

WALK SOFTLY

By Ann Herrick

CHAPTER ONE

I slammed my spoon into my cereal bowl. "Why on earth do I have to go *Oregon*?"

Mom ignored the clattering spoon. "What can I say, Gwynne? Your Aunt Elaine eloped. I couldn't very well tell my sister to postpone her first honeymoon so Dad and I could go on our second one."

"This is just great!" I put on my longest pout. "First I'm robbed of a trip to Europe. Now I'm being shipped off to Oregon. At least in Los Angeles I could've gone shopping with Aunt Elaine. I might've even gotten the autographs of the cast of Central Hospital! What can I do in Oregon? What's there?"

"Trees." Dad poured cream into his coffee. "A lot of trees."

"Big deal! There are trees in New York. Central Park is full of them. We even have one in our courtyard."

Mom leaned across the table and patted my hand. "Gwynne, I'm sorry about Los Angeles. I know you're disappointed. As for being 'robbed' of a trip to Europe...well, how many kids do you know who go on a honeymoon with their parents? Besides, we'll take you the next time."

"When?" I yanked my hand away from Mom's. "In five years when I'll be too old to enjoy it?"

Dad sighed. "You're only fourteen. I hardly think you'll be too old at the tender age of—"

My turn to sigh. "Dad. You just don't understand."

"We try to understand," Mom said in a tight voice. "I wish you'd do the same."

Guilt pricked at me. I knew Mom and Dad going to Paris for their twentieth anniversary was not a crime. But I felt left out.

Besides, how would I face the kids at school in the fall? A vacation in a dull place like Oregon would be bad for my image, lowly as it already was.

And there were other things to worry about. I chewed my lip. "What about all those bears out in Oregon?"

"I'm sure we'd hear if there were wild animals roaming the streets," said Mom. She brushed my bangs to the side, which I can't stand. It's such a patronizing gesture. Besides, they're my bangs. "You probably won't see anything more terrifying than a few deer."

I snorted. The horses in Central Park were enough to make me nervous.

Mom brought out her reassuring smile. I knew she'd try her everything-will-be-okay approach. "You'll have a good time in Oregon. You've always had fun with your cousin Neeta."

"But that was at Gramma's house in Indiana," I protested. "There was a great park and swimming pool in West Lafayette. Besides, I haven't seen Neeta since Gramma died. It's been three years! Maybe Neeta's changed."

"Well," said Dad, "I'm sure you'll still like—"

"And Aunt Madeline is such a bore!" I raised my voice. I didn't really like pointing out the obvious.... But I was desperate. "All she does is knit. And Uncle Judd...." I rolled my eyes. "He's such a know-it-all. He spouts off constantly."

My parents were silent. I figured they would be. They couldn't deny what was true.

"Your Uncle Judd is a great guy in a lot of ways," Dad finally said. Then he grinned. "If I could put up with his 'spouting off' when we were growing up, you can put up with it for ten days."

"Your Aunt Madeline is nice, too," said Mom. Her right eyebrow rose and she did what all parents do when they knew their arguments were weak. They turned into dictators. "There's really no other choice but for you to go to Oregon. Our plans are set. We can't change them, even if we wanted to."

"Hmmmmph." I curled my lower lip and stared down at my fingernails, trying to exude misery from every pore.

"Don't whine and pout and make your aunt's and uncle's lives miserable either," said Mom.

"I wouldn't do that," I said indignantly. "I'm not a baby!"

Mom and Dad looked at each other.

"Remember, it's only for ten days," Mom said. "After all, we wouldn't want to impose on your aunt and uncle any longer than that."

Translation: They wouldn't want to stick them with *me* any longer than that! I'd run out of arguments. "I guess going to Oregon will be okay," I said, even though I was sure it would be horrible. I knew it was what they wanted to hear.

"We want you to have a good time," said Mom, as if their wanting it would make it so.

"I know," I said. That seemed to satisfy everyone, so I excused myself and went to my room to pout in privacy.

I'd had my own plans before the second-honeymoon idea was sprung on me. I was tired of being a dreary Honor-Roll nobody who always sat next to the pencil sharpener. I needed a

new image!

I'd gotten my braces off last month and recently my body had almost caught up with my hands and feet. I'd even graduated to a single A-cup bra. So Amy, my best friend and fellow social zero, and I had hoped to prepare ourselves to look our best for the first day of school.

I needed the confidence great-looking girls seemed to possess. So far, no matter what the social situation, I was always tripping over my own feet or bumping into walls because I was trying so hard to act casual.

So to build up our self-esteem, Amy and I had planned everything from a new exercise routine to the exact day we'd both have our legs waxed. We'd even decided to get one of those makeovers at the cosmetics counter in Bloomingdale's. With me going off to the Oregon wilderness Amy would have to start without me. I'd fall behind schedule.

I decided to call Amy. Maybe *she* could help me figure a way out of going to Oregon.

"Hi, it's me," I said the second she answered.

"Hi! All set for your trip to L.A.? I just know you'll be discovered and come back famous. All you have to do is go on that Universal Studios tour and—"

"Hold it, Amy. I'm not going to Los Angeles."

"What? That's great! Then starting tomorrow we can go to the gym and sign up for that advanced aerobics—"

"Hold it again. I'm going to Oregon." I explained about Aunt Elaine eloping.

"But what's in Oregon?"

"Trees."

"Trees? I don't get it."

"The trees are incidental. I'm going to Oregon to stay at my cousin's house."

"Oh."

I tapped my fingers on the mattress. "Unless we can figure out a way for me to stay here."

"You know I'd smuggle you into my room. But Kirstin says sharing a room with me is bad enough. She hates overnights. She says she's not taking in any strays."

"Your sister has such a delicate way of putting things."

"Maybe I could stash you in my closet and sneak food to you."

"Thanks, but no thanks." I paused, then said, "I was thinking of a way to talk Dad into letting me stay here and guard our place."

"Don't use the word *guard*. It sounds dangerous."

"Good point." I drummed my fingers on the nightstand. "Maybe I could offer to paint the kitchen while they're away. Mom's always saying it needs a change. But Dad's easier to convince. I'll go to his store this morning, so I can work on him without Mom around."

"Good idea. Let me know how it turns out. Maybe you can still join the aerobics class in the afternoon."

"I'll call you as soon as I know."

I hung up, stretched out on my bed and thought about the best way to approach Dad. I couldn't go to Los Angeles and come back with autographs and Hollywood adventures to impress the Right People and forever change my boring image at school. So I would *have* to talk him into letting me stay in New York.

"How could a trip to Oregon impress anyone?" I said to the bedpost. "If any Popular Kids ever found out, I'd be more of a social outcast than ever. I mean, who on earth would ever get excited about a bunch of trees?"

Title: Walk Softly and Watch Out for Bigfoot

Purchase Link: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07JQHZ2JY>

Author Website: <http://annherrickauthor.com>