

MICHAEL GRANT

GONE

COMPLETE COLLECTION



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"This is great fiction. I love these books."—Stephen King

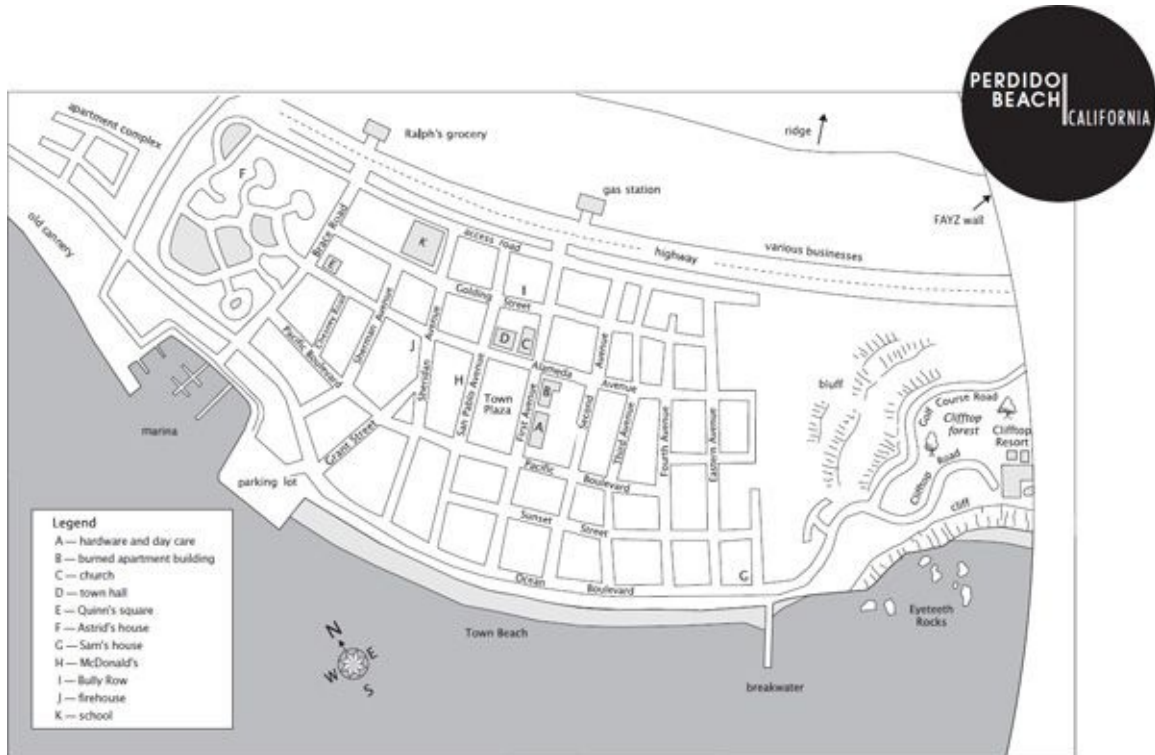


GONE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MICHAEL GRANT

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For Katherine, Jake, and Julia

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ONE

299 HOURS, 54 MINUTES

ONE MINUTE THE teacher was talking about the Civil War. And the next minute he was gone.

There.

Gone.

No “poof.” No flash of light. No explosion.

Sam Temple was sitting in third-period history class staring blankly at the blackboard, but far away in his head. In his head he was down at the beach, he and Quinn. Down at the beach with their boards, yelling, bracing for that first plunge into cold Pacific water.

For a moment he thought he had imagined it, the teacher disappearing. For a moment he thought he’d slipped into a daydream.

Sam turned to Mary Terrafino, who sat just to his left. “You saw that, right?”

Mary was staring hard at the place where the teacher had been.

“Um, where’s Mr. Trentlake?” It was Quinn Gaither, Sam’s best, maybe only, friend. Quinn sat right behind Sam. The two of them favored window seats because sometimes if you caught just the right angle, you could actually see a tiny sliver of sparkling water between the school buildings and the homes beyond.

“He must have left,” Mary said, not sounding like she believed it.

Edilio, a new kid Sam found potentially interesting, said, “No, man. Poof.” He did a thing with his fingers that was a pretty good illustration of the concept.

Kids were staring at one another, craning their necks this way and that, giggling nervously. No one was scared. No one was crying. The whole thing seemed kind of funny.

“Mr. Trentlake poofed?” said Quinn, with a suppressed giggle in his voice.

“Hey,” someone said, “where’s Josh?”

Heads turned to look.

“Was he here today?”

“Yes, he was here. He was right here next to me.” Sam recognized the voice. Bette. Bouncing Bette.

“He just, you know, disappeared,” Bette said. “Just like Mr. Trentlake.”

