

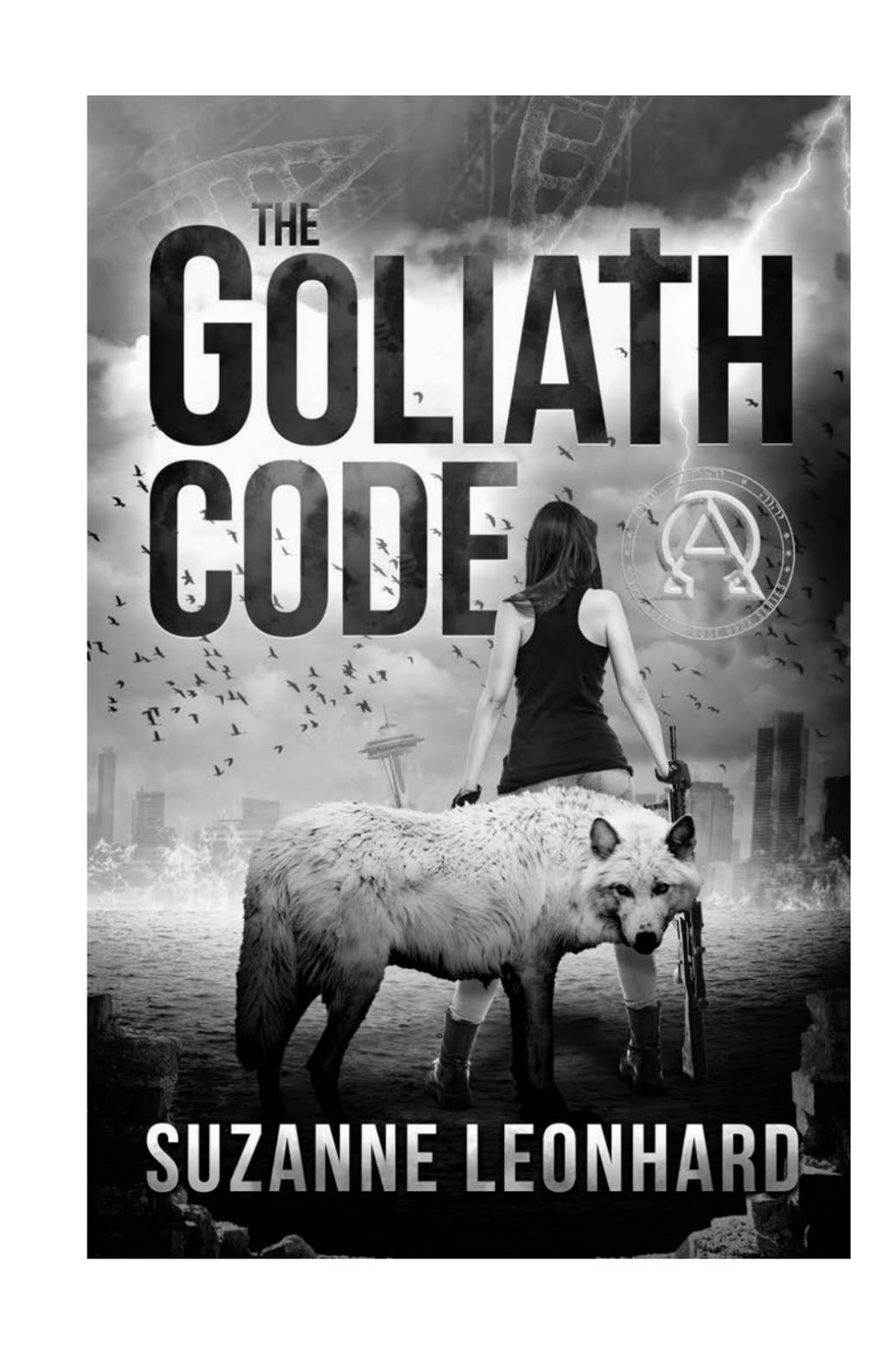
THE GOLIATH CODE

Book One

Chapters 1 - 3

SUZANNE LEONHARD





THE
**GOLIATH
CODE**

SUZANNE LEONHARD

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.



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For RRL

Acknowledgments

I've always wanted to write a book about the end of the world. I'd like to think it's because I long to give the most "tragic" story in the history of the universe a happy ending, but it could also be that I'm a bit of a drama queen—and what could be more dramatic than the apocalypse? The idea for *The Goliath Code* rolled around in my head for years before I finally started writing it and, once I sat down at my keyboard, writing through the eyes of a sixteen year old girl didn't come easy. There were a lot of people that encouraged me along the way and kept me going, so bear with me while I thank them.

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Finally, thank you to my editor Rosanne Catalano. Not only is she knowledgeable about the infrastructures of bridges and the lifespans of cheeses, she is a divinely gifted wordsmith.

And now...let's begin.

Prologue

I raced through the snow-covered forest, ignoring the biting cold. Sunbeams filtered through the pine canopy over my head, casting scarlet bands of dancing light across the frozen landscape. The scene reminded me of a book my mother read to me when I was little, about a magical world forever trapped in winter. Mom was gone now. So were happy endings.

The shouts behind me grew louder.

I glanced over my shoulder at the perfect set of boot prints I'd left behind in the snow. Two fresh, powdery inches had fallen the night before, slowing me down, leaving a visible trail, and making the soldiers' jobs that much easier.

I veered around a dead stump and crashed through a tangle of ferns. The muscles in my legs complained. I dug deep and ran on, letting the forest close in around me. My boot caught on a branch winter-welded to the forest floor. I stumbled but stayed on my feet.

Finally, I burst from the tree line and into a bright, snowy clearing where the brilliant red sky blinded me. *Apocalypse red*. The words rang in my head. That was my grandfather's description of the ruddy Devastation sky.

The reminder twisted my stomach into a familiar knot of grief and guilt. I could still hear his gruff order. “Be smart. Stay tough. Protect them at all costs.”

I squeezed my eyes shut against memories that always left me feeling desperate and alone. They say time heals all wounds, but mine had only festered.

The two men crashed out of the forest behind me. I took off running with a renewed energy. I dashed across the clearing into the shelter of the trees beyond. I dodged rocks, ducked branches, leapt fallen logs, and shot through a thick wall of blackberry bushes, no longer caring where I placed my feet. I ran from more than just the soldiers now; I ran from the crush of memories that threatened to overwhelm me.

A patch of ice did me in.

I landed hard on my back, knocking the air out of my lungs. The cold soaked through my coat and jeans, but I stayed on the ground. Everything had gone quiet—no more shouts, crunching snow, or snapping branches, just the sound of my heart thumping in my ears.

I've lost them.

I took a moment to catch my breath, pushing my black cap high on my forehead to stare up at the swaying green canopy above me. Nothing moved in the forest. Most of the animals had either died during the Devastation or been hunted to extinction.

I missed the birds the most. They'd been the first to die. One by one they'd fallen from the sky like fat, feathered hailstones, leaving swarms of mosquitoes to multiply. The deer and elk died next. Thousands of them went blind, developed lung diseases, starved, and wasted away. Then the predators fell: bear, mountain lion, wolves, coyotes. Except for the persistent buzz of insects, the forest had become an empty, lonely place.

Male voices broke through the silence. I lifted my head; the

two soldiers stood in the trees thirty yards away. I hadn't lost them after all.

Good.

I smiled to myself and rolled to my feet. It would have spoiled the fun if our game had ended too soon.

I brushed the snow from my pants, lingering long enough for the men to spot me. The fat one saw me first. "There!" he shouted. Then I headed off at a steady pace, careful to run slower this time.

