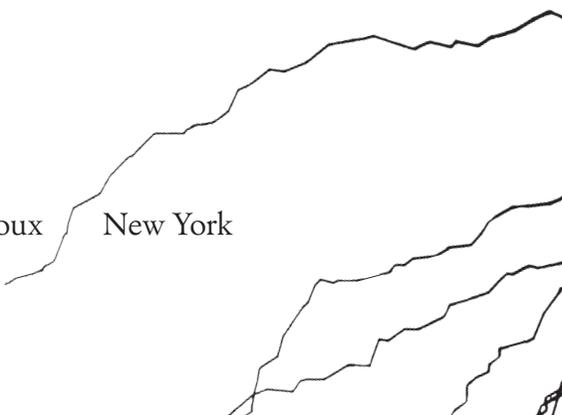


JENNIFER BOSWORTH

# STRUCK

Farrar Straus Giroux New York

An abstract line drawing in the bottom right corner of the page, consisting of several jagged, overlapping black lines that suggest a landscape feature like a hillside or a mountain range. The lines are thin and black, set against the white background.



## PROLOGUE

When you've been struck by lightning as many times as I have, you start to expect the worst pretty much all the time. You never know when that jagged scrawl of white fire, charged with a hundred million volts of electricity, might blaze down from the sky and find its mark on you; sear a hole like a bullet right through you, or turn your hair to ash; maybe leave your skin blackened to a crisp, or stop your heart; make you blind, or deaf, or both.

Sometimes lightning plays with you a little, lifts you into the air and drops you twenty yards away, blows your shoes off, or flash-fries the clothes from your body, leaving you naked and steaming in the rain. Lightning could wipe the last few hours or days from your memory, or overload your brain, short-circuiting your personality and rendering you a completely different person. I heard about a woman who was struck by lightning and cured of terminal cancer. A paraplegic who was given the ability to walk again.

Sometimes lightning strikes *you*, but it's the person standing next to you who ends up in the hospital. Or the morgue.

Any of that could happen, or none of it, or something else no one's ever heard of. The thing about lightning is you

never know what it's going to do to you. Lightning could turn you into some kind of freakish human battery, storing up energy, leaving you with the persistent feeling that any day now you're going to spontaneously combust. Like a bomb is going to go off inside you and do, well . . . what bombs do best.

Or maybe that's just me.

My name is Mia Price, and I am a human lightning rod. Do they make a support group for that? They should, and let me tell you why.

My name is Mia Price, and I am a lightning *addict*.

There. Now you know the truth. I want the lightning to find me. I crave it like lungs crave oxygen. There's nothing that makes you feel more alive than being struck. Unless, of course, it kills you. It does that to me from time to time, which is why I moved to Los Angeles. As the song says, it never rains in Southern California. But the song also says when it pours, it *pours*.

The song is right.

My name is Mia Price, and it's been one year since my last strike, but that doesn't mean I've stopped expecting the worst. Lightning only strikes in L.A. a handful of times every year. The problem is, I traded thunderstorms for earthquakes, one earthquake in particular. The one that changed the city, and my life, forever.

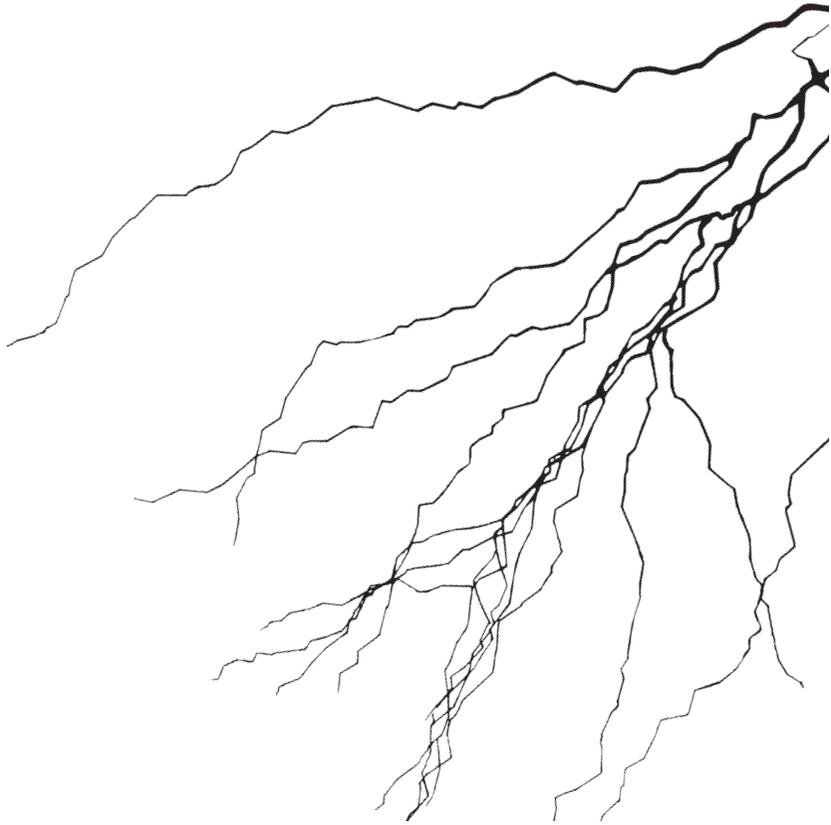
That day, the day of the worst natural disaster to hit the United States, oh, pretty much ever . . . it rained.

