

Apocalypse in Memory - Leora, Year 6, NSW

The sky broke around us. Rubble fell from seemingly every direction. Fire blazed. Noise, deafening noise. A mixture of screams. Cries. Talking.

I just stood as people ran. No one knew from what, I don't know if we do now. But we knew it wasn't good. Then someone grabbed my hand, their clutch warm against mine.

“Hey, hey.” He tugged. “We gotta go Cara. Something's happening.”

It was Elias. My best friend.

“Where can we even go? I mean look at this place. This is an apocalypse if I've ever seen one,” I breathed out.

His eyes darted around, he hesitated to speak as if he didn't know either. I had watched enough movies to know not everyone had thick plot armor, and I was not going to be the main character.

“We'll go to the highway, maybe someone will hitch us a ride. I don't know, but we aren't staying here, okay?”

I held my breath.

“Okay?”

I nodded.

And then we ran. After a minute, my legs started to ache. I was holding back salty tears, and as for Elias, I have no idea. Inside, I think we were all panicking. Buildings were falling. There was the smell of smoke. And of course, the natural instinct is to scream, so there was a whole lot of that surrounding us.

I *almost* felt like yelling too. Was it just Chicago that was falling to pieces, like porcelain against concrete? Or was it happening elsewhere, too?

We reached a highway after 10 minutes of panic and agony. In the moment, you don't think the crowd will have the exact same idea. But people are smart. The roads were backed up for miles. If you could even drive, let alone find a path through the honking cars, I guarantee someone would be banging on your windshield asking for help.

We rested at the underside of a bridge. Gazing over at Elias, I rasped, “What is happening? I know everyone's thinking that but like...is it aliens?”

“No, if it was aliens you'd see them. And no one's getting attacked, it's just the buildings.” He checked his phone. I glanced over. The headline read, WORLDWIDE PANIC: CITIES DESTROYED.

I gasped quietly.

“I don't think it's war either. Nothing like that explodes buildings one by one and sets fire like how that did.”

“Earthquakes?”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Fire? What does the article say?”

“Just to get away from any buildings, and that they don't know what did it. Seems like it all happened at the same time.”

He checked his watch. All my thoughts were: *Where do we go next?* There was so little help. It had only been 24 minutes but it felt like hours.

The longest 24 minutes of my entire life.

“We should get going again,” he said.

I leant down and tightened my laces.

“Okay. You ready? Let's go. Somewhere.”

“Somewhere.”

We walked side by side, exhausted, away from the city. After a while, the sun began to set and we were plunged into terrifying darkness. The noise quietened down, though you'd hear an occasional sob. I felt like crying too, I wanted to. But we were all too weak. I held it in and put on a strong, brave face. Elias took my hand.

We got some way down the road before we were too weary to go any further. We rested in an abandoned car, in the middle of the silent road.

I tried to joke. He tried to laugh back. We had talked about it so calmly, but what was next? Civilization was over, and we had no idea why.

24 minutes turned into 24 hours. Headlines were distressing. Then they stopped. The connections went offline. We didn't know then that it would be forever.

Many nights I fell asleep looking at the shining stars. They seemed so comforting, so knowing.

That if we weren't here, thriving, someone out there was.

Now it's 2040. So many years since we watched Chicago, and our whole world, crumble. Still no answers. Speculations, suspicions, some kind of a freak natural disaster, but nothing set in stone.

The kids gather round to hear what it was like before the cities were overgrown remains, before many were nomads. Seems strange to me now.

I worry sometimes, that it'll all happen again. That we'll build back up for it to all be stripped away. But we made it. We're here. We're *alive*.

Me and Eli laugh without fear these days.

Earth has been through so much but even then, it's never over.