



The
Aftermath

Book 1

Sara Michelle

Day 7

*My New
Normal.*

I almost wish I hadn't made it. At least then I'd be dead. I don't really know what happens after we die. But I know it would sure beat this situation I've found myself in. Still, I don't think I'll ever fully grasp how lucky we are to be alive—if you can call it luck. I sometimes find myself thinking that it would've been so much easier to have passed away. I think being dead would be easier than this new life—my new normal.

It was freezing. It felt as if the sun had lost every joule of heat. Sure it was shining bright—a little too bright given the tragedy. But the air was angry, frigid. This was the kind of cold that couldn't be eliminated with sweatpants and fuzzy slippers. This was the kind of cold you got when you had the flu. Not even the hottest bath could make you feel warm enough. The wind penetrated your brain, and every breath you took turned your blood to ice. Our throats were raw.

Finding a decent heat source was nearly impossible. All the power was out here along with the rest of the city. And the state. And the country. At this point I wouldn't have been surprised if the entire planet had been damaged by this catastrophe.

There were no civil humans around. All the people left were fighting for their lives. We were all looking for the same things. Food, water, shelter, and more importantly, an answer to this mess.

Ryan and I kept to ourselves. Thank God I've got him. Pure fate kept us together, that's for sure. From what we've calculated, it's been seven days since *The End*. We don't really have a more suitable name for it right now.

There was absolutely no warning. Quite frankly, I don't think anyone expected anything out of the ordinary to happen. It was three days after Christmas. The only thing unusual was the clear sky. Typically, we're pelted with snow at this time of year. But it was cold and sunny. Perfect holiday weather.

We'd just finished celebrating Christmas. Our two-year anniversary was a short two days away. Then our entire lives were shaken—literally. This earthquake was no ordinary earthquake. I'd grown up in California, and I'd experienced what I thought was the worst. But this was no California quake. It was as if the Lord himself had shaken the earth with every bit of power he held. Every bone in your body rattled and collided. Pain soared through your joints and nerves. Frantic screams could be heard; small explosions, then larger ones.

I do remember seeing panic sweep across Ryan's face. Then darkness. But I'll never fully remember or know how terrifying that day really was. I was

completely unconscious for two days after it happened.

I awoke to Ryan's gentle embrace. That must have been on day three. He was stroking my hair. I remember it being so bitterly cold. After my eyes adjusted, I was hit with a painful dose of reality. This was no dream. No ordinary nightmare either. This was real. This was hell on earth.

The city looked like a creepy ghost town from a cheesy cable movie. Every building in eyesight was destroyed and covered in a blanket of ash and gray snow. Every once in a while, a crazed survivor could be seen, running, calling out, looking for help. Their cries were left unanswered.

We were alone and scared. Nobody

expected the theories and stories to actually come true. I think that people had put the thought of the apocalypse out of their minds. After 2012 passed with no strange activity, the whole idea seemed like rubbish. Seemed like a lifetime away. We were proven terribly wrong. Nostradamus got it right after all. The earth had played a sickening joke, caving into itself, destroying everything it could. Now here we were with no idea of where to go or what was yet to come.

It continued to get colder. I prayed that the weather stayed clear. A blizzard would kill off every last survivor. We were able to find some torn blankets and dirty coats in the midst of all the rubble. They were filthy and smelled

of death and raw sewage. But hygiene would have to come after warmth. Cold meant death.

I hadn't bathed since it happened. I'm sure I looked like a monster. My hair felt dry and caked with mud and other unknown garbage. I was bruised and cut from the impact of the quake. My mouth was dry. I could taste vomit. But I didn't complain. I needed to be thankful. Not only for the fact that I was alive, but because I was alive with Ryan. He doesn't fail to rock me to sleep each miserable night, and I know he's not going to leave me. Yes, I can say I'm grateful.

We walked past a young boy today, probably around seven years old. I'll never know how he made it. His blue

eyes stood out like jewels against his bruised body. The look of terror and bewilderment on his face caused my heart to ache. I looked at Ryan with pleading eyes. He shook his head.

“Cecilia,” he said taking my hand, “he won’t make it. At this point, it’d only frustrate him and slow us down. We don’t know what happens next, and we can’t take risks. It’s every man for himself.”

He was right. We couldn’t have any extra baggage on our hands. But I looked at the boy with sympathy. I wondered how he felt. Was he confused? Well I guess that was obvious. Where was his mom? How was his life before ... this? I almost began to argue with Ryan’s decision, but reality set in.

Emotionally I was drained. My body ached from being shaken to its core. My stomach longed for food. My throat was dry and thirsted for water. The snow was too dirty to touch. We had to walk. We had to figure out the severity of the situation. We needed food. We needed water. We needed shelter. So far, we'd only come across moldy food and dirty water. I'd tried drinking some, but it only made me sick. Other than that, we'd only found more dirt, mangled bodies, and the rubble of what used to be. It seemed as if someone had come and stolen all the necessary items to live.

Day 8

“Cecilia, honey, wake up.” Ryan shook me gently and I groaned. Everything ached. My eyelids felt like weights. I shivered. Ryan pulled me closer. His heart thumped against my cheek, assuring me that life still ran through his veins. Without him I’d be gone. I wouldn’t try to live. But I wouldn’t give up until he did. I couldn’t. He’d already done so much for me, and I would never leave him to face this alone.



Sara Michelle

*The
Inside*

Book 2

Day 13

8:00 a.m.

