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Sierra Girls

author

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Chapter 1

Michelle and Amy stepped into the afternoon sunshine. The front steps of Lighthouse Middle School overlooked the beach, but building sandcastles was the last thing on Michelle's mind. Although Mr. Cooper hadn't exactly grilled her, she always felt irritable after visiting the counselor's office. She hadn't meant to tell Cooper about the fight she'd had with her dad that morning, but he'd dragged it out of her, effectively ruining her mood.

"Sorry about your dad," Amy said. "I love to fly. It's so much fun. And Tahoe is the best."

"Yes." Her voice sounded sad in her ears. "I asked him to take me for three days, but he just wouldn't budge. He can be so stubborn sometimes. Mom would've let me go." As soon as it was out of her mouth, Michelle regretted it. Even a year after her mom's death Michelle's grief still lingered, always threatening to break through.

"So why wouldn't he let you go with him?" Amy asked. "He could've got you out of school for one day, and you guys would've had so much fun."

Michelle stopped and turned toward Amy. They'd put about half a mile between them and the school. The walking path along the shore wasn't crowded, but they had to dodge bicycles, joggers, and random dogs every few minutes.

"That's just it, Amy. He could've got me out of school today, but he said school's more important than a weekend at Tahoe. I'm sure he's right. He's always right. But he could've been a little less stoic about it."

After sidestepping a particularly feisty Chihuahua, Amy said, "But doesn't your dad have to carry passengers in the plane? Maybe there weren't enough seats."

"There would have been one extra seat that I could have ridden in. That's why I kept badgering him about it. I feel kind of bad now. I should've just let it go. I wouldn't even kiss him goodbye this morning because I was pouting. Now I won't see him for two days."

They walked to the intersection of Swift Street where they usually parted company. Amy had to go to the Guardian offices where her mom worked.

"Sorry, Michelle. I wish I could help."

"I'll be fine. It's nice just to talk to someone about it. You're a good listener." They hugged, and Michelle watched Amy walk away, marveling at how much better she felt after talking to her friend—especially considering how crappy she'd felt telling the same story to Mr. Cooper. He was always trying to fix her, but Amy just enjoyed being with her. Like her mom.

Michelle rounded the last corner before her house. She loved the little bungalow in the Circles district of what she thought of as uptown Santa Cruz. Their house was at the end of a cul-de-sac, Sea

Lion Circle. Most of the neighboring houses were summer rentals, and most of the renters were sun worshipers who spent most of their time a few blocks away at the beach.

The street was deserted. No cars. No SUV's. No kids running in the front yards. It had been this way ever since she'd started summer school. Michelle thought it meant that mostly old people had rented the houses, but she really had no idea. She rarely met any of her neighbors.

Mrs. Henschly—the babysitter who always wanted to teach Michelle to knit—wasn't due for a couple hours. Michelle planned to spend that time surfing the Internet. She loved computers. Her dad's best friend, whom she used to call Uncle Nathan when she was a kid (she'd since dropped the Uncle part), had been teaching her computer programming for the past couple years. She was currently working on a C# program. It was a game, but she wasn't sure exactly what it would do just yet. Before she could finish it, she needed to look up some programming tips on the Internet about how to read the joystick controller properly.

But first things first. Once inside, she headed straight for the refrigerator. Michelle was a grape fanatic, and that was the first thing she always thought of when she walked in the front door. She'd just sat down in front of the computer when she heard a car pull into the driveway.

She looked out the dining room window, but didn't recognize the white AMC Hornet in the driveway. Maybe Mrs. Henschly got someone to drive her here early. A man stepped out and Michelle knew instantly that she'd seen him before, though she couldn't quite remember where. She had a good memory for faces, and by the time she walked out the front door, she'd placed it.

"Roper Lund?"

He looked a bit startled at this greeting. She was used to that. He was wearing the same hairpiece he'd been wearing the only other time she'd seen him. It was a dead give away.

"Michelle," he said. "You're looking good. I'm surprised you remember me."

She smiled but forbore telling him how she'd recognized him. "Of course I remember you. It wasn't even six months ago. What are you doing here? Are you back at the university?"

"No. I graduated last month, and I've started a new job in Aptos."

It had all come back to Michelle now. She'd met Lund in February when she'd participated in a counselor-training program at UCSC. Mr. Cooper had arranged for her to go, and Lund had interviewed her. It was like an exchange program for wannabe school counselors. Lund had been studying at Sac State, and he and the others in the program had come to Santa Cruz to conduct supervised counseling sessions with real live kids. She'd been one of the guinea pigs. At first, she'd feared it would be an unpleasant experience, but Lund had been so nice that she'd ended up having a great time with him. Mr. Cooper and one of Lund's professors had been there observing, and Mr. Cooper told her afterward that they'd given Lund an excellent mark on the assignment.

"That's great," Michelle said. "Maybe we can get together sometime."

Lund's expression changed. "Actually, Michelle, that's why I'm here." He looked at her for several seconds without speaking. "There's been an accident. Your father's plane crashed in the mountains."

Michelle's world collapsed. Her vision began turning black and fuzzy around the edges.

"He's alive," Lund said, "but he's in the hospital in Tahoe City." Tears rolled out of Michelle's eyes

and down her pale cheeks. She barely noticed. Lund came to her and put his arms around her. "It's all right," he said. She knew he was trying to soothe her, but the words sounded flat and meaningless in her ears. "There, there," he said. "He'll be all right. He was injured, and he's in the intensive care unit. The doctors are very hopeful though."

Michelle tried to speak, but no words came out. She pulled out of his embrace and sat on the stone bench near the entryway.

Lund loomed over her, casting his shadow across her face. "Your father keeps asking to see you. The doctors told him you'd come. They couldn't get him to calm down otherwise. Mr. Cooper just got the call a few minutes ago. They asked him to drive you up there, but he can't. He's got some family thing tonight. He called me, and I came right away. I'm sorry that we have to meet again under these circumstances."

Michelle could hardly think straight. "I don't know," she said. "I'd better ask Mrs. Henschly. She's supposed to be watching me tonight."

"Mr. Cooper already called her," Lund said. "She thought it best that you go see your dad." He paused. "Just in case."

Michelle stared at Lund's face for nearly a whole minute. She was trying to decide what to do, but her brain was floating in molasses. She thought of her father lying in a hospital bed then thought of how unkind she'd been that morning. If he died before she could apologize, before she could tell him how much she loved him—

"All right," she said. "I need to grab a few things from the house and lock up." The words came out of her mouth. She heard them but didn't know how they'd managed it.

"You'd better bring a sweater," Lund said. "It gets cold in the mountains at night, even in the middle of summer."

For a moment, she sat immobile. Then she took a deep breath and walked into the house. Five minutes later, she was sitting in Lund's car, speeding over the road toward her dad.

...excerpt....

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