

## AN EXCERPT FROM JOSEPHINE'S DAUGHTER:

*Book Five in the Golden City Series by A.B. Michaels*

*San Francisco, 1893*

The coastal oak, ancient by any standards, stood on the edge of the Firestone estate with branches so thick and heavy that several dipped against the ground before rising again. That made it perfect for a toddler named Kit to climb upon its gnarled limbs and call it her very own “nanny bone” tree. Over the years, she had defended her citadel from both her older and her younger brother with shrieks and tears and flailing arms, so that by the time she turned thirteen, everyone in the Firestone clan indulgently acknowledged whose tree it was.

On this particular September afternoon, during one of the Firestones’ many garden parties, Kit and two younger friends, Cecily and Bea, had climbed to the upper branches to perch among the leaves. Kit rucked her blue velvet smock between her knees and leaned back against the trunk with a sigh. “It is my favorite hiding place in all the world,” she said. “I’ve tested it many times. No one can see us.”

She was right. Twenty minutes later the three girls saw a man and a woman strolling across the lawn toward the tree. It was obvious they assumed they were alone.

“What’s my papa doing with your mama?” Bea whispered to Cecily.

With a finger to her lips, Kit quickly shushed her cohorts. Who knew what secrets they might learn?

“I think she knows,” Hazel Anders said to the man, her voice filled with worry. She was like a hummingbird, small and fragile and fluttery. Anxiety, everyone knew, was her constant companion.

Kit glanced at Cecily and reiterated her silent warning.

“How could she? There’s no resemblance.” Clarence Marshall, big and blond and florid-looking, responded with his customary confidence.

“The hair,” Mrs. Anders said.

“Nonsense,” he replied. “Who would know? Frank barely has any.”

“A feeling, then. I sense it every time she and I are together. A certain disdain ...bordering on dislike. Covered with a veneer of civility.”

“You are imagining things, my dear. But so what if she does? She is nothing to us.”

“She has the power to destroy us. One word and —”

“And why would she? She has everything she could possibly want. She’s on top of the world. In fact, I should thank her. If she hadn’t insisted we move here, you and I would never have—”

“Please stop. I wish it had never happened. I wish we had never met.”

As Mrs. Anders began to sniffle, Mr. Marshall took her spindly hand in his large paw. “Don’t say that, Hazel. You don’t mean it. Somebody had to help you. I’m just glad it was me.” He tipped her chin so that she looked up at him.

Kit looked at Bea, whose eyes were wide as saucers. Bea said nothing, however. None of the girls did, no doubt understanding they had heard too much already.

Mrs. Anders looked tearfully up at Mr. Marshall. “No, I don’t mean it. I am grateful, really. But ... it’s just so difficult.”

He patted her hand. “I know. We just have to be strong, that’s all. Come, we’d better get back. I imagine their game will be ending soon.” As they walked back toward the mansion, he added in a light-hearted tone, “Thank God you never liked Russian whist.”

By tacit agreement, the three girls waited until the couple had crested the hill before breaking their silence. Ten-year-old Bea, the youngest, spoke first. “Why was my daddy talking about your daddy’s hair?” she asked Cecily, giggling. “Or what little there is of it.”

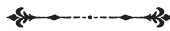
Cecily didn’t answer, looking stricken. She was an only child, and twelve, and more than capable of putting one and one together to make two.

“I’m sure Cecily has no idea,” Kit said. “But I expect you’ll get a whipping if you tell your papa what you heard him say. Or your mama, too.”

“My papa doesn’t whip me,” Bea said.

“There’s always a first time.”

Kit began to climb down the tree. Somehow it no longer seemed quite the sanctuary it had been.



Kit and Cecily never talked about what they’d heard that day. Although Kit imagined her friend was ashamed, it couldn’t hold a candle to what Kit felt. She knew without a doubt that the woman Mrs. Anders spoke so fearfully of was Kit’s own mother, Josephine.

Who else was on top of the world? The Firestone name meant everything in San Francisco society.

Who else passed judgment on everybody and everything from behind a veil of sweetness? Kit experienced that from her mother every day of her life.

And who else had convinced Bea’s parents to move to the Golden City so many years ago? If she’d heard the story once, she’d heard it a thousand times.

Kit’s mother had the power to destroy whomever she chose. What Kit overheard only reaffirmed what she already suspected: that her mother was a controlling, spiteful, and dangerous woman.

But does a thirteen-year-old ever know quite as much as she thinks she does, especially when it comes to her mother?