

OBLIVION

The stars that went out first. One by one, as we stared into the heavens, they winked cold, as though a dark fist curled around each one. It only took about fifteen seconds for the entire night sky to turn ink black.

I blinked hard, not quite believing it. Michael's hand clenched around mine, tight, painful almost. I turned to look at him. Our eyes met, but from the little I could see of his shadowed face, he didn't look surprised. No, the only expression I could read was. . . horror. Dread.

The first wave of fear twisted my insides. "What's happening?" I whispered. He didn't answer, but was on his feet in the next moment, hand slipping from mine.

I scrambled up after him. "Michael?" He was staring out over the city, our hometown of Sedona, Arizona. Our vantage point was beautiful. The red rocks of Thunder Mountain towered in the background of our view, standing guard over the valley and city below. We had enjoyed the scenic picture, the open sky. . . but the sprawling lights of the city seemed too bright now, harsh below the inky backdrop of the starless night. A sharp wind picked up, whipping my auburn hair back from my face. Eyes stinging, I wrapped my arms around myself, following Michael's intense gaze.

A patch of lights from my hometown went black. I sucked in a breath, staring in bewilderment at the dark section among the scatter of lights. Then another section blinked out. Then another. And another. A scream rose up from the streets, ringing faint, but shrill and clear. I swallowed hard.

"Get to the truck." Michael's voice had never sounded so strained. I threw a tense glance in his direction, but then locked my gaze back on my city, trying to make sense of it.

“Get to the truck now.”

“But—” As I started to object, another scream split the night.

“Desi!” He seized my arm. I needed no more encouragement, and together we turned and raced down the side of the hill. His black pickup was parked on the side of the dirt road. Michael jerked the door open for me. I climbed in, and before my fingers had even snapped the seat belt into its lock he was in the driver’s side. Clasp my hands in my lap, I watched him sidelong. Every muscle in his body was tight, his jaw clenched, his green eyes focused as he wheeled the car around and stepped on the accelerator. Easy-going, confident Michael was never this wired. His fear scared me more than anything else.

It took all the self-restraint I possessed not to clutch at the door handle as we flew around the winding, tight corners. Red dust flew, and the scraggly foliage streaked by as the needle slowly rose on the speedometer.

“Where are we going?” I dared. He opened his mouth to respond, then just shook his head and gripped the steering wheel harder.

Already, we were almost into the valley again, heading back into the heart of Sedona. I scanned hard for anything else out of the ordinary, but I heard it first. Sirens. More than one. I hesitated for an instant, then rolled the window down.

A cacophony of sound hit me: barking dogs, shrieks of fear, more and more sirens. We wound around the last bend, and the spinning red and blue lights from police cars nearly blinded us as they raced down the main road. Michael hit the brakes and we came to an abrupt, stomach-wrenching stop.

“What on earth—?” My hand flew to my pocket and I yanked out my cell phone.

“It won’t work.” Michael was edging the car forward, trying to turn left onto the crowded road.

“What?”

“Your phone. It’s not going to work,” he said distractedly.

I frowned, then dialed my home number. My phone lit up for a second, then flickered and died. I stared at it, then stared at Michael. “How did you—”

“GET DOWN!” Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something black sweep in our direction, and then Michael forced my head down. With a whine, the car stalled and died. A crushing pressure engulfed us. I let out a shriek as my ears popped violently, and then the windows of the car buckled, shattering inward. The glass showered over us, and I froze.

Car alarms went wild. My mouth was dry, my hands shaking.

“Are you okay?” Michael asked swiftly. I slowly raised my head, staring around at the glittering shards of glass that dusted everything. My breath came quickly.

“I... I think so.”

He gave a short nod, then carefully opened his door, standing so all the glass clinked to the ground before hopping out. “Come on.”

I tried to make myself move, to do the same as him, but my fingers fumbled as I went for the seatbelt, a wave of dizziness sweeping over me.

My door swung open, and Michael reached over me to undo the buckle. “Easy does it. Careful.” With his guidance, I managed to take my feet and drop down to the ground. The wind hit me again, hard. I let out a shiver, trying to focus on my surroundings.

“Okay, we gotta get out of here.” Michael’s eyes were stony as he looked around at the road. Every car had either died or crashed, and only a few of the swirling lights had survived. He took my hand, starting to pull me with him, but I planted my feet, begging him for answers with my gaze.

“What is going on?”

Michael took a breath and ran his free hand through his dark, tousled hair, scanning the scene once more. “I can’t tell you that. Just trust me.”

He knows something, he really does. I was too afraid to protest further when he tightened his grip on my hand and pulled me after him. We ran across the street, ignoring the cops and racing along the side of the road.

It was a summer night; the wind should never have been that cold. It turned into angry hands as we ran, tearing at our clothing, our hair, pushing us backwards. My eyes stung, and pressure slowly built in my ears again. I shook my head sharply, aware of the onset of a headache behind my eyes. Every resounding footstep was an echo of my heartbeat.

The very air thickened. Every breath was harder to suck in, harder to force out of my lungs. I slowed down in horror, focusing on breathing, but Michael dragged me along. Gasping, I stumbled after him, then raised my eyes back to the black sky. My heart stopped.

It heaved and roiled, the very image of a turbulent ocean.

This is impossible. Every piece of logic I possessed screamed at me, but my disbelieving eyes watched as this ocean of ink grew more violent. There was a crack like a gunshot, and the ground beneath my feet lurched.

My hand tore free of Michael's and I went sprawling onto the pavement. Fire lanced through my elbows and knees, but I had no time to focus on my pain. At that moment, there was a giant creak, and I looked up.

