

What Light Study Guide

What Light by Jay Asher

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Plot Summary

The following version of the novel was used to create this study guide: Asher, Jay. *What Light*. Razorbill, October 18, 2006.

Every year just before Thanksgiving, Sierra travels with her family from their Oregon Christmas tree farm to a town in California to tend the family's tree lot. Sierra loves what her family does, even though their Christmas traditions are different from those followed by other families. This particular Christmas tree selling season of her junior year is high school is different from all of the previous seasons. Sierra's parents do not think their tree lot earns enough money to justify keeping it open. If they decide to close the lot, it means that all the Christmas traditions Sierra has known all of her life will be over. Additionally, Sierra falls in love with a boy named Caleb even though she tried to keep herself from doing so because she knew her family would be leaving. Sierra fights Caleb's reputation as a troubled boy and her parents' fears that her heart will be broken when she and her family return to Oregon.

Although Heather, who is Sierra's friend in California, wants Sierra to have a holiday romance so the two can double date, Sierra balks at the idea of a temporary relationship. She has a reputation for being fussy about the boys she dates. Besides, her father will not let her date any of the boys who work at the tree lot. When Sierra sees Caleb, however, she changes her mind. She is captivated by his dimple and giving nature. Even when Heather shares with Sierra the rumor that Caleb went after his sister with a knife, Sierra is not willing to accept that Caleb is bad at heart.

Sierra learns that Caleb saves his tips to buy Christmas trees for people who cannot afford them. She begins helping him deliver these trees. Eventually she proves to him that he can trust her to share the truth about what happened between himself and his sister. She learns that Abby had been fussing at Caleb because she believed he had made a mistake when he encouraged her to stay with her mother after their parents divorced. Caleb told Sierra that he snapped because of the pressure being put on him by his sister and went after her with the knife to scare her.

Meanwhile, Andrew, a boy who works at the tree lot, tells Sierra's mother and father about the rumors involving Caleb. He used the information as a way to get back at Sierra because she would not date him. Sierra's parents had already questioned her relationship with Caleb because they would be leaving at the end of the tree selling season. They were worried that she would get her heart broken when they left and did not want her to be hurt. When they heard about Caleb's incident with the knife, they refused to let her see Caleb any longer.

Sierra talks with her parents on two different occasions, first about the long distance relationship and second about the knife incident, asking them to give Caleb a second chance. They agree to do so when Sierra asks them to trust her. It is not until Caleb decorates the trees Sierra has planted on top of the Cardinals Peak with lights that

Sierra sees how dedicated he is to her. They say goodbye with plans to attend Sierra's winter formal in Oregon together.



Chapters 1 and 2

Summary

In Chapter 1, Sierra gets gifts of photographs from her best friends Rachel and Elizabeth on the last day that she will attend school during the winter semester. Because her parents run a Christmas tree farm and operate a tree lot in California, Sierra is allowed to do her schoolwork long distance between Thanksgiving and Christmas so she can help her parents on their lot. She hates leaving her Oregon friends, but looks forward to seeing Heather, her best friend in California.

The tree lot in California as well as the tree farm in Oregon is a second generation business. Sierra's mother and father met because her mother's family bought their tree each year at her father's lot. This year, Sierra fears it will be their last year in California because the tree lot has been losing money.

The girls talk about boys and boyfriends. Rachel and Elizabeth accuse Sierra of being too fussy about boys. They agree to meet for lunch but Sierra discourages her friends from coming to see her off when she leaves in the morning because she and her mother will be leaving at 3 a.m.

In Chapter 2, Sierra is up at sunrise to help her Uncle Bruce gather bundles of trees. She fastens a hook dangling from the helicopter he pilots to each bundle of trees. As she waits for the helicopter to come, she thinks about the process through which they go to decide which trees to cut. That evening as Sierra looks over the hills of their farm, she considers their yearly traditions with the tree lot.

One of Sierra's traditions is planting a tree on Cardinal Peak in California. She gets up in the middle of the night to get a tree from the greenhouse so she will be sure not to forget it in the morning. She has been planting a tree there for the past five years. If they return the following year, the plan is for them to cut down the first tree they planted as a gift for Heather and her family.

Analysis

Sierra, the daughter of a family of Christmas tree farmers, is the first person narrator of this novel. She tells her story in the present tense.

The reader learns a good deal about the mechanics of Christmas tree farming as Sierra describes how her family decides which trees to cut and sell, and how they conserve land and deliver trees to their customers that are as fresh as possible. Sierra describes the six year growing cycle in which one in six trees is cut while the remaining five are left to grow. New saplings are planted to replace the ones that have been cut. She also describes how the family purchased a helicopter to help cut down on roads cut across the farm and to help deliver trees more quickly after they are cut.



Because she is the daughter of Christmas tree farmers, Sierra's Christmas traditions are different from those of other families. From just before Thanksgiving until Christmas, her family lives in an Airstream trailer on a Christmas tree lot in California. She enjoys seeing the families that have come to them year after year to buy their Christmas trees. Selling the trees is a tradition for the family. It is particularly special to Sierra mother and father because they met on the California lot when her dad worked there with his parents. They are now the second generation owners of the lot. Because she has been going to California to work the lot for all of her life, Sierra cannot imagine what a different Christmas would be like.

Since Sierra leaves her home town each Christmas, she notes that missing her friends from Oregon has also been a holiday tradition of sorts. Her friends Rachel and Elizabeth give her pictures of themselves so she will not forget them. In exchange, however, Sierra gets to spend Christmas with Heather, her friend from California.

The helicopter is an important symbol in this novel as it was purchased to help conserve land for growing trees and helps the trees get delivered faster and fresher. Another important symbol is the first tree that she planted on Cardinal Peak in California. This tree is intended to be cut down as a gift for Heather and her family. It is a symbol of Sierra's friendship with Heather.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways are Sierra's Christmas traditions different from typical Christmas traditions? Do you think you would like her way of life? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the differences in the relationships between Sierra and her friends in Oregon and Sierra and Heather? How does she balance these relationships?

Discussion Question 3

What is the tone of this novel so far? How does the author develop this tone?

Vocabulary

melodrama, subtly, unrestricted, migrating, rebellious



Chapters 3 and 4

Summary

In Chapter 3, Sierra describes the Airstream trailer in which she and her family live at the tree lot in California. Outside the window above her bed, a tree topples against the window. Andrew, a guy who had asked her out last Christmas, is the one responsible for knocking over the tree. She had told Andrew they could not date because of her parents' unwritten rule.

Outside the door of the trailer, Sierra hears shoes scraping. Heather's voice calls out. They hug each other. As Heather looks out the window, she mentions how good looking the ball players who are working at the lot are. Sierra knows better than to try to start a relationship with one of those guys. If her father senses one of the boys is interested in her, he punishes them by making them clean the outhouses. Besides, Sierra knows she will be leaving in a month so she does not see the sense in getting involved in a short term relationship.

In Chapter 4, after Thanksgiving dinner, Heather and Sierra hike up Cardinal Peak to plant their new tree. Heather wears the red sweatshirt she always wears when they plant the tree. As they walk, Heather tells Sierra that she plans to break up with Devon, her boyfriend, right after Christmas. Heather explains that Devon is boring. She hopes to get Sierra a boyfriend so they can go on double dates together.

When they reach the spot where they always plant the new trees, Sierra is pleased to see how much the trees have grown. She wonders again if she will have a chance to give the biggest tree to Heather and her family. When Heather mentions Sierra will be coming one more year, Sierra tells her that her family may not come back the following year. Heather echoes Sierra's worries when she says that she cannot imagine Sierra and her family not being part of their Christmas celebrations.

Analysis

Although Heather wants Sierra to have a boyfriend for the month of December, Sierra is not sure. First, she believes a short term relationship is too much work when she knows the relationship will end when she and her family go back to Oregon on Christmas Day. To make matters worse, Sierra's father is dead set against her having a dating relationship with any of the boys who work on the tree lot. Any of the boys who show Sierra any special attention at all are given the duty of cleaning the bathrooms at the tree lot. Andrew, one of the guys who works at the tree lot each year, tried to date Sierra last year. Her father had discouraged it. When Sierra sees Andrew her first morning on the tree lot she tries to talk to him but he brushes her off.

After their traditional Thanksgiving dinner with Heather and her family, Sierra and Heather set about to carry out their own tradition. They plant the tree that Sierra brought



from Oregon with the other five, one for each year, that they have planted on Cardinals Peak.

Different for Sierra this year is the stress she feels because she does not know if her family will be returning for another Christmas season. When Heather refers to something they will be doing the next year, Sierra has to break the news to her that she and her family might not be returning. Although the book is set during the holidays, it has a tone of nervous anticipation because Sierra knows it might be her last year in California.

One of the significant objects in this section of the novel is the red sweatshirt that Heather wears when she and Sierra make the hike up Cardinal Peak to plant the sapling. Sierra recalls that Heather bought the sweatshirt the winter that Sierra's grandparents died. It is a symbol of how much Sierra loved her grandparents as well as the strength of the friendship between Sierra and Heather.

Remember in this section how Heather mentions that it would be cool if they could put lights on their trees on Cardinals Peak. She mentions that it would be a good way to share their friendship with everyone in the town. They make a joke about the way that there are no electrical outlets that far up the mountain. This will be significant later on in the novel.

Discussion Question 1

Do you agree with Sierra's parents that it would be a bad idea for her to date guys who work at their Christmas tree lot? What problems might that cause?

Discussion Question 2

How does the author keep in the reader's mind that Sierra's family is not sure they will be returning to California the following year? Why do you think he keeps reminders fresh in the reader's mind?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the relationship between Heather and her boyfriend. Do you think Heather is really as shallow as she seems when she discusses that she is going to break up with her boyfriend and why she has not done so yet?

Vocabulary

cordial, petulantly, paparazzi, horrendous, justify



Chapters 5 and 6

Summary

In Chapter 5, the first day their lot is open, Sierra helps a father and his seven year old daughter pick out a tree. She is touched when the girl exclaims that the lot smells like Christmas, the same thing that many of their customers say. At the drink counter Sierra makes herself a cheap peppermint mocha using coffee a packet of hot chocolate mix and a peppermint stick. As she sells her first tree, Sierra describes how the trees are wrapped for transport after they are sold.

Heather brings lunch and once again suggests Sierra find a boy she likes so they can double date. Andrew sees the girls sitting in the Airstream and waves at them. Sierra's father notices and tells Andrew to get back to work. Heather decides she needs to find someone for Sierra who does not work at the tree lot but Sierra reminds her that she does not want to date at all. Heather insists it would be a good idea so Sierra tells her that she will think about it just to satisfy her friend.

When Sierra goes back to the Bigtop (the tent where they ring up sales), the ladies from the downtown association are leaving posters to be displayed for the Christmas parade. As she is stapling up the posters, Sierra notices a good looking guy with a dimple holding a tree. Andrew notices Sierra watching the guy and tells her that dimples are a result of a muscle deformity. Sierra gives him a dirty look. During the course of the afternoon, she begins to rethink her reasons against dating. She sends a text to Heather asking what a holiday love affair would include.