A few minutes later I found myself in a familiar glade where a crooked elm grew sideways over a rotten stack of firewood. I stomped around in the snow, making a confusion of tracks, then shimmied up to the highest branches of my favorite hemlock tree to wait for the fun to begin.

I spotted the soldiers easily from my vantage point. They shuffled along beside my tracks and, after a few moments, entered the glade to puzzle over my hodgepodge of footprints. I looked down onto their heads, watching them peer in one direction, then the other.

Finally, the tall soldier called out to me in accented English. "Ve know you are here, boy." He had gold bars on the collar of his ocean blue uniform, gold braided epaulets on the shoulders of his long overcoat, and a gold officer's insignia pinned to the beanie perched on the side of his head. He was a centurion, the obvious leader of the two. "Ve vill not hurt you."

I rolled my eyes at the lie.

The fat soldier tried coaxing me out. "We got some bread and fresh water for ya, lil' fella."

Violence flared in me. The man's Southern accent branded him a traitor, which made him worse than the invader standing next to him.

I fingered the sharp hunting knife in my pocket and imagined hurling it straight into the top of the private's large head—right through the fabric of his Europa beanie. It would be

such poetry to kill him by skewering the symbol of his betrayal to his skull.

He who is prudent and lies in wait for an enemy who is not, will be victorious. It was my enemy's favorite quote, one I'd taken to heart and used to my advantage.

A distant howl snapped me back to reality.

The sound grabbed the men's attention, too.

"It's that thievin' wolf from camp," the Southern soldier grumbled.

The centurion scanned the tree line, his rifle at the ready. "Enjoying our food, I am sure."

"I told you," the private snapped, "the animal attacked me. What was I s'posed to do, Kovac, get myself killed over a sack a potatas?"

Anxious for the party to start, I shifted my weight off the branch. I wrapped my arms and legs around the thick tree trunk, hugging it tightly to my chest, and waited for the perfect moment.

Then my foot slipped.

I scrambled for a better hold, doing my best to stay quiet, but the slippery bark betrayed me. I came crashing down the tree in a hard rain of wood and pine needles. The centurion dove out of the way, but the fat Southerner had slower reflexes. I landed on top of him, knocking him to the ground. We grappled, each trying to get the upper hand. I kicked my bootheel into his face and sent him backwards, crying out and holding his nose.

I sprang to my feet, ready for whatever might come next. The cold steel of an automatic rifle barrel pressed against my cheek. "Do not move," the centurion ordered.

Every ounce of my training demanded I disarm him, but Europa soldiers were a heartless bunch of dogs—they shot first and asked questions later—so I fought down the impulse.

Deciding on the “frightened child” approach, I scurried back against the hemlock tree.

“That’s right, boy,” the centurion sneered. “I am ze vun in charge here.”

The private, his hand clamped over his face, wailed in agony. “Webel twash bwoke my dose!”

Keeping his weapon trained on me, the centurion kicked at the private. “Get up! You do not need your nose to stand!”

The private staggered to his feet. Blood oozed from between his fingers, dripping over his lips and chin. It was hard to hide my satisfaction. The fat man picked up on it immediately, grabbing me by the throat and shoving me back—hard—against the tree. “I’ll teach you, ya scrawny runt!” he spat.

He hauled back his hand and cracked me across the face. Sparks shot through my jaw. I shook my head to clear the ringing in my ears, but, before I could stabilize, he struck me again. I staggered. One more blow and he’d knock me off my feet.

My hand shifted to my pocket, to the knife. I could put him back on the ground in a second.

The private moved to hit me again—my fingers curled around the smooth hilt—but the centurion grabbed his arm. “Halt!” Assessing me with narrowed eyes, he shoved the private away. “Vhat is your name, boy?”

The centurion had a rigid, pitiless face. When I didn’t answer, his stare intensified. He was trying to intimidate me, but it wouldn’t work. Then he yanked the black cap from my head and freed my tangle of hair. I gasped, feeling instantly vulnerable.

The private’s eyes practically leapt from his skull. “God almighty!” he shouted. “He’s a her!”

He took hold of my chin, jerking my head from side to side.

I clenched my teeth. *Stay calm.*

“Wait a minute. Wait one mother-lovin’ second.” The smile on his blood-caked face widened.

I’d been made.

“It’s her! We found her!”

The centurion peered harder at me, wrinkling his nose. “What is your name, girl?”

But they already knew the answer.

“It’s her, Kovac! I will tell you somethin’, mister, the praetor better give me a promotion for this. I am *done* traipsin’ through the wilderness roundin’ up his lab rats.” He cackled, patting me on the cheek. “This little lady is gonna make sure Melvin Calhoun gets exactly what he deserves.”

“Ziss isn’t America anymore, Private,” his superior dismissed. “Ve do not give promotions to men for simply doing zeir jobs.”

Calhoun gave him a calculating look. “Well, then. Maybe it’s time I found more advantageous employment.” He directed his weapon at the centurion.

This sudden change of events didn’t surprise me at all—once a traitor, always a traitor—but the centurion’s pinched face turned scarlet. “What are you doing, you idiot?!”

“I’m takin’ the girl.” The private grinned. “Black market’ll pay top dollar for a comfort girl with copper hair.”

He’s going to sell me? The knife in my pocket called again. One quick strike to his kidney; that’s what Melvin Calhoun deserved.

A branch snapped on the other side of the glade, followed by a subtle, steady rustle through the snowy underbrush. The soldiers were too busy arguing to notice.

“C’mon, Kovac,” the private coaxed. “I’ll cut ya in for a share. We can’t waste prime girl flesh like this on the praetor’s cracked experiments.”

Kovac puffed out his chest. “You cannot bribe me—”

“Forty-five percent.”

The centurion blinked. “*But is it really her?*” he breathed.

Calhoun took me by my coat sleeve and gave me a shake. “Go ahead. Tell ’im your name.”

A large, hairy shape appeared in the woods behind the men. I smiled and looked the private in the eye. “You can call me bait.”

“You see?” The centurion huffed. “She says her name is Bates.”

The private scowled. “No...she said *bait*.”

A low, rumbling growl filled the glade. The soldiers turned. A hulking white wolf stood in the underbrush ten yards away.

Calhoun whimpered. “K-Kovac?”

The animal’s black lips curled back into a terrifying snarl.

“Quiet, you idiot!” Kovac hissed.

The wolf raised his hackles. His thick body coiled. A glimmer of imminent death reflected in his cold amber eyes.

I cocked my head at the vicious beast. “You’re late,” I chided.

The centurion scrambled to turn his weapon on the animal. With a savage growl, the wolf was on him. Centurion Kovac went down in a riot of screams and sharp, snapping teeth.

The private shrieked at the wolf and raised his weapon. I moved into action, lashing out with a perfect crescent kick—one that would have made my grandfather proud. The private’s weapon flew from his hands and flipped, end over end, against the red sky. I caught it in midair, spun, and slammed the stock into his chest, adding broken ribs to his cracked nose. He fell to the ground, moaning in pain. I snapped the weapon to my shoulder and pointed it at his left eye. He looked up at me, sputtering. Like my victims before him, the private was having a hard time reconciling my sudden transformation from scrawny runt to guerrilla fighter.

His breath came quick and shallow; he was calculating whether I was capable of shooting him. “You can’t—”

“I can.” Thanks to men like Kovac and Calhoun, my skills had been refined in the unforgiving fires of war and vengeance.