The door to the hallway opened. Every eye locked on it. Mr. Trentlake was going to step in, maybe with Josh, and explain how he had pulled off this magic trick, and then get back to talking in his excited, strained voice about the Civil War nobody cared about.

But it wasn’t Mr. Trentlake. It was Astrid Ellison, known as Astrid the Genius, because she was . . . well, she was a genius. Astrid was in all the AP classes the school had. In some subjects she was taking online courses from the university.

Astrid had shoulder-length blond hair, and liked to wear starched white short-sleeved blouses that never failed to catch Sam’s eye. Astrid was out of his league, Sam knew that. But there was no law against thinking about her.

“Where’s your teacher?” Astrid asked.

There was a collective shrug. “He poofed,” Quinn said, like maybe it was funny. “Isn’t he out in the hallway?” Mary asked.

Astrid shook her head. “Something weird is happening. My math study group . . . there were just three of us, plus the teacher. They all just disappeared.”

“What?” Sam said.

Astrid looked right at him. He couldn’t look away like he normally would, because her gaze wasn’t challenging, skeptical like it usually was: it was scared. Her normally sharp, discerning blue eyes were wide, with way too much white showing. “They’re gone. They all just . . . disappeared.”

“What about your teacher?” Edilio said.

“She’s gone, too,” Astrid said.

“Gone?”

“Poof,” Quinn said, not giggling so much now, starting to think maybe it wasn’t a joke after all.

Sam noticed a sound. More than one, really. Distant car alarms, coming from town. He stood up, feeling self-conscious, like it wasn’t really his place to do so, and walked on stiff legs to the door. Astrid moved away so he could step past her. He could smell her shampoo as he went by.

Sam looked left, down toward room 211, the room where Astrid’s math wonks met. The next door down, 213, a kid stuck out his head. He had a half-scared, half-giddy expression, like someone buckling into a roller coaster.

The other direction, down at 207, kids were laughing too loud. Freaky loud. Fifth graders. Across the hall, room 208, three sixth graders suddenly burst out into the hallway and stopped dead. They stared at Sam, like he might yell at them.

Perdido Beach School was a small-town school, with everyone from kindergarten to ninth grade all in one building, elementary and middle school together. High school was an hour’s drive away in San Luis.

Sam walked toward Astrid’s classroom. She and Quinn were right behind him.

The classroom was empty. Desk chairs, the teacher’s chair, all empty. Math books lay open on three of the desks. Notebooks, too. The computers, a row of six aged Macs, all showed flickering blank screens.

On the chalkboard you could quite clearly see “Polyn.”

“She was writing the word ‘polynomial,’” Astrid said in a church-voice whisper.

“Yeah, I was going to guess that,” Sam said dryly.

“I had a polynomial once,” Quinn said. “My doctor removed it.”

Astrid ignored the weak attempt at humor. “She disappeared in the middle of writing the ‘o.’ I was looking right at her.”

Sam made a slight motion, pointing. A piece of chalk lay on the floor, right where it would have fallen if someone were writing the word “polynomial”—whatever that meant—and had disappeared before rounding off the “o.”

“This is not normal,” Quinn said. Quinn was taller than Sam, stronger than Sam, at least as good a surfer. But Quinn, with his half-crazy half-smile and tendency to dress in what could only be called a costume—today it was baggy shorts, Army-surplus desert boots, a pink golf shirt, and a gray fedora he’d found in his grandfather’s attic—put out a weird-guy vibe that alienated some and scared others. Quinn was his own clique, which was maybe why he and Sam clicked.

Sam Temple kept a lower profile. He stuck to jeans and understated T-shirts, nothing that drew attention to himself. He had spent most of his life in Perdido Beach, attending this school, and everybody knew who he was, but few people were quite sure what he was. He was a surfer who didn't hang out with surfers. He was bright, but not a brain. He was good-looking, but not so that girls thought of him as a hottie.

The one thing most kids knew about Sam Temple was that he was School Bus Sam. He'd earned the nickname when he was in seventh grade. The class had been on the way to a field trip when the bus driver had suffered a heart attack. They'd been driving down Highway 1. Sam had pulled the man out of his seat, steered the bus onto the shoulder of the road, brought it safely to a stop, and calmly dialed 911 on the driver's cell phone.

If he had hesitated for even a second, the bus would have plunged off a cliff and into the ocean.

His picture had been in the paper.

"The other two kids, plus the teacher, are gone. All except Astrid," Sam said. "That's definitely not normal." He tried not to trip over her name when he said it but failed. She had that effect on him.

"Yeah. Kind of quiet in here, brah," Quinn said. "Okay, I'm ready to wake up now." For once, Quinn was not kidding.

Someone screamed.