In Chapter 6, Sierra asks her parents if they will be returning to California the following year. They tell her they are not worried about their farm but that they may not be able to sell the trees themselves. Her father agrees with her that selling the trees is the best part of their job. They tell Sierra it will depend on how much money the lot brings in whether or not they will decide to return the following year or not.

Sierra describes the good looking guy she saw to Heather when Heather brings lunch. Devon is with her. Heather recognizes the guy from Sierra's description and even shows her a picture of him on her phone. Heather does not seem pleased and tells Sierra that Caleb is not a good choice. When Sierra pushes to know why she should not date Caleb, Heather tells her there is a rumor that Caleb attacked his sister with a knife. The sister is fine, but no longer lives in California.

Analysis

Uncertainty continues to color the tone of the novel as Sierra asks her parents if they plan to operate the tree lot the following year. Her parents seem to be as upset as Sierra at the idea they will not be able to enjoy the fun of selling their own trees. Sierra describes the joy she feels as she experiences a young girl and her father pick out their



perfect tree. They tell Sierra that the fate of the lot will depend on how it does financially this year.

Heather continues to insist that Sierra find a boy with whom she would like to hang out with during the month of December. It appears that Sierra fully intends to stick with her declaration that she does not want a short term relationship, that it would only cause heart ache for both she and the boy. It is not until Sierra sees Caleb that she changes her mind and thinks that she might consider dating for the short term.

Meanwhile, notice Andrew's character. Even though he knows that Sierra's father does not want her dating the boys at the tree lot, he seems to be doing everything that he can to get Sierra's attention. Each time he tries to catch Sierra's eye, her father send him to clean the bathrooms.

Because Heather has heard the rumors about Caleb, she encourages Sierra to stay away from him. Even though Heather does not personally know Caleb, she believes the stories that she has heard and uses them to encourage Sierra to stay away from Caleb. Sierra, who believes she has a very high radar when it comes to a person's moral values, wonders how she misjudged Caleb so badly if he is the sort of person who would attack his sister with a knife.

This cheap peppermint mocha that Sierra makes in this section of the novel will be a recurring symbol in this novel. It is not only a symbol of Christmas, the time of year the novel is set, but also a symbol of the growing relationship between Sierra and Caleb.

Discussion Question 1

What role does Andrew seem to play in the novel?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think Caleb really attacked his sister with a knife, like Heather says? Why or why not? Do you suspect there is more to the story?

Discussion Question 3

What will it mean to Sierra if her parents do not return to California her senior year? Why do they think that selling the trees themselves is the best part of their business?

Vocabulary

bolster, infatuated, unrelenting, deformity, anvil, clarify, monosyllabic, cryptically, unconfirmed



Chapter 7

Summary

In Chapter 7, as Heather tells Sierra about her problems with Devon, Sierra suggests she go ahead and break up with him. Heather insists that even though she has not decided if it would be worse to get Devon something expensive or homemade and thoughtful before she breaks up with him. While they are talking, Heather points out to Sierra that Caleb is somewhere on the three lot because his truck, a purple pickup, is parked nearby. Sierra wonders why he is there since he has already bought a tree.

Caleb approaches her and asks if her name is Sierra. She explains that her parents own the lot. He responds that the information helps him understand why all of the workers are scared to talk to her. Even though Sierra points out to him that she remembers he bought a tree the previous day, he brings her a tag for another one. He fixes himself a hot chocolate and Sierra is surprised when he uses a candy cane to stir it. She tells him she makes her drinks the same way.

Because of the rumor Heather told her about, Sierra hesitates when Caleb puts out his hand for a handshake. When Sierra indicates she knows his name is Caleb, he seems surprised and asks if she has heard about him. He does not have a true smile and Sierra brushes off the statement by saying she overheard someone call him by that name. Before he leaves, Caleb suggests they might see one another again before the end of the season. Heather comments on how awkward the conversation between Sierra and Caleb seemed. She apologizes at first but Sierra agrees that Caleb is carrying some sort of emotional baggage.

On her way to Heather's house that evening, Sierra stops to say hello to the Hoppers, a family who owns another Christmas tree lot. She is surprised to see Caleb there buying a tree. He spots her and they talk for a moment. While they are talking, the workers put a second tree into Caleb's truck. She presses him, wanting to know why he buys so many trees. They tease each other. She picks at him about his admission he lost his comb and has not replaced it. He teases her about her use of big words. Even though she is enjoying herself, she thinks about what Heather told her and she pauses. Caleb senses the pause. She admits to him that she has heard the rumors. Caleb tells her not to worry about it. She notices his jaw is clenched when he gets in his truck and drives away with only a small wave.

Analysis

The rumor that Heather shared with Sierra hangs between Sierra and Caleb as they try to interact with each other. Caleb realizes from the way she acts that Sierra knows something about his past. Sierra knows that if she and Caleb have a chance at a relationship, she needs to know what actually happened between Caleb and his sister.



Caleb does not seem to want to tell her. It is as if he believes she has made up her mind about him based on the rumors she has heard.

Meanwhile, Sierra tells her reader that she knows better than to judge a person based on rumor. She realizes how untrue rumors can turn out to be. She also recognizes that Heather is unsure of what actually happened since she was not there. Even though she does not know him, Sierra recognizes Caleb's worth as a person. She knows he deserves not to be judged on a rumor.

Sierra is intrigued by Caleb's habit of buying Christmas trees. She knows that he has bought two from their lot. For this reason she is surprised when she sees him buying two trees from the Hoppers' lot. While they are talking, he indicates he has bought other trees from her parents' lot that she has not been there to witness. In a prior purchase, Caleb had told Sierra that he was buying trees with the money he had earned through his tips at work, this was why he was paying for them with small bills. When Caleb drives off and barely waves goodbye to Sierra, one has to wonder if she will learn why Caleb buys so many trees and what happened between him and his sister.

The peppermint mocha that Caleb makes for himself with coffee, hot chocolate, and a peppermint stick catches Sierra's attention because it is the same way she makes her own drinks. These similar drinks are the beginning of the connection between Sierra and Caleb.

Discussion Question 1

What does it say about Sierra that she does not want to judge Caleb based on the rumor she has heard? What does it say about Caleb that he is so hesitant about talking about what happened between him and his sister?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Caleb's habit of buying trees. For what do you think he is buying all of the trees?

Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast Sierra's attitude toward boys and Heather's attitude toward boys.

Vocabulary

perspective, assortment, nonchalantly, feign, peruse



Chapter 8

Summary

In Chapter 8, on Saturday Heather and Sierra go to eat at Breakfast Express. On the way to the restaurant, Heather tells Sierra that Devon has suggested that Sierra invite Andrew to the parade. Sierra tells her that it is a terrible idea. When they arrive at the restaurant, Sierra learns why Heather looked at her strangely when she suggested that restaurant. Heather tells her before they even go inside that Caleb works there. Even though Sierra starts to suggest Caleb might be off that day, he walks out of the kitchen just as they walk into the restaurant.

Caleb smiles at Sierra, and she tells him she did not know he worked there. He asks if she would have come if she did. Heather is clearly dismissive with Caleb. She tells Sierra it is because she knows that Caleb is interested in Sierra. She is critical of Sierra for being obviously interested in Caleb. Sierra does mention that she can tell by Caleb's body language that he is upset about whatever it was that happened.

While they are in the restaurant, Sierra watches as a mother with twin daughters enters the restaurant. One of the girls gives Caleb a drawing of a Christmas tree. The mother tells Caleb they have decorated the tree that he gave them. The girls are excited because it is the first time they have had a tree. Caleb sets the girls and their mother up with two cups of hot chocolate before they leave.

Sierra realizes that Caleb has been buying the trees with his own money to give them away to needy families. When Caleb returns to their table, Sierra has Heather motion for him to sit with them. Caleb again picks at Sierra when she uses the word "allotment." Before he goes back to work, Sierra tells Caleb that if he plans to buy another tree she will be at work from noon to 8 p.m.

As Sierra helps unload trees that day, she considers that the only people she ever sees at the tree lot are those who can afford to buy a tree. Her dad joins her and asks if she thinks he is too rough on her about boys. She comments that she does not think that he wants her to see anyone, much less a boy at the tree lot. He points out to her that having to end a relationship can be hard. It would make it hard for her to leave when the time came. Sierra tells him that she understands.

Back in the Bigtop, Sierra sees Caleb waiting to pay for a tree. She asks him how he got started buying and donating the trees. Giving her the short version he says that Christmas was always a major celebration for his family. He also participated in a necessity drive with his church to gather things people needed but he thought it was nice to sometimes give people what they wanted. Caleb adds that his family no longer celebrates Christmas in the major way they did at one time.



Sierra suggests to Caleb he could get more money for his trees if he were to put out a jar for donations. Caleb replied that he had thought about that but did not want to take away from any charities that did give people what they needed. Sierra takes advantage of the moment and hands Caleb a paper bag with a comb in it. After Sierra greets a family who visits the lot each year, Caleb invites her to go with him to deliver a tree that night. She turns him down because she has to work. When she sees the way he assumes it is because of the rumors, she promises that she will go with him one night. They agree on Monday night.

Analysis

One aspect of Caleb's personality that becomes obvious in this chapter is how defensive he gets when he senses that Sierra is reacting to him negatively because of the rumors that have been circulated about him. When she tells him she is not able to go with him to deliver a tree, his body language tells her that he believes it is because she is judging him based on the rumor. While Sierra is able to read Caleb's body language when he reacts to her negatively, she also recognizes by his body language that he feels bad about whatever happened with his sister.

Sierra tries to convince Heather not to be so hateful to Caleb. Heather has both avoided Caleb and has been dismissive of him, clearly indicating in the restaurant that she did not want him to spend time talking to them. As Sierra talks to Heather about Caleb, she gets Heather to admit that she does not know how much of the rumor is true or what actually happened. Heather also tells Sierra that in the times that Caleb has talked to her, he has not been anything but nice.

To strengthen Sierra's belief that Caleb is not as bad as Heather has heard he is, both she and Heather witness the twin girls who visit the restaurant to thank Caleb for the tree he gave them. They learn that Caleb is using his own money to buy Christmas trees for families who cannot afford them.

Just as Sierra and Heather's families have Christmas traditions, Caleb shares with Sierra that his family also had its traditions. They not only decorated their tree and house but also caroled and participated in activities at church. He adds that his family does not celebrate Christmas in the way they used to, another comment that reveals a mystery about Caleb and his family.

One of Caleb's self made traditions is that of delivering Christmas trees to families who need them. He explains to Sierra that while there were charities, like his church's necessity drive, that provided things that people needed. While he knew there were people who were desperately poor and needed these necessities, he also believed it was important for people to get things that they wanted.

Even as Heather encourages Sierra to find a boyfriend so that they can double date, Sierra's father discourages her from starting a relationship when she knows she will be leaving on Christmas Day. While her father has Sierra's best interests in mind and does



not want her to get hurt, he does not seem to take into consideration that love and attraction are not always something a person can control just because the situation is not ideal.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the attitude that Caleb takes about the rumors that Sierra has heard. How does his attitude affect your opinion of him?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think about Caleb's insinuation that people should sometimes get things that they want, not just things that they need?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Sierra's reaction to her father's lecture about why he does not want her falling in love with anyone in California. Do you think his request is realistic?

