

MOLTON by Layla H. Messner
Introduction

I looked down at my hands, and they were not my pale, freckled ones. These were the hands I had always wanted, strong with glorious olive skin. They reached out and dipped a scrap of cloth into the flame of an oil lamp. The lantern sat on a pebble-filled counter, next to a tarnished grill. Heat licked up at my wrist, and I jerked back. I dropped the burning fabric onto the grill. It fell through the slots and landed on the coals.

Whoosh. The coals caught fire.

A wave of sweltering heat came at my face. I staggered back, getting a glimpse through a small, glassless window. Vegetable garden. Rough stone wall. Single, sloping mountain in the distance.

Something terrible is about to happen. That knowing came from nowhere and everywhere, like premonitions do, and my throat constricted, thick with future tears.

The earth bounced, and I pitched forward. I grabbed onto the first thing my hand touched.

Heat seared into my right palm. The pain brought my attention back to Mom's ordinary, Martha Stewart kitchen. Cherry wood cabinets. Canary yellow backsplash. Gas stove—front burner lit under my palm. I yanked my hand off the flame and cradled my arm to my chest.

“Rachel!” Leonardo's deep voice shouted. A chair clattered to the floor in the dining room.

I turned, bracing my back against the stove, expecting the earth to shake again. Leonardo stood in the kitchen doorway. That was impossible—he had just shouted from the dining room—but now the archway framed his tall, curly-headed form. The scars on the right side of his face stood out like a map of pain. My mouth opened, and I screamed.

Leonardo flinched and took a step backward. He collided with my parents as they tore into the room.

“Rachel, what happened?” My father grabbed the turkey-patterned dishtowel and came at me full speed.

Leonardo's gaze didn't leave my face. “Second degree burn to the palm.”

The fingers of my uninjured hand touched the cool metal of the sink. I had edged across the whole kitchen. What was I trying to get away from?

Earthquake. I opened my mouth.

“Volcano,” I gasped.

Dad jerked to a stop.

I shook my head. *No, it was an earthquake. Why would I say it was a volcano?* I opened my mouth again.

“Volcano,” I said.

Ice curled around my spine. I squeezed my fists and parted my lips once more. *Earthquake!*

“Volcano!” I shouted.

Everyone stared like I’d lost my mind. Maybe I had.

My father stood, towel extended, while my mother looked from me to my father to Leonardo, as though begging someone to lend sense to my words. I felt much the same way, but it was Leo who held my attention; he could have been a statue in his high-end suit.

I opened my mouth and screamed again. This time I didn’t...I couldn’t stop.

My father jerked into motion. He turned on the water, wrenched my hand under the icy stream, and held me still when I struggled to pull away.

“What is it, sweetie?” Mom kept asking. “Please, Rachel, tell me what’s wrong.”

Leonardo just stood there, riveted, in my kitchen doorway, while I stared into his brown eyes and screamed.

I screamed until I blacked out.