I stared down the rifle sights at the private’s sweaty brow. I could hear the wolf enjoying his centurion lunch and, judging by the look of horror on his face, Private Calhoun could hear it, too. I pressed the rifle barrel against the soft, fatty flesh of the man’s forehead, shifted my finger to the trigger, and slowly let out my breath—

“Seraphina!” the private shouted.

I hesitated.

“That’s yer name, right? I-I have somethin’ for ya.”

He eased his hand down to his uniform belt and slipped a piece of paper out from beneath the brass buckle. He handed it to me with trembling fingers, its glossy surface faded and worn by time. The past and present collided. Hot tears flooded my eyes. Everything I was—everything I’d been forced to become—came crashing in and rage welled up inside me.

“Where did you get this?” I demanded.

The private snorted. “Thought that might get yer attention.”

My eyes narrowed. “Not the kind you were hoping for.”

I swung back the rifle stock and bashed him in the side of the head.

Part I

Chapter One

The world ended on the last Monday in September, three days after my sixteenth birthday.

I sat between my mother and my twin brother on a hard pew in the Roslyn Bible Church, a stone mausoleum built in the Dark Ages, watching my cousin Felicity marry Roger Freeman. I barely knew the bride. I'd never met the groom. As far as I could tell, neither of them cared whether I was there or not.

I cared.

The forecast called for snow that night, so my best friend, Alyson, and I wanted to grab a quad ride up to Crystal Creek before the park service closed the trail for the season. But, thanks to my mother, I had to sit through this lame religious ceremony first.

While the happy couple stood beneath a wedding arch of baby's breath and white roses, pledging their undying love, I stared at the back of my hand and tried to figure out if a tribal or a color tattoo would look better against my pale skin and faint freckles. My mother noticed and nudged me with her elbow. I clenched my jaw, turning a dark scowl back to the

spectacle in front of me. Why did anyone even bother with marriage anymore? It never lasted. Case in point: my own parents. They weren't exactly happy these days.

My mom had taken my four-wheeler hostage to force me to this wedding. That had been—in baseball and felony terms—her third strike. Her second strike had been refusing to let me go to homecoming with Eric Hawk, something I'd never forgive her for.

No, because she said so.

I pictured myself—a sophomore—showing up at homecoming with Eric—a senior—in his black Mustang, his red-tailed hawk tattoo peeking out from under his rolled-up sleeve. It would have been awesome. Nope. My mom had found the perfect cruel and unusual punishment.

I wasn't in love with Eric or anything. Like most high school jocks, he was kind of a jerk, but the day he'd asked me to homecoming, I'd gotten twenty-three new follows on Trill.

Mom used to be more chill. She had a 24/7 open-door policy, which meant my brother and I could talk to her about anything, anytime. But talking to her hadn't helped much lately, not since she'd started going to church. That had been her first strike.

None of us understood why she'd done it, not even Dad. She'd been a rational human being her entire life, then one Sunday she'd gotten out of bed and gone to a service. My parents fought about it all the time. Dad tried to make her see reason; he asked why she needed religion, why we weren't enough for her. Mom always answered the same way. She encouraged him to go to church, which none of us would ever do.

Her conversion really messed things up for me and my brother. She disapproved of everything we did: our music, our movies, our friends. She insisted on praying over every meal—even in restaurants, even in McDonalds. It was humiliating. If

anybody from school ever spotted her praying over my McNuggets, I'd never hear the end of it.

I'd told her that last week when she asked why I refused to eat out with her anymore. At that point, she'd threatened to pull me and my brother out of Cle Elum-Roslyn High School and enroll us in Mountain Christian Academy. They wear uniforms and take Bible classes *every day* at that school.

I just didn't get it. They say Christians have family values or whatever, but Mom's new religion was tearing our family apart. Lately, my dad practically lived at work, my brother rarely came out of his cave in the basement, and I spent most of my time at Alyson's house. At least my friend's mother respected her kids enough to let them live their own lives.

Up front, the pastor—we'd heard a lot about Pastor Rick lately—droned on and on about love, commitment, faithfulness, and mercy. Every now and then the wedding guests shouted a passionate "Amen!" I passed the time wondering what my mom would do if I came home with a red-tailed hawk like Eric's tattooed into the back of my hand.

Probably cut my arm off.

According to my mother's new religion only heathens wore tattoos, which probably explained why she wouldn't let me go to the dance with Eric. Thanks to Jesus and people like Pastor Rick, I was destined to remain a nobody who'd had a fleeting shot at popularity. My life was a wasteland.

I slumped down in the pew.

When the pastor started reading from the Bible, my brother David shifted beside me. He'd been fidgeting and chewing his nails since we sat down. He wasn't any happier to be there than I was, but at least mom hadn't forced him to wear an ugly purple dress she'd pulled off a discount rack. She'd even found a pair of flowery shoes to match the baby roses she'd jammed in my braided hair. I looked like a cake.

In contrast, David wore a classy pair of blue pants and a

gray button-down shirt. Mom had even let him wear his black sneakers because she couldn't find dress shoes to fit him. On rare occasions, my brother's condition worked in his favor.

Although David had been granted the distinct honor of entering this world three minutes and twenty-three seconds before me, he'd been born with a rare bone disorder called achondroplasia. Among other things, it causes dwarfism. My twin brother stood only four feet four inches tall. I almost always felt guilty about being bigger, stronger, and more coordinated, but it was okay. His resentment balanced things out.

His back was too bent to play sports, his legs were too bowed to climb trees, and his arms were too short to ride a quad. But what my brother lacked in physical ability, he made up for in intelligence. He'd read his first book at two, become a chess master at ten, and made himself a fully functional jetpack at twelve. My brother David was the smartest person I knew. Since our father was a Nobel Prize-winning geneticist, that was saying something.

David caught me staring at his legs, which stuck straight out from the pew, and kicked me hard in the knee. He didn't like being stared at. But I wasn't trying to be mean, I was imagining what his legs would look like when they grew as long as mine, when our father finally finished working on the cure he'd been promising David for years.

My brother dreamed of growing straight and tall like me. Now Dad was close to completing animal trials. If all went well, David might begin treatment by the end of the year. Last week I'd caught him looking at basketball hoops on Amazon. Yeah, my brother was a little bit excited.

I retaliated by jamming my elbow into his ribs. He whimpered like an abused puppy, earning me a stern look from our mom. I expected my parents to take David's side; they usually did. Today it gave me one more reason to be mad at Mom and I ran with it.

When the ceremony finally ended, the bride and groom kissed, turned to accept their applause, and then paraded up the aisle, arm in arm.

Our mother stood, gesturing for us to do the same. “Everybody stands when the bride and groom walk by,” she whispered.

Rolling our eyes in unison, my brother and I reluctantly stood. “Dead man walkin’,” David whispered. I bit my lip to hide a laugh.

BOOM! The deep sound broke the air. It shook the church, rattling the enormous stained glass window behind the stage. The giant bell banged in the steeple high above my head. I grabbed the pew in front of me, craning my neck upward. The plaster ceiling cracked.

The bride and groom stopped in the middle of the aisle. Felicity’s eyes went wide with shock; she dropped her bouquet.

Her new husband bent down to pick up the flowers. “Sorry, God,” he drawled. “It’s too late to protest now.”

The congregation fluttered with nervous laughter.

“It’s just a fighter jet from McChord, folks,” Pastor Rick assured us. “Nothing to worry about.”

A low rumble started beneath the floorboards. My feet tingled with the sensation. David looked down—he felt it, too. The rumble grew louder; the vibration grew stronger. Everyone in the church started talking at once.

David leaned past me and grabbed Mom’s hand. “We need to leave.” The urgency in his voice made the hair on my arms stand up.