Actually, it poured.

## PART 1

*Lightning never strikes twice in the same place.*

—Proverb



**APRIL 14**

Three days until the storm . . .



# 1

I don't sleep much. An hour here. Two hours there. Chronic insomnia, it's one of my more tolerable lightning strike aftereffects. Not as bad as the veiny red scars that cover me from neck to toes, or the burning in my chest that flares hotter when I get a little emotional. Insomnia? Eh. It could be worse (and usually is). Most people wish they had more hours in the day. I keep almost the full twenty-four.

When I go to bed at night, it's not with the intention to sleep. If sleep happens, great. If it doesn't, well, that's something I've gotten used to.

So when I opened my eyes and saw a guy standing over my bed, I had to assume I'd finally fallen asleep. And when I noticed the shiny silver knife gripped in his hand—the kind of pretty, decorative blade that has no practical application but murder—I decided this was not a dream I wanted to see through to the end. It would have been nice to stay asleep a bit longer, but now I was going to have to wake myself before Nightmare Boy used his knife to gut me.

"Wake up, Mia," I told myself in a voice that came out hoarse and scratchy, like it would have if I'd actually awakened.

The guy startled back from my bed. He dropped the

knife and it fell straight down and stuck in the wood floor with a *thunk*. Must be sharp. He scrambled to yank it free, but looked unsure what to do with it after that. His face was in shadow, but his wide, white eyes and jerky movements told me he was as scared as I was supposed to be. As far as nightmares went, he wasn't too bad. I decided to stay asleep.

I closed my eyes, hoping I'd open them to a new dream.

But there were no more dreams that night, only Nightmare Boy's soft, retreating footsteps.

When I opened my eyes again, feeling as though I hadn't slept at all, it was the morning I'd been dreading. The morning when my brother, Parker, and I would return to school for the first time since the quake.

We had a dream dictionary kicking around the house somewhere. If I consulted it, I was pretty sure it would confirm my suspicion that a knife in your dream was a bad omen. Not that I needed an omen to give me the heads-up that this day was going to suck.

As I dragged myself out of bed, I noticed a small split in the floor, right about where Nightmare Boy's knife had lodged itself in the floorboards. Strange. Then again, there were plenty of other little cracks and splits on the old floor of my restored attic bedroom.

I put thoughts of the dream away. I had bigger problems—real problems—to worry about. I didn't know what to expect back at school, but if the changes that had taken root throughout the rest of the city were any indication, I should probably give in and expect the worst, as usual.

Thanks for the warning, Nightmare Boy. Not that it'll do me any good.



I stood outside Mom's bedroom door and listened to Prophet's muffled voice. I couldn't make out what he said, but after a month of Mom obsessively watching his televised sermons, I could guess the subject matter.

The end of the world is at hand.

Those who surrender their souls to Prophet will be saved.

Those who don't will suffer and die and suffer some more.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. We heard you the first time.

"Mom?" I tapped on the door before turning the knob. It was seven in the morning, and outside the sun was doing its job, but Mom's bedroom was a cave. She sat at her window in the grungy bathrobe she hadn't shed in days, peeking through the slats in the blinds. Her eyes traveled back and forth between the window and the TV, which was playing *The Hour of Light*, Rance Ridley Prophet's morning broadcast. He did three shows a day: morning, midday, and evening. Ever since we brought her home from the hospital, Mom had been obsessed with Prophet. The only way she missed his broadcast was if the electricity or cable went out. I almost looked forward to those outages now.

"Brothers and sisters," Prophet intoned, "God will soon

make His final judgment. You must decide now on which side you will stand, on the side of heaven, or on the side of earth and its wicked, worldly pleasures. Will you be lifted up, raptured to paradise, or laid low by God's terrible vengeance?"

Prophet's voice drowned out my entrance into the bedroom. Sometimes I wondered if Mom's hearing was somehow damaged during the quake. She seemed so oblivious to what went on around her. The doctor who attended to her for all of five minutes before he gave her bed away to someone more needy said she was fine. Malnourished and dehydrated, but she'd live. After three days trapped under a collapsed building, she had some bad bruises, a few cracked ribs, and a dozen lacerations on her face and arms—caused by the wall of glass that had exploded near her when the building started to buckle—most of which had nearly healed by now. Physically, she was as sound as could be expected. Mental health was another matter.

The Internet—along with our utilities and cable—had been in and out since the quake, but when our connection was working I'd researched Mom's symptoms until I determined what was wrong with her: Acute Stress Disorder—Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder's evil twin on steroids—caused by a traumatic event, which is re-experienced in flashbacks, anxiety, delusions, emotional detachment, even amnesia.