Vocabulary

concedes, definitive, allotment, defensive, multitudes

Chapters 9 and 10

Summary

In Chapter 9, Sierra uses her laptop to chat with Rachel and Elizabeth. They ask about the fate of the tree lot. She tells them her parents will not say for sure but she feels like their sales have been down. When Rachel talks about the winter formal she is planning, Sierra imagines Caleb attending the dance with her. She tells Rachel and Elizabeth that she has met a boy that she likes. They warn her not to get fussy this early in the relationship when she says that there is a problem. Both of them advise her to talk to Caleb to find out from him what happened.

That night, Sierra goes with Caleb to deliver a tree. As they drive, Sierra tells Caleb about the six trees that she has planted on Cardinals Peak. He asks for the story. She explains that her mother helped her plant her first tree when she was five. When that tree was six years old, the family cut it down and gave it to the maternity ward at the hospital where Sierra was born. Sierra had been so upset when the tree was cut that she knelt by the stump and cried. Her father gave her a slice of trunk he had cut from that tree to keep as a reminder.

Sierra continues telling the story explaining how the next day when they were preparing to leave for California, she had started crying again because she had not planted a tree to replace the one they had cut down. Because they did not have time to plant one, she had gotten a sapling from the greenhouse and taken it with them. She told him about the plan to give that first tree she had planted to Heather's family, but wondered if it would be better to give it to a family who really needed it.

In Chapter 10, Mrs. Trujillo thanks Caleb profusely when he knocks on her apartment door holding the tree. Luis, Mrs. Trujillo's son, had wanted it to be a surprise for her. Even so, Sierra suspects that Luis is uneasy about the free tree. After they leave the apartment, Caleb explains that he got the family's name from the food bank. He had talked to Luis first, who said his mom wanted a tree. He continues to tell her about his decision to give away trees because just after his parents had divorced, there were years they could not afford to buy a tree. For this reason, Caleb knew what it was like not to have a tree at Christmas.

The next time Caleb comes to the tree lot, Sierra notices Andrew talking to him and making angry gestures. Shortly afterward, Caleb talks to Sierra and seems not to be angry. Sierra's dad sees them talking and warns Caleb to keep it short because Sierra had a good deal of work to do. Before he left, Caleb suggests to Sierra that she "show up" at the Christmas parade the following night. When Sierra returns to the Bigtop her father warns her against starting a relationship with Caleb.



After her father leaves, Andrew confronts Sierra about her friendship with Caleb. He says that she does not really know Caleb. He adds that if her father knew what Caleb had done, he would not approve of the relationship.

Analysis

Sierra and Caleb share with each other their Christmas traditions involving trees. Sierra's tradition is to plant a tree on Cardinals Peak each year. Caleb's tradition is to buy trees with his tips and give them away to less fortunate families. He does so because there were years when his family could not afford a tree. He had not forgotten those Christmases when they could not afford the things they wanted for their holiday celebrations.

A significant symbol mentioned in this part of the novel is the slice of tree trunk that Sierra's father cuts from the tree that they donate to the hospital where she was born. This tree was the first that Sierra had planted and nurtured by herself, with help from her parents. She was so upset when they cut it down that she cried over the stump. Her father kept this slice of trunk for her so it could remind her of her first tree.

Sierra continues to share with the reader the details of the Christmas tree selling business. In this particular section she shares how the stumps appear to be crying when the trees are first cut because they continue to draw up water from the ground. She explains the trunks do the same thing. This is why a slice of the trunk is cut off right before the tree is sent home with its new owners. The tree cannot draw up water from the trunk because it seals itself off with sap after having been cut.

Andrew's interest in Caleb and Sierra's friendship becomes more critical in this section. He obviously holds a grudge because Sierra refused to date him. He knows the rumors about Caleb. He attempts to manipulate their relationship by threatening to tell Sierra's father about what Caleb did to his sister.

Comments continue to be made about the rumor that circulates about Caleb. Most of the people who counsel Sierra about her relationship advise her to get the real story about Caleb instead of listening to the rumors. "Trust your instincts," Elizabeth says. "Maybe Heather heard the rumor wrong. Wouldn't he be in some sort of special home if he stabbed his sister?" (86). In this quote, Elizabeth not only points out that the rumor Heather repeated might not be right, but that if he had really hurt his sister or intended to hurt his sister, he would not be free but instead in jail or a detention center.

Discussion Question 1

Even though they have grown up nowhere near each other, what do Caleb's and Sierra's lives have in common? How are they different?



Discussion Question 2

Why do you think that Andrew is so intent on destroying Caleb's and Sierra's relationship? Do you think he really has Sierra's best interests in mind or is he just retaliating?

Discussion Question 3

Do you agree with Elizabeth that if Caleb had really done something cruel to his sister, he would not be allowed to walk about freely? What does this say about the rumors that have been spread about Caleb?

Vocabulary

distribution, nudge, symbolic, cascades, sentimental, confronting



Chapters 11 and 12

Summary

In Chapter 11, Sierra goes to the Christmas parade with Devon and Heather. As they wait for Devon to get them coffee, Heather points out that Caleb is sitting with his friends across the street. Sierra walks toward Caleb and notices a boy in a band uniform and a girl in a cheerleader uniform getting out of a car nearby. When someone calls the boy by his name, Jeremiah, Caleb looks up. Caleb continues to look at Jeremiah as he walks past the bench where Caleb is sitting. Jeremiah looks at Caleb, and Sierra senses a sadness in both of them. She also sees that the cheerleader, apparently Jeremiah's sister, grabs Jeremiah's elbow to move him past Caleb.

After Caleb says goodbye to his friends, Sierra asks who the band member was. Caleb explains it was Jeremiah, his old friend. Sierra asks for the story about the broken friendship. Caleb pauses and Sierra wonders if Caleb is worth the trouble since he is so hesitant to talk to her about anything dealing with his past. When Sierra tells Caleb she thinks he should go back to his friends so she can help Heather, he tries to clarify. He tells her that because of what happened with his sister, Jeremiah's parents no longer wanted them hanging out together. Caleb adds that Jeremiah's sister served as a monitor to make sure that Caleb and Jeremiah did not get a chance to talk to each other. He assures Sierra he will tell her soon what happened. He does not want to tell her at the Christmas parade. He notes, just as the band begins to play, that she probably would not be able to hear him.

As the parade continues, Sierra and Caleb find Heather and Devon. Heather is glaring at Devon. She tells Sierra and Caleb that Christy Wang, the Winter Queen, asked Devon for his phone number. Heather is obviously hurt and offended. Sierra gets the feeling that Heather never intended to break up with Devon.

Sierra rides with Caleb to deliver a tree after the Christmas parade. The people to whom they deliver are not happy because they missed the Christmas parade waiting for Caleb. He apologizes for the inconvenience but Sierra is angry. He asks her if she would only do good deeds if she was praised for them. He tells her that he is aware of how mean the people were, but that he believes everyone should be allowed the benefit of the doubt for having a bad day.

In Chapter 12, as Sierra thinks how busy the lot has been and how tired she is, she hopes that they may be able to stay open another year. With a ten dollar bill she gets as a tip, she decides to buy ingredients to make cookies to take to the next family to whom she and Caleb deliver a tree.

The next day, Sierra's dad questions her when he sees Caleb's truck pull into the tree lot. She tells her father that she knows they will only be there a few more weeks in the season, an attempt to let him know she is aware of his concern. She tells her father that



she likes Caleb, an admission that makes her father wince. He suggests that she be careful and Sierra realizes how ironic the advice is since her mother and father met each other on that lot and had the same long distance relationship.

Caleb is pleased to learn that Sierra has baked cookies to take to the family to whom they will deliver the tree. After they make their delivery, they go to a twenty-four-hour diner for pancakes. She suggests that they talk and asks why he has not yet used his new comb. Caleb asks Sierra to start the talk by telling him what she has heard. She does so.

Caleb begins the full story by explaining how much his parents' divorce hurt his mother. They stayed with her in the beginning. He and Abby had their own lawyer. Caleb convinced Abby they needed to stay with their mother. His father moved to Nevada and it was not until they went to visit him at Christmas that Caleb realized how much trouble their father was really having with the divorce.

Abby was mad at Caleb for encouraging them to stay with their mother. She accused him of being responsible for the trouble their father was having adjusting. Jeremiah knew how much Abby was bothering Caleb and how much he did blame himself for what had happened. There came a day when Caleb could not take Abby's accusations any longer. He grabbed a knife from the kitchen and ran after her. He did not think he really wanted to hurt her, just scare her, make her understand he was hurting as well. She had gone to her room and closed the door. He hit the door with the knife over and over again.

Afterward, Abby had gone to live with their dad. Caleb was left to deal with the rumors as well as his mother's pain that she was not getting to see her daughter grow up. He is most angry with himself because that is his fault. Jeremiah was part of the incident because he was visiting with Caleb when the incident took place. He told his family about what happened, and his mother told him he could not see Caleb any more. Caleb's mother told other parents what happened and Caleb believes she blew the story out of proportion.

Sierra realized how much Caleb still hurt about what had happened and how people continued to treat him. Caleb realized that Sierra really did want to understand. They both felt as if a weight had lifted from their friendship.

Analysis

Most significant in these chapters is that Sierra finally learns the full story about the incident between Caleb and Abby from Caleb. Sierra learns the rumor mill is right, that Caleb did go after his sister with a knife. However, those who spread the rumors do not know the entire story of what happened that day and the days leading up to it. Caleb's frustration with his sister certainly does not excuse him from trying to hurt her but it does help Sierra to understand the background and the activities that led up to the knife



attack. Caleb additionally sets Sierra's mind at ease by telling her that he does not think that he would have actually hurt Abby, he just wanted to scare her.

Caleb also shares with Abby how Jeremiah, his former best friend, figured into what had happened. Since Jeremiah had been at Caleb's house when Caleb went for the knife, Jeremiah had told his family what had happened. Instead of keeping it private, as it should have been, Jeremiah's mother spread the story to other families. "Everyone reacted so fast. Everyone had an opinion without ever hearing from Caleb" (125) Sierra thinks as she realizes how unfair the rumors have been to Caleb. Not only has he lost his best friend because of what has happened, he has had to live with the consequences of the rumors that still circulate about him, nearly four years later. There are people in the town, like Heather, who base their opinion of Caleb on the rumors they have heard rather than getting to know him and judging for themselves.

Although Sierra is understanding once she learns Caleb's story, there is a point at which she considers giving up on the relationship. Even though she believes she has proven she trusts Caleb by going to deliver trees with him and even started baking cookies as a way to make a contribution to Caleb's project, Caleb still is unwilling to share anything about his past. It is when Sierra asks Caleb for details about the broken relationship with Jeremiah that begins to doubt he is the right boy for her. "If something that small shuts him down, I don't know if I want to stick around. I've walked away for much less than this" (106). It seems also to be at this point that Caleb realizes that if he does not tell Sierra about his past that he will lose her.