The three of them stumbled into the hall, which was now full of kids. A sixth grader named Becka was the one screaming. She was holding her cell phone. "There's no answer. There's no answer," she cried. "There's nothing."

For two seconds everyone froze. Then a rustle and a clatter, followed by the sound of dozens of fingers punching dozens of keypads.

"It's not doing anything."

"My mom would be home, she would answer. It's not even ringing."

"Oh, my God: there's no internet, either. I have a signal, but there's nothing."

"I have three bars."

"Me too, but it's not there."

Someone started wailing, a creepy, flesh-crawly sound. Everybody talked at once, the chatter escalating to yelling.

"Try 911," a scared voice demanded.

"Who do you think I called, numbnuts?"

"There's no 911?"

"There's nothing. I've gone through half my speed dials, and there's not anything."

The hall was as full of kids as it would have been during a class change. But people weren't rushing to their next class, or playing around, or spinning the locks on their lockers. There was no direction. People just stood there, like a herd of cattle waiting to stampede.

The alarm bell rang, as loud as an explosion. People flinched, like they'd never heard it before.

"What do we do?" more than one voice asked.

"There must be someone in the office," a voice cried out. "The bell went off."

"It's on a timer, moron." This from Howard. Howard was a little worm, but he was Orc's number-one toady, and Orc was a glowering thug of an eighth grader, a

mountain of fat and muscle who scared even ninth graders. No one called Howard out. Any insult to Howard was an attack on Orc.

“They have a TV in the teachers’ lounge,” Astrid said.

Sam and Astrid, with Quinn racing after them, pelted toward the lounge. They flew down the stairs, down to the bottom floor, where there were fewer classrooms, fewer kids. Sam’s hand on the door of the teachers’ lounge, they froze.

“We’re not supposed to go in there,” Astrid said.

“You care?” Quinn said.

Sam pushed the door open. The teachers had a refrigerator. It was open. A carton of Dannon blueberry yogurt was on the floor, gooey contents spilled onto the ratty carpet. The TV was on, with no picture, just static.

Sam searched for the remote. Where was the remote?

Quinn found it. He started running through the channels. Nothing and nothing and nothing.

“Cable’s out,” Sam said, aware it was kind of a stupid thing to say.

Astrid reached behind the set and unscrewed the coaxial cable. The screen flickered and the quality of the static changed a little, but as Quinn ran the channels there was still nothing and nothing and nothing.

“You can always get channel nine,” Quinn said. “Even without cable.”

Astrid said, “Teachers, some of the kids, cable, broadcast, cell phones, all gone at the same time?” She frowned, trying to work it out. Sam and Quinn waited, like she might have an answer. Like she might say, “Oh, sure, now I understand.” She was Astrid the Genius, after all. But all she said was, “It doesn’t make any sense.”

Sam lifted the receiver on the wall phone, a landline. “No dial tone. Is there a radio in here?”

There wasn’t. The door slammed open and in rushed two kids, fifth-grade boys, their faces wild, excited. “We own the school!” one yelled, and the other gave an answering hoot.

“We’re going to bust open the candy machine,” the first one announced.

“That’s maybe not a good idea,” Sam said.

“You can’t tell us what to do.” Belligerent, but not sure of himself, not sure he was right.

“You’re right, little dude. But look, how about we all try and keep it together till we figure out what’s going on?” Sam said.

“You keep it together,” the kid yelled. The other one hooted again, and off they went.

“I guess it would be wrong to ask them to bring me a Twix,” Sam muttered.

“Fifteen,” Astrid said.

“No, man, they were, like, ten,” Quinn said.

“Not them. The kids in my class. Jink and Michael. They were both math whizzes, better than me, but they had LDs—learning disabilities, dyslexia—that kept them back. They were both a little older. I was the only fourteen-year-old.”

“I think maybe Josh was fifteen, in our class,” Sam said.

“So?”

“So he was fifteen, Quinn. He just . . . just disappeared. Blink and he was gone.”

“No way,” Quinn said, shaking his head. “Every adult and older kid in the whole

school just disappears? That makes no sense.”

“It’s not just the school,” Astrid said.

“What?” Quinn snapped at her.

“The phones and the TV?” Astrid said.

“No, no, no, no, no,” Quinn said. He was shaking his head, half smiling, like he’d been told a bad joke.

“My mom,” Sam said.

“Man, stop this,” Quinn said. “All right? It’s not funny.”

For the first time Sam felt the edge of panic, like a tingling at the base of his spine. His heart was thumping in his chest, laboring as if he’d been running.

Sam swallowed hard. He sucked at the air, unable to take more than shallow breaths. He looked at his friend’s face. He’d never seen Quinn so scared. Quinn’s eyes were behind shades, but his mouth quivered, and a pink stain was creeping up his neck. Astrid was still calm, though, frowning, concentrating, trying to make sense of it all.

