friends lost their jobs, too. Dad reminded us to pray for our friends, the economy to get better, and all our relatives.

Every time I made a few friends at school, we ended up packing and moving again. I didn't know if making friends was worth the pain of having to say goodbye. "Mom, could you check the hole for the roses again? It looks deep enough to me."

She stuck a ruler in the hole. "Perfect. Time for a break, darling. I think we deserve one."

"I'm always ready for a break." I dusted my hands against my jeans and picked off a few leaves stuck to my hat.

I became a worrier. Even with high school years away, I

already wondered if someone would invite me to the senior prom. I exercised like crazy and starved myself sometimes, and the next minute, I found myself binge eating. Those moving days had to be the worst days of my life.

Mom slipped off her shoes and went inside. "It's hot today. Let me get a washcloth so we can wipe our faces."

Mom worried about me having to adjust to a new school all the time. I hated introducing myself and seeing those forced smiles and stares all day. For some reason, no one ever asked me to join them for lunch. But I kept hoping and praying the hard times would go away one day.

I grabbed the washcloth, flopping it on my face. "It feels great, refreshing as can be."

School life got awful sometimes. I could deal with the students ignoring me and even the eye rolls, but some of the students were plain rude. And having to use a map to find my classrooms the first few days sure made it easy for others to poke fun at me.

"I think we did a good job so far," said Mom. "I love your idea for the roses. I can almost picture them blossoming in my head."

"Really?"

Mom poured a cup of coffee and sank into her favorite chair in the kitchen, staring out the window as she sipped. It was quiet except for the humming of the refrigerator. Mom seemed lost in thought.

"Are you resting, Mom?"

"Sorry. How is everything going at school?" Mom's eyes still focused on the roses we planted. Having friends at school and a place we could finally call home was a relief for her.

"I'm getting pretty good grades on my tests and homework assignments. By the way, we have a science project in Mrs.

Clark's class. It's a group project. Michelle and I are working on it together, but we need to find a couple of other classmates to join our group."

"When is it due?" said Mom. "I hope Michelle and her parents are doing well."

"It's an end-of-semester project. Michelle's parents seem fine. They're always nice to me. Thanks for letting me go over to study with Michelle. She's always so much fun."

Mom hesitated. "I hope you guys aren't having too much fun that you don't finish your homework."

"Nope. We always finish our homework. Michelle is good about getting her homework done."

Mom grinned. "I'm sure glad you have such a good friend."

"She is my very first best friend." I thanked God all the time for bringing Michelle into my life.

Mom swung around in her chair and gazed at me. "I know the moving made it hard for you to make good friends. I'm so sorry we had to put you through all the moving."

"Yeah. I'm sorry too for being a teenager monster sometimes. I just got so tired of moving from school to school. I'm glad we're staying for a long while."

Mom sighed. "Me too." We looked at each other and busted out laughing.

"I guess you're happy about getting your garden back."

Mom chuckled. "Is it so obvious to everyone?"

"Yeah, Mom. It's as plain as the nose on your face."

Mom laughed. "You're hanging around Grandma too much. You sound like her more and more every day."

Chapter 2

I fought with Dad the last time we moved. From his low-pitched voice, I knew what he was about to tell me. The news came half-way through the school year, and I had friends I didn't want to leave behind. My heart sank when he broke the bad news about having to move again.

I shouted at Dad. "You're the worse father ever. It's not fair what you're doing to me." I had never been so disrespectful to him before.

"I'm sorry." Dad reached out to hug me. I pulled away from him.

"Why can't you be like everyone else's dad? If I get married and have kids, I will never do this to them."

He tried to explain. Not wanting to hear his speech about how things would get better soon, I cut him off.

Dad twisted his hands together. "I'm so sorry, darling. We have to get ready to move in a few weeks."

Tears filled my eyes as I stared at Dad. "You have to do something so we can stay. You can't do this to me again. It's not fair."

"I know. I know. It's been so hard finding steady work," said Dad. "I tried looking everywhere. I hope you'll forgive me."

"Never. Leave me alone," I shouted, stomping my feet. "I can't

believe you would do this to me.”

Dad didn't say another word and plodded out of the room. I slammed the door behind him and began flinging shoes and clothes everywhere. “Darling, are you all right?” whispered Mom behind the door.

“No, I'm not all right. Please leave me alone.” I heard Mom's steps as she headed down the hall. Grabbing my pillow to my face, I screamed as hard as I could.

I pleaded to God. *“How come this is happening to me? I don't understand why I have to go through this again. You gave me friends, and now you're taking them away from me. I don't understand.”*

* * *

Tired from crying on and off most of the night, I overslept. Shuffling of boxes could be heard coming from Mom's room. In the kitchen, I saw boxes already filled with pots and pans and cups and dishes.