Mom had all the symptoms and then some. She should have been in a hospital, under the care of a psychiatrist and a team of nurses tending to her around the clock. But the hospitals were still full of patients with actual life-

threatening injuries, people with broken backs and crushed limbs and infected burns. People suffering from earthquake fever, an immunity disorder caused by mold released from the ground during the quake. People so malnourished and dehydrated from the lack of food and water in the city that the only way their bodies would accept nutrients was through a tube. There were no beds for those with functioning bodies but malfunctioning minds.

The upside was Acute Stress Disorder usually lasted a maximum of four weeks, and it had been four weeks to the day since the earthquake. Three weeks and four days since rescue workers pulled Mom's unconscious, dehydrated body from beneath several tons of rubble. It was a miracle she'd still been breathing. The people who'd been found with her were not so lucky. Some were crushed instantly. Others suffocated, and it was their deaths that saved my mom's life. There wasn't enough oxygen in the small cavern beneath the wreckage to go around.

Four weeks since the quake . . . it seemed like four thousand.

"Mom?" I said again. I kept my voice low, gentle, as though my words might hurt her if they came out too hard. She stiffened and her shoulders hunched as she craned her head around. It had been so long since she'd washed her hair that it appeared wet with grease. The scars on her face stood out in waxy, salmon-colored lines against skin that hadn't seen the sun in weeks. It was an effort not to flinch every time I looked at her. At least my face had been spared from the lightning scars that etched the rest of my body. Mom's face, on the other hand . . . she would need

plastic surgery to remove the scars if she didn't want to be reminded of the quake every time she looked in a mirror.

"We have already begun to witness God's wrath," Prophet continued. "He whispered to me that He would strike Los Angeles only minutes before His fist came down. The end of all things is at hand, brothers and sisters, and it will commence right here, in Los Angeles. For this is not the city of angels, but a city where devils rule from their hillside mansions and immense studios, spreading their corruption like a plague through your television screens and movie theaters and the Internet. Is it any surprise, in a city so amoral, that our young people—the ones who call themselves 'rovers'—dance and drink and cavort on the graves of the dead in the Waste?"

I turned the volume down, averting my gaze from the milky orbs of Prophet's eyes. His snowy hair avalanched over his shoulders, thick and frosty as a polar bear's pelt, though he couldn't be older than thirty-five, with that peanut-butter-smooth, tanned face. That bleach-white crescent of a smile. But mostly when I looked at him I saw the eyes, empty and opaque, filmed with cataracts.

"Mom, Parker and I have to go," I said.

"What?" she finally responded. "Where . . . where are you going?" Her voice dragged, weighted with the antipsychotics and anti-anxiety medications I'd procured for her through less than legitimate means. Even if I could get Mom an appointment with one of the overburdened doctors in the city, they'd just give me prescriptions I couldn't fill. Pharmacies had been looted within the first days after the quake. Supplies of food, water, and medications were trickling back into the city by air, but with most of the freeways

shut down, and the trucks that did make it in being looted, there wasn't enough to go around.

When the quake hit, there were nineteen million people living in the greater metropolitan area. The population had thinned since then. Those who could manage it had abandoned the city like the proverbial sinking ship. But there were still too many people to feed and medicate. Even counting the private jets celebrities loaned to aid organizations, there were only so many planes and helicopters available to import goods. Supplies were divided up for the area hospitals and clinics and consumed as soon as they left the trucks. *If* the trucks made it from the airports to their drop-off destinations.

The only option I was left with for getting Mom's meds was the black market. I knew I was buying the same pills that were being stolen, but I couldn't afford to care. My moral compass didn't point the same direction it used to.

"Mom," I said again. I could tell she was having a hard time focusing on me. Half her attention was on the window and half on Prophet. "Parker and I have to go back to school today. But we'll come straight home after. You'll only be alone for a few hours."

A look started to surface on Mom's face. Terror at the prospect of being left alone in the house, with rioting and looting still going on throughout the city, water and power and cell service still unreliable.

Mom twisted her hands together in her lap, like she was trying to mold them into some new shape. "What if someone tries to get in while you're gone?"

"I checked the doors and windows. Everything's locked up tight. No one's getting in." It was a good thing I'd checked

the windows again this morning. I'd found the one in the garage unlocked. It was a small window, but someone could squeeze through if he or she really wanted to.

Mom unraveled her fingers and parted the blinds again. "There was a boy watching the house earlier. A boy your age with glasses. I've seen him before. I can't . . . can't remember where. He saw me looking and he went away. I know him from somewhere, Mia. I *know* him, but I can't *remember*." She pounded both fists against her temples so hard I jumped. "Why do you both have to go? Can't one of you stay here with me? I don't want to be alone in this house with him out there watching."

I didn't want to tell her why it was so important that both Parker and I return to school, why it couldn't wait another week. We were down to our last cans of food, and the few schools that had reopened not only offered free lunch, but the kids who started attending classes again got priority aid. Parker and I would each receive a ration of food to take home with us for every day we showed up.

