

## AN EXCERPT FROM THE PROMISE:

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

Have you ever known the fearsome feeling that at any moment you may lose control of yourself? But you know you *can't* lose control, because everyone is counting on you to be the one who holds it all together. The one who makes it all right for others to falter because they are confident you will not. It was the loneliest feeling in the world, knowing it was all up to me.

I was at the end of my tether trying to calm Berry down from her near-hysteria at the thought of losing Miss Evie in the rubble. She wanted to run back in and search for the doll, but of course I couldn't let her.

Aunt Marget was no help; in fact, she added to my burden. "Toby and Ronnie's spirits are in the house and I am not leaving," she declared, and sat pugnaciously defiant while I tried unsuccessfully to make her see reason.

We were alone now. I had been at my task for what seemed like an eternity, but my aunt simply would not budge. I continued to sit in the dainty chair I had dragged into the yard and held onto Berry as she continued to mourn her loss. She had slept for a little while, which I was grateful for, but upon awakening had remembered the fate of her doll, and so the tears had returned.

The smell of smoke was growing stronger and a wave of utter helplessness combined with panic washed over me. I wanted to run and find someone to help us, but I couldn't leave my aunt and Berry alone. Try as I might, I couldn't stop my eyes from welling up. I knew we would have to leave soon, yet I despaired of getting us out of our predicament before further tragedy struck.

Then, out of nowhere, the soldier appeared. He was broad shouldered and wore an olive-green uniform. Under his hat I saw short dark hair, and he had deep gray eyes like the ocean on a stormy day. He had knelt down in front of Berry and me, and when I looked up, he gazed directly into my eyes—no, into my heart, I think—and touched my face so gently, like a feather, even though I felt the rough texture of his palm. He asked my sister's name and when I told him, he proceeded to kid her about it.

Berry stared at him, her despair temporarily derailed. "My name isn't Miss Strawberry."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Miss Raspberry, then."

Berry shook her head forcefully. "No, that isn't my name either."

The soldier made a show of looking perplexed. "My apologies. Um, Miss Blueberry?" She shook her head. "Cranberry?" Another shake. "Huckleberry?"

"No. Just *Berry*," my sister said with the comical exasperation only the littlest children can muster. I swallowed hard at the loving, clever way in which the man, Ben, distracted her.

“Well, Miss Berry, I am glad to meet you and would like to help you and your—” he glanced up at me “—sister?” I nodded. “And your—”

“Aunt,” I supplied.

“And your aunt. Because this is not the best place for you to be right now, and it’s time for you all to be moving to a safer location.”

“But I c...can’t go,” Berry said, tears threatening to fall once more. “Miss Evie is back there—” She twisted in my arms to point at the house. “She was upstairs and fell down—and I can’t leave her there.”

“Miss Evie is the doll our mother made for Berry,” I quickly explained. “She’s—it’s very important to her.”

Ben stood and looked at the rubble. “Wait here,” he said.

“She has red hair and is wearing her apple-green dress!” Berry called out.

He disappeared around the side of the house and I held my breath, caught between fear for his safety and hope that he would produce the rag doll. He returned several minutes later empty-handed.

“I am afraid it’s a bit of a jumble, Miss Berry,” he explained. “My guess is that Miss Evie found a safe place to hide and is just waiting for all the shaking to stop. Once it does, she’ll make herself known and you’ll be able to get her back.”

Berry pondered this for a bit and seemed to think the idea had merit. Then she frowned. “But how long will that take?” she asked.

I caught Ben’s eye and shook my head ever so slightly. *No use building her hopes up.* He seemed to understand.

“I wish I could tell you for certain, little one, but I don’t rightly know. It may take a while, but in the meantime—”

At that moment, a wagon pulled up driven by one soldier with another one riding shotgun. I couldn’t tell what was in the back of it. The driver hopped down and walked over, addressing Ben, who rose, stood at attention, and saluted the man.

“At ease, corporal,” the man said. He touched the brim of his cap out of respect to my aunt, no doubt assuming she was in command of our little group. “Ma’am. I’m Warrant Officer Josiah Whitcomb from the Presidio Artillery Corps. We’ve been charged with creating a firebreak in this area and this street looks to be a good defensive position. I’m afraid you’re going to have to leave this location immediately. I’m terribly sorry.”

“What does he mean? How is he going to break the fire?” Berry asked Ben.

Ben and I exchanged looks again. Of course I understood what the officer meant. As a member of the artillery corps, the man was in charge of blowing things up. Berry must have understood that Ben’s hesitation meant something bad, because she hopped from my lap and ran over to Aunt Marget, as if the two of them would defy the entire Army if need be.

I couldn't help myself. I laughed with incredulity. I am sure I sounded like a madwoman—I felt like one, at any rate. "I can't get my aunt to budge," I said to Ben, my voice rising in desperation. "She says the spirits of my Uncle Toby and Cousin Ronnie are in the house and she can't leave them. And even if she wanted to, she can barely walk." I felt that sense of panic rise up again to engulf me. "It is hopeless!" I cried.

Ben held out his hand to me, beckoning me to stand. He then did the strangest, most wonderful thing. He put his hands on either side of my face as if directing me to pay attention only to him. His thumbs swept across my cheeks. His eyes burned with a ferocity of tenderness.

"It is not hopeless," he said firmly. "We will get you to safety. I can tell that you are strong and brave and smart, and you will need to be all of those things to help your sister and your aunt to get through this. You can do it. I know you can."

And then he kissed me on my forehead, as if we had known each other forever.

And it felt as if we had.