

By Kate Merchant



A Long Journey

The Adventure Begins

Chapter 1: A Grand Adventure Begins

July 22, 1992

Sophie's Perspective

The letter arrived during the summer of 1992. July 16, 1992, to be exact. I was almost fourteen. Alternative music was big, the public World Wide Web was still in its infancy, and Brenda and Dylan were starting to drift apart on "Beverly Hills 90210." My best friend, Heather Shields, and I were sitting on my dad's front porch, eating cherry ice pops, when the mailman stopped by.

"Hey, Mr. Lomax." I licked up the pop juice about to drip onto the porch.

"Hi, Sophie. Here's your mail for the day." Mr. Lomax smiled and handed me a stack of letters.

"Thanks!" I got up and motioned Heather to come inside with me. We had just returned from a camping trip that morning and were going to watch the latest episode of "90210" that I had taped. The show had been an obsession for us since the beginning of junior high. The off-season episodes were our favorites since we didn't have to wait through a summer hiatus. This week was supposed to be killer, with Dylan kissing Kelly.

My dad, Dan, was a paramedic for the Santa Barbara County Fire Department. We lived in a small, two-story house in Goleta Valley, a Santa Barbara suburb a couple of miles from the beach. When I tell people about where I grew up, I usually just mention Santa Barbara and UCSB. It was my own personal slice of heaven. I had lived in Goleta my entire life, just my dad and me. Mary, my mom, had left us years ago. I still saw her on the odd occasion, like my junior high graduation last June. My dad and I were as close as we could be, barring the inescapable fact that I now had breasts.

"Sophie," Heather said. "I am going to get some sodas, okay?"

"Okay." I flipped through the envelopes. On one, Ed McMahon announced that my father could be the latest millionaire from the Publishers Clearinghouse Sweepstakes. Another envelope held our electric and water bills. The final envelope was one of those thick ones that you expected to see when you got accepted into college. Looking at it for a moment, I took a deep breath.

Last winter, my art teacher had encouraged me to apply to Dowsford College, a prep school in Nottingham, England. Ms. Reece, who was from England, rambled on about the merits of the Dowsford arts department. The school accepted a limited number of new students and very few non-British students. Heather and my other best friend, Lex, made me apply. Actually, Lex ransacked my room for my drawings, and Heather filled out my application. They stole my Nirvana tapes until I agreed to fill out the essay portion. My dad threatened to put a parental lock on the cable to show only ESPN if I didn't complete the scholarship applications. All this

work took more than a month, but I finally got both the admissions application and financial form completed, and my dad sent them FedEx to the U.K.

Six months later, here I was, looking at the envelope emblem for Dowsford College. The quality of the paper reminded me of the wedding invitations that Lex's cousin had sent out last spring. The envelope was really beautiful, a work of art.

Heather walked into the kitchen. "Sophie, do you want to make popcorn?" She then noticed my expression. "What happened? You look really freaked out."

I turned and held up the envelope.

Looking at it with wonder, she exclaimed, "Holy crap! It finally came. Open it!"

"I can't," I whispered. This envelope had the potential to change everything in my life.

"Are you kidding? A thick envelope means good news. Remember when my sister got her acceptance to Stanford last year? Don't be such a chicken."

I nodded and started to open it, telling myself, *Like a Band-Aid, Sophie. Just open it.* I then ripped open the beautiful paper. With shaking hands, I pulled out the letter.

Dear Miss Walker,

We are pleased to announce your acceptance to Dowsford College...

"Oh, my God!" I dropped the letter like a hot potato.

Heather picked it up and read it. "Oh, my God!"

We both started squealing and jumping up and down. I hadn't heard anything after being waitlisted in the spring, so I had assumed that my application had been turned down.

"I'm calling Lex!" Heather headed to the phone.

I nodded and started reading. The letter explained that in addition to my acceptance, I was receiving a scholarship that covered tuition and board. The letter also outlined the expenses that would be my family's responsibility. School started in September, and I needed to be moved into the dorm the week before the first day of term.

Lex raced into the doorway a couple of minutes later with Heather's boyfriend, Kevin. We all took turns looking at the letter until my dad got home around 6 p.m.