Mom nodded, shuffling us toward the aisle. The shuddering lurched into an all-out roll that knocked us back down onto the pew.

Car alarms wailed outside, sirens blared, shrieks went up from the wedding guests. The bride and groom fell to their

knees halfway to the exit doors. No one knew whether to sit, stand, or run.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the pastor called from the front of the church. “Please try to stay calm. We seem to be having a minor earthquake.”

I looked at David, staring into wide green eyes identical to my own, and a chill raced up my spine. My brother looked pale, nervous. That's when I got scared.

We got back on our feet again. The bell over our heads clanged like crazy; the ground beneath us sounded like an engine accelerating. I half-expected a freight train to come barreling through the floor.

“This church has been here for a long time!” the pastor called out a bit louder. “We are perfectly safe!”

Perfectly safe?

The deep rumble of the quake surged up through the foundation of the building and bounced it like a toy. I watched, amazed, as the stained glass window behind the man of God rippled like a living thing. It expanded and contracted; its blue, green, and gold colors rolling like a shimmering wave.

“Mom!” David shouted above the roar. “We have to get out of here!”

The pastor lifted his Bible over his head. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not—”

The stained glass window exploded from its casement. It shattered into a million pieces, a sharp hurricane of glass knifing across the stage toward the pews. Mom shoved us to the floor, then fell on top of us. My bare knees dug hard into the vibrating, polished wood. I heard screams—a baby crying—people praying. My brother's ragged breathing echoed in my ears.

I squeezed my eyes shut and willed it to end. But this was only the beginning.

Mom pulled us to our feet. I steadied myself as the church

rocked all around us. “Are you two all right?” she shouted over the thundering noise.

She gave us a frantic once-over, then turned toward the exit. She had tiny pieces of glass embedded in her back and shoulders. Droplets of blood oozed through her beautiful print dress and slid down her slender, bare arms. I opened my mouth to tell her, but she pulled us toward the aisle again.

Wailing, crying people, most of them covered in stained glass and blood, froze in shock. Others stared at the pastor, who had gone quiet.

My brain screamed not to look at him, but I did anyway.

Pastor Rick Cole had fallen to his knees, his Bible clutched in his hands, his eyes and mouth open in a look of surprise. For a moment I thought he was okay. Then I saw the long, jagged piece of golden glass jutting from the side of his neck. He gurgled and toppled to the stage.

That’s when all hell broke loose.

Screaming parishioners shoved each other aside and charged the aisles. Roger Freeman tried to escort his wife to the door, but the wedding party stampeded over her. A loud groaning pulled my eyes upward. The ceiling was gone. It lay in heaps all around us. I stared into the steeple—into the deep, dark underbelly of the heavy iron bell clanging madly against its frame. It rocked. It shuddered. And then it fell.

My mother grabbed the ruffles on the front of my dress and yanked me into the aisle beside my brother. The bell flew past, stealing my breath. It crashed down through the pews where we’d been sitting and into the basement.

The church was coming apart.

My instincts turned me toward the back of the building. Screaming people stacked up against the exit, pounding at doors that had shifted and refused to open. My mom hauled my brother onto her hip and pulled me in tight with her other arm. She dragged us down the aisle in the other direction. We

clambered onto the platform where the elegant wedding arch had been, stepping on white roses and baby's breath scattered across the crimson puddle of Pastor Rick's blood.

Mom heaved open a trapdoor in the floor, revealing a deep baptismal font, and slipped my brother down inside. I went in next. The cold, hard porcelain bit into my legs as I scrambled in. My brother curled up in a tight ball. I felt the earth jolt, felt the font shift, and wondered if it would ever end.

A long, brassy note blended into the noise around me. I could barely hear it above the roar of the quake, but it grew in volume until it sounded like the piercing blast of a thousand trumpets. I crawled to where David huddled against the side of the font, molded myself against him, and covered my ears to shut out the terrifying noise.

A large piece of stone tumbled through the trapdoor. It slammed into the bottom of the font, filling the air with dust. I peered through the darkened gloom, wondering why my mom hadn't closed the trapdoor behind her and sealed us all in. Suddenly, a white-hot light lit the font like a starburst. I flinched and shielded my eyes as it illuminated my brother's grimy red hair and tear-streaked face. I turned to check on Mom. She wasn't there.

David shot me a frantic look.

I scrambled to the trapdoor, thrust my head out, and froze. The earthquake blast kept coming, but I barely noticed the steady shower of dust and plaster falling all around. My eyes fixed on the horrifying scene playing out in front of me. The painful brightness came from everywhere and nowhere. It felt too hot against my skin; I wanted to crawl back under the floor and hide. My mother stood just feet away, surrounded by a bubble of snow-white peace that felt threatening and alien. Her lips moved. For a bizarre moment, I thought she was singing, but I couldn't grasp the words.

Then she turned her head to look at me with an odd

mixture of joy and regret glistening in her eyes. “Endure,” she called out.

I realized, with a jolt of panic, that she was saying goodbye. I would not leave her.

Determined, I moved to climb out onto the stage. The white bubble rose, lifting my mother with it. A crack of thunder split the air. The earth shuddered. What remained of the ceiling above my head detached in free fall. I tumbled backwards into the font.

The bright light winked out. The trapdoor slammed shut. The world went quiet.

I lay there in the darkness, gasping, struggling with what I’d just seen. The light had left...and it had taken my mother with it.

Chapter Two

I opened my eyes to pitch blackness. The lurching and shuddering had stopped, blanketing the world in an unnatural silence that made my heart ache. I couldn't see my brother, but I could feel his small body curled against mine. I could hear his breath hitching. He was crying.

"Mom?" he whispered.

I shook my head, still trying to work through what I'd seen.

"Sera?" he pressed.

He couldn't see me shaking my head in the darkness. He couldn't see my bloodless face, my haunted eyes, or my trembling hands.

He took hold of my arm. "Sera, did Mom get out?"

I tried to inhale past the constriction in my chest, but that only lodged it deeper. How could I tell him? Finally, I managed one simple word. "No."

It was enough.

I held him as he sobbed. I felt numb, lifeless. Ten minutes ago, I was sitting next to her on a pew, counting strikes. Now, she was gone.

The font shuddered. I held my breath as the rumbling started beneath us again, swelling on all sides.

David sniffled. “Aftershock.”

CRASH! BANG! It sounded as if the world was trying to fall out from beneath us. I’d heard that aftershocks could be stronger than the initial quake, so I knew we weren’t out of danger yet.

I pulled myself together, sat up, and took off my shoes.

“W-what are you doing?” David stammered.

“Mom—” My voice cracked; I took a deep breath. “Mom risked her life to save us. I’m not going to just sit here and wait for the church to finish us off.”

I set aside my grief, knowing it would be waiting for me later. I rolled to my knees and felt above my head for the edges of the trapdoor. I pushed upward, but the door wouldn’t move. “Help me.” The air tasted stale. It was becoming hard to breathe.

I heard my brother stand up beside me. I planted my feet, put my palms against the door, and pushed with everything I had. “Puuuuush!”

David grunted and wheezed. “It’s stuck,” he groaned.

I adjusted my position and used my shoulder as leverage. “Again!”

We pushed and heaved until we were both exhausted, but we couldn’t budge the door.

David finally sat down with a thud. “Something’s blocking it. We’re safer down here, anyway.”

“I am not dying in here, David!” I bent forward, put my back against the trapdoor, and used my legs to push as hard as I could.

“We aren’t going to die.” His irritated tone did nothing for my growing anxiety.

Determined, I pushed and pushed some more, until my

muscles ached and my legs went weak. The door wouldn't move.