“We have to check it out,” Sam said.

Quinn let loose a sort of sobbing breath. He was already moving, turning away. Sam grabbed his shoulder.

“Get off me, brah,” Quinn snapped. “I have to go home. I have to see.”

“We all have to go see,” Sam said. “But let’s go together.”

Quinn started to pull away, but Sam tightened his grip. “Quinn. Together. Come on, man, it’s like a wipeout, you know? You get launched, what do you do?”

“You try not to get worked up,” Quinn muttered.

“That’s right. You keep your head straight through the spin cycle. Right? Then swim toward daylight.”

“Surfing metaphor?” Astrid asked.

Quinn stopped resisting. He let go of a shuddering breath. “Okay, yeah. You’re right. Together. But my house first. This is messed up. This is so messed up.”

“Astrid?” Sam asked, not sure of her, not sure at all if she wanted to go with him and Quinn. It felt presumptuous to ask her, and wrong not to ask.

She looked at Sam, looked like she was hoping to find something in his face. Sam suddenly realized that Astrid the Genius didn’t know what to do, or where to go, any better than he did. That seemed impossible.

From the hallway they heard a rising cacophony of voices. Loud, scared, some babbling, as if it would be okay as long as they didn’t stop talking. Some voices were just wild.

It wasn’t a good sound. It was frightening all by itself, that sound.

“Come with us, Astrid, okay?” Sam said. “We’ll be safer together.”

Astrid flinched at the word “safer.” But she nodded.

This school was dangerous now. Scared people did scary things sometimes, even kids. Sam knew that from personal experience. Fear could be dangerous. Fear could get people hurt. And there was nothing but fear running crazy through the school.

Life in Perdido Beach had changed. Something big and terrible had happened.

Sam hoped he was not the cause.

TWO

298 HOURS, 38 MINUTES

KIDS Poured out of the school, alone or in small groups. Some of the girls walked in threes, hugging each other, tears streaming down their faces. Some boys walked hunched over, cringing as if the sky might fall on them, not hugging anyone. A lot of them were crying, too.

Sam flashed on news videos he'd seen of school shootings. It had that kind of feel to it. Kids were bewildered, scared, hysterical, or hiding hysteria beneath laughter and bold displays of rowdiness.

Brothers and sisters were together. Friends were together. Some of the really little kids, the kindergarteners, the first graders, were wandering on the grounds, not really going anywhere. They weren't old enough to know their way home.

Preschoolers in Perdido Beach mostly went to Barbara's Day Care, a downtown building decorated with faded appliqués of cartoon characters. It was next to the Ace hardware store and across the plaza from the McDonald's.

Sam wondered if they were okay, the littles down at Barbara's. Probably. Not his responsibility. But he had to say something.

"What about all these little kids?" Sam said. "They'll wander into the street and get run over."

Quinn stopped and stared. Not at the little kids, but down the street. "You see any cars moving?"

The stoplight changed from red to green. There were no cars waiting to go. The sound of car alarms was louder now, maybe three or four different alarms. Maybe more.

"First we see about our parents," Astrid said. "It's not like there aren't any adults anywhere." She didn't seem sure of that, so she amended it. "I mean, it's unlikely there are no adults."

"Yeah," Sam agreed. "There must be adults. Right?"

"My mom will most likely either be home or playing tennis," Astrid said. "Unless she has an appointment or something. My mom or dad will have my little brother. My dad's at work. He works at PBNP."

PBNP was Perdido Beach Nuclear Power. The power plant was just ten miles from the school. No one in the town thought about it much anymore, but a long time ago, in the nineties, there had been an accident. A freak accident, they called it. A once-in-a-million-years coincidence. Nothing to worry about.

People said that's why Perdido Beach was still a small town, why it hadn't ever gotten really big like Santa Barbara down the coast. The nickname for Perdido Beach was Fallout Alley. Not very many people wanted to move to a place called Fallout Alley, even though all the radioactive fallout had been cleaned up.

The three of them, with Quinn a few steps ahead, walking fast on his long legs, headed down Sheridan Avenue and turned right on Alameda.

At the corner of Sheridan Avenue and Alameda Avenue was a car with the engine running. The car had smashed into a parked SUV, a Toyota. The Toyota's alarm came

and went, screeching one minute, then falling silent.

The air bags in the Toyota had deployed: limp, deflated white balloons drooped from the steering wheel and the dashboard.

No one was in the SUV. Steam came from beneath the crumpled hood.

Sam noticed something, but he didn't want to say it out loud.

Astrid said it: "The doors are still locked. See the knobs? If anyone had been inside and gotten out, the doors would be unlocked."

