

Edge of Light

A Novel by Jay Antani

CHAPTER ONE

October 23, 2030

We're on our way to the game when Abby gives me and Conner the news. She'll be moving east with her family after the fall semester, probably in January. With her father out of work and the California fires making her younger brother's breathing worse, it all makes sense. Conner says he's sorry to hear, maybe it's for the best, but I stay quiet. Hard to speak when you feel like you just got sucker punched in the chest.

All through the game, I keep it together, telling myself it won't be so bad, Abby being gone. Maybe she won't leave, maybe there's another way. There's an ache in my chest. I'm thinking ahead to next semester and life without Abby when the field begins to glow and shadows form and shift. I look up, shielding my eyes, and see this *thing*, this blinding object tearing out of the north.

People scream and gasp. Cries of awe go up around me in the bleachers. I can't utter a sound. It's like a dragon just invaded our skies, racing southward, a ragged arc trailing behind it. Dread surges into my chest. It's the difference between watching someone dying in a movie and knowing for sure that you're about to die—for real.

It streaks death-ray-white over Oberon Heights and goes on for what seems like miles and miles. We stare, astonished, and murmurs run through the crowd. A few are aiming their phones at it when, trailing away to the edge of sight, the glowing thing blows open, and the whole world turns inside-out. Violet evening becomes bright-white afternoon, and everyone's ducking for cover! Abby leans into me. I reach out for Conner, and, huddled together, we all brace for radiation. Are we about to be burnt to a crisp?

Seconds pass. The glow fades. We're here! I'm alive!

I collect my breath, hearing howls and claps and nervous laughter.

"What the—?" are my only words when the blast wave hits: a sound so loud you're sure it's the last thing you're ever going to hear. Glass shatters near and far. The field goes half-dark. Car alarms go off all over the place. And a warm gust blows through us, above the noise. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch birds scattering.

Dozens of smaller explosions, like artillery fire—*pop! pop-pop! pop! pop-pop-pop!* *pop!*—sound from the far southern distance. The booms settle and, eventually, all I hear are dogs barking, a child crying somewhere. On the field, in the bleachers, stunned, heavy silence. It's much darker now, and in the light of their phone screens, a terrified man talks to a woman, nervously laughing, below us.

Conner looks back at me. "Had to be a comet or some shit, right?" He's got a slightly crazy look like he's giddy *and* freaked out. Abby is sure it was a missile. But I feel like we just saw and heard the gates of hell open.

As the wind and the noise die down, people start climbing up the bleachers to get a better look southward. From the bottom of my heart, a fear starts to rise and fill my being: Is this World War III? Are we all about to die?

“Check it out!” Conner’s on his feet now and staring south. There’s a red-orange aura, a fingerprint stamped on the horizon, which flares for a few more seconds and gets fainter and fainter. Once it’s gone, we’re aware of the dark: only a couple of lights over the field didn’t get blown out.

The stands fill with more shouts and the glow of phone screens. I can feel bodies. Elbows and feet crushing down the stands. “Move,” somebody in the stands yells. “Out of the way!” The players on the field, the cheerleaders, everyone on the sidelines is making for the far side of the field where people are scaling the high chain-link fence and over into the parking lot.

I check on Abby, crouched down, her hands in her hair, covering her ears.

“You okay?” are the first words out of my mouth.

But she only looks at me, unsure what to say.

“Let’s get up above this crowd,” Conner says. “Get a better look around.”

I get up, point to the top of the stands. “How about the announcer’s booth?”

Police and ambulance sirens cut the air from all directions. We push our way up the ten or twelve rows to the announcer’s booth. We peer through the blown-out windows. It’s a cave, darkness in the greater dark. Glass and debris cover the bleachers below the booth. The vice principal and gym teacher, who were just announcing the game a couple of minutes ago, are gone.

Abby and I try to make calls. She’s trying to reach her parents. I’m calling my mom in the ER. Her shift started at 2 p.m. today. CALL FAILED.

“Anything?” I ask her. She shakes her head. And there’s this dread in my heart like we’re trapped and cut off from our worlds. From the look on her face, I can tell she’s feeling it too.

After Conner and I brush off shards from the window ledge, I scramble up onto it, hoisting myself onto the roof. I reach down and help the others up.

Whole neighborhoods are in pitch dark—black, bottomless wells around rims and patches of light. The horizon is a monstrous ink-blackness behind clouds of smoke and dust. Above us, we can still see the vapor trail, dissipating now, twisty and bulbous. I’ve seen barium x-rays of intestines that look like that.

The flashlights from phones bob and dance like manic fireflies at the bottom of the bleachers where a restless bottleneck is trickling through the gate. People are hollering and crying to get through, and what seems like a fight between two guys—maybe they’re high or drunk—is brewing while a third tries to pull them apart, laughing. “I don’t like the look of that,” I say to Abby, and we turn our attention directly below us to the scaffolding behind the bleachers. Anyone who doesn’t want to deal with the pileup at the gate is taking their chances by climbing down.