This was not about education. It was about survival.

Mom's fists were curled against her temples, her body hunched like she was bracing for impact. Was there really someone watching the house, or was she seeing things again?

"Mom . . . *Mom*, I need you to take your pills before we leave." Xanax for anxiety. Thorazine for the hallucinations and flashbacks.

She pulled her chin against her chest. "I already took them."

"Are you sure?" I sounded patronizing, but Mom hardly

ever remembered to take her pills. Most of the time she hardly seemed to remember her own name.

She gave me a sharp look. "I'm sure," she said.

A soft knock at the open door. Parker poked his head in, his thick, straw-colored hair, still wet from the shower, hung in his eyes. The water was on today. That had been a relief. I hadn't taken more than a handful of showers since the quake, and I didn't want to return to school smelling like one of the Displaced.

Parker went to Mom, put his arms around her. "Love you," he said. "We'll be back before you know it, okay?"

Mom tensed at his touch. Parker released her, trying not to look hurt by her rejection, but I knew he was. Out of the two of us, Parker had always been the sensitive one. "Empathetic" was the word Mom used to describe him, but it was more than that. Parker didn't just empathize. He was a "fixer." When someone was hurting, he tried to find a way to make them better.

But Parker couldn't crack the wall Mom had put up around herself, and it was killing him. Mom's rejection wasn't personal, though. At least, that was what I told myself. But she didn't like people to get too close anymore. Every day she seemed to fold more tightly into herself, growing smaller and smaller, as though she were still being crushed under that fallen building.

"I'll wait in the car." Parker avoided my eyes as he walked past me, but I saw they were wet, and I felt emotion close my throat.

When he was gone, I went to Mom. I wanted to hug her, too, even though I knew she would be as rigid and unresponsive as a twist of wood. But more than that, I

wanted to grab her by the shoulders and shake her and demand she come back to us. We needed her.

My eyes strayed to the TV. On-screen, the camera panned back, revealing the stage. Several identically dressed teenagers—the boys wearing crisp white shirts and white slacks, the girls in long white dresses—flanked Prophet on each side. Two of them were twins, a boy and a girl, with white-blond hair a shade more ivory than Prophet's; both so tall and thin, they looked like they'd been stretched. Prophet's entourage of adopted children. His Twelve Apostles, he called them, though I only counted eleven on stage with him.

Considering how Prophet had managed to brainwash millions of people into believing he was not just a man named Prophet, not just *a* prophet, but *the* prophet God had chosen to let us know the world was about over, I didn't want to imagine the conditioning that went on in the privacy of the man's home.

"He's out there again . . . watching the house," Mom said urgently. "The boy. Look."

I bent to squint through the blinds into the bright sunlight. People passed by on the sidewalk, wandering aimlessly. The Displaced. Those whose homes had been destroyed by the earthquake. But I didn't see any boy watching the house.

"What does he want?" Mom asked. Her hand fluttered to her face; fingers traced the knotted line of a jagged pink scar along her jaw.

"I don't know," I told her, hearing the despair in my voice, thick as an accent.

Her voice shook. “Everything is coming apart, and Prophet says things are only going to get worse. He knows what’s coming, Mia. God speaks to him.”

God. Oh, God, God, God. I was sick of hearing about God, maybe because I hadn’t heard much about him (or her, or it) since Mom’s mom—our fanatically God-fearing, Bible-thumping grandma—passed away a couple years ago. After that, Mom was free to stop pretending she bought into Grandma’s fire-and-brimstone theology. Grandma went to the grave thinking her daughter would someday join her in fluffy white-cloud heaven, instead of plummeting straight to hell, where my father was roasting on a spit with the rest of the unbelievers.

Mom always claimed she was firmly agnostic despite her extreme evangelical upbringing. She didn’t believe in anything in particular, and she was perfectly content to wait until she died to find out the real deal. I figured her obsession with Prophet was a phase born out of desperation, like people on an airplane who start praying when they go through a nasty bit of turbulence.

I touched Mom’s shoulder. It was a hard, protruding angle. She was nothing but bones under her bathrobe.

“Everything’s going to be okay,” I told her, even though the words had lost their meaning from too frequent use. I was always saying them to someone now, to Mom, to Parker, or to myself.

“Be careful out there,” Mom said, touching me briefly on my gloved hand before pulling away. “Take care of your brother.”

“I will.” I turned to go, and Prophet whispered over my

shoulder, like he was standing right behind me. *“And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as a sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood.*

“The time is coming,” Prophet said. “The end is coming.”



Parker sat in the front passenger seat of my silver hatchback, watching the Displaced wander past on the sidewalk, looking as tattered and lifeless as a herd of zombies. I wished, not for the first time, that we had a bigger garage so I didn't have to leave my car on the street. So far the Displaced hadn't messed with it, but I expected every morning to come outside and find a window busted out, and maybe a family sleeping inside.

Our Craftsman bungalow was located only a few blocks east of Venice Beach, where so many of the Displaced had migrated after the quake and set up tents as temporary homes. A lot of them made their way up to our neighborhood to knock on doors and ask for food or clothing or clean water.