Sierra's father continues to share his concerns with her that she will get hurt when they have to go back to Oregon after Christmas. Sierra understands his concern and tries to let him know that she understands but still wants to pursue the relationship with Caleb. Notice how her mind continues to return to the fact that her parents met on the tree lot, just like she and Caleb did, yet they are discouraging her from the same sort of relationship.

The Christmas parade is significant for a couple of reasons. First, it is a Christmas tradition for the people of the California town where Sierra and her parents have their tree lot. The reader can tell the parade is a tradition not only because the one couple gets so angry with Caleb because they missed the parade waiting for the tree but also because Caleb and his friends have their own parade tradition of giving commentary on the different floats and people who attend the parade. The Christmas parade also signifies a turning point in Heather and Devon's relationship. Up to this point, Heather had portrayed to Sierra that she was tired of Devon and was just looking for an opportunity to dump him. Because Heather gets so angry with Devon when the Winter Queen asks for his phone number, Sierra realizes that Heather does not really want to dump Devon, she just wants more attention.

A new thread of the story also begins in this section of chapters. Sierra learns how Caleb's relationship with his best friend was lost when he got angry with his sister. Sierra believes the destruction of the friendship was unfair and unnecessary. She also thinks that it was not what Caleb and Jeremiah wanted.



Discussion Question 1

Now that Caleb has told the full story of what happened between himself and Abby, do you understand him any better? Has your opinion of him and his actions changed? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways has Sierra worked to prove that she trusts Caleb even though she did not know his full story? Do you think she is right in considering walking away if he does not start sharing with her?

Discussion Question 3

What evidence shows that Jeremiah and Caleb miss each other as friends? Why do you think this new story line is significant in the novel?

Vocabulary

undeterred, rendition, skeptical, sanity, imminent, beguiling, defective, reconcile



Chapters 13 and 14

Summary

In Chapter 13, Caleb mentions that he gave Sierra a good deal of ammunition, but Sierra tells him that she would never use any of it against him. She senses that enough people have already done that to him. He shares with her that he finally stopped trying to tell people the truth about what had happened because he figured the only people to whom he owed the truth was his mother and Abby.

The principal at Heather's school allows Sierra to attend classes one day each winter semester. It is during her day at school that Sierra tells Heather that Caleb finally told her the full story. She asks Heather to continue giving him a chance.

Meanwhile, Sierra realizes from the Winter Queen incident that Heather does not really want to break up with Devon she just wants to feel like he needs her. They discuss Devon when they go into Heather's English class. Jeremiah enters the class and sits in front of Heather. He begins to talk to Sierra, asking if she is Caleb's new girlfriend. Sierra asks why he and Caleb do not hang out together any more. When he replies it is complicated, she asks if it is really complicated or if his family makes it complicated. Jeremiah reminds her that he was at Caleb's house the day everything happened and that she was not there. Sierra notices through the rest of the class he only stares at his notebook and does not take any notes. After school Devon, Heather, Caleb and Sierra go downtown to shop.

In Chapter 14, Sierra and Caleb try to get Devon to understand that he needs to think about a Christmas present for Heather but he is too dense to understand. They wind up laughing at him. They go to a store called the Candle Box. Sierra is obsessed with watching a woman carve candles but Caleb brings her a candle to smell that has the scent of peppermint, Christmas trees and chocolate. He says that the candle and its scent remind him of Sierra. They go with Devon and Heather to have their pictures made with Santa. Caleb has a copy of their picture made into a keychain.

At the end of the chapter, the two couples run into a boy whom they know is in a long distance relationship with a girl they know is from Tennessee. Sierra makes a comment that a long distance relationship like that cannot last. She knows she has said the wrong thing when she sees Caleb narrow his eyes. Believing that their relationship will only end up hurting them both, Sierra makes an excuse about having to go back to work. As Caleb walks her back, he argues that a long distance relationship can work if both people want it badly enough.

Analysis

Now that Sierra has learned the full story about Caleb and his sister, she sets about trying to mend relationships. In Heather's English class she has the opportunity to talk



to Jeremiah. She learns that it is not only Jeremiah's family but also Jeremiah who has his doubts about Caleb. The fact that Jeremiah is distracted by what Sierra has talked to him about shows that he is perhaps second guessing what he has thought about Caleb and their relationship.

Sierra has also gathered from the way that Heather became jealous when the Winter Queen asked Devon for his phone number that Heather did not really want to break up with him. She and Caleb work in conjunction to try to get Devon to understand that Heather wants him to do something special for her to show that he cares about her. Devon does not seem to take the hints they are giving him. Even after Heather has told him what she wants for Christmas, a special day doing what she likes to do, he comments that he thinks she wants a scented candle for Christmas.

The rumors about Caleb seem to be losing their grip on the characters of the novel as even Heather willingly includes Caleb in a shopping trip. There are two reasons why Heather is more accepting of Caleb. She knows that Caleb has told Sierra what happened between him and his sister. Because she trusts Sierra's judgement she figures if Sierra is still willing to hang out with Caleb, he must be okay. Also, Heather begins to base her opinion on what she does know about Caleb. As she tells Sierra: "When I heard the two of you were prancing all over town delivering Christmas trees like Mr. and Mrs. Claus, I figured the rumors must be exaggerated" (131).

At this point, the only people who do not know about Caleb are Sierra's parents. Already, Sierra's dad is concerned because he does not want Sierra starting a relationship with someone when they will be leaving after Christmas. He is concerned she will be emotionally hurt. With a father this protective, one has to wonder what he will think when, and if, he learns about Caleb's incident with his sister. Sierra notes that her parents; "have always emphasized forgiveness, believing people can change. I want to think they would stand by those words, but when it comes to me and who I like, I'm not sure how they would react" (134).

Important objects in this pair of chapters include the candle that Caleb tells Sierra reminds him of her. It is a candle scented to smell like peppermint, chocolate and Christmas trees. He claims it would drive him crazy to have it burning in his room. Another significant object is the photo keychain that Caleb has made from their picture with Santa. It is a symbol that he wants to see her frequently.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think that Devon is really as dense as he pretends to be when it comes to his relationship with Heather? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the way Heather's attitude toward Caleb has changed since she has gotten to know him better.



Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast Caleb's and Sierra's opinions of a long distance relationship.

Vocabulary

feisty, unchaperoned, grovel, despondent, discreetly, futzing, arduous, oblivious, hypnotized, cynical, pessimist, adamant



Chapter 15

Summary

In Chapter 15, Sierra shows Caleb's picture to the photos of Elizabeth and Rachel. She imagines what they might say about the relationship. When Sierra talks to Rachel later, she learns that Rachel got a part in the play *A Christmas Carol* because the girl assigned the part got sick. Rachel wants Sierra to take a train back to Oregon to see her performance. Sierra asks her mother if she can go, but then admits that she does not really want to leave. She tells her mother that Caleb has invited her to meet his family that weekend. It is during her conversation with her mother that Sierra learns that Andrew has talked to her father about Caleb. Her mother suggests that Sierra should talk to her father as well.

Rachel hangs up on Sierra when she tells her she will not be coming to the production of *A Christmas Carol* because she is supposed to meet Caleb's family. Since she is already frustrated, she takes the opportunity to talk to her father about Caleb. He tells her there is too much going on that evening to talk. Sierra leaves with Heather and Devon to make cookies without even asking. Before they go into the grocery store, Sierra gets a text from Elizabeth telling her she should reconsider her friendships.

Inside the grocery store Sierra and Caleb take half the shopping list while Heather and Devon take the other half. In the dairy department, Caleb grabs Sierra's hand. She notices he is looking at Jeremiah and his mother, shopping nearby. Jeremiah and his mother turn and face Sierra and Caleb. They acknowledge each other and Caleb introduces Sierra. Sierra follows Jeremiah's mother as she tries to walk away, telling her that her parents own one of the Christmas tree lots.

As Jeremiah and his mother walk away, Cassandra walks up behind Sierra and Caleb and tells Caleb her brother does not need to be around Caleb. Sierra tells Cassandra that Caleb is good as well and that it was time that Cassandra and Jeremiah realized that. When Cassandra walks away, Sierra apologizes to Caleb for confronting Jeremiah and his family. Later, in the checkout line, they see Jeremiah and his family again. They will not look at Caleb and the other. Sierra is angry about the way they act of Caleb tells her that it is his fault they are acting that way. When Jeremiah's mother does look in her direction she tells her the family should come visit the tree lot because they will be giving discounts the following day.

Jeremiah and Cassandra do visit the tree lot the following day. Cassandra talks to Sierra while Jeremiah looks for a tree. Sierra tells Cassandra that Caleb regrets what happened and would not hurt anyone. She also tells Cassandra that she believes it was decided for Jeremiah that he could not be friends with Caleb any more before Jeremiah and Caleb had a chance to talk about what happened. When Jeremiah walks up behind them, Cassandra asks what he would do if Caleb freaked out again while Jeremiah was with him. Sierra tells the two she knows who Caleb is not and that he would not hurt



anyone. Cassandra tells Sierra that although she wants things to turn out differently, she would always put her brother first.

Analysis

Friendships are the focus in Chapter 15 as Sierra struggles with her own friendships in Oregon at the same time she tries to help Caleb and Jeremiah mend their friendship in California. Sierra angers Rachel because she chooses to meet Caleb's family instead of taking a train back to Oregon to see Rachel in her play. Just like Jeremiah has perhaps overreacted because he has chosen to break off his friendship with Caleb, Rachel overreacts by hanging up on Sierra. Elizabeth suggests to Sierra in a text that she re-evaluate her relationships but Elizabeth is willing to forgive Sierra more quickly than Rachel.

Sierra makes a surprising discovery when she does finally get a chance to talk to Jeremiah about his relationship with Caleb. Before her one on one with Jeremiah, Sierra was of the opinion that: "Jeremiah and Caleb used to be best friends, and they should still be best friends. They just never had a chance to figure things out before these lines were drawn" (160). She realizes from her talk with Jeremiah that while he does wish that he and Caleb were still friends, he also was frightened by what happened that day. Sierra seems to think that it has been his mother's continued reference to what happened that has built up the fear Jeremiah feels when he thinks about Caleb.

Since Jeremiah and Cassandra do pay a visit to the tree lot to talk to Sierra, it is a sign that they are willing to consider a relationship with Caleb. Sierra points out to Cassandra that Caleb's behavior at school should prove to her that he is not going to act in a violent way again. She also tells Cassandra that Caleb gives away Christmas trees in an attempt to help other families. Cassandra's comment voices what some may think about Caleb's tradition of giving away trees, that he is trying to make up for some wrong that he has done. Sierra knows that Caleb is trying to make up for a wrong, but she also knows it is not because he has ruined his own family, like Cassandra says. She knows it is because he is hoping to balance out his mistakes and find some sort of inner peace.

Trouble is also on the horizon for Caleb and Sierra because Andrew has apparently followed through with his threat to tell Sierra's parents what happened between Caleb and his sister years before. Sierra tries to talk to her father about the rumor that Andrew has decided to spread but her father tells her he does not have time to talk about it. It is perhaps good that Sierra's father does not put an end to her relationship right then, but it could also indicate that he is thinking about the best way to handle the situation.

