

BETH

AND THE **TRIO** OF

ANGELS

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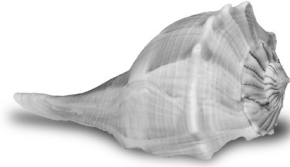
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CHAPTER 1

BETH THREW HER BACKPACK INTO THE CAR, reluctantly sliding in beside her sister Pat in the back seat. Maybe the car would be out of gas. Maybe Mom would discover a nail in the tire. Maybe, by some miracle, they would have engine trouble.

Beth turned and faced the window, almost willing the car to refuse to move. She held her breath. She prayed for something to happen. Anything. In the front seat her sister Meg chatted brightly with Mom.

Beth couldn't go to school. She couldn't face the class. Not after yesterday. They must have all heard about it by now. All the fourth graders must have talked about it at recess. It was probably even circulating down to the little kids and up to junior high.

Mom turned the key, and the engine started, signaling the beginning of the trip. The car moved forward. The lights worked. The windshield wipers tapped a light rhythm, clearing away the mist. Everything was normal. Except everything was not normal.

The idea of returning to school made Beth's head spin. Her thoughts flew around like a flock of birds, seeking cover from a coming storm.

"I hope this ride lasts forever," she whispered under her breath. "I don't want to go to school. I can't do it. I just can't do it. I will never be able to face the teacher, the other kids . . ."

Pat, the oldest, shifted slightly in Beth's direction, facing her sister with a steely look in her eyes. "You have to get out of the car when we get to school, Beth. You don't have a choice. Fourth graders don't just drop out."

Outside, long green fields dotted with patches of blue and yellow flowers flew by the window. Beth knew the route all too well. Just a few more miles, and the fields would give way to civilization, a grocery store, a gas station. And then one more sharp curve, a post office, a

white church. Second left. Third building on the right. Medfield Christian School.

With each mile that passed, the sick feeling in the pit of Beth's stomach seemed to worsen. How could she open the door of the car, step out into the school parking lot, sling her backpack over her shoulder, and risk seeing another fourth grader walking in her direction? Risk seeing anybody, for that matter? The school secretary. The janitor. Or worst of all, Robbie Ladd, the biggest tease in the whole fourth grade. She couldn't even bear to think about it.

From the front seat Meg, the next oldest, tossed her auburn curls and chatted as if it were just an ordinary school day. "Did you see what Ann Ross was wearing yesterday? I hope Mr. Miller is sick again. I really liked the substitute. I'm so glad it's pizza day. Are you going to try out for basketball?"

Just hearing her talk caused Beth's stomach to tighten. They really *were* going to school. She really *was* going to have to open the car door, navigate her way across the parking lot, direct her steps to the front entrance of Medfield Christian School, walk down the hall crowded with

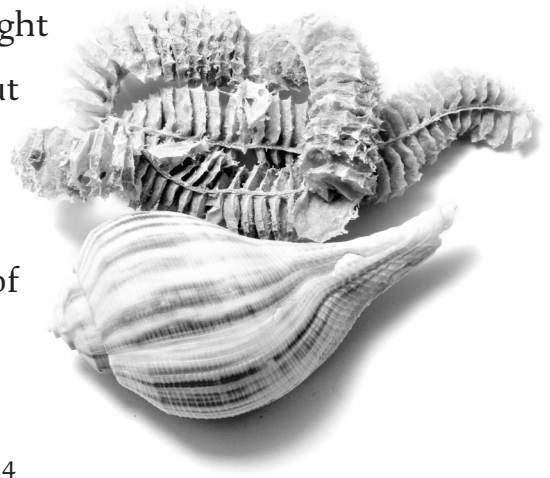
kids, face Mrs. Starr at the door to her classroom, nod and smile, cross in front of Robbie Ladd's desk, and slink into her seat. This was happening!

Meg's voice faded as Beth replayed the whole thing in her head. The day had started out almost perfectly yesterday. She had been so happy, so hopeful.

She remembered humming as she packed everything into Mom's car. She had been so proud of her work. When Mrs. Starr posted the rules for the science fair, she had been more than ready.

The Nissan continued traveling toward Medfield Christian School as Beth recalled how everything started. Her thoughts rolled like the waves on the beach the day she arrived at her idea for the science fair.

When she had found the mysterious object on vacation last summer, she thought it was a piece of seaweed. But when she looked online, she discovered the chain of flat discs was a string of egg cases.



Excited, she had cracked open one of the discs. Sure enough, out fell the tiniest shell she had ever seen. It was a perfect channeled whelk!

Her mind had immediately flown to the school's yearly science fair. She knew right then and there she was holding a winner. The year before, she had set her heart on a blue ribbon. But then she had come down with the flu and had been unable to get things completed on time. Standing on the beach in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, holding the sand-coated egg case, she'd determined this school year was going to be different.

"Beth?" Mom's voice broke into her thoughts. "I was asking if you wanted to be picked up early today or if you planned to stay after school for soccer."

Stay after school? She didn't even want to get out of the car! Didn't want to be dropped off at all! Beth mumbled something to Mom and let her thoughts take over once again.

Back home in Michigan, she had carefully placed the tiny shells into an envelope. Then she slid the envelope and egg cases into a shoe box and placed it on a shelf.

The next step had been to find a large whelk. Medfield, Michigan, was not exactly on the Atlantic Ocean! She remembered wracking her brain to find a way to buy the shell. Saving her dog-walking money had been a brainstorm! Each Friday she put 50 cents in a tithe envelope and one dollar in a jar. One month later she had had enough cash!

How excited she had been when the small package finally arrived in the mail! Opening the box, she admired the large pink-and-tan shell. Then she placed her new treasure in the shoe box with the egg case and tiny, grainlike shells.

It had seemed like forever before Mrs. Starr finally announced the date for the fair and spelled out the rules.

How her thoughts had hummed! She'd guessed Mrs. Starr would ask for a Bible text! Tucked safely in the shoebox was an index card with 1 Chronicles 16:9 carefully printed:

*Sing to Him, sing psalms to Him;
talk of all His wondrous works!*

Six weeks had gone by quickly as she completed every step. She had been so proud of the poster. It had taken hours to keep the printing straight and even. In the middle she glued three egg cases and some tiny shells.

She had been so excited yesterday as she packed everything into Mom's car! How could she have guessed what would happen before she could proudly set it all up in the school gym? Oh, how she wished she could have warned herself yesterday as she prepared to leave the house!

Beth broke from her thoughts. She could not avoid reality any longer. With mounting fear, she peered out the car window as her destination grew closer. What was she going to do?