But sometimes they didn't ask.

I looked around again for the boy Mom mentioned. I didn't want to think someone might be casing our house, but I also didn't want to believe Mom was hallucinating again. The Dealer—that was the only name I knew him by—told me the Thorazine was supposed to control that.

For some reason I thought of the dream I'd had about Nightmare Boy and that knife he'd been ready to plunge

into me. And I thought of the unlocked window in our garage. Then I forgot those things as a middle-aged man with grime etched deep into the lines on his forehead spotted Parker in my car and stooped to knock on the window.

I hurried down the walk, bracing for trouble. The Displaced weren't like people who'd been homeless before the quake. They weren't used to going without, and it made them more aggressive, a fact Parker often chose to ignore. He probably would have turned our house into a temporary shelter if it weren't for Mom.

By the time I reached the car, Parker had already rolled down the window. He held out several crumpled bills to the man.

"It's all I've got," Parker said. I caught his eye over the man's shoulder and shook my head. A few dollars was more than we could spare these days. Black market meds weren't cheap.

Parker ignored me.

"Thank you," the man said, nodding over the money. "This helps. Everything helps. I have a family, you know. It's for my family."

A militiaman I'd seen patrolling the area jogged up the sidewalk toward us, one hand resting on the Taser fastened to his belt. He was dressed head-to-toe in black, like he thought he was a Navy SEAL or something.

When riots and looting broke out after the quake, it quickly became apparent that the LAPD didn't have anywhere near enough officers to control the chaos, and the National Guard and FEMA were tied up elsewhere. Droughts and wildfires in the Midwest had destroyed over a million acres of farmland, resulting in food shortages all

over the country. A series of unseasonal hurricanes had ripped through the Gulf of Mexico, killing thousands and wiping out the fishing industry. Fierce tornadoes were showing up in states where they had no business existing, tearing up whole communities. Add to that the United States was involved in more wars at the moment than I could keep track of, and military forces were deployed overseas. Humanitarian organizations were occupied with famine in Africa and mass outbreaks of some new pandemic in India.

Our federal government was too busy saving the world to focus on Los Angeles, and our city government wasn't doing much better. A number of high-ranking officials, including the mayor, had perished during the quake, and those who were left couldn't figure out who was in charge, much less make any decisions about a riot solution. It was up to the people to protect themselves, so that's what they did, forming neighborhood militias composed of ordinary citizens.

"Move along, sir," the militiaman called out to Parker's charity case, who shoved the money into his pocket and shuffled away. The militiaman gave him a little push to hurry him along. The guy stumbled, probably weak from hunger.

"Hey!" Parker said, getting out of the car and facing the militiaman. The man had several inches on my brother. Still, Parker didn't back down. "You didn't need to do that. He was already leaving."

The militiaman narrowed one eye at Parker, probably the way he'd seen someone do it in a cop drama. "You shouldn't give them money. They know where to get

handouts, it encourages them to come up into the neighborhoods instead of staying in Tentville where they belong.”

Parker glowered at the man, but wisely chose to stay quiet when he saw how the militiaman’s hand rested so lovingly on that Taser.

I cleared my throat to get the militiaman’s attention.

“Hi,” I said, holding out my hand. “My name’s Mia. I live here.” I nodded toward our house.

The man eyed my fingerless leather gloves, took note of my black turtleneck, my black jeans, and my boots. It was warm out, even this early in the morning. Not turtleneck and gloves weather, for sure, but I needed the coverage at all times, or someone might catch sight of my lightning scars. It occurred to me that the militiaman and I were dressed in nearly identical outfits. He nodded approval.

“Brent,” the militiaman said.

“We appreciate what you’re doing,” I said, casting Parker a keep-your-mouth-shut look.

“Someone has to make sure we’re not overrun by these drifters,” Brent said. “I feel sorry for them, losing their homes and everything, but it’s time things got back to normal around here.”

I didn’t have to fake a nod of agreement. What I wanted more than anything was for things to get back to normal.

“Could you do me a favor?” I asked. “My mom saw a guy watching our house. She said she’s seen him before.”

“You think he’s planning a break-in?”

“I don’t know, but I wondered if you could keep an eye out for him.”

“What’s he look like?” Brent asked, eyes suddenly bright with interest.

“Um . . . he was around my age . . . oh, and he had glasses.”

“Dark glasses?”

“Um . . . yeah,” I decided. Mom hadn’t been specific.

“I’ll find him,” Brent said, caressing his Taser again. “And you might want to tell your brother to wise up. You leave crumbs on the floor, eventually you get roaches.”

Parker muttered something I didn’t catch, and I hoped Militiaman Brent didn’t either. It wouldn’t hurt to have this guy watching our backs.

“Thank you so much,” I told Brent, gushing a bit to make up for my brother.

Brent was standing in front of my house with his thumbs hooked in his belt loops when we pulled away. I wondered if Mom was still peering out the window. I hoped Brent made her feel safer.

