**Third Place: The Fifth Sign**

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**The first sign was always her toes.** They’d start to tingle and ache, in a way that was not painfully unbearable - but hideously uncomfortable. She wouldn’t notice at first, too indulged in the little things around her, like the music in her head or the paintings smeared across her hand. But then, it would escalate gradually - slowly moving up her body and into her nerves. She knew something was wrong; something was bothering her, she felt it in the whispers of her mind and in the base of her bones. She felt it seep into the colors in her hand; emerging with the paintings as if it was there from the start.

The second sign was always her mind. It bustled around, her thoughts frantic and irregular, tripping over one another as they fought for attention, for dominance. Questions would rise one after another, struggling for an answer that was never there. The collision of thoughts sent her head spinning and gaze blurry, left her blind and vulnerable to life. It was the longest, too. It was persistent, relentless, and every other word that fits the description.

The third sign is simple. Just like an earthquake, it is quick, sudden and cannot be predicted. Just like an earthquake, it leaves behind a trail of chaos - and it would be up to her to pick up the debris. It is the sudden realization that something is undeniably wrong. That the hairs on her arms aren’t rising because its cold, that the sweat gathered on the edge of her brows doesn’t mean it is hot. It just strikes - like a fact. Like a simple equation where x= one number only. The planets orbit the sun. Mitochondria is the power root of the cell. And she’s losing it. It’s a fact.

Now, the real action starts in the fourth sign. It is her where her muscles began contracting instead of her brain. She was all blurred fists and scratchy screams. She was moving so fast; you almost couldn’t see her. A whirlwind, a tornado, a flailing pair of limbs.

One minute she was there; a living proof of existence. Another minute she was not; a trick of light. Powered by the adrenaline in her veins, all she did was leave chaos in her way.

And now darlings, we finally arrive to the fifth sign. It is nothing yet everything at the same time. It is the flow of lies pouring out of the delicate shape of her lips. It is the glassy eyes and reassuring smiles. It’s the shaky hands under the table, and bouncy knees against the chair. The questions have stopped; or blurred, she couldn’t really tell. The screaming in her head had subsided into faint background music, and was replaced by empty space. She could almost see every atom that made up life. Almost.

What is most significant about the fifth sign, you say? Well darling, it is the beginning of the end