"Someone was driving and blinked out," Quinn said. He wasn't saying it like it was supposed to be funny. Funny was over.

Quinn's house was just about two blocks down Alameda. Quinn was trying to maintain, trying to stay nonchalant. Trying to keep acting like cool Quinn. But all of a sudden, Quinn started running.

Sam and Astrid ran too, but Quinn was faster. His hat fell off his head. Sam bent and scooped it up.

By the time they caught up, Quinn had thrown open his front door and was inside. Sam and Astrid went as far as the kitchen and stopped.

"Mom. Dad. Mom. Hey!"

Quinn was upstairs, yelling. His voice got louder each time he yelled. Louder and faster, and the sob was clearer, harder for Sam and Astrid to pretend not to hear.

Quinn came pelting down the stairs, still yelling for his family, getting only silence in return.

He still had his shades on, so Sam couldn't see his friend's eyes. But tears were running down Quinn's cheeks, and tears were in his ragged voice, and Sam could practically feel the lump in Quinn's throat because the same lump was in his own throat. He didn't know what to do to help.

Sam set Quinn's fedora down on the counter.

Quinn stopped in the kitchen. He was breathing hard. "She's not here, man. She's not here. The phones are dead. Did she leave a note or anything? Do you see a note? Look for a note."

Astrid flicked a light switch. "The power is still on."

"What if they're dead?" Quinn asked. "This can't be happening. This is just some kind of nightmare or something. This . . . this isn't even possible." Quinn picked up the phone, punched the talk button, and listened. He punched the button again and put the phone to his ear again, then dialed, stabbing at buttons with his index finger and babbling the whole time.

Finally, he put the phone down and stared at it. Stared at the phone like he expected it to start ringing any second.

Sam was desperate to get to his own house. Desperate and afraid, wanting to know and dreading knowing. But he couldn't rush Quinn. If he made his friend leave the house now, it would be like telling Quinn to give up, that his parents were gone.

"I had a fight with my dad last night," Quinn said.

"Don't start thinking that way," Astrid said. "One thing we know: *you* didn't cause this. None of us caused this."

She put her hand on Quinn's shoulder, and it was as if that was the signal for him to finally fall apart. He sobbed openly, pulled his shades off, and dropped them on the tile floor.

“It’s going to be okay,” Astrid said. She sounded like she was trying to convince Quinn, but also herself.

“Yeah,” Sam said, not believing it. “Of course it is. This is just some . . .” He couldn’t think of how to finish the sentence.

“Maybe it was God,” Quinn said, looking up, suddenly hopeful. His eyes were red and he stared with sudden, manic energy. “It was God.”

“Maybe,” Sam said.

“What else could it be, right? S-so—so—so—” Quinn caught himself, choked down the panicked stutter. “So it’ll be okay.” The thought of some explanation, any explanation, no matter how weak, seemed to help. “Duh, of course it will be okay. It’ll totally be okay.”

“Astrid’s house next,” Sam said. “She’s closest.”

“You know where I live?” Astrid asked.

This would not be a good time to admit that he had followed her home once, intending to try to talk to her, maybe ask her to go to a movie, but had lost his nerve. Sam shrugged. “I probably saw you sometime.”

It was a ten-minute walk to Astrid’s home, a two-story, kind-of-new house with a pool in the back. Astrid wasn’t rich, but her house was much nicer than Sam’s. It reminded Sam of the house he used to live in before his stepfather left. His stepfather hadn’t been rich, either, but he’d had a good job.

Sam felt weird being in Astrid’s home. Everything in it seemed nice and a little fancy. But everything was put away. There was nothing out that could be broken. The tables had little plastic cushions on the corners. The electrical sockets had childproof covers. In the kitchen the knives were in a glass-front cupboard with a childproof lock on the handle. There were kid-proof knobs on the stove.

Astrid noticed him noticing. “It’s not for me,” she said snippily. “It’s for Little Pete.”

“I know. He’s . . .” He didn’t know the right word.

“He’s autistic,” Astrid said, very breezy, like it was no big thing. “Well, no one here,” she announced. Her tone said she’d expected it, and it was fine.

“Where’s your brother?” Sam asked.

Astrid yelled then, something he hadn’t known she could do. “I don’t know, all right? I don’t know where he is.” She covered her mouth with one hand.

“Call to him,” Quinn suggested in a strange, carefully enunciated, formal voice. He was embarrassed by his freak-out. But at the same time, he wasn’t quite done freaking out.

“Call to him? He won’t answer,” Astrid said through gritted teeth. “He’s autistic. Severely. He doesn’t . . . he doesn’t relate. He won’t answer, all right? I can yell his name all day.”

“It’s okay, Astrid. We’re going to make sure,” Sam said. “If he’s here, we’ll find him.”