Parker barely spoke during the drive to school. I wasn’t sure if he was annoyed with me for enlisting Militiaman Brent to keep an eye on the house, or if he was upset about Mom, or nervous about returning to school. Probably all of the above, with an added emphasis on the latter. Parker hadn’t heard much from his friends since the quake. Once the Internet was up he’d exchanged a few brief e-mails with them, so he knew they were alive, but not much else. With riots and looting still rampant, and so many people sick or injured or starving, not knowing if his friends were okay was almost more than he could handle. He didn’t say much, but he didn’t have to. I knew my brother. At least, I used to.

Nothing was the same as it used to be.

Parker and I were only two years apart in age, and we'd always been close. But he'd changed since the quake, grown quieter, more introverted. I thought tragedy was supposed to bring people closer, but Parker was pulling away, same as Mom. I should have been the glue holding us together, but apparently I wasn't sticky enough.

Ocean Avenue, which ran parallel to the Pacific, was the quickest way to Skyline High School, and as far as I knew the road was intact and clear of debris. We passed several groups of road crew volunteers in orange vests still working to haul mounds of rubble from collapsed buildings out of the road, but at least we could get through.

But as I drove, I began to wish I'd chosen a different route. The drive along Ocean Avenue offered a view of the vast shantytown known as Tentville that had been assembled on the sands of Venice and Santa Monica. Ten square miles of the city had been destroyed, including downtown Los Angeles. People called it the Waste now, because that's what it was. A wasteland of fallen high-rises, shattered cement and glass, and empty, ruined buildings. Only one tower remained standing in the Waste, dominating the cityscape like an enormous monument to the dead.

But even miles from the epicenter of the quake, buildings had sustained major damage, especially those that were not up to code. Roofs caved in. Walls collapsed. Fires broke out and raged unchecked, while firemen and rescue workers were distracted by the catastrophic devastation downtown. On the west side, the damage was random. You'd see a dozen normal houses, and then one that looked like it had been stepped on by a giant. Even our house, which

had been built around the time when people were still building houses “right,” had cracks running up the walls and across the ceiling. I didn’t want to think about what Parker and I would have done if our house had collapsed or burned to the ground. We’d be living in Tentville with the rest of the Displaced, caring for Mom in the midst of the chaos.

We drove past a woman sitting on the sidewalk, surrounded by plastic bags full of her belongings and holding a large umbrella, though the sun had barely climbed over the horizon. I wondered if she didn’t have a tent, if the umbrella was the closest thing she had to shelter.

“Was the Internet up this morning?” Parker asked, squinting at the woman with the umbrella. “Did you check the weather?”

“Don’t I always?” It was a ritual of mine to check at least three weather sites every morning, even though it wasn’t necessary. When a storm was coming, I *felt* it. My skin would tingle and my bones would ache, and the fire in my heart and my blood, the feeling that had been growing inside me since the first time I was struck, would burn hotter.

Except on the day of the Puente Hills Earthquake. That day the storm had materialized out of a clear blue sky. I’d seen storms do that where we used to live in Lake Havasu City, but only during the sweltering monsoon season, and those storms were usually over as soon as they began. But storms in L.A. didn’t just *happen*; you could always see them coming.

“So, what’s the forecast?” Parker asked.

“Clear skies all week.”

He nodded. "Good. The last thing we need right now is . . ." He trailed off, casting a glance my way. "You know," he mumbled.

I did know. The last thing we needed was another electrical storm, and not only because people were saying lightning might have caused the Puente Hills Quake . . . because that day I felt lightning cracking the sky even from fifteen miles away, and I had wanted nothing more than to put myself in its path. It took every ounce of my self-control not to get in my car and race downtown toward the storm so I could get a piece of it. Even when the shaking started, when it seemed like the whole world would crumble if it didn't stop, the only thing I could think about was pulling the lightning down into me. The aliveness I would feel. The perfect pain that might do anything to me. Even kill me.

Yeah, the last thing we needed right now was another storm.

Up ahead, what remained of the Santa Monica Pier tilted like a ramp into the ocean. The longest of the wooden pilings that supported the pier had bent and broken during the quake, pouring hundreds of tourists and a dozen or so chintzy restaurants into the Pacific. A section of the famous Santa Monica Ferris wheel still protruded from the water, like the spine of some Lovecraftian sea beast emerging from the depths.

Laid out on the sand on either side of the downed pier were thousands of tents and makeshift lean-tos. Scores of people milled about on the sand. Aimless. Waiting to get their lives back. And in the midst of the disorder, Prophet's great White Tent, where he held his midnight revivals,

stood out like a mirage, glowing incandescent in the morning sun, its white canvas walls flapping in a light breeze. Followers, dressed in pristine white, wandered through the crowds of beach dwellers, offering to trade bottles of water or oatmeal cookies for a moment of the beach dwellers' time. Even from the road, it was easy to distinguish the Followers from everyone else, like white doves among dirty park pigeons.

Even from a distance, I could see how willing people were to follow the Followers into the White Tent.