I sank back down onto the cold porcelain. "We're trapped," I breathed. Panic coiled itself around me. "Nobody knows we're here. How are they going to find us?"

"We're fine."

"We're going to die!" I shouted back. "Right here! Right where we're sitting!"

"Just stay calm—"

"I can't breathe." A dark fog clouded my vision. The world slipped sideways. I clawed at the high neckline of my dress.

"You're hyperventilating. Slow your breathing. Take slow, deep breaths."

I was gasping, desperate for air. "I can't—"

"Sera!" he shouted. "If I can breathe, you can breathe! Take slow, deep breaths!"

My head reeled. *Nobody's going to find us. We're going to die in the dark. Our bodies will rot here. Wild animals will tear us to pieces.*

I lurched upright, slamming my head into the trapdoor. Everything went black....

I'm floating in the water. A deep blue sky. Her silk print dress. A mountain of gold. A dragon rises from the sea. Red eyes burn through me. Sharp teeth sink into my neck.

I woke with a start, my throat dry, my heart pounding. The unexpected darkness disoriented me.

"Welcome back."

"David?" I croaked. I tried to shake off the disturbing dream, but I could still feel razor teeth against my skin. "Where am I?"

"The font. You panicked and hit your head."

I rubbed the painful lump on the top of my scalp and it all came flooding back to me. *The wedding. The earthquake. My mother.* Fresh tears stung my eyes. "How long was I out?"

The light on David's wristwatch flared red, reminding me of burning red eyes. I saw the quick illumination of his face, dirty and dripping with sweat. "About twenty minutes," he replied.

"The air—"

"We have plenty of air, Sera. It's full of dust, but it'll last forever."

Forever? "I don't plan on being down here that long." A board creaked above my head like a ghostly footstep. I lunged to my knees and started pounding on the underside of the stage. "Help! Help us! We're down here!"

Almost in answer to my shouts, something crashed above us. It shook the font, sending a rain of dust falling onto our heads. I shrieked. "What was that?!"

"The church—what's left of it, anyway. It isn't stable. Like I said, we're a lot safer down here than wandering around up there."

"But there could be people out there looking for us."

"I've been beating on that door for the past twenty minutes." That explained his sweaty face. "There's nobody out there right now. Nobody alive anyway."

Panic nudged at my brain again. "They're going to find us, though, right?"

"Of course. We just have to stay calm and wait it out."

Stay calm, I coached myself. *Wait it out*. I sat down and began dividing out a strand of my hair. "How...how big do you think the quake was?"

"Based on the damage, the movement, and the fact that we live on a mountain made of volcanic rock—I'd say pretty big."

I braided my hair with trembling fingers. "Gimme a number," I pressed. If I was going to stay calm, I needed him to keep talking.

"I'm not a seismograph."

"Guess."

“I don't guess.”

“Then hypothesize.”

I heard an echoing thud and figured he'd slammed his hand against the font. “I don't know!”

Like me, he was processing a lot. Unlike me, he preferred to do his processing in silence.

We sat quietly for a moment, my fumbling fingers working and reworking the braid. The darkness pressed in. I started to imagine the world above me, annihilated and filled with bodies. My mouth went dry.

“What kind of jet do you think it was?”

“Jet?” David repeated.

“The pastor said the big boom was a fighter jet from McChord.”

“Probably a Raptor. In dry air, they're capable of breaking the sound barrier at—” He cut himself off.

“At what?” I reached for him in the dark. “David?” I hated that I couldn't see him. “What is it?”

“Nothing.” He sounded distracted. “It...it was at least a seven.”

“A seven?” I realized he was talking about the earthquake now. “Seven... That sounds big.”

Silence threatened again.

“What time is it?” I asked.

He sighed. The red light flared on his watch. “Five seventeen.”

Another question popped into my head. I opened my mouth, then hesitated, not sure I wanted to hear his answer.

He must have heard me take a breath. “What?”

“Do—” I swallowed hard. “Do you think Seattle's okay?”

His answer was quiet. “Dad's building is built to withstand earthquakes.”

“Can it handle a seven?”

“Definitely.”

The universe wouldn't be cruel enough to take our mom and dad on the same day, would it?

Moments ticked by, turning into anxious minutes. My thoughts went to my mom, bringing hot tears to my eyes. I swallowed hard. "Do you think Ms. Hutchins will give us time to finish our History—"

"Enough, Sera. Conserve your energy and try to sleep."

I felt him roll away from me and knew he was taking his own advice, but sleep wasn't an option for me. I was too afraid I'd close my eyes and wake up dead.

I heard his deep, even breathing and fought the urge to reach out and pinch him for leaving me alone in the dark. I pulled my knees to my chest, trying to think about something pleasant—something other than crumbling buildings, bloody faces, and eerie white lights that stole mothers away from their children.

A while later I checked David's watch, thinking an hour had gone by since the last time he'd checked, but only minutes had passed. I clenched my fists and closed my eyes, trying to focus all my energy. I willed rescuers to find us. Thoughts of my mother eventually crept in again; I ended up sobbing quietly in the darkness.

Two hours later, David shivered against me in his sleep. I could feel cold air drifting over my skin. The sun must have gone down outside. I fumbled in the dark for my shoes and tugged them on, then huddled against my brother's back to keep us both warm.

A low rumble made my heart leap into my throat. I braced myself, imagining the font tilting sideways with the roll of another earthquake—until I realized the rumbling came from inside of me. I hadn't eaten since breakfast, but, with my stomach tied up in knots, I doubted I could. I licked my dry lips. A glass of water sounded amazing, though. I thought of Mr. Beckham, our science teacher, who'd taught us the rule of

threes. The average human body could survive three minutes without air, three hours without shelter, three days without water, and three weeks without food.

Thinking of what would happen to me after being trapped in the font for three days made me shudder. What would it feel like to die?

At around one in the morning, my ears perked at the sound of a faint voice. At first I thought I imagined it, but then the voice came again, louder, and this time it woke David.

“What’s that?” he murmured.

“It sounds like somebody calling out. Hello?” I called back.

“Hello!” came the excited female reply. “Yes, help me! I-I’m over here! My legs are trapped! I can’t move!”

My heart sank. It wasn’t a rescuer. It was someone trapped in the dark like us.

“What’s your name?” David called back.

“Felicity,” she whimpered. “Please. Please help me.”

Our cousin had survived and now she lay out there in the dark, in the shifting church with the carnage. Images of smoldering wreckage and death filled my mind; suddenly the font didn’t seem like such a bad place to be.

“We can’t help you,” David called back.

“Don’t tell her that!” I snapped.

“I’m sorry, Sera, was it supposed to be a secret?”

“Saying it like that will just upset her.”

“The woman is trapped under a church. I’m pretty sure she’s already upset.”

“Hello?” Felicity called to us.

“Let me do it,” I told him. “Felicity?” I called sweetly. “It’s your cousin Sera. I’m sorry, but David and I are stuck, too. We’re under the stage and we can’t get the trapdoor open.”

“Ohhh. Oh, nooo.” Felicity moaned. She started crying again, then screaming. “Help! Somebody help me!”

“You were right as always, Sera,” David said dryly. “Your way was so much better than mine.”

I scowled at him in the dark. “It’s okay, Felicity,” I called out. “We’ll be rescued soon.”

David grunted. “Now who’s saying things they shouldn’t?”

“It’s true,” I insisted. It had to be.

Felicity kept yelling. I could hear her struggling against whatever had her trapped.