I felt my brain slip out of its dream state. It was so comforting to finally wake up in an actual bed. I lay still, appreciating the moment before finally opening my eyes. They slowly opened, and I took in the scenery around me. The room was plain, but it was sturdy, safe, and I was finally able to claim something as my own.

Cecilia and I'd begun to consider the snow shelter as our temporary

home. It was the first clean and suitable shelter we had since the earthquake almost two weeks ago. I shuddered at the pang of painful memories. I just didn't want to go there. Not yet. I don't think I could ever thank God enough for keeping me and the love of my life alive and, for the most part, healthy. It definitely wasn't the easiest weeks of my life, but we got through it together and with very little *physical* damage.

I'll never be able to get rid of the horrible memories of that day. The screaming. The boom. The flash of light. The gore. The pain. The complete blood-pumping horror. It was almost too much to bear. No matter how long I live, that day will never stop haunting me.

After traveling on foot for many days and nights, we now call the Denver Snow Shelter home ... at least for the time being. I can't explain how, in a time of such desperation, I was able to conveniently—brilliantly, if I say so—come up with the idea to come here. Luckily it was still intact. And I've been thankful for this space every moment of the last two days ... even if we've yet to figure out the many unexplained noises we continue to hear. We often wonder if it's the shelter or just the world itself trying to decide if it's truly finished with the horror it has unleashed.

I sat up and stretched, ready to continue working on our new normal—the new lives that we would build. The road to completing our goal was going

to be rough. But with Cecilia—for Cecilia—I'd be able to accomplish anything. I was sure of it. I rolled myself out of bed and made my way over to the closet-sized bathroom.

I stared at my reflection and tried to figure out how a guy like me was still alive after this devastating earth alteration. My face looked scruffy since I hadn't shaved since the quake. My hair was getting too long, and the blond was fading more into a lighter brown, almost auburn. My arms were firm, and I had defined muscles in all the right places. My eyes, still a bright blue, never failed to be the biggest charmer for Cecilia. My girl.

I debated whether or not to hop in the shower or go see if she was awake.

Since we'd been here, I'd taken at least nine showers, taking advantage of the plentiful hot water. A very nice luxury considering the current state of affairs. Maybe it was too indulgent? I wasn't sure how long our luck would last.

It was so unbelievably hard to man-up and comfort Cecilia when I could barely stand the horrible conditions myself. All in all, I was just glad the initial struggle to survive was over. We were safe for the time being.

I decided against showering and instead went to see if Cecilia was awake. I walked out into the hallway and tiptoed up to her bedroom door. I knocked and waited a moment to see if she would answer. She didn't. I turned the doorknob and peeked inside. Her

bed was perfectly made, and she was nowhere to be seen. I rolled my eyes. She'd always been the tidiest girl I'd ever known.

Day 13

9:00 a.m.

Just as I began to wonder where she could be, the smell of maple oatmeal and burned toast wafted down the hall. My stomach growled. I shut her door. Then I followed my nose into the large kitchen. I found her there stirring a pot of oatmeal. I came up behind her and wrapped my arms around her small waist. She yelped in surprise and turned to face me. Instead of her usual smile I got a scowl.

“Don’t scare me like that while I’m cooking, Ryan,” she scolded.

I removed my arms from around her waist and put my hands up in surrender.

“Sorry, Chef Boyardee,” I replied sarcastically.

She rolled her eyes, turned her back to me, and continued stirring.

Geez! What was up with her this morning? She continued to finish cooking breakfast without saying a word. She soundlessly handed me a bowl of oatmeal and took her seat at the table. I followed her and took my own.

“What’s wrong with you this morning?” I asked.

She took a spoonful of oatmeal and didn’t meet my eye.

“Nothing,” she replied quietly and continued eating.

This was totally suspicious. She was *never* pissed at me. Where was the attitude coming from?

When she was through eating, she stood up and grabbed my bowl. I wasn't exactly finished, but I decided it wouldn't be smart to protest right now.

I helped Cecilia clean up and grabbed her hand. She didn't pull away, but she held her hand limply in mine. I led her back to my room. I wanted to discuss the next step to moving on from this disaster. As much as we both avoided accepting it, the snow shelter wouldn't sustain us forever. I figured the supplies would last four to five weeks at the most. Who knows when the power

would give? I wasn't sure about the water supply either. We had already used so much without thinking about conserving. It was scary to think about, but we had to be realistic. I opened my door. She took a seat on my bed.

“So what's today's agenda?” she asked quietly. Curiosity sparkled in her eyes, along with something else I couldn't put my finger on. I sat next to her and took her hand again.

“Eventually, we're going to have to start exploring the city. The snow shelter is a huge blessing. But realistically, it's not going to last us forever.”

She rolled her eyes for what seemed like the hundredth time this morning. “I'm not a child. Or stupid. I know that. How long are we talking?”

Okay, honestly, I was getting a little irritated with her sore attitude. I hadn't done anything to her and didn't deserve to be treated so rudely. I just didn't understand girls. What was up? I took a deep breath and calmly replied, "I'd give us five weeks tops."

Cecilia looked down once again. "That soon?"

I felt so helpless looking at her. I felt all my irritation slip away. I hated not being able to fix things for her. This situation was way out of my control. I was willing to give up anything to go back to the way things were before we were enveloped in this inescapable hell.

I wrapped my arms around her. I tried my best to comfort and reassure her that somehow everything would be