"Hey, kids, I thought you would be around the TV, watching that guy Duke Sperry," he said, teasing me.

"It's Luke Perry, Daddy. Look what came in the mail today," I said, handing him the paperwork.

Frowning, he took it from me. As he read, he broke into a grin, the eye-crinkling one that I loved. It made him look like a kid.

"Sophie, this is amazing! Congratulations, sweetie," Dad said, pulling me into a hug. "We have some plans to make, huh?" My dad was happy, but I could tell he was also a little sad.

Looking at my dad's expression, it hit me for the first time that I'd be leaving soon. I would no longer see him or my friends every day. When I had filled out the paperwork back in January, I hadn't believed there was a chance in hell that I would get accepted. I applied mostly to get people off my back. Before, I had thought I would mostly likely leave for UCLA or UCSB, schools within driving distance. Dowsford was 5,000 miles away.

I wouldn't turn fourteen until September, after school had started. Panic started to settle in as the euphoria morphed into the realization of what this meant. No more Dad or Lex or Heather. What I would do without my "90210" night with Heather? No more sunny weather. I had never been out of the country, but I knew how cold and wet England could be.

When I realized all the changes this would mean for me, I broke out in a cold sweat. My dad took one look at me and turned to my friends. "Kids, go watch that '90210' show. I need to speak with Sophie for a moment."

With that, Dad led me up the stairs to my room.

"I don't... I don't want to do this," I whispered to him as we passed by his army photo and my fifth-grade graduation headshot on the way to my bedroom.

My room was my haven. Artwork that I had created over the years adorned the walls. Attempts at impressionism, abstracts, and drawings of cities stared at us. My art teachers thought I had the makings of either a junior Frank Lloyd Wright or Georgia O'Keefe. My drafting table sat in front of the window. The corkboard on my dresser was covered with photos of my friends and from our spring formal. Lex and Heather were musicians, and I had done the cover artwork for their band. Kevin was their manager.

My dad walked in with me. "Okay, baby, I know you're scared, but you can't give up on this," he said, sitting me on my bed as he took the desk chair.

"I'll be five thousand miles away," I mumbled, looking down at my nails.

"I know," Dad said quietly. "It's going to be a big change for us. I didn't think I would lose my little girl this soon, but this is an amazing opportunity, Sophie. You get few chances like this in your lifetime. Who knows what this could mean for your future? Let's talk about this over pizza."

We walked back downstairs where Heather, Lex, and Kevin were sitting around the kitchen table. They looked at me worriedly. "You okay, Sophie?" Heather asked.

"Yeah, I just had a stupid panic attack," I said, trying to act nonchalant like the worldly woman I wasn't.

"You have to do this," she said.

"What I am going to do without Perry Thursday?" I asked as we hugged tightly.

"Expand your taste in men," Lex commented dryly.

We all laughed, and Dad ordered the pizza. By my second slice, I decided to accept. Like Dad said, this was the chance of a lifetime. This school had the possibility to open doors that I couldn't even fathom. The letter was dated July 15th, and I had to notify the school by July 30th about my acceptance.

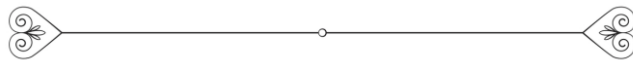
The rest of my summer was spent in a whirlwind of activity to prepare for my upcoming journey. Dad spent the next few weeks arranging my airfare, student visa, and dorm assignment. He also had to find a guardian for local emergencies. Teachers were sending me assignments that I needed to complete before the start of school. It was a big change for someone who usually spent her summers on the beach.

August arrived, and I was ready to leave for Dowsford, specifically the Martin House dorm, my new residence for the next four years. My friends and I gathered at LAX to say goodbye. I wouldn't be coming home until winter break, since the British don't observe Thanksgiving, and Dad didn't have the money for multiple trips overseas. That meant I wouldn't see any of my friends again until Christmas. They gave me a going away party the night before and a framed photo of our spring formal for my dorm room.

At the airport, Heather and I hugged a tearful goodbye, and Dad took my backpack. He was coming to Dowsford to get me settled, and then I was on my own. With one more hug for Heather, and a promise to write, I turned around and followed my father toward my future.

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