Astrid nodded and fought back tears.

They searched the house inch by inch. Under the beds. In the closets.

They went across the street to the home of a lady who sometimes took care of Little Pete. There was no one home there, either. They searched every room. Sam felt like a burglar.

“He must be with my mom, or maybe my dad took him to the plant with him. He does that when there’s no one else to babysit.” Sam heard desperation in her voice.

Maybe half an hour had passed since the sudden disappearance. Quinn was still weird. Astrid seemed about to fall apart. It wasn’t even lunchtime but already Sam was wondering about night. The days were short, it was November 10, almost Thanksgiving. Short days, long nights.

“Let’s keep moving,” Sam said. “Don’t worry about Little Pete. We’ll find him.”

“Is that meant to be a pro forma reassurance or a specific commitment?” Astrid asked.

“Sorry?”

“No, I’m sorry. I meant, you’ll help me find Petey?” Astrid asked.

“Sure.” Sam wanted to add that he would help her anywhere, anytime, forever, but that was just his own fear talking, making him want to babble. Instead, he started toward his own house, knowing now beyond doubt what he would find, but needing to check, anyway, and to check something else, too. Needing to see if he was crazy.

Needing to see if it was still there.

This was all crazy. But for Sam, the crazy had started long before.

For the hundredth time Lana craned her head to look back and check on her dog.

“He’s fine. Stop fretting,” Grandpa Luke said.

“He could jump out.”

“He’s dumb, all right. But I don’t think he’ll jump out.”

“He’s not dumb. He’s a very smart dog.” Lana Arwen Lazar was in the front seat of her grandfather’s battered, once-red pickup truck. Patrick, her yellow Labrador, was in the back, ears streaming in the breeze, tongue hanging out.

Patrick was named for Patrick Star, the not-very-bright character on *SpongeBob*. She wanted him up front with her. Grandpa Luke had refused.

Her grandfather turned on the radio. Country music.

He was old, Grandpa Luke. Lots of kids had kind of young grandparents. In fact, Lana’s other grandparents, her Las Vegas grandparents, were much younger. But Grandpa Luke was old in that wrinkled-up-leather kind of way. His face and hands were dark brown, partly from the sun, partly because he was Chumash Indian. He wore a sweat-stained straw cowboy hat and dark sunglasses.

“What am I supposed to do the rest of the day?” Lana asked.

Grandpa Luke swerved to avoid a pothole. “Do whatever you want.”

“You don’t have a TV or a DVD or internet or anything.”

Grandpa Luke’s so-called ranch was so isolated, and the old man himself was so cheap, his one piece of technology was an ancient radio that only seemed to pick up a religious station.

“You brought some books, didn’t you? Or you can muck out the stable. Or climb up the hill.” He pointed with his chin toward the hills. “Nice views up there.”

“I saw a coyote up the hill.”

“Coyote’s harmless. Mostly. Old brother coyote’s too smart to go messing with humans.” He pronounced coyote “kie-oat.”

“I’ve been stuck here a week,” Lana said. “Isn’t that long enough? How long am I supposed to stay here? I want to go home.”

The old man didn't even glance at her. "Your dad caught you sneaking vodka out of the house for some punk."

"Tony is not a punk," Lana shot back.

Grandpa Luke turned the radio off and switched to his lecturing voice. "A boy who uses a girl that way, gets her in the middle of his mess, that's a punk."

"If I didn't get it for him, he would have tried to use a fake ID and maybe have gotten in trouble."

"No maybe about it. Fifteen-year-old boy drinking booze, he's going to find trouble. I started drinking when I was your age, fourteen. Thirty years of my life I wasted on the bottle. Sober now for thirty-one years, six months, five days, thank God above and your grandmother, rest her soul." He turned the radio back on.

"Plus, the nearest liquor store's ten miles away in Perdido Beach."

Grandpa Luke laughed. "Yeah. That helps, too."

At least he had a sense of humor.

The truck was bouncing crazily along the edge of a dry gulch that went down a hundred feet, down to more sand and sagebrush, stunted pine trees, dogwoods, and dry grasses. A few times a year, Grandpa Luke had told her, it rained, and then the water would go rushing down the gulch, sometimes in a sudden torrent.

It was hard to imagine that as she gazed blankly down the long slope.

Then, without warning, the truck veered off the road.

Lana stared at the empty seat where her grandfather had been a split second earlier. He was gone.

The truck was going straight down. Lana lurched against the seat belt.

The truck picked up speed. It slammed hard into a sapling and snapped it.

Down the truck went in a cloud of dust, bouncing so hard, Lana slammed against the headliner, her shoulders beaten against the window. Her teeth rattled. She grabbed for the wheel, but it was jerking insanely and suddenly the truck rolled over.