“Try not to move,” David advised her. “The building isn’t—”

There was a *CREAK*, a *GROAN*, and then a loud *BANG!* I felt the sound jolt through my body.

“Stable,” he finished.

Felicity’s pleading stopped.

I held my breath. “Felicity?” There was no response—not even a whimper. Tears filled my eyes. “Hello?”

David squeezed my hand. We didn’t hear from our cousin again.

At some point, I must have finally fallen asleep because I woke a few hours later to David nudging me. “Sera?”

“Hm?” I woke up groggy and disoriented.

“Listen.”

Several cracks of sunlight now filtered down between the floorboards, offering enough light to make out the shape of my brother’s dirty face. He looked like he’d been through a war. I cleared my head of sleep and listened. It was faint, but I could hear the distinct sound of something scraping above our heads.

My heart lurched. My brother and I locked eyes, then launched into a flurry of shouts. “Help! Help us!”

Excited, muffled voices echoed above us.

“We’re here!” I screamed.

“Under the stage!” David cried.

We pounded on the trapdoor, beating on it with everything we had.

We heard a flurry of activity—banging, scraping, voices yelling. The light filtering down between the boards broadened and intensified. Plumes of dust fell into our eyes and drifted into our mouths. We kept pounding.

Finally, the trapdoor opened above our heads. We blinked in the blinding light of morning.

“Here!” someone bellowed.

The world became a blur of faces, lights, hands, and shouting. And then green eyes, capped by shaggy silver brows, stared down at us. *Grandpa Donner*. His sheriff’s uniform was caked with dirt and sweat; worry and fatigue shadowed his face. When he spoke, the bushy ends of his thick silver mustache twitched with emotion.

“My God,” he rasped. “They’re alive.”

Chapter Three

Several pairs of hands reached in to pull us from the font. The moment we stood on our own feet, Grandpa dropped to his knees and hauled us into a powerful hug. “I thought I’d lost ya both,” he croaked.

David and I cried hysterically out of sadness and relief. Grandpa was here. He would keep us safe. He would know what to do.

I buried my face in his broad shoulder and never wanted to let go.

Finally, he shifted back. He wiped the tears from his own face, then looked us over carefully. “Are ya hurt?”

We shook our heads. Scratches crisscrossed our exposed skin and I had a lump the size of a walnut on the top of my head, but, other than that, we were both fine.

Grandpa looked past us, at the workers still shining their flashlights into the dark font. “Anybody else in there with you?” he asked us.

I glanced at David. His chin quivered. He opened his mouth to speak, but no sound came out.

“No,” I rasped. That single word again. Small, but devastating.

Tears pooled in my grandfather’s eyes. I forced down a sob. He pulled us both close again. David’s chest shook with heavy emotion and I bit my bottom lip to keep from crying. I was the only one who knew the truth. And the truth was so much more horrible than either of them could imagine.

Grandpa took a breath and pulled himself together. “Let’s get you two someplace safe, okay?”

David and I each took hold of one of his big hands, letting him lead us from the tangle of lumber and stone that had once been the Roslyn Bible Church. I glanced back only once. The stage we’d been hiding beneath was unrecognizable. The force of the quake had twisted and smashed it, just like the rest of the church. Everything was destroyed—except the font.

We left the church parking lot in the early morning light. The sun, just above the horizon, cast a dim glow over a totality of destruction like nothing I could have ever imagined. The historic neighborhood around us was in shambles, like a wrecking ball had bowled through it. Fires burned up and down the streets; hazy, black smoke shadowed the southern horizon and concealed the snow-capped mountains.

Sirens screamed through the city.

We headed down North Second Street, sidestepping ragged fractures in the road where the asphalt had thrust upward, leaving deep, angry rips in the earth. We wove through downed trees tangled in dead power lines and skirted around cars crushed by debris. I made the mistake of looking into one of the cars. When I saw the dead woman behind the wheel, I almost threw up. I didn’t look into any more cars after that.

All the old houses on First Street were piles of kindling. Even the newer structures like Cascade Dental had suffered collapses. I saw Lisa Butler, a local realtor, sitting on her lawn, rocking her dead dog. A few houses down, hardware store

owner Mike Jorgenson stood on his sidewalk, staring blankly at a large sinkhole that had swallowed his house whole. When we crossed onto Idaho Street, a loose horse charged out from a side yard and almost trampled us before racing off down the block.

The world had come unglued.

Grandpa led us toward the city hall building, which, aside from a few broken windows, had sustained very little damage from the quake. He ushered us through the shattered glass front doors, propped open with two heavy wooden desks, and led us toward a first aid station set up by the curving staircase. People in various stages of shock and despair packed the rotunda, lying in cots, slumped on metal chairs, and sitting in groups on the floor. I stared at the familiar faces as we passed, wondering if any of them had lost someone they loved in the flash of a bright white light.

Otto Reinkann, our family doctor, looked up as we approached. Normally a cheerful, friendly man, the doctor looked ashen and exhausted. He tried to smile when he saw us, but the effort got lost in the lines of fatigue drawn on his face. “How are my two favorite patients?” He sat us down in a couple of metal folding chairs and quickly assessed our health. “Some blankets and water, please?” he called out.

Across the room, a group of kids from school manned a table stacked with blankets, boxes of granola bars, and bottles of water. The town had obviously been busy while David and I were trapped in the font. It wasn’t uncommon for snow and ice storms to take out the power in the winter, so people living in a town like ours, at the top of a mountain pass, knew how to pull together in times of need. I’d never seen anything like this relief effort, though.

A petite blonde turned our way. Milly Odette, a sophomore like me, had her hair pulled back in a neat braid and still had on her cheerleader sweater with the big ‘W’—for Warriors—

on the front. I rolled my eyes and sank in my chair. The very last person I wanted to deal with right now was the annoyingly cheerful Texas transplant who, even in the aftermath of an apocalypse, still managed to look perfect.

Milly hurried over to us, carrying thermal blankets and two bottles of water. I ignored her.

Doctor Reinkann shined a penlight into David's eyes. "Do you have any pain?"

David shook his head.

Milly draped a shiny Mylar blanket over my shoulders, did the same for David, and then hurried off to help someone else.

The doctor's light glared into my eyes. "And how about you, Sera?"

I squinted. "Just here." I touched the sore spot on the top of my head.

He sifted through the hair on my scalp and probed the wound mercilessly. I grimaced. "Yes, I bet that does hurt," he said. Finally, he turned to Grandpa. "Water, food, and rest."

Grandpa nodded. "Give everybody what they need, Doc, but go easy on the supplies." In a low voice, he added, "We still don't have any idea how far-reaching this thing is."

I looked around the room full of people. Some were sobbing inconsolably. This wasn't anything like an ice storm or even the blizzard two winters ago that knocked out our power for ten days. It would take a long time to recover from this.

Two young men barreled through the front doors carrying a man on a stretcher. One of those young men was Tim Odette, Milly's older brother. "Unconscious man!" Tim shouted.

Tim—or, as my best friend Alyson liked to call him, tall, tasty, and Texas—had a bruise the size of a plum on his cheek, but it only made his eyes look bluer. He still had on his number five jersey. That, plus Milly's cheerleader sweater, told me the quake must have hit during football practice.

The doctor, already halfway across the room, called out, “More blankets!”

They placed the stretcher on a long table and, even from across the room, I could see that the man was in bad shape. As the doctor worked, a shocking flow of blood streamed onto the tile floor at his feet. I watched the crimson pool funnel into the grout and wondered if it would stain. Would people point to it in years to come and say, “That’s from the day of the big quake.”

The injured man started screaming.