The telephone pole directly above me was swaying. Its shadow fell on me as it tipped and started to plummet. I screamed and rolled...

Hands grabbed me and jerked me aside just as the telephone pole came crashing down. The taut lines snapped, sparks flew, and I buried my head into my rescuer's shoulder, choking back sobs. Michael silently held me for a moment, then gently pulled me back to my feet. "You're okay, Desi. We have to move on."

I moved away from him, unsteady, but suddenly recognizing the street. *Home. I'm not far.* Turning quickly, I tried to race down the next street, but my feet and mind were not in sync, so I stumbled along, still trying to breathe.

"Desi, where are you going?" Michael jogged to catch me and grabbed my elbow, but I jerked it out of his grasp.

"Home."

"That's not safe."

As if to confirm his words, the next gust of wind brought a cold that was deeper than temperature—a chill with a vibe of malice in it. And though it sent my hair streaming across my face, it was utterly silent. Not one sound followed. I spun to face him, shuddering. "Then my family isn't safe! I need to get to them!" An image formed in my mind: my scatterbrained mother in hysterics as she tried to contact me, little Gracie screaming my name...

“We don’t have time!” Michael’s voice was anguished as he moved close to me. “You have to trust me, they’ll be okay if we can get out of here. We need to leave now!”

The words didn’t make sense to me, but it didn’t matter. I ignored him, turning and determinedly breaking into another run. *I won’t leave them.*

Michael groaned, but I heard him running behind me, down the street, around the corner, across the yard...

“Mom?” I yelled as I flung the front door open. “*Gracie?*”

Silence met my ears. I started in, but Michael grabbed my arm, and at the same moment the windows shattered inward, glittering glass littering the carpet of our living room. Michael was yelling, but for a dazed moment, I couldn’t make out his words. I shook my head to clear the fog.

“—not *here!*” Michael was shaking my arm. “If you want to help them, you have to come with me!”

There was a resolute urgency in his tone I couldn’t ignore. I cast one longing look down into my home, but didn’t object as he took my hand again. “Where are we going?” I asked numbly.

“I’ll show you, if we can get there in time.”

We kept running.

It was a scene from a horror movie. Store windows were shattered, lights were out, cars had spun off the road and into each other. The silent wind kept chasing us, following us no matter where we were. People were screaming from their homes, or cowering in the backseat of

cars. The sky seemed to reach for the ground, closer and closer, and as it did so, I watched the color start to drain from my world.

A dry sob escaped my throat. The only lights that were left over turned white, and the color was leached from everything else until it was left steel gray or black. I looked to Michael, and suddenly I couldn't take it anymore.

“Stop! Michael, stop!”

“We can't!” he said this through gritted teeth, tightening his grip on my hand.

“You know what's going on! *Tell me what's going on!*”

“There's no time—”

“Stop it!” I dug in my heels, and he wheeled around to face me. “What is happening to my home?”

“You want to know? Fine!” he moved in until his grim face was inches from mine.

“They're after me. It's why they're here — it's all my fault. Save your other questions for when we're safe.”

Without bothering to gauge my reaction, he dragged me off again. My heart was hammering. It didn't make sense. His fault. A little voice whispered in my head, *Well, how long have you known him, really?*

We didn't make it much further. With one giant heave, the ground beneath us rocked again. Somehow the two of us managed to keep our footing. Michael leapt over a large crack that had split open in the road, and I followed, trying not to make him wait for me.

We turned a corner and he jerked me to a stop. Thick and billowing, a tower of smoke devoured the buildings and road ahead of us. No, not smoke. Fog. Pitch-black fog. The air

seemed even heavier here, the malice more tangible. Every single light on this road went out all at once with an ominous bang.

“Right... different route,” Michael said tensely, pulling me backwards. I think I managed a squeak, and then we were running away, down to the next road. We barely paused to look down it before continuing further, Michael shaking his head and moving faster.

And then we skidded to another stop. A massive nimbus of the black fog rose from nowhere and everywhere at the same time, curling to life straight down the road, blocking our way forward. Stunned, I looked up, trying to see where the massive, thick wall ended, but it was impossible.

“Run!” he jerked me left, and we sprinted down the next street, but the fog whipped to life, the silent, deadly wind dragging it around until it blocked us there, too. We flipped around and ran back, but suddenly we were standing in the middle of the road, with the fog on every side of us, advancing quickly. Weight seemed to press on me from every side. There were more small detonations as the last few lights from every street went out. The ground pitched, the sky writhed, and no matter which way I turned, the fog was closing in.

Utter fear was bright in Michael’s eyes as he looked at me, then up. “Alright! Okay! You’ve got me! Leave this place alone!”

Nothing changed. He seized my arms. The fog swallowed us whole. Nothing existed but swirling darkness, the awful pressure, and Michael’s hands on my arms.

I felt him pull me in, and his arms wrapped around me in a tight hug. Even that close, I couldn’t see him at all. “It’s *me* you want! She doesn’t know anything, I swear!” He shouted at

the top of his lungs, voice going hoarse. “Desi! It’s going to be okay, I promise! You’re going to get out of here. Can you hear me?”

I clutched him, sobs shaking my frame. “Yes, I can hear you!” The pressure built stronger and stronger, clamping me in an iron fist, crushing me.

“I’m sorry! I’m so sorry, Desi! I—”

And he vanished.

He hadn’t released me, hadn’t even finished his sentence. One moment he was there and the next... he was gone. Just gone.

The wind dropped to a breath and the fog started to dissolve before my eyes, until I could dimly make out the surrounding scene.

“*Michael?*” My voice echoed in the demolished street.

I was alone.