We lower ourselves off the booth, right up against the railing and take a look. More and more people—mostly kids I’ve seen around at school—are on the scaffold, a colony of panicked ants crawling thirty feet to the ground. Two lose their grip and fall, grunting as they land in the hard dirt.

We lean out over the railing and consider the scaffold when we hear, “Here goes nothing,” and watch Conner swing one leg over the railing, then the other.

“Dude!” I grab at his shoulder. The guy gets queasy at the mere *thought* of heights.

He pushes out a breath. “First rule of life: don’t look down,” he says.

As he begins lowering himself, Abby tells me her phone’s going off.

She presses a hand to one ear, answers her phone. “Dad? Yeah, I’m here!”

As Abby listens to her call, Conner, who's been frozen in place on the scaffold while people are scrambling down all around him, says he'll meet us down on the ground. I give him a thumbs up. "Right behind you!"

Abby begins to explain into her phone where we are when she stops and holds the phone away, brings it to her ear again. "Hello?" Again, staring at her phone: "Shit!"

Her family's okay, she tells me, and her parents are on their way to pick up her brother at a friend's house—

We hear a clang, like a bolt popping, a short metallic groan. Screams follow: in the lights of phones and cars, we see one of the wide struts of the scaffolding broken loose—maybe from the weight of everybody—and it's dangling, half-bent and sticking out like a mangled arm. People drop like dominoes all the way down.

"Conner!" I shout. Abby and I train the lights of our phones, searching the bodies moaning and stumbling back onto their feet. "Conner!"

People, shouting over and at each other, begin limping toward the sidewalk. We call down for Conner again but can't see or hear any sign of him.

We consider scaling down the scaffolding too, chance the broken strut.

"That way," Abby tells me, pointing down the bleachers to the front gate where the vice principal and gym teacher are directing crowds toward the exit.

Once we're out on the street, we scan for Conner: still nothing. I check my phone again. Signal's still weak. I try the hospital: CALL FAILED. Abby tries her parents: CALL FAILED. I imagine all the injured on their way to ERs all over the city. I want to see my mom right now. Need to know she's okay.

I'm doing all I can to stay calm. Beneath all this is the feeling nothing will ever be the same.

* * *

Crowds and police are everywhere. A police chopper circles a mile south. Down below, cars are on a crawl all the way to Skyland Boulevard where the traffic light is blinking red, out of service. We can hear the shrill staccato of a traffic cop's whistle somewhere beyond the cars.

We cross the street behind the stands and look for Conner. No sign of him anywhere. We yell for him, cross from one side of the block to the other.

"You think we left him back by the stands?" I ask and picture him lying there, injured in a bush somewhere.

"But there was no sign of anybody. It was pretty much cleared out."

We walk east toward Skyland and cross it toward our neighborhoods. I try to reach him on my phone but no luck.

Half the streetlights are blown out. Lot of the houses are dark too. Streets are dotted with flashlights of people's phones. There's a smell in the air that's part burning tire and part electrical short.

Even with the sirens coming from all directions and the garbled commands of a police officer on a loudspeaker, the crowds here—pedestrians, neighbors, people from the game—are all weirdly quiet like they're in a panicky daze, like everyone's holding their breath; edgy, waiting for something—like an aftershock, another explosion. That's when I feel Abby's hand slip into mine. Even with all that's going on, the feel of her hand, slender and firm and as cold with fear as mine, is a charge that goes through my heart. Neither of us says anything. We hold

on to each other, side by side, weaving through knots of pedestrians for a couple more blocks before we find an opening in the crowds and pick up our pace.

“It’s going to be all right, Ab,” I say. But the words do nothing; the sight and sound of that explosion’s got me too freaked out. Did a bioweapon just go off and poison the whole city? Will we find Conner?

Hundreds of people are on the move out here. As we pass Carlton Park on our right, we see the flashlights of neighbors who’ve gathered here in the dark.

“Abigail!” A block ahead, from the park side, Abby’s mom is running toward us.

Abby lets go of my hand, and we break into a run. “Oh my God,” she says, giving her mom a hug. “How’re you guys? How’s Danny?”

“He’s in the car,” her mom says. “We’re fine. Let’s get you home.” Her mom, tears in her eyes, presses her hands to her daughter’s face and hugs her again. “Are you all right?”

Across the street, in the haze and headlights, we see her father waving to us from their car.

“Dev, hop in,” her mom offers, reaching an arm toward me. “We’ll get you home.”

“It’s okay. I’m only a couple of blocks from here. I’ll be okay.”

Abby’s mom looks unsure, but then her eyes soften, and her mouth forms a tight smile.

“You be careful. Got it?”

“I do. I want to keep a lookout for Conner.” We explain about happened.

“You need us, you know where to find us,” she tells me. “Don’t hesitate, do you hear?”

I nod. “Of course, Ms. Mendes.”

“Any time. You need a place tonight? Is your mom home?”