Over and over and over.

She was out of her seat belt, tossing around helplessly inside the cabin. The steering wheel was beating her like an agitator in a washing machine. The windshield smashed her shoulder, the gearshift was like a club across her face, the rearview mirror shattered on the back of her head.

The truck came to a stop.

Lana lay facedown, her body twisted impossibly, legs and arms everywhere. Dust choked her lungs. Her mouth was full of blood. One of her eyes was blocked, unable to see.

What she could see with her one good eye was impossible to make sense of at first. She was upside down, looking at a patch of low cactus that seemed to be growing at right angles to her.

She had to get out. She oriented as best she could and reached for the door.

Her right arm would not move.

She looked at it and screamed. Her right forearm, from elbow to wrist, no longer formed a straight line. It was twisted into an angle like a flattened "V." It was rotated so that her palm faced out. The jagged ends of broken bones threatened to poke through her flesh.

She thrashed in panic.

The pain was so terrible, her eyes rolled up in her head and she passed out. But not for long. Not long enough.

When she woke up, the pain in her arm and left leg and back and head and neck made her stomach rise. She threw up over what had been the tattered headliner of the truck.

“Help me,” she croaked. “Help. Someone help!”

But even in her agony she knew there was no one to help. They were miles from Perdido Beach, where she’d lived until a year ago when her folks moved to Las Vegas. This road led nowhere except to the ranch. Maybe once a week someone else would come down this road, a lost backpacker or the old woman who played checkers with Grandpa Luke.

“I’m going to die,” Lana said to no one.

But she wasn’t dead yet, and the pain wasn’t going away. She had to get out of this truck.

Patrick. What had happened to Patrick?

She croaked his name, but there was nothing.

The windshield was starred and crumpled, but she couldn’t kick it out with her one good leg.

The only way was the driver’s side window, which was behind her. She knew that the mere act of turning around would be excruciating.

Then, there was Patrick, poking his black nose in at her, panting, whimpering, anxious.

“Good boy,” she said.

Patrick wagged his tail.

Patrick was not some fantasy dog that suddenly learned to be smart and heroic. He did not pull Lana from the steaming wreckage. But he stayed with her as she spent an hour of hell crawling out onto the sand.

She rested with her head shaded by a sagebrush. Patrick licked blood from her face.

With her good hand Lana detailed her injuries. One eye was covered in blood from a gash in her forehead. One leg was broken, or at least twisted beyond use. Something hurt inside her lower back, down where her kidneys were. Her upper lip was numb. She spit out a bloody piece of broken tooth.

The worst by far was the horrifying mess of her right arm. She couldn’t bear to look at it. An attempt to lift it was immediately abandoned: the pain could not be endured.

She passed out again and came to much later. The sun was remorseless. Patrick lay curled beside her. And in the sky above, a half-dozen vultures, their black wings spread wide, circled, waiting.

THREE

298 HOURS, 05 MINUTES

“**THAT TRUCK,**” SAM said, pointing. “Another crash.” A FedEx truck had plowed through a hedge and slammed an elm tree in somebody’s front yard. The engine was idling.

They ran into two kids, a fourth grader and his little sister, playing a halfhearted game of catch on their front lawn. “Our mom’s not home,” the older one said. “I’m supposed to go to my piano class this afternoon. But I don’t know how to go there.”

“And I have tap dance. We’re getting our costumes for the recital,” the younger one said. “I’m going to be a ladybug.”

“You know how to get to the plaza? You know, in town?” Sam said.

“I guess so.”

“You should go there.”

“I’m not supposed to leave the house,” the little one said.

“Our grandma lives in Laguna Beach,” the fourth grader said. “She could come get us. But we can’t get her on the phone. The phone doesn’t work.”

“I know. Maybe go wait down at the plaza, right?” When the kid just stared at him, Sam said, “Hey, don’t get too upset, okay? You have any cookies or ice cream in the house?”

“I guess so.”

“Well, there’s no one telling you not to eat a cookie, is there? Your folks will show up soon, I think. But in the meantime have a cookie, then come down to the plaza.”

“That’s your solution? Have a cookie?” Astrid asked.

“No, my solution is to run down to the beach and hide out until this is all over,” Sam said. “But a cookie never hurts.”

They kept moving, Sam and Quinn and Astrid. Sam’s home was east of downtown. He and his mom shared a small, squashed-looking one-story house with a tiny, fenced backyard and no real front yard, just a sidewalk. Sam’s mother didn’t make much money working as a night nurse up at Coates Academy. Sam’s dad was out of the picture, always had been. He was a mystery in Sam’s life. And last year his stepfather had left, too.

“This is it,” Sam said. “We don’t believe in showing off with a big house and all.”