Discussion Question 1

Is Rachel being selfish for getting so mad at Sierra? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 2

Should Sierra have gotten involved in trying to repair Caleb's and Jeremiah's friendship? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

What is the tone in this part of the novel? What circumstances help to develop this tone?

Vocabulary

cordial, bailing, ladling, agitated, rescind



Chapter 16

Summary

In Chapter 16, when Sierra's mother confronts her about Caleb, Sierra tells her that whatever Andrew has told them about Caleb was not told to them because Andrew was worried about Sierra. It was because he wanted to hurt Caleb or get back at Sierra for not dating him.

Sierra, and her mother and father take a walk to talk about Caleb. Sierra tells them what happened with Caleb's sister and what kind of person Caleb has turned out to be. They are upset because it was not Sierra who told them what happened, but instead Andrew. Her father admits he does not want Sierra going out with a boy who has been violent in the past. Sierra tells her parents that she is being cautious. She wants her parents not to judge Caleb and to trust her.

Before she leaves the tree lot to go with Caleb to his mother's house, Sierra confronts Andrew because he told her parents about Caleb. Caleb is obviously angry but sees fear in Andrew's eyes and his glance turns apologetic.

Sierra meets Abby and her mother. Before dinner, Caleb takes her to tour the house. She sees Abby's bedroom door with the knife slashes in it. The marks are still visible even though their mother tried to cover them up. Seeing the marks makes what happened between Caleb and his sister more real to Sierra. When Caleb's mom calls for them to come and eat they struggle to overcome the awkwardness of that moment before heading downstairs.

The members of the family are tense for a moment when Sierra asks Abby about school but they seem to relax when she tells them about life on a Christmas tree farm. She and Caleb then talk about the trees they have delivered together. Sierra notices Abby and Caleb's mother walks away from the table while Abby talks about getting a tree with her father. Abby asks Sierra if it is hard for her to leave her friends at Christmas. Sierra tells her she does miss them, but has not lived her life any other way. Caleb breaks in and says that they knew how things could be different for Abby. Sierra tells him she did not mean her comment that way but Caleb said he was tired and suggested they should not make her parents worry.

In the truck, he tells Sierra that he cannot forgive himself for what he did because it caused his mother to be separated from Abby. When they reach the lot, Caleb apologizes to Sierra. He says that she deserves better than him. She argues, telling him that she believes he is worth the trouble they face. He does not respond. Sierra walks to the trailer and cries. When she looks outside she sees that Caleb is still sitting in his truck. She can see that he is crying.



When he finally leaves, Sierra goes out and helps on the lot. When she cannot stand the people any longer, she goes back to the trailer. Heather has left a voice mail for Sierra telling her that Devon gave her her perfect day. She asks how dinner with Caleb's family went but Sierra does not answer. Caleb has also left a voice mail apologizing for the way that he acted. He asks permission to come by the trailer before church. Sierra sends him a text telling him to come by.

Analysis

Between the questions that Sierra's parents ask and Caleb's own decision that their relationship is too hard, Sierra and Caleb go through quite a bit of stress in this chapter of the novel. Caleb continues to judge himself harshly because of the problem that he believes he created for his mother and Abby. The guilt he feels when Abby and Sierra begin talking about spending Christmas in a place different from where they live and missing their friends causes Caleb so much guilt and pain that he ends the meal and takes Sierra home early. Sierra is hurt by his decision to leave early and also his decision that he is not worth the trouble that he is putting her through.

Sierra finally manages to have the conversation she knows she has been needing to have with her parents. They are both angry with her because it was Andrew and not she who told them about the rumors surrounding Caleb. Even though she begs them to trust her it can be understood why this might be hard for them, especially since she has neglected to tell them important information about Caleb.

Sierra plays upon her parents' desire for the truth and belief in the importance of giving others a second chance when she points out how much damage has been done to Caleb because of the rumors that have been spread about him. When she talks to her mother, she asks, what is "the difference between gossip and relevant information?" (163). She hopes that her mother will understand that the only people who actually knew for sure what happened that day were Abby, Jeremiah and Caleb. All of the other people involved are just spreading, or repeating, rumors they have heard.

An important symbol included in this section of the novel is the knife marks that Sierra sees on Abby's bedroom door. These knife marks are significant because they prove to Sierra that the incident between Caleb and Abby really did happen.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the cause of Caleb's feelings of guilt while Sierra is having dinner with his family. Does he overreact to the discussion? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Does Sierra give her parents a good argument for why they should trust her and trust Caleb? Why or why not? Use examples from the book to prove your point.



Discussion Question 3

Discuss the incident between Caleb and Andrew. Why is it significant that Caleb backs off when he sees that Andrew is afraid of him?

Vocabulary

relevant, suppress, intervenes, blatantly, merge



Chapters 17-19

Summary

In Chapter 17, Caleb tells Sierra that he and Abby talked about his reaction to their conversation the night before. He realizes that he is the one who still has the problem with what happened. Sierra walks with Caleb to church. Before she leaves to go back to work, Abby distracts Caleb by telling him to get Sierra flyer for the candlelight service. While he is gone, Abby shares with Sierra how much Caleb likes her.

In Chapter 18, Sierra calls Elizabeth to find out how Rachel's play went because she has not been able to get Rachel to respond to her texts. Elizabeth shares that Rachel is mad because Sierra chose a boy over her. She also tells Sierra they are concerned that she will get hurt by the relationship. Before they say goodbye, Sierra asks Elizabeth to get the cutting from her first Christmas tree from her house in Oregon and mail it to her.

When she begins helping her parents with the trees on that day, she thinks about how her father had tried to make Andrew apologize to her but Andrew had quit rather than apologize.

Later that day, Sierra and Caleb plan to bake cookies at his house. As they are preparing to start baking, the doorbell rings. It is Jeremiah. Jeremiah sees Sierra and tells her that if it were not for her pushing and prying he would not have come to see Caleb. He explains that he finally took a stand with his mother and sister. Sierra decides to let Caleb and Jeremiah have some time. She takes the cookie ingredients to Heather's house. Later that night, after they deliver their trees, Caleb admits to Sierra that he found his Christmas gift from his mother.

In Chapter 19, Caleb takes Sierra to his mother's garage. Inside is a trampoline, Caleb's Christmas present from his mother. The two try it out. Laying there, they kiss each other for the first time. Back at the trailer, Sierra sends Rachel a text apologizing for missing her play. Rachel eventually responds. She asks Sierra if she can help with the Caleb situation. Sierra says that she needs a Christmas miracle.

The next day, Caleb greets Sierra at the tree lot with a kiss. Her mother tells her that she needs to get back to work. Sierra mother tells him that they will be leaving in a week and they are not comfortable with the relationship. Sierra admits to Caleb that her father thinks they are getting too serious. Caleb is angry when he realizes that Sierra and her family may not be coming back. He says he is not sure if everything he is having to go through is worth the relationship.

The next day, Sierra gets the package from Elizabeth. Along with the cutting from the tree that Elizabeth sent, Rachel sent two tickets to their school's winter formal.



Analysis

Sierra's parents throw a new loop into Sierra and Caleb's relationship when they, again, decide that Sierra and Caleb are getting too close. It appears that Sierra's conversation with her parents did not have as much impact on them as she wanted it to have. Now that they have stopped focusing on the rumors about Caleb, they have gone back to discouraging the relationship because they will be leaving.

Despite all that Caleb has put Sierra through, he gets uncharacteristically upset when he learns that Sierra and her family might not return to run the lot the following year. His frustration with her seems petty after she not only has stuck with him when he refused to talk to her about the rumors circulating about him being a knife wielding maniac, but also helped him to reunite with Jeremiah.

Also in this section, Sierra reunites with Rachel and Elizabeth. She asks for their help with her relationship with Caleb, even though they have both admitted they are not sure it is the right thing for her. With the help of her friends in Oregon, two important objects are sent from Oregon to California. One of these objects is the slice from Sierra's first tree. The second is a pair of tickets to their school's winter formal. The reader will learn later in the novel how these two tickets will be significant in Sierra's and Caleb's relationship.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think it is appropriate for Sierra to give Caleb the slice of the first tree she grew? Why or why not? Why does Sierra's mother say that it is the perfect gift for him?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the "betrayal" Caleb seems to feel because Sierra has not told him that her family might not return to run the tree lot the following year. What difference might this make in their relationship?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss how wishy-washy Sierra's parents are being about her relationship with Caleb. What do you think is at the core of their disapproval?

Vocabulary

etched, traditionalist, traitor, procrastinators, sartorial



Chapter 20

Summary

In Chapter 20, Sierra tries to talk to her father again. She tells him that she senses he is using Caleb's past as a way to discourage the relationship. While she knows that he is trying to save her from having her heart broken, Sierra argues it should be her decision if she wants to continue the relationship or not. It is at this point that her father chooses to tell her that they are almost certain they will not be returning to run the tree lot the following year. Sierra hugs her father and sympathizes.

He tells her that she cannot imagine how hard it will be for her to have to say goodbye to Caleb when the time comes. She asks him how it felt when he had to leave her mother when they were dating. He decides that since she has already fallen in love with Caleb, it will not change anything if he takes away the last few days that they will have together. He does warn her, however, not to ignore that the end of the season is coming. He wants her to be prepared for it. Sierra calls Caleb right away for him to come buy a tree.

Luis, who has started working at the tree lot, and Sierra load a big tree into Caleb's truck when he arrives. It is a gift from her parents. After he and Sierra are finished with the delivery, Caleb drives them to Cardinals Peak. He says that he wants to finally see her trees. He says that he loves the trees and asks if she has ever thought of decorating them. After a moment, Caleb comments that he can see only five trees. Sierra realizes it is the biggest tree that is missing. They find the stump of the tree and Caleb suggests someone fell in love with it and wanted it for their home. Sierra is upset because it was the tree she was supposed to give to Heather. As they are walking back down the hill, Caleb spots the tree by the side of the road. Sierra is even more upset that the tree just got left to die.

After work the next day, Sierra's mother and father take her out to dinner. They go to Breakfast Express. Caleb waits on them. While they wait to order, Sierra asks her mother if she ever wanted to do anything other than work on a farm where her entire life revolved around Christmas. As they all think about how they only have a few days of this Christmas season left, Sierra notices her mother look sadly at her father.

Caleb brings Jeremiah to the lot to help shut the lot down for the season. Caleb is not able to stay because he has traditions with his family he needs to be part of. He asks Sierra to attend his church's candlelight service with him on Christmas Eve. Luis finds them and tells Caleb he has put a perfect tree in Caleb's truck. It is a gift from him and the boys on the baseball team.



Analysis

The tone of this section of the novel is bittersweet as Sierra's father seems to decide once and for all that it is okay for Sierra to go ahead and spend the few days they have left with Caleb. He knows Sierra has already fallen in love with Caleb. He does warn Sierra that she and Caleb should not ignore the end of the season that is quickly approaching.

Also in this section, Sierra's father tells her it is certain that they will not return to California the following year. It is a significant announcement for a variety of reasons. As she discusses with her mother and father, the traditions that surround the tree lot are the only holiday traditions that she has ever known. They discuss this in the context of Sierra asking her mother if she had ever considered being anything other than a Christmas tree farmer. Sierra says that their lifestyle, just like their Christmas traditions are "all I've known. You at least had some normal Christmases before you got married" (218).