“I can’t get ahold of her. She’s working tonight. I want to be home in case she shows up.”

Abby looks off across the street at her dad and brother in the car for a second then gives me one last hug. I want to tell her goodbye, but as they're getting ready to cross the street, Abby turns, grabs my face, and kisses me. And not on the cheek.

My heart gives a kick against the front of my chest, my breath stops. I feel her mouth for all of two seconds, but already I know it will blaze for eons in my mind.

She steps away, doesn't say a word, and I watch them move across the street. "Uhh," I hear myself saying, "bye!" but all I'm thinking about are her lips. We wave to each other, Abby and I, before she gets into the car and the whole family is waving at me as the car merges in with the slow-moving caravan along the street. And just as suddenly as the kiss, she is gone.

I walk up the block, trying to puzzle out where Conner could be. He figures shit out. He's not the lost-in-a-crowd type. Maybe he's trying to reach his dad. He and his stepmom are on location in Thailand for a film shoot. They're screenwriters. His dad also makes commercials. This is his first big project. They're supposed to be in Thailand for a month, but now, who knows.

My phone goes off. Mom!

"Dev?" Her voice is spotty from the weak signal. "How . . . doing okay? Where . . . you?"

I tell her I'm on my way home and how we saw everything. "It was insane, Mom! The whole world just lit up for a second and then this blast of heat. And all this glass exploded and frickin' sirens and shit. We found our way out, but we lost Conner!" I realize I'm breathing fast and try to slow it down. The line's scratchy and her voice comes through in spots.

“Didn’t catch all that, D,” I hear her say. “We . . . slammed here . . . will be home as soon as I can.” I hear a lot of background noise. People yelling. A voice booming over a P.A. Then she’s back on the line: “Listen, I’ve got to go, sweethea—I will be in touch.”

“Sure, Mom. I should be home in a few. Take care of yourself, all right?”

No answer. “Mom, you there?” The line’s dead.

I hurry the rest of way, anxious to reach home, which is about halfway down Hamilton. I can still hear the police sirens and, from farther south, the faint chop of helicopters. Otherwise, the street’s quiet, and except for a few people around a fender-bender near the top of the street, it’s empty. There are signs of damage, windowpanes smashed or blown in, but nothing too bad.

I walk through the gate and up the path to our door. It all looks intact. I step inside, flip the switches. The lights work! And apart from a few picture frames and a broken vase on the floor, things are in one piece. I walk the house, turning on lights and sniffing for signs of a gas leak. My nose detects nothing. The water in the tap is running too.

Now I realize how hungry and parched I am, so I gulp down a couple of glasses of water, devour two bananas and a handful of almonds. There’s a signal on my phone, so I text Conner: *You good? What happened?*

Sorry, he texts back after a minute, *after things got crazy, the cops pushed us all back*. Next text: *I waited around but never saw you guys*. We text back and forth like that, both of us surprised that we never spotted each other.

I check my laptop for more news. The internet is choppy, but I’m able to pull up dashcam and smartphone clips from Mexico City: bustling neon streets then, *bam!*, the meteor flashes open like an evil eye and the airburst turns night . . . not into day exactly, but a creepy and phantom version of day—an atomic-bomb version of day—before the light folds into dark again.

I keep watching as seconds later, a boom erupts from the phone speaker along with screams from onlookers and the shattering of glass as the camera shakes and goes dark. A Google search confirms So Cal got hit with a blast wave from “a large meteorite that exploded in the lower atmosphere.” Not only that. It was one in a *series* of hits, all in the Western Hemisphere. A weather blogger reports that meteor sightings out in the desert have been way up lately. I click to read more, but the signal jams up again.

Feeling a bit survivalist, I find the earthquake kits. From the hall closet, I dig out a flashlight, fresh batteries, and a palm-sized shortwave radio from a plastic bin jammed full of random junk.

In my room, I pop the batteries into the flashlight and the radio. The radio used to belong to my dad—well, *his* dad, in fact—and hasn’t been used in years. Not since camping trips up to Yosemite and Tahoe when I was six and seven years old.

I switch on the radio, hear paper-thin voices on waves of garble and fuzz. Searching the dial, I can’t find anything but religion and Latin jazz . . . then I hear a newscaster with a British accent: “The unprecedented events occurred between 6:20 and 7:45 p.m. Pacific Standard Time. Witnesses in Los Angeles, Mexico City, Havana, and La Paz in Bolivia reported seeing fireballs, which exploded in the lower atmosphere and sent shockwaves in all directions, shattering glass, triggering minor quakes and knocking out power in many areas. The American disaster-management agency, FEMA, predicts billions of dollars in damage and casualties in the hundreds across the Western Hemisphere. Authorities in the affected countries have mobilized local and federal operations to assess damage.” A buzzing drowns out the broadcast, and I click off the radio.

I wonder how Mom is holding up. I hope Conner's okay and wonder if his parents will cut their schedule short and come home early. And Abby: even with all the confusion of tonight, I think of her lips, the feel of her hand in mine.