A bottle of water appeared in front of my face—my grandfather’s way of getting my attention. He pulled up a chair in front of me and David, then sat down. I snatched the bottle from his hand and drained it in several gulps.

Grandpa gave me a gentle look. “Can you tell me what happened to your mom?”

David’s eyes settled on me. Panic tightened my chest. *The blinding light. Her whispered words. The crushing loss.*

Tears clogged my throat and I lowered my head.

“It’s all right, sweetheart.” Grandpa smoothed back my hair. “It’s all right. We’ll do our best to find her.”

But they never would.

The injured man finally stopped screaming. I was afraid to wonder why.

“Mom saved us,” David rasped. “She...she put us in the font and saved our lives.”

Grandpa gave a tremulous smile and dashed at the moisture on his face. “That doesn’t surprise me a bit.”

“Have you heard from Dad?” David asked.

I watched my grandfather’s face, looking for any sign that he was keeping something from us. He shook his head. “Phone and power are out. Can’t even get a cell signal.” David’s expression fell and Grandpa patted him on the knee. “Seattle’s

built to withstand stuff like this. On top of that, I raised your dad to be tough as old leather. I'm sure he's okay."

Eliza Cole drifted past, wrapped in a blanket, her face red and splotchy from crying. She was the school nurse, but she was also Pastor Rick's wife. I'd never liked her. She was one of those Christians who walked around acting like their halo was shinier than anybody else's, but everybody knew she was having an affair with Coach Stephens. A picture of her husband flashed through my mind—on his knees, Bible raised, glass jutting from his neck—and I squeezed my eyes tight against the image.

"The pastor hasn't been found yet," Grandpa explained.

"He's dead." David wiped his nose on his sleeve. "In front of the window, three feet, maybe four, from the font."

Grandpa shook his head. "We only found you two in that area. Maybe he crawled off."

David frowned at me. We both knew Pastor Rick hadn't been in any condition to crawl anywhere.

Dirty, injured people continued to drift in through the front doors. I wondered about Alyson. She lived in an older home near Cedar Gulch and, based on what I'd seen in town, older homes hadn't done well in the quake. And what about Eric? I had no idea where he lived.

Deputy Jim Hester, a nice man who'd worked for my grandfather for as long as I could remember, called out to him from the front entrance. "Sheriff? We could use you outside. Mayor Skaggs is talkin' about callin' off the search at the library on account of the storm and a lot of folks are gettin' pretty upset."

Grandpa sighed and shook his head. "I'll be right there, Jim."

My heart lurched. I grabbed my grandfather's callused hand. "You're leaving?"

“There are still a lot of folks missing, Sera,” he said. “But if you need me to stay, I will.”

I imagined other kids out there, alone, buried beneath the rubble, wondering if they’d be found before their “rule of threes” ran out. I knew I couldn’t stop him. Still, it took me another long minute to let go of his hand.

“I’ll be back,” he said. “I promise.”

David shrugged off his thermal blanket. “I’ll help.”

Grandpa stopped him, and readjusted the Mylar back around his small shoulders. “The best thing you can do for me, son, is stay here with your sister.” He gave us both serious looks. “Stay put and get some rest. I’ll be back in a few hours.” He kissed us each on the head and left.

David slowly climbed back up into his chair. He took everything as a slight against his capabilities and I could tell Grandpa’s words had affected him.

“He didn’t mean it like that,” I said.

David stared at the floor. “Yes, he did.”

Raised voices drew my attention to the door. Several bearded men barged into the rotunda, followed by a woman in a white bonnet. All four of them were draped in brown canvas ponchos with large yellow crosses embroidered on the front. They were CBCers.

They marched over to the man lying on the stretcher. It looked like the man’s bleeding had stopped, but, instead of thanking Doctor Reinkann, the CBCers started shouting at him.

“You had no right to put your hands on him!”

“You have defiled my husband!” the woman wailed.

“Apostle Phillips,” Doctor Reinkann began, “without treatment this man will die.”

The tall, bald man, leader of the Cascadia Baptist Church, insisted on being referred to as the apostle. He led a group of religious preppers who lived in a commune outside of town.

They didn't use technology and refused to associate with anyone who did—especially doctors.

“That is not up to you!” the apostle bellowed. He looked at the other two angry, bearded men. “Pick up Brother Eric.”

The two men moved into action.

Doctor Reinkann protested. “You can't take him—”

The apostle stepped in front of the doctor and gave him a murderous glare. “We can! And we will!”

I held my breath, waiting to see if the doctor would insist. CBCers could be brutal when it came to protecting their own. A kid at school had found that out the hard way when he'd stolen a poncho off an elderly member. They'd jumped him in an alley two days later.

The doctor wisely backed down, allowing the apostle and his people to take the dying man away.

Tim Odette wandered over to us, shaking his head. “Poor fella. His family won't let the doctor help him.”

David grunted. “They think their God will heal him.”

Tim sat down in Grandpa's vacated chair. “So how you doin', Double D?”

David scowled and pulled his thermal blanket tighter around his shoulders. He hated Tim's nickname for him—Double D for David Donner.

“I'd be doing a lot better if I had a cellphone in my hand.”

“Wouldn't do you any good.” Tim downed a bottle of water. “Power and cell services are out. Nothin' but a shrieking tone on the landlines. Our folks flew to Texas two days ago; Milly and I haven't been able to get ahold of 'em yet.”

“What about FEMA?” David asked. “Or the National Guard.”

“Haven't seen any soldiers. Just a lot of sad, hurt people. And looters—I've seen a lot of those.” Tim broke into a smile, smacking David on the shoulder so hard he almost knocked him out of his chair. “I sure am glad you're all right, Double D.

You, too, Sera. Your grandpa was worried sick about y'all last night."

David exhaled his irritation and righted himself. For some reason—unknown to anyone but him—when Tim had arrived from Austin he'd decided to be David's best friend. Unfortunately, my brother had been punched, shoved, tripped, and mocked his entire life by guys like Tim. So, naturally, he assumed Tim was just setting him up for a big embarrassment down the road.

Milly walked up, wiping her hands on a paper towel. "If one more person comes in here bleedin', I am runnin' from this building screamin' my fool head off."

Her assessing blue eyes fell on David. "Did you get some-thin' to eat?"

David's attention dropped to his lap.

"They've got fruit and sandwiches in the cafeteria." She arched her brows at his lack of response. "I'd be happy to fetch ya some."

David shook his head and muttered something that sounded like, "No thank you." I'd suspected for a while that my brother had a crush on Milly Odette; now the fact that her presence suddenly struck him mute confirmed it.

Milly looked at me. "Sera?"

"I'm fine." I was starving. I wasn't sure why I'd lied—maybe I just didn't like the idea of Milly Odette doing me a favor. It was too late to take it back, anyway.

"Well, you look just horrible," she declared. "That dress is —" She looked me up and down and grimaced. "Come with me." She turned on her heel and headed toward the back hallway.

I gaped at David, who shrugged, clearly not caring that his twin sister had just been insulted by Hillbilly Barbie.

"She's in drill sergeant mode," Tim warned. "You best go with her before she comes back lookin' for ya."

I scowled at Tim. In what universe did I jump because Milly Odette said so?

“I hear there’s some donated clothes in the cafeteria,” Tim added.

Clothes? The idea of finally getting out of the filthy, ruffled dress overrode any issues I had about Milly. “I guess it wouldn’t hurt to check it out.”

I pulled my Mylar blanket tighter around my shoulders, grateful it covered the dress, and trailed after Milly.

She led me past several empty offices, then into the cafeteria where dozens of people sat at long tables eating sandwiches and apples. My stomach growled at the smells, but food wasn’t my priority at the moment.