Her parents' decision not to open the tree lot again is significant because of what it will mean to Sierra's relationship with Heather. Because Sierra's family will not be going to California, Sierra and Heather will not be able to spend the holidays together as they have in the past. It also means that Sierra will not have an extended time to see Caleb for the holiday season either.

Most significant is what the closing of the tree lot will mean to Sierra's father's business. The lot is special because his father ran the lot before he inherited it. Two generations of the family have sold trees at the lot. It is also at this Christmas tree lot that Sierra's father and mother met. Notice how Sierra takes every opportunity to point out to her father when he discourages her from having a long distance relationship that he and her mother did the same thing. Perhaps, it is because Sierra's father knows so well how hard that relationship was that he discourages his daughter from doing the same thing.

Sierra feels disappointment and anger over what happens to one of the trees she had planted on Cardinals Peak. Apparently, someone discovered her group of trees and decided to help themselves to the largest of the group, the one she was planning to give to Heather's family. Sierra feels better about the tree when Caleb tells her that whoever took it must have thought it was beautiful and wanted to decorate it in their own home. She is crushed, however, when she sees the tree was abandoned about halfway down the hill.

Another significant tree in this section of the novel is the one that Sierra's parents give to Caleb. It seems to be a sort of peace offering because they have given him such a hard time and because they are finally admitting that they admire him for giving the trees away to people who need them. Even the boys on the baseball team pool their funds and donate a tree to Caleb's cause.



Discussion Question 1

What do you think of Sierra's father's decision to let Sierra and Caleb spend the remaining days of Christmas together? Do you think he feels badly for the way he has acted? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss how it will affect Sierra and her family not to run the Christmas tree lot the following year. How might it affect the people of the town in California?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Sierra's reaction when she sees that the tree she intended for Heather's family has been cut down. How does it make the situation worse that the tree was just abandoned?

Vocabulary

metaphor, illuminates, complacent, diaphanous, translucent



Chapter 21-24

Summary

In Chapter 21, Abby joins Heather and Sierra at the tree lot to help out on the day before Christmas Eve. As they fill bags with tree clippings, Sierra learns that Heather is knitting a scarf for Devon. What she has finished so far is only two feet long and is slightly twisted. Sierra believes the scarf will be a way for Heather to be certain of Devon's love. She reasons that if he loves her, he will wear it no matter how bad it looks. Heather says that she has a real gift for Devon as well, tickets to a comedy festival.

After they close the lot on Christmas Eve, Sierra and her parents have dinner in the trailer. They ask what she thinks about the fact they may not come back the following year and admit that they know she is being pulled in several different directions. Although they usually give each other only small gifts on Christmas Eve, Sierra's parents give her the key to a car. It goes to Bruce's old truck.

In Chapter 22, as a joke, Caleb wears an ugly holiday sweater that belongs to Heather's mother when he picks Sierra up for the Christmas Eve service. He removed the ugly sweater before they actually go to the church. When they arrive, the church is lit only with candlelight. Caleb's mother and sister sing in the choir. At one point in the service, Caleb motions to Sierra to go outside with him. As they look at the dark windows of the church, Caleb explains all of the candles have been put out, leaving the inside dark. The congregation begins singing Silent Night as two people with candles light the candles of two other people. In this manner, the light slowly begins to spread through the building as more candles are lit. He describes the anticipation he would feel as the light slowly came in his direction.

In Chapter 23, after the service, Jeremiah hugs Caleb, telling him Merry Christmas. Sierra and Caleb begin walking back to the tree lot. Sierra realizes that she loves Caleb and wants to tell him so but cannot bring herself to do so.

The next morning, Caleb and Devon meet Heather and Sierra at Heather's house. Devon seems truly happy with his scarf. He puts it around his neck even though it barely reaches his collarbones. He is also happy with his comedy tickets, but not as pleased as he is with the scarf. Heather gives Sierra a receipt for train tickets to Oregon. She will be traveling to visit Sierra over spring break. Devon gives Caleb and Heather the candles with the scent a Very Special Christmas.

Sierra gives Caleb the slice from her first tree. He hands her his gift. It is a slice from the tree in Cardinals Park. He painted a Christmas tree on the center of it. He explains part of that first tree needed to go back to Oregon with Sierra. He also gives her a necklace with a pendant of a duck in flight. He says the ducks are creatures they wait on to come



south for the winter. When Caleb drives Sierra back to the tree lot, she fears that will be the last time she sees him. He asks her to believe in them.

In Chapter 24, Jeremiah talks to Sierra during a bonfire at the tree lot the evening of Christmas Day. He tells her that she is good for Caleb, and that Caleb seems to be good for her. Jeremiah points out to Sierra that there are colored lights on top of Cardinals Peak. At the same time she gets a text from Caleb telling her that her tree family misses her. After getting permission from her parents, Jeremiah drives Sierra to the road that leads to the top of Cardinals Peak.

Caleb's truck is parked near the grouping a trees with a power cord running from the truck to the lights on the trees. He said his family had told him that he looked so distracted that they sent him to spend time with Sierra. She realizes at that moment that she wants the relationship between her and Caleb to work out. She gives him the envelope with the winter formal tickets in it. He agrees to go with her. They dance together.

Analysis

The novel ends on a joyous note as Heather believes she has proof that Devon really loves her and Sierra and Caleb finally confess their love to each other. The gifts that Sierra and Caleb give to one another are corny because they are so perfect. Sierra gives Caleb the slice of trunk from the first tree she planted while he gives her a slice of trunk from the tree that had been cut down on Cardinals Peak. These similar gifts demonstrate to the reader how alike the two are in their thinking. They also symbolize the objects, Christmas trees, that caused the two to meet in the first place.

Also a significant symbol in this section of the novel is the duck pendant that Caleb gives to Sierra. He tells her that the people of California wait each winter for these ducks to fly south. In a similar way, Caleb will be waiting to see if Sierra and her family will be coming south again to operate their Christmas tree lot.

Significant in this section is the way that Caleb decides to spend his last evening with Sierra. He had asked once before if Sierra had ever considered decorating her trees. Sierra explained to him that she and Heather had done so one year using eco friendly decorations. When Sierra first took Caleb to the top of the peak, he noted that he could see the tree lot from where they were standing. He uses this information to put lights on the trees, knowing that it will draw Sierra to him.

Consider also the feat that decorating the trees must have been since even Heather and Sierra had thought about doing so but had not followed through with their ideas. Heather had remarked to Sierra on the way up the hill one day that it was a shame there were no power outlets available. Caleb apparently finds some way to hook power to his truck to power the lights.

A final significant object in the novel is the scarf that Heather knit for Devon. Even though it is too short and a little twisted, Devon is clearly pleased with it. He recognizes



how much work and time Heather probably put into it. It seems that his habit of being self involved is forgiven when he fusses so profusely over Heather and the scarf.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the uses of light in this section and the meanings of the use of light.

Discussion Question 2

In what tone does the book end? How does the author ensure this happy ending?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Caleb's goodbye gift to Sierra significant? Why does Sierra decide to give him the tickets to the winter formal when she sees what he has done for her?

Vocabulary

indulge, ascertain, perspective, jaded, meticulous, submerge



Characters

Sierra

Sierra is the main character and narrator of this novel.

Sierra's parents own a Christmas tree farm in Oregon. Each year just before Thanksgiving they go to California where they operate a lot from which they sell their trees. Sierra goes with them and helps on the lot. The traditions she has known for Christmas have all revolved around the tree lot.

It is during the Christmas of her junior year that Sierra fears her family will not return to California the following year. They have decided that they do not sell enough trees on the lot to make the trip worthwhile. Sierra does not want this year to be her family's last year at the Christmas tree lot because she has a special gift that she wants to give Heather, her best friend in California. It is the Christmas of their senior year.

This year is also different for Sierra because she has met Caleb, a guy whom she likes. Caleb has a bad reputation in town because of rumors spread about him. Thus, Sierra must convince her parents to let her see him. She also must fight the opinions of other people in the town. Heather is one of those people. Heather has made up her mind about Caleb's character, even though she and the other people have never gotten to know him. After all of the bumps in their relationship, Sierra decides she wants to continue to get to know Caleb even though the relationship will be long distance. She invites him to attend her school's winter formal with her, a sign that she is committed to him and the relationship.

Caleb

Caleb is the boy to whom Sierra is attracted when she spots him on her parents Christmas tree lot. He has dark hair and a dimple.

When Heather learns that Sierra is attracted to Caleb, she suggests that Sierra find another boy to whom she can be attracted. Heather shares with Sierra the rumors that have circulated in their town about Caleb.

Caleb tells Sierra that he did go after his sister with a knife but only after he could no longer handle her pressuring him because she blamed their father's bad emotional state on him. He told Sierra he wanted to scare Abby, but he never intended to kill her or hurt her.

Since that time, Caleb's reputation has been marred by the rumors that have circulated about what he is suspected to have done to his sister. Most of the people, like Heather, avoid him because of the rumors they have heard even though they really do not know Caleb.



Because Caleb and his family knew hard times after the divorce, Caleb knows what it is like to be without a tree at Christmas time. For this reason, he uses the money he gets from tips at his job to buy trees. He gives these trees to families who cannot afford a tree.

Jeremiah Moore

Jeremiah Moore is a boy who was once best friends with Caleb. Jeremiah was at Caleb's house when Caleb went after his sister with the knife. Jeremiah told his family what had happened. They not only told others what happened but also blew the incident out of proportion, making Caleb seem like a monster.

Sierra realizes that Jeremiah and Caleb miss each other. She talks to his family on several occasions about the destroyed friendship. Eventually, Sierra also talks to Jeremiah and gets him to think about whether ending the friendship with Caleb was his decision or if it was pushed on him by his family.

Jeremiah does begin to visit Caleb near the end of the novel. The two begin to repair their friendship. The night before Sierra is to leave to go back to Oregon, Jeremiah tells her that she hopes that she and Caleb will maintain their relationship because she has been good for him.

Heather

Heather is Sierra's best friend in California. She is the one who encourages Sierra to try to find a boyfriend so they can double date during the Christmas holidays.

When Heather discovers that it is Caleb who has caught Sierra's eye, she discourages Sierra from continuing the relationship. Even though she did not witness what happened between Caleb and his sister, she repeated the rumors that she had heard about what happened.

Heather and her boyfriend, Devon, provide not only a bit of comic relief but also show how complacency can be bad for a relationship. Because their relationship grew stagnant, Heather thought she and Devon needed to break up. It took a bout of jealousy on Heather's part to realize how much she loved Devon.

Andrew

Andrew is a boy who works on the Christmas tree lot owned by Sierra's parents. The previous year he had asked Sierra to date him. Since her father discouraged Sierra from dating anyone, Sierra turned Andrew down.



When Sierra returns to the tree lot for the current year, Andrew is still upset because she refused to date him. He gets angry when he sees her with Caleb and tells her father the rumors about Caleb and his sister.