Faintly, I heard the sound of shattering glass and the scream of an alarm.

"Mia, look out!" Parker grabbed the wheel and cranked it right. Just in time, too. We barely avoided mowing down a guy as he sprinted across the street, his arms loaded so high with stolen electronics he couldn't see over them. He made it across Ocean Avenue without getting creamed and disappeared into an alley, headed toward Tentville.

I screeched to a halt at the curb and waited for the inferno in my chest to cool. My heart was in my throat, my whole body trembling with the rush of adrenaline.

A group of Followers approached the car, holding poster board signs raised above their heads.

*The End Is Coming*, one sign read.

*The Sixth Seal Is Cracked*, another read.

*We Have Been Warned*.

*The Real Storm Is Still to Come*. I stared at the Follower who held this sign. She smiled and waved, like we were old friends, and gestured for me to roll down the window.

I hit the gas and probably left streaks of rubber behind as I burned away from the curb.

Parking at school was madness. There were buses and cars jamming up the whole lot. No one seemed to know who was coming and who was going. Normally there was someone on-site to direct traffic, but apparently that person hadn't shown up for work today.

As soon as we got out of the car, we were immersed in shouting and honking, whistles blowing as kids shuffled off the buses. To reduce traffic on the roads—which were still barricaded or blocked off by debris in many areas—returning students were advised to take the buses, even if they had cars or their parents could drop them off. But with Mom at home alone, I wasn't comfortable being stuck at school until the buses came at the end of the day. I wanted to be able to rush home and check on her if I needed to.

Two militiamen tried to herd the flow of people into a line, but they were ignored. Kids pushed and shoved and fought their way toward the school, even though we wouldn't receive our rations until the end of the day. Someone rammed past me and crunched my toes. Someone else nailed me in the ribs with an elbow. It wasn't that there were more people than usual heading to school; there were far fewer. But they were frantic. Desperate. Starving. Crying. Sick.

Scared.

But not the Followers. The Followers were perfectly calm and removed from the rest of us, their eyes bright as little lightbulbs, knowing smiles playing at the corners of their mouths. Somehow they managed to disturb me more than

the rest of the crowd, even the kids who were suffering from earthquake fever, their skin rash-red, lips and eyelids and the rims of their noses and ears crusted with yellow sores. Earthquake fever caused the immune system to go into overdrive, so white blood cells started attacking healthy cells. Their bodies were essentially waging war on themselves.

Looking at the sufferers turned my stomach, but seeing the Followers up close like this, in real life, not on *The Hour of Light*, made me feel like turning and running away. Running as fast as I could, and taking Parker with me.

But we couldn't run away, not either of us. Not unless we wanted to starve.

The first bell warbled like a sick bird as Parker and I made our way through the crush of people and toward the main building. The bell system must have been damaged during the quake. One more thing that was off-kilter, knocked askew by our city being shaken like it was contained in a snowless snow globe.

I thought of what Militiaman Brent had said. *It's time things got back to normal around here.* Looking around at how many of the students wore Followers' white, and how many others looked like they'd come from a refugee camp, so skinny their eyes were sucked into the sockets, lips cracked and skin chalky from dehydration, I had a sinking feeling I wouldn't find anything close to normal at Skyline.

Approaching the school, I heard raised voices and then a squawk of pain and surprise. Parker and I froze in place, earning growls and shoves from the students behind us. A group of boys with mean, feral eyes and dirty skin and clothes surrounded a much smaller, weaker-looking kid.

One of the feral boys bent the smaller kid's arm behind his back, and another jabbed a fist into his kidney. The kid cried out again. His backpack hit the ground.

I searched the flow of students moving toward the school, hoping someone would step forward. Do something. I saw people watching out of the corners of their eyes, and people pretending not to see at all. I saw people walking faster, probably worried they might be the next victims.

Heat pulsed in my chest, thumping like a second heart-beat. The sound boomed in my ears. I breathed deep.

*Keep it together, Mia. You made it through the last four weeks without imploding; you can make it through the next few minutes.*

The feral boys released the kid and shoved him away. He staggered and grabbed onto the flagpole to stabilize himself. Tears leaked from his eyes and he wiped at them angrily with his sleeve.

Parker's paralysis broke, and he started toward the attackers. I grabbed him back.

"No," I told him firmly.

Parker's eyes were livid. "They can't get away with it."

"They already did."

The pack of boys tore open the kid's backpack, scattered his books and papers, and took off with whatever was left inside, probably a bottle of water or an energy bar. The backpack looked close to empty.

Parker wrenched away from me, and for a second I thought he would go after the pack. But he had acted too late. They were already gone.

My brother rounded on me. "I could have done something."

“You could have gotten your ass kicked.”

“Better than standing here watching!” His voice was rising, so I forced mine to sound calm even though I felt like I was boiling on the inside.

The crowd parted around us, now pretending not to see my brother and me having it out.

“What do you think would happen if you came home from school battered and bruised? Mom would go into free fall. Think about it, Parker. Think about *her*.”

Parker glared at me. “Mom’s not the only one in the world who needs help.”