Milly stopped in front of a table piled high with grocery bags overflowing with clothes. I saw pants, shirts, socks, shoes—even underwear.

She slid a couple of bags my way. “Folks started bringin’ in donations yesterday.”

I dropped my blanket, no longer caring about the dress I had on, and started tearing through the clothes.

“There’s bound to be somethin’ in there that’ll fit ya.” She wrinkled her nose at me. “That dress is awful.”

Something Milly and I could both agree on.

I quickly found a pair of jeans, a Washington State Huskies sweatshirt, and pair of worn running shoes—all in my size. “I’ll take these.”

Milly nodded. “Follow me.”

She walked me into the ladies room, where a large frosted window lit up the small space. The jagged hairline fracture in the glass must’ve been a gift from the earthquake.

“Water’s not on,” she told me, “so don’t use any of the toilets. They’ve set up Porta Potties out back if you need one.”

With clean clothes clutched in my hands, I could feel my

spirits beginning to lift. And then I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror.

I stared in shock at my reflection. My hair had come loose from the updo my mother had painstakingly styled for the wedding. It now fell in a tangled, coppery, mess around my head. A thick layer of dirt coated my face, making my eyes look big and haunted. Muddy tearstains ran from my lashes down to my cheeks, and over my jawline. My nose was red and chapped where I'd been wiping it on my sleeve.

The ruffled dress was ruined. The front ruffle was torn where my mother had grabbed it to pull me away from the plummeting church bell; dirt and sweat stained the purple fabric. I knew the red splatters across the front had to be my mom's blood.

Unable to stop myself, I covered my face with my hands and cried.

After a few moments, I heard Milly pull several paper towels from the dispenser on the wall. "My mama says that when people encounter real tragedy in life, they divide into two groups, the quitters and the fighters." I heard the glug of a bottle of water as she continued. "She says, 'And it's up to you, Milly Lynn Odette, to decide which team you're gonna be on.' Here." I sniffled and peeked through my fingers. She held out a wet paper towel. "Let's get you cleaned up."

I wiped my face and scrubbed my arms and legs, trying to scour the tragedy off my skin, while Milly pulled out a brush and started working on my tangled hair.

"Our house is completely gone," she told me. "Ground swallowed it right up. 'Course, it swallowed up that godawful shed out back, too, so there's your silver lining. Did your mamma do your hair? I can tell it was real pretty before the quake got it."

"My mom—" My voice cracked. "My mom is.... She's missing."

Milly's eyes met mine in the mirror. "I'm so sorry." Her face turned pink. I thought she might start crying, which would have been an emotional disaster for us both. Instead, she swallowed hard and continued brushing. "There's a lot of people missin'—mostly kids. Folks have started tapin' pictures of them on the Miner's Memorial outside."

She pulled my hair back into a ponytail and secured it with an elastic band. "There. You're all set."

My reflection almost looked like a live person again—even if I didn't feel so alive on the inside.

Milly gave my shoulders a steadying squeeze. "Hang in there, Miss Sera. You're not as alone as ya feel."

Before I could start crying again, I took my donated clothes into one of the stalls and closed the door. I kicked off my pointy flats, then couldn't get out of the filthy purple dress fast enough. But, just as I was about to toss it to the floor, I had second thoughts. I pictured Mom sifting through the discount rack and finding it. As much as I hated the shiny fabric, the over-sized ruffles, and the washed out lavender color, something about it had appealed to Mom. She'd been thinking about me. She'd bought it just for me.

After I put on the jeans, sweatshirt, and running shoes, I left the stall with the purple dress in my hand. For almost twenty-four hours I'd been desperate to get rid of it and suddenly I couldn't part with it.

Milly looked me over, then nodded her approval. "Welcome to Team Fighter, Sera Donner."

That's when I decided to stop hating Milly Odette.

We left the ladies room together, heading back to the rotunda. I felt clean, human again, ready to take on the world—and then I saw the crowd gathered outside the front doors. *More drama?* My heart squeezed at the thought.

Milly paused. "Now, what's that all about?"

I tossed the purple dress onto a chair and we hurried over to see what was happening.

Everybody was staring up at the sky. I peered over the broad shoulders in front of me and saw an enormous, dense wall of black clouds rolling in from the east, churning with frightening intensity and speed. It was a monster storm; unlike anything I'd ever seen.

"Yikes," Milly said. "That's a soaker."

Doctor Reinkann stood at the front of the crowd, urging everyone back inside. "All right now. Everybody back into the rotunda, please. We are likely to see lightning strikes and some sizable hail from a storm this size. Come on, now. Back. Back inside where it's safe."

A shock of alarm shot through me. I looked around the crowd. "Where's David?"

Milly pointed at a blond head near the door. "I see Tim."

We pushed our way through the crowd toward him and I took hold of his arm. "Where's my brother?"

Tim looked down at me, his face weighted with worry. "He ran off."

"He *what?*"

"He took one look at the sky and said he had to find your grandpa."

My heart lurched. The wind was picking up. Things were getting bad fast.

Tim shook his head. "I shoulda stopped him."

"It would have been easier to stop the storm," I grumbled. "I have to find him."

"We'll help you," Milly insisted. "I need a break from blood and bandages."

Ignoring the ominous threat hanging in the sky above, the three of us hurried through the courtyard and out into the street. I looked both ways—past the earthquake wreckage—but couldn't see David.

Milly pulled her brother around to face her. “Which way did he go?”

Tim shrugged. “I dunno, Mills. He’s pretty quick for a little guy.”

Then I remembered what Deputy Hester had said. I knew exactly where my brother was heading. “The library.”

We took off running up Idaho Street, past Marko’s Place, past the Brick Bar & Grill, and past Suzy’s Sundries—all of them demolished by the quake. It didn’t take long before I spotted David up ahead of us. He galloped through the rubble at an alarming pace for somebody whose short, bowed legs barely bent at the knees.

We caught up with him as he turned onto Dakota.

“Grandpa told us to stay put!” I shouted. *How dare you scare me like that!* I wanted to add.

Though out of breath, David didn’t stop. He simply pointed up at the sky.

“Yeah,” I griped. “Another reason to stay in city hall.”

David refused to slow down, leaving us no choice but to follow him.

We found our grandfather standing with Deputy Hester and Mayor Skaggs outside the shell of what had once been the Roslyn Public Library. Rescuers in protective masks swarmed the site. The roof had collapsed. The walls were cracked and crumbling. There were books scattered everywhere.

We rushed up to them as Mayor Skaggs mopped his forehead. “...about fifteen minutes before the storm hits.”

“We have a problem,” David blurted.

Grandpa frowned down at him and then at me. “I thought I told you two to wait at city hall.”

David, gasping, pointed at the sky. “See that?”

“We are aware of the storm,” the mayor replied.

David, trying to catch his breath, shook his head. “It’s...not a storm.”

The mayor smirked. “All right, son, we don’t have time for—”

“Now, hold on a minute, Frank,” Grandpa Donner interrupted. “Let’s hear the boy out.”

David took a deep breath. “Did you hear the sonic boom before the earthquake?”

Grandpa nodded. “I heard that.”

Deputy Hester frowned. “It was a fighter jet from—”

“No.” David cut him off. “When a jet breaks the sound barrier, you don’t hear one sonic boom.”

All the color drained from my grandfather’s face. “You hear two.” His attention flew back up to the darkening sky. “My God.”

The mayor looked up. “Well, if it’s not a storm, then what the hell is it?”

David’s answer sent a chill racing through my body. “It’s an ash cloud.”