Sierra's father witnesses an argument between Andrew and Sierra at the tree lot. Her father asks Andrew to apologize to Sierra, but Andrew refuses. Instead, he chooses to quit.

Sierra's Dad

Sierra's dad is never given a name in the novel. Like his wife, he is not even given a courtesy title and last name. He is part of the novel because of his relationship to Sierra.

Sierra must work the hardest to convince her father that she can handle a long distance relationship and that Caleb is not the monster some people have made him out to be.

Sierra's father discourages Sierra from dating the guys who work on the tree lot. He also discourages the guys who work on the tree lot from showing interest in Sierra by assigning them the duty of cleaning the outhouse if they show interest in her.

Cassandra Moore

Cassandra Moore is Jeremiah's sister. She works in cooperation with her mother to keep Jeremiah away from Caleb. For instance, she steers Jeremiah away from Caleb before the Christmas parade when they spot one another.

Later, after Sierra confronted the Moore family in the grocery store, Cassandra told Sierra that she would always do what was best for her brother. She changed her mind at some point because she agreed to cover for Jeremiah when he went to reunite with Caleb.

Rachel

Rachel is one of Sierra's best friends from Oregon.

Rachel gets mad at Sierra when Sierra does not take a train to Oregon to see her in a production of A Christmas Carol. Rachel does get over her anger with Sierra and recognizes that Sierra wanted to spend the time with Caleb.

In order to help Sierra, Rachel sends her tickets to the school's winter formal in hopes that Sierra will be able to invite Caleb to the dance.

Elizabeth Campbell

Elizabeth Campbell is one of Sierra's best friends from Oregon.



It is Elizabeth who helps to heal the break between Rachel and Sierra after Sierra did not come back to Oregon for Rachel's play.

Elizabeth is also the character who mails the slice of tree trunk to Sierra in California so Sierra can give it as a gift to Caleb.

Sierra's Mom

Sierra's mother is a character who is never given a name, not even a last name and courtesy title. In the novel, she is known for her role as Sierra's mother.

Because Sierra's mother lived in California and met her husband when he was a young man working on the tree lot with his family, she is understanding of Sierra's relationship with Caleb. She more quickly gives her blessing to Sierra and Caleb than her husband gives his blessing.

Abby

Abby is Caleb's younger sister. Although Caleb came after Abby with a knife because she blamed him so badly for their father's bad emotional state after their parents' divorce, Abby has forgiven Caleb for what he did.

Abby lives with her father in another state but happens to be visiting for Christmas. She meets Sierra and takes the opportunity to tell her how much her brother likes her.

Devon

Devon is Heather's boyfriend. He is described as a dense but kind boy. At first, Heather tells Sierra she plans to break up with Devon but is waiting for the right time to do so.

It is when the Winter Queen asks Devon for his phone number that Heather realizes that she really does still love Devon. Devon also redeems himself by treating Heather to a perfect day and then making a fuss over a knitted scarf that she made for him.

Mrs. Moore

Mrs. Moore is the mother of Cassandra and Jeremiah. Caleb believes it is Mrs. Moore who is responsible for spreading some of the more hurtful rumors about what happened the day that Caleb went after his sister with a knife. Because Jeremiah was at Caleb's house the day that the incident occurred, his mother will not allow him to be friends with Caleb any longer.



Luis Trujillo

Luis Trujillo is Mrs. Trujillo's son and a friend of Caleb's. Although Sierra sensed that Luis was uncomfortable when she and Caleb surprised Luis' mother with a free tree, Caleb later told her that he had talked to Luis to make sure it was okay.

Luis later gets a job working at the tree lot.

Christy Wang

Christy Wang is the Winter Queen for the Christmas parade. When Christy asks Devon for his phone number it makes Heather realize that she does not really want to break up with Devon.

Mrs. Trujillo

Mrs. Trujillo is the woman to whom Caleb and Sierra deliver a tree the first time that Sierra goes with Caleb on a delivery. She is deeply grateful for the tree and is delighted that it is a live tree.

Uncle Bruce

Uncle Bruce is a family member who helps out on the Christmas tree farm. He is the one who pilots the helicopter that is used to airlift trees out of the tree farm.



Symbols and Symbolism

Helicopter

This helicopter is a symbol of how Sierra's family tries to be eco friendly at their tree farm. It saves the family from having to cut multiple roads through the farm and gives them more workable land. The helicopter also allows them to deliver their trees more quickly, while the trees are at their freshest.

Oldest Tree

This oldest tree is the first tree that Sierra planted on Cardinals Peak when she was eleven years old. She had intended to give this tree as a gift to Heather and her family the last year she worked the lot with her parents. It is one of the reasons that Sierra does not want her parents to have to give up the tree lot.

Sierra is angry when she and Caleb go to visit her trees for the first time and discover that someone has cut down the biggest tree in an attempt to take it home as their Christmas tree. She and Caleb find it discarded on the road as the person who cut it down apparently could not make it all the way down the hill with it. Caleb cuts a slice of this tree trunk for Sierra as her Christmas gift.

Peppermint Mocha

Sierra's and Caleb's shared love of peppermint mocha is a symbol of their shared likes. Sierra is surprised when she first sees Caleb mixing coffee and hot chocolate in a cup with a peppermint stick. It is the same way she makes her drinks at the tree lot. She refers to the combination as a cheap peppermint mocha.

Slice Cut From the Base of the First Tree Sierra Planted

This slice of tree symbolizes how important the trees are to Sierra. Her mother had helped Sierra plant this first tree when she was six. When the time came for it to be donated to the hospital where Sierra was born, which had been the plan all along, Sierra was so upset she cried over the stump. Her father kept the slice cut from the end of the tree's trunk and gave it to Sierra as a reminder of her first tree.

Sierra kept this tree slice on her dresser until she began dating Caleb. She asked Elizabeth to mail it to her so she could give it as a gift to Caleb because of his own obsession with trees.



A Very Special Christmas Candle

The scent of this candle symbolizes the things that helped to bond Caleb and Sierra when they first met. The candle includes the scents of Christmas trees, peppermint, and chocolate.

Keychain Photo of Sierra and Caleb with Santa

This keychain photo is symbolic of the budding relationship between Sierra and Caleb. Sierra knows that Caleb really likes her when he asks for the keychain photo and then begins carrying it with him because it holds a picture of them.

Cut Marks in a Door

These cut marks still visible in Abby's bedroom door are symbols of Caleb's frustration with his sister for suggesting that he was to blame for all that was wrong in their lives. They symbolize the fact that Caleb did, at one time, let his anger get the best of him. They make the story that Caleb told Sierra real.

Two Tickets to the Winter Formal

These two tickets to the winter formal at Serra's school symbolize Sierra's decision that she does believe that her relationship with Caleb is worth the time and effort of a long distance relationship. Sierra only gives him these tickets after he finds a way to decorate her trees on Cardinals Peak with lights, giving them a special place and special way to say goodbye.

Knitted Scarf

This scarf that Heather attempts to knit for Devon is a symbol of Devon's devotion to Heather. Even though the scarf is very short and twisted, Heather can tell from the look in Devon's eyes that he is really impressed by the fact that Heather made it for him. Even after Heather gives him his real gift of comedy tickets, Devon continues to wear the scarf.

Duck Pendant

Caleb gives this duck pendant to Sierra as a Christmas gift. It is a symbol of their relationship because he explains to her that the people of California wait for the ducks to fly south for the winter, somewhat like he would wait for Sierra and her family to come south for the winter to run their tree lot.



Settings

Oregon Christmas Tree Farm

When the novel opens, Sierra and her mother are still staying at their Christmas tree farm in Oregon. It is at this farm that the trees they sell on their California tree lot are grown.

California Tree Lot

This Christmas tree lot in California was first operated by Sierra's grandfather. The business was passed on to her father. It was while Sierra's father was working as a teen on that lot that he met Sierra's mother. A good deal of the action in the novel takes place on this tree lot. It is where Sierra first sees Caleb.

Cardinals Peak

Cardinals Peak is the name of a hill that overlooks the city where Sierra's family has their Christmas tree lot. Every year since she was eleven, Sierra and Heather have planted a sapling on that peak. At the end of the novel, Caleb arranges lights on the trees Sierra has planted. When she sees the lights, Sierra joins Caleb on the peak.

The Bigtop

The Bigtop is what Sierra and the other workers call the tent at the Christmas tree lot where the cash register, drink center and flocked trees are kept.

Breakfast Express

Breakfast Express is the restaurant where Caleb works. It is while Heather and Sierra are eating in this restaurant that they learn that Caleb has been using his tip money to buy Christmas trees for people who cannot afford them.



Themes and Motifs

Differences in Christmas Traditions

In this novel, everyone has their own set of unique Christmas traditions. It is these Christmas traditions that make every family unique. Although many Christmas traditions are discussed in this novel, none are quite like the ones followed by Sierra and her family.

Because Sierra and her family run a Christmas tree farm in Oregon, they are involved in Christmas all year long. Shortly before Thanksgiving they move to an Airstream trailer on a Christmas tree lot in California where they sell their trees. They are not home for the holidays. Instead, they spend their Christmas as one of other people's Christmas traditions. Sierra notes how many people come back year after year to buy trees from her family because they have always done so.

Heather and her family, who are friends with Sierra and her parents, have their own set of traditions when it comes to Christmas. They share Thanksgiving dinner with Sierra and the others. Each year Heather's mother participates in an ugly Christmas sweater contest which she has won for several years in a row. She cuts the sleeves from the sweater and makes one pillow, which she gives to Sierra, and one pillow, which she keeps for herself.

Although Caleb and his family have suffered the hurt of a divorce, they continue to try to follow their Christmas traditions. They always attend the candlelight Christmas Eve service at their church. They also have omelets and french toast for breakfast on Christmas Day.

Sierra and Caleb have also begun their own holiday traditions. Caleb buys and gives trees to families who cannot afford them. Sierra helps out by making cookies to give to the families who get the trees. Years before she ever met Caleb, Sierra had her own tradition that revolved around Christmas trees. Every year since she was eleven, Sierra has been planting a tree on Cardinals Peak. She did not know at the time that tradition would give her and Caleb a perfect spot to declare their love for each other.

The Hurt Rumors Can Cause

Caleb's story is an excellent example of the way the spread of rumors can pile additional guilt on someone already feeling guilty. Because Jeremiah's mother blows the story of what happened between Caleb and his sister out of proportion and does not provide any context for the story, people assume the worst. It is only after Caleb loses his best friend and a good deal of respect for himself that Sierra finally helps people start to see the truth about Caleb.



Although Heather admits that she does not know Caleb personally, she is quick to share the rumor that she has heard about him with Sierra. She does include with her story that she has had very little interaction with Caleb and does not really know him. In all their dealings, Heather does admit she has not known him to be anything but kind. In Heather's account, Caleb tried to attack his sister with a knife. When Sierra gets the truth from Caleb, it turns out the story is slightly different.

Because he has been prejudged from the rumors that circulate about him, Caleb believes that it will not do any good to try to tell people the truth of what really happened. He has decided that his mother and Abby are the only ones to whom he owes the truth. After he and Sierra become friends, he does eventually tell her the truth about what happened.