Those were the words he left me with as he plunged back into the tangled procession of students.

I turned once again to the kid still holding the flagpole. He had one hand pressed to his side where he’d been sucker punched, his mouth set in a grimace of pain and his eyes turned toward the sky, maybe so no one would see his tears; maybe to look at the flag that was at half-mast to honor the dead, where it would probably stay for a long, long time.

A girl dressed in white approached the kid, holding out a tissue. She was smiling as though nothing could possibly be wrong in the world. She spoke softly to him, but I was close enough to catch her words.

“Have you accepted the Word of Rance Ridley Prophet as the Word of God?” she asked.

The kid shook his head but accepted the tissue.

I moved on before I could hear more, but I glanced back once and saw they were still talking, and I felt a chill dance up my spine. I fell in with the rest of the disheveled, hollow-cheeked kids trudging into the school, keeping my

distance from the Followers. When I reached the cement stairs, I saw that someone had tagged them in white spray paint. One word on each step.

WHICH  
SIDE  
WILL  
YOU  
CHOOSE?

My head pounded as I climbed past the question.

I was heading through the door when a girl with long black hair veered in front of me, knocking me aside and sloshing half of her to-go cup of coffee onto my turtleneck.

“Hey! Watch it!” I stood there with my arms spread, dripping.

The girl stopped and turned slowly to face me. A line from some kid’s show I used to watch played through my head. *One of these things is not like the others . . .*

The girl didn’t fit. Where nearly everyone else here looked like they’d been through a war, this girl seemed to think she was in line at a nightclub. She wore a tight black dress and tall black boots. Her lips were painted a shade of red that made me think of stop signs. I didn’t remember ever seeing her at school before the quake, and she was the kind of person you remembered. If she wasn’t registered at Skyline, she wouldn’t be eligible for aid. Maybe she thought she could seduce some food off the aid workers. The way she looked, it would probably work.

I glanced around and saw the crowd had thinned. Now it was just me and the girl in black.

“You could say you’re sorry,” I told her when she only stood there, saying nothing. The smell of her coffee soaking into my turtleneck made me salivate. I hadn’t tasted coffee in weeks.

“Sorry,” the girl said perfunctorily, staring straight into my eyes in a way that was too direct; smiling the way people smiled when they had a secret they couldn’t wait to tell. “I didn’t see you,” she added. “What a klutz, huh?”

She didn’t seem like a klutz. She seemed like the kind of person who could walk on ice in her spike-heeled boots and never slip.

“Which side will you choose?” she asked.

“Huh?”

“The question on the steps. Which side will you choose?”

“What are my options?”

“Us,” she said, putting a hand to her chest. “Or them.” She nodded at the Follower still talking to the boy near the flagpole.

“How about neither.”

She laughed. “But you haven’t even heard my sales pitch. It’s a good one. I think you’ll like it.”

The second bell warbled then. Perfect. I was officially late for my first day back at school. The girl in black better hope that didn’t disqualify me from getting what I came for.

“Not interested,” I told the girl. Her mysterious smile dropped, and she opened her mouth to say something else, but I didn’t give her the chance. I weaved around her and into the school.

And stopped.

My mouth fell open. I heard a sound in my throat like air leaking from a punctured tire.

The whole length of the entryway, about thirty feet, was completely wallpapered in photographs and flyers from floor to ceiling, and the tile along one side of the floor was littered with bouquets and stray flowers. The air was heavy with their mingled perfumes. I resisted the urge to cover my nose and mouth like I'd caught a whiff of garbage. The whole place reeked of funeral.

I stepped to one wall and examined a collage of photographs. Faces. So many faces. Adults. Children. Elderly men and women. Babies. Dogs. Cats. And captions, most of them handwritten on scraps of paper, pinned beneath the photos.

*We miss you so much.*

*I will love you always.*

*We'll never forget you.*

*I know you're in a better place.*

There were poems, and longer notes, and obituaries, and I felt my eyes burning.

"This wall is for the dead."

I jerked in surprise. I hadn't noticed the girl in black come up beside me.

I blinked the tears out of my eyes before looking at her. "Yeah, I figured that out."

She turned around and faced the opposite wall. Her sharp heel speared a white rose petal. "That wall is for the missing, people who disappeared after the quake. People who have not been found."

I thought of my mom, buried in the Waste with the rest of the dead, waiting for her air to run out. What if she'd never been found? Would I have posted her picture on this

wall, hoping that someone had seen her? Hoping she was still alive, lost in the shuffle at some hospital or clinic?

I felt panic rising inside me. I tried to breathe, but I couldn't seem to get any oxygen to my lungs. The heat that lived in my chest flared, like a hot coal that never quite went out.

The girl in black tilted her head and watched me curiously, a dreamy sort of expression on her face. "Are you okay?" she asked.

I bolted. I needed out of that hallway, with all those dead and missing people gazing at me from their photographs. With its stench of flowers that belonged in a funeral home, not a school.

And more than anything, for reasons I didn't understand, I had to get away from the girl in black.