

## Chapter 1

# The Surprise

“**R**ay, come quick!” Benjie shouted as he burst into the house. “What do you think Dad brought home?” Benjie was shouting his news even though he could not see Ray. Benjie knew if Ray had his work done, he would be somewhere reading a book.

Just then Mom came out of the bedroom with Baby Ruth. Neither Mom nor the baby looked happy.

“Benjie,” Mom reproved, “you woke Ruth. You need to learn to talk, not shout, when you come into the house.” Mom shook her head and looked sadly at Benjie. “Sit on this chair for five minutes.” She knew sitting on a chair was a grievous punishment for Benjie.

*Benjie’s face has a ‘stricken’ look, Ray thought as*

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he came into the room. Ray loved using new words. *Stricken* was one he had come across recently. It meant "hurt," for one thing. Ray could see Benjie felt hurt and distressed.

Benjie knew he must not talk back. This was not the first time he had disturbed Ruth's nap. He sat on the chair and looked at the clock. He loved his baby sister, but he kept forgetting about her naps.

"What did you want to tell me?" Ray asked in a kind, big-brotherly way.

Benjie looked at Mom.

"Yes, Benjie, you may talk." Mom knew what he was wondering. She sat down and started rocking Ruth back to sleep.

"Oh, Mom, when I am happy I feel like I have to shout! Dad brought home a surprise! But I am sorry I woke Ruth."

"A surprise?!" Ray exclaimed. "Where is Dad?"

"But Ray . . ." Then Benjie stopped and looked pleadingly at Mom. "Please, Mom, say that we can keep the surprise. Please! Dad said it depends on what you say."

"You mean you don't know what the surprise is either?" Ray interrupted excitedly.

"Not yet." Benjie looked at Mom. His eyes begged her to say yes. "Please, Mom."

Mom was looking curious, but rather doubtful. "If it is a goat, I don't know where we would keep one. And with Uncle Mark's goats breaking

out and coming over, we would have a regular mix-up with goats." Mom was shaking her head as she spoke. Already she was, as Ray would say, "fearing the worst."

"And the garden," Mom went on, "I do not want goats in the garden." Mom was even now picturing a herd of goats frisking about in her precious garden, eating everything in sight.

"Oh, it isn't a goat." Benjie stared hard at the clock. "Mom, is it five minutes?"

Mom glanced at the clock and nodded. "Yes, it is, Benjie, and you may go."

"I will try to remember not to forget," Benjie said as he hurried out with Ray. For Ray had waited for him, not wanting to go out without Benjie. Ray dearly loved his younger brother. Even though they were natured differently, they were very good friends. Ray loved to study and read. Benjie loved to be outdoors. He did not like to read. Not if he could go exploring in the woods, or be outside where things happened in real life instead of on a written page! How he hated sitting on a chair and doing nothing! A whole day did not seem as long as those five minutes, sitting there staring at the clock and thinking about why he had to be punished.

Even as he hurried outside, he whispered a little prayer that God would help him remember. He loved Mom and did not want to disappoint her.

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Shep, their faithful old dog, bounded to meet the boys. Then he saw Mom coming with Ruth. At once Shep turned his attention to Mom, wagging his tail joyfully. Shep loved them all, but, as Ray once said, it seemed Shep knew Mom was special, for he was always extra happy when he saw her.

Whenever Dad came home, Shep barked and welcomed him joyfully. Shep was never out of humor when he was awakened from a nap. Now he went from one person to the other, wagging his plume of a tail and smiling his big dog smile.

Ellen and Toby left the sandbox where they had been playing and came to join the rest of the family. Ellen was just younger than Benjie. She loved to pretend that Toby (who was not quite three) was her little boy. She held his hand and walked slowly so he could keep up.

By now Dad had finished unharnessing Chap, their new horse. As soon as Dad turned him out, Chap rolled himself in the pasture. Since it had rained a little shower that morning, Chap was soon covered with dirt. But he did not mind. He shook himself heartily several times and galloped out to join the other horses.

"How do you like Chap by now?" Mom asked as Dad came near. Ray and Benjie looked at each other. They were fairly bursting with curiosity, and now their parents had to discuss Chap! The boys loved horses, but the horse was not the surprise.

"He did well," Dad said, answering Mom's question. He had gotten Chap several weeks before at a sale. "The owner didn't want him because he didn't ride well, remember? But he did just fine with the wagon."

"Good. You'll use him more for pulling the wagon and the buggy anyway," Mom said. "If he is safe and stands quietly, that is the main thing."

"But, Mom, we wouldn't want to drive just any old plug, would we?" Ray asked. Ray liked a horse that had speed.

"Couldn't we talk about horses later and get on with the surprise?" Benjie asked impatiently. He knew he must not interrupt grown-ups, but Ray was not a grown-up.

"Oh, yes, the surprise," Dad said, with a twinkle in his eye. He picked up a box from under the wagon seat. He brought it over to Mom and then hesitated.

"If we don't keep the surprise, maybe it is best we don't see it," he said.

Dad looked at Mom, and Mom looked at Dad.

"If it's a good surprise, we'll surely keep it," Mom said, relieved that it did not seem to be a goat. "I can't imagine what it is." She was curious too.

The box quivered a little in Dad's hands, and low whimpers came out of it.

"Oh, what is it?" Ray and Benjie asked together. Dad set the box on the ground. Ellen