Grandma stood ready in the kitchen. “Good morning, darling. I'll warm up your breakfast unless you want lunch instead.”

I assumed she had heard about what happened the night before. “I'll have breakfast. Sorry for being late. I can't believe we're moving again.”

Grandma tapped me on the shoulder and sighed. “Well, I know your father is doing the best he can. What do you want on your toast today?”

“Strawberry jam, Grandma. I've been at this school for a whole semester. How can this be happening again? I like my friends so much.” A semester was just long enough to get comfortable and have a few close friends. I even joined a club.

Grandma wrapped her arm around my shoulder. "One semester is quite a long time for you. I know it's going to make leaving hard. I made friends I'm going to miss, too. I'm so sorry, darling."

After breakfast, Grandma read the Bible to me. She recited a few verses that snapped me out of my lousy mood and gave me hope. Grandma knew how to explain the Bible, making sure I understood what God wanted to tell me. She became my escape from all the hurts and disappointments, especially the loneliness I experienced from all the years of moving.

"I want a normal life with friends, and I hate worrying about being the new kid at school all the time. I've lost hope, Grandma."

She nodded. "Like all difficult times in our lives, God reminds us that all these things shall pass. He has never failed to keep His word. Darling, ask God to help you with your anger toward your dad and also to give you faith that your school situation will get better soon."

I couldn't have gotten through the moving and drama at all the different schools the last few years without Grandma. She knew what I needed to hear from her. "It's getting harder and harder each time we move."

Grandma smiled. "Let's finish our breakfast, and after I wash the dishes, we can take a stroll around the neighborhood and talk some more."

"I'll help you clean up, Grandma. Let me dry the dishes for you, and I'll put them away, too."

Every time we moved, my relationship with Dad got worse. Arguing with Dad became routine. Sometimes, I wouldn't talk to him for weeks.

I didn't know how to break the news to my friends and thought about writing them a letter so I wouldn't have to face them. But I decided to tell them at lunchtime instead. "Hey, guys. I got some bad news to tell you. My parents told me we're moving in a few weeks. I'm not handling it very well."

My friend Mary jumped up from her seat. "What? You can't leave us." The bell rang. Everyone dumped their trash and raced off to class. Mary glanced back and shouted, "I'll talk to you later, Sydney."

For some reason, my friends never talked to me about my big announcement afterward. A week went by, and I wondered if they even cared.

As I waited for the bus, Mary came over and reminded me about coming to her house that night. "Sydney, you're still coming over to do homework, right? I need your help with math class again."

I nodded. "Sure. I won't forget. I'll be over around the usual time." When I got home, I locked myself in my room, feeling sorry for myself. Life seemed so gloomy and heavy.

"It's getting late, darling. Are you still going over to Mary's house to do homework?" asked Mom. "You guys normally get together on Wednesdays. I hope you didn't forget all about it."

"No, Mom. I'm still going. I'm just a little late."

When I got to Mary's house, I knocked and knocked again. Since the lights were off inside the house, I turned to leave, then the door opened.

"Surprise!" my friends screamed out. They crawled out from under the table and popped up from behind an old couch in the living room. Purple and pink balloons, my favorite colors, decorated the room. Mary's mom even came out and hugged me.

She thanked me for helping Mary with her homework and told me how much she would miss me.

I grabbed Mary's arm and whispered, "I had no idea."

Mary laughed. "I hope you didn't think we forgot all about you leaving us. We wanted to surprise you. We have cake and a gift for you, too."

"I guess we're not doing homework tonight," I smirked, pumping my fist in the air.

"We're not," said Mary. "Let's get the party going."

We talked all night about the fun things we enjoyed together—watching cartoons on movie night, window shopping, getting manicures, and baking cookies. And we danced and sang along to our favorite songs.

"I loved the chocolate-covered chips and cake. I want you to know you're the best friends I've ever had. You've taught me so much about friendship and kindness. I will miss you so much. Sorry for blubbering all over you. Love you guys." My friends gave me a friendship bracelet they made themselves for my going-away present.

I never got over the scariness of moving to a new school. My insides knotted up at the thought of not knowing a single person, and I worried too much about what others thought about me. Hearing the whispers as I walked by students in the hallway and getting left out of activities all the time made school life miserable.

It's funny how being alone at a new school all the time changed how I saw students like myself. I became aware of the students who sat by themselves at lunch with no one to talk to, who buried themselves in the library day after day as I sometimes did, who got pushed around for just being new at school.