No matter how hard twelve-year-old North Olson tries to do what's right, he can't seem to please his dad. When a major flood threatens to destroy his hometown, North is left in charge of his little sister Rosie. A blizzard blows in and his great-grandmother disappears. Can North find his great-grandmother and keep Rosie safe as flood waters continue to rise? Will he finally make his dad proud?

STORM WARNING

Elizabeth Raum

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By Elizabeth Raum

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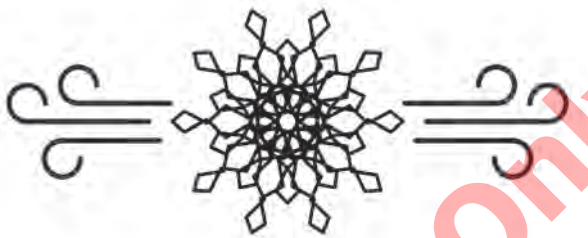
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1



Meltdown

In the fields surrounding the houses, the snow was waist deep. In some places, even deeper. Sure, some had melted, but there was still a lot to go. John Wheeler, our TV weatherman, said the winter of 1996–1997 was "one for the record books." The snow fell continuously, and it piled against whatever it hit. My friend Tyler Nelson helped me make a snow stairway up to the garage roof. We spent hours sliding down the other side into the field behind the house. It was the best sledding ever. Snow wasn't a problem … unless it melted all at once.

On April 1, Dad drove into the yard just as the school bus dropped Rosie and me at the mailbox. "North," he yelled. "Drop your books inside and give me a hand."

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I tossed my backpack into the kitchen and raced back outside. Dad had already begun unloading a giant pile of sandbags from his pickup. "We'll pile them between the houses and the road. Just in case."

I groaned. "You really think the water could come up this high?"

"I do," he said. "We may be far from the river, but with so much snow in the field, we're likely to get overland flooding. If water fills the road, there's a chance it will seep into the basements. At least this will keep water out of the main floors."

I was helping Dad unload sandbags when Rosie bounded out of the house.

"I want to help, too," she said.

"Yah, right," I snorted, and then wished I hadn't because if Dad heard … But apparently he hadn't.

He smiled at Rosie. "That's my girl." He pointed to one of the sandbags we'd stacked on the snowy ground. "Go ahead. Lift it."

Rosie's the smallest eight-year-old kid in the entire second grade. She bent down, wrapped her arms around the white bag of sand, and tried to lift it. Nothing happened.

She took a deep breath and tried again. "It's stuck," she said.

I grabbed the bag, lifted it over my head, and spun in a circle.

"Show-off," Rosie said. "You unstuck it. That's not fair."

"But it wasn't—

"Now don't you worry about it," Dad said, patting Rosie's shoulder. "Those bags weigh about half as much as you do. Leave the heavy lifting to your brother and me."

"Then I'll sing for you," she said. "Singing makes the work go faster."

Dad and I unloaded the sandbags. Rosie pranced around us singing "Ring Around the Rosie." She thought she was being clever, and Dad thought so, too. This was ridiculous. I mean, next year she'll be a third grader, but sometimes she acts more like she's in kindergarten, especially around Dad. But I knew better than to say that out loud. So I tried to zone it out. Eventually, she got cold and went inside. We could finally work in peace.

We began piling the sandbags between the houses and the road. Dad stripped off his heavy jacket and rolled up his sleeves. The long, jagged scar on his left arm shimmered in the setting sun and flowed like a twisting river up his left hand to his shoulder. "A war injury," Mom told me.

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One day last fall, I asked Dad, "What happened?" I figured a kid's got a right to know stuff about his own dad. Right?

Apparently not. Dad walked away without a word. But that didn't stop me wondering. He was a hero. I was sure of it.

"Stop daydreaming, North, and get to work," Dad said, and I did.

The driveway, soggy with melting snow, squished when we lifted our boots. Suddenly, Dad stopped work. He stared into the bushes near the driveway.

"What's that?" He pointed to a small pile of sticks by the side of the driveway, and then he bent down and pulled out a flat board littered with broken bits and pieces.

I had no idea what it was.

His voice got real quiet. "Look at this," he said. "Look closely."

I stared at the board, struggling to read its barely legible label: "Fair Winds Farm." I pulled back, looked up at Dad, and felt my voice go all quivery. "It's the model of the farm where you grew up."

He hurled the broken bits across the snowy yard. "It was the model of the farm."

"Maybe we can fix it?" I said.

"Forget it. The damage is done." He wanted to say more, I could tell, but Dad's not a cursing kind of guy, and this was a cursing kind of situation.

My chest got tight. I closed my eyes and tried to swallow, but it was like all those broken bits got stuck in my throat.

Dad's scowl said more than words.

I gulped and whispered, "I didn't leave it outside. Honest."

Dad either didn't hear or pretended not to. "When I gave you that model, I told you what it meant to me. I told you that your grandfather made it for my dad, and my dad gave it to me when I turned twelve. When I passed it along to you on your twelfth birthday, I asked for a promise. Remember?"

I nodded.

"And what was that promise?"

It was hard to focus on what Dad was saying. I kept asking myself how the farmhouse got outside. I kept it on the top shelf of my bedroom closet so it would be safe, and no one knew it was there but me. No one.

"I asked you a question! You promised to take care of it. Is this how my son keeps his promises?"

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"But Dad. I didn't bring it out—"

"Don't lie. Don't even try. Don't make it worse." He stormed into the house. When the door slammed, I could feel it in my bones.

The model was all he had left of the farm in Wildrose, North Dakota. His parents died in a traffic accident right after Dad and Mom got married. There were lots of debts—it wasn't a good time to be a small farmer—and then I was born. They might have been able to save the farm if I had been healthy. As it was, they sold the land, the equipment, and the house just to pay the hospital bills. "This model is all I have left," Dad said when he gave it to me. "That and a few photos. The bank took the rest. I'm trusting you to pass it on to your son."

And now it was gone, and there was nothing I could do to make it up to him.

I unloaded the rest of the sandbags by myself, staggering under the weight, but I didn't stop until I had piled them into two neat rows across the front lawns just like Dad wanted.

I was almost done when I heard familiar accordion music. Whenever Grandma Lily opens her windows or the kitchen door, her music escapes. This time it was Lawrence Welk, her favorite. She loves the guy, has all his records. "He's a musician for the ages," she says.

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