After Sierra learns the truth behind the rumors, she begins campaigning to restore the faith of people in Caleb's good nature. She is particularly interested in convincing her own parents, and Jeremiah, who was once Caleb's best friend, that Caleb does not represent any harm to her or to them. Sierra does manage to get Caleb and Jeremiah interacting again when Jeremiah realizes that his mind was made up for him concerning Caleb. Sierra also convinces her parents that Caleb means her no harm though they are more difficult to convince than Jeremiah.

Logistics of the Long Distance Relationship

Because Sierra and her family will be returning to Oregon after Christmas and, perhaps, not returning to California again, the logistics of a long distance relationship is at the forefront of several of the characters' minds. Although her parents discourage Sierra from starting a relationship that will turn out to be long distance, Sierra does not think her parents should advise her because they also had a long distance relationship. Meanwhile, Sierra and Caleb clash over their own opinions of whether a long distance relationship can work..

When Sierra first arrives in California, she does not want to date anyone even though Heather encourages it. Sierra reasons that she will only be hurt when she has to leave and go back to Oregon after Christmas. Even though her parents met at the tree lot and their love survived the long distance relationship, it is not a challenge that Sierra wants to undertake.

After meeting Caleb, however, Sierra decides that he might be worth the challenge of a long distance relationship. As they begin to struggle with their doubts and questions, Sierra wonders again if it is really worth it. When Heather and Caleb discuss a boy they see texting his girlfriend from Tennessee, Sierra shocks Caleb by indicating the long distance relationship will not work between the two people. Caleb takes Sierra's response as an indication that she does not think that a long distance relationship between them would work out as well. He argues that if both people in the couple were willing to work on the relationship, there was not reason they could not stay together.



Later in the novel, Sierra does a complete turn on her ideas about long distance relationships. She believes that she and Caleb have a chance to keep their love alive despite the miles. She even gives him tickets to her school's winter formal as a sign that she has decided to give a long distance relationship a chance. When her parents question her intentions, Sierra reminds them that they too, survived a long distance relationship.

Life of a Family Business

Sierra points out to her reader several times that the Christmas tree farm, and tree lot in California is a family business. It was passed down from Sierra's grandfather, making it a two-generation operation. Being part of a family business is both fulfilling and stressful for Sierra.

Because Sierra is part of her family's Christmas tree production, she is allowed to travel each November to California and help at the family's tree lot. She misses a month of school but is allowed to do her work and submit it via email. During the month in California, Sierra help her parents unload and display Christmas trees, and assist customers in picking out their perfect tree.

Besides the fact she works without pay, one of the downsides of working in a family business is that Sierra's father discourages her from dating any of the boys who work on the tree lot. This comes in handy for Sierra because she does not want to date Andrew, the boy who has a serious crush on Sierra. However, it is unhandy for the boys who work on the lot. Any of them who show the least bit of interest in Sierra are assigned by her father to clean the outhouses.

Another challenge of being part of a family business of Sierra's knowledge that the business may or may not be left to her when her parents are too old to run the business any longer. Just as her grandfather left the tree lot to his son, Sierra wonders if she will one day be in charge of running the lot. When Sierra's parents announced with almost complete certainty that they will not be returning to the tree lot the following year, it is disappointing for both Sierra and her parents. Her parents are disappointed because they actually met and began their relationship on the tree lot. Sierra is disappointed because she will not be able to carry on this part of her family's business and way of life.

Challenges in Relationships With Friends

In addition to providing Sierra with a challenging lifestyle in which to pursue a love relationship, Sierra's relationships with her girlfriends are stressed because of her family's work on the tree lot in California. Rachel and Elizabeth, Sierra's best friends in Oregon feel abandoned when she leaves to go to California. Sierra feels she never gets to spend enough time with Heather, her friend in Oregon. To make matters worse, feelings tend to get hurt when Sierra makes decisions between her Oregon and California friends.



Rachel and Elizabeth make things difficult for Sierra because they are over the top in letting her know how hurt they are when she leaves for California each year. Even though she has no control over her situation, they act as if they are being punished by her because she is going away.

When Sierra is in California, misunderstandings are easy. An example is the time that Sierra chooses not to take a train back to Oregon to see Rachel in her play. Even though Sierra understands the play is important to Rachel, she does not want to give up any of her already short time in California to go back to Oregon. Rachel gets angry and hangs up on Sierra. She refuses to respond to Sierra's calls and texts.

Meanwhile, Sierra is sad because she is not able to spend more time with Heather. She had once referred to Heather as her winter friend, but she realized it was wrong to put their friendship in a box. Sierra knew that Heather was a best friend, just like Elizabeth and Rachel back home. Because her parents tell her they probably will not be returning to the tree lot the following year, it puts Sierra's friendship with Heather in jeopardy. Instead of getting angry with Sierra, however, Heather gives Sierra a Christmas gift of a receipt for a train ticket that she has bought to visit Sierra over their spring breaks.



Styles

Point of View

This story is told in the present tense from the first person point of view. The use of present tense keeps the reader engaged in the story and wondering where it will lead. Sierra and the other characters are experiencing what is happening at the same time that the reader is learning what is happening. Since this is the story of a significant time in Sierra's life, her first true love as well as the last time her parents will perhaps run their tree lot in California, it is appropriate that Sierra tell her own story. No other character would have the direct access to Sierra's thoughts and feelings about what is going on around her. The author also wants the reader to focus on Sierra and her experiences. The best way to do this is through the first person point of view.

Language and Meaning

One of the things significant about the language and meaning in this novel is Sierra's choice of words and the way Caleb teases her about her word use. Sierra uses words like "arduous" and "peruse" as she talks to Caleb. He is both impressed and amused by her talent for using these words in sentences. In order to keep up with her word choices, Caleb subscribes to a word of the day app on his phone and begins using equally impressive words like "sartorial" and "diaphanous" in his conversations with her.

Structure

The plot of the story, whether or not Caleb and Sierra will choose to commit to one another and a long distance relationship, is developed in a linear fashion. Since this is a love story, the climax occurs when Sierra and Caleb finally tell one another that they love each other. The story line basically follows the couple as they survive bumps of a new relationship. Their travels are particularly bumpy because of the rumors circulating about Caleb and the question of whether or not Sierra and her family will be returning to the lot the following year.



Quotes

Even though I'm the one leaving for another holiday season far from home, Rachel pretends like it's her world that gets turned upside-down each year."

-- Narrator (Chapter 1)

Importance: Sierra describes how Rachel, one of her best friends in Oregon, reacts each year when it is time for her and her family to go to California to operate their Christmas tree lot.

The plan for next year has always been to cut down the first one we planted and give it to Heather's family. / That's one more reason this can't be our last season."

-- Narrator (Chapter 2)

Importance: Because the family has been losing money at their tree lot in California, Sierra fears the family will not return the following year. There are several reasons why Sierra hopes it will not be their last year to run the tree lot. An important reason is that she wants to be able to give Heather and her family the tree that she first planted on Cardinals Peak as their Christmas tree.

I thought I wanted to feel needed, but that gets exhausting real fast. I learned that it's much better to feel wanted."

-- Narrator (Chapter 4)

Importance: Sierra, who is described as being fussy about relationships, says that she has learned from her past dating experience that being wanted is better than being needed. She comes to understand that Heather's threats to break up with Devon come from her desire to feel needed by him.

The farm is our life, really. I guess with all the early mornings and late nights back home, I've always seen this as the prize. Watching people get excited about finding the right trees. It'll be hard to let that go."

-- Sierra's Dad (Chapter 6)

Importance: Sierra's dad admits to her that if they do have to give up their tree lot, he will miss getting to see people picking out their trees as it has always served as a sort of prize for all the hard work they do at the farm.

Now, I realize that the only people I'm seeing are the ones who will have a tree for Christmas. The people I don't see are the families who can't afford a tree even if they want one. Those are the people Caleb brings our trees to."

-- Narrator (Chapter 8)

Importance: When Sierra learns that Caleb is buying Christmas trees with his own money and taking them to people who cannot afford them, she realizes that there is



another group of people she never recognized existed before. These are the people who cannot afford to purchase a tree at the lot.

In all my time on this lot, season after season, I've never followed a tree from the time it left our possession to its eventual home."

-- Narrator (Chapter 9)

Importance: When Sierra goes with Caleb the first time to deliver a tree, it is the first time she will ever see one of the trees they grew set up in a stranger's home.

He looks at me and smiles. 'So you would only do this if people tell you how awesome you are for it?'"

-- Caleb (Chapter 11)

Importance: Caleb teaches Sierra a lesson when he helps her to realize that he does not deliver the trees just so that people will thank him and admire him. He recognizes the frustration in the couple that missed the Christmas parade because of miscommunication and is kind to them despite their anger toward him.

He looks away. The unspoken irony is that he and Mom met this exact way. On this lot."

-- Narrator (Chapter 12)

Importance: Sierra finds it ironic that her father is discouraging her from starting a relationship with a guy she met in California, especially since her mother and father met on the lot when she lived in California and he lived in Oregon but worked at Christmas at the lot.

I couldn't listen to it anymore. I don't know how else to describe it. One day she screamed at me, the same thing she always screamed: that I'd ruined our dad's life, and hers, and Mom's. And some switch in me . . . flipped.' His voice quivers. 'I ran to the kitchen and grabbed a knife.'"

-- Caleb (Chapter 12)

Importance: Caleb describes how he could no longer take his sister yelling at him because she felt he had made the wrong decision when he encouraged her to stay with their mother with him after their parents' divorce. It was when she was fussing at him one day that he could take the blame no longer and got the knife from the kitchen to scare her.

Caleb doesn't give the trees hoping for gold stars. He's hoping for peace, to balance his mistakes."

-- Narrator (Chapter 15)

Importance: Sierra is astute enough to realize that Caleb is purchasing and giving away trees as a way to feel better about himself.



I guess when you've grown up one way, it's hard to miss how things could be different, you know?"

-- Sierra (Chapter 16)

Importance: Even though Sierra has never celebrated Christmas in what might be called the traditional way, she recognizes that if her family does not come back to California the following year, she will miss the traditions she and her family shared each year.

Abby's forgiven me, and that helps. But I cannot forgive myself for everything I took from my mom."

-- Caleb (Chapter 16)

Importance: Caleb tells Sierra that his sister has forgiven him for what happened between them but that he cannot forgive himself for what happened. He cannot forgive himself for causing his mother to miss out on her daughter's growing up years.

I love coming out here,' I say. 'Every time I hike up this hill, I think . . . I get this feeling like . . . that my trees are a deep personal metaphor.'"

-- Sierra (Chapter 20)

Importance: Sierra shares with Caleb that her trees on Cardinals Peak represent who she is and what she stands for. They are symbolic of the life she has lived up to that point.

I went back to your tree on Cardinals Peak,' he says. 'The one that was cut. Part of it needs to return home with you.'"

-- Caleb (Chapter 23)

Importance: As a Christmas gift for Sierra, Caleb cuts a slice from the trunk of the tree that was cut down on Cardinals Peak. It is symbolic that a slice of the tree that originally came from Oregon will be going back to the Christmas tree farm from where it came.