“Well, you live near Town Beach,” Astrid said, pointing to the only advantage of this house or this neighborhood.

“Yeah. Two-minute walk. Less if I cut through the yard of the house where the biker gang lives.”

“Biker gang?” Astrid said.

“Not the whole gang, really, just Killer and his girlfriend Accomplice.” Astrid frowned, and Sam said, “Sorry. Bad joke. It’s not a great neighborhood.”

Now that he was here, Sam didn’t want to go in. His mother would not be there.

And there was something in his house maybe Quinn, and especially Astrid, shouldn’t see.

He led the way up the three sun-faded, gray-painted wooden steps that creaked

when you stepped on them. The porch was narrow, and a couple of months ago someone had stolen the rocking chair his mom had put out there so she could sit and rock in the evening before she went to work. Now they just had to drag out kitchen chairs.

That was always the best time of day for them, the beginning of his mother's workday, the end of Sam's. Sam would be home from school, and his mom would be awake, having slept most of the day. She would have a cup of tea, and Sam would have a soda or maybe a juice. She would ask him how school had gone that day, and he wouldn't really tell her very much, but it was nice to think about how he could tell her if he wanted to.

Sam opened the door. It was quiet inside, except for the refrigerator. The compressor on it was old and noisy. The last time they'd talked out on the porch, feet up on the railing, his mom had wondered whether they should get the compressor fixed, or whether it would be cheaper just to get a secondhand refrigerator. And how would they get it home without a truck?

"Mom?" Sam said to the emptiness of the family room.

There was no answer.

"Maybe she's up the hill," Quinn said. "Up the hill" was the townie phrase for Coates Academy, the private boarding school. The hill was more like a mountain.

"No," Sam said. "She's gone like all the others."

The stove was on. A frying pan had burned black. There was nothing in the pan. Sam turned off the cooktop.

"This is going to be a problem all over town," he said.

Astrid said, "Yeah, stoves left on, cars running. Somebody needs to go around and make sure things are off and the little kids are with someone. And there's pills, and alcohol, and some people probably have guns."

"In this neighborhood some people have artillery," Sam said.

"It has to be God," Quinn said. "I mean, how else, right? No one else could do this. Just make all the adults disappear?"

"Everyone fifteen or over," Astrid corrected. "Fifteen isn't an adult. Trust me, I was in class with them." She wandered tentatively through the living room, like she was looking for something. "Can I use the bathroom, Sam?"

He nodded reluctantly. He was mortified to have her here. Neither Sam nor his mother was really into housekeeping. The place was more or less clean, but not like Astrid's house.

Astrid closed the bathroom door. Sam heard the sound of running water.

"What did we do?" Quinn asked. "That's what I don't get. What did we do to piss God off?"

Sam opened the refrigerator. He stared at the food there. Milk. A couple of sodas. Half of a small watermelon placed cut side down on a plate. Eggs. Apples. And lemons for his mom's tea. The usual.

"I mean, we did something to deserve this, right?" Quinn said. "God doesn't do things like this for no reason."

"I don't think it was God," Sam said.

"Dude. Had to be."

Astrid was back. "Maybe Quinn's right. There's nothing, you know, normal, that

can do this,” she said. “Is there? It doesn’t make any sense. It’s not possible and yet it happened.”

“Sometimes impossible things happen,” Sam said.

“No, they don’t,” Astrid argued. “The universe has laws. All the stuff we learn in science class. You know, like the laws of motion, or that nothing can go as fast as the speed of light. Or gravity. Impossible things don’t happen. That’s what impossible means.” Astrid bit her lip. “Sorry. It’s not really the time for me to be lecturing, is it?”

Sam hesitated. If he showed them, crossed this line, he wouldn’t be able to make them forget it. They would keep at him till he told them everything.

They would look at him differently. They would be freaked, like he was.

“I’m going to change my shirt, okay? In my room. I’ll be right back. There’s stuff to drink in the fridge. Go ahead.”

He closed the door to his room behind him.

He hated his room. The window opened onto an alley and the glass was that translucent kind you couldn’t really see out of. The room was gloomy even on a sunny day. At night it was so dark.

Sam hated the dark.

His mom made him lock up the house at night when she was at work. “You’re the man of the house now,” she would say, “but still, I’d feel better if I knew you had the door locked.”

He didn’t like it when she said that, about him being the man of the house. The man of the house now.

Now.

Maybe she didn’t really mean anything by it. But how could she not? It was eight months since his stepfather had fled their old house. Six months since Sam and his mother had moved to this shabby bungalow in this decrepit neighborhood and his mother had been forced to take the low-paying job with the lousy hours.

Two nights ago there had been a thunderstorm and the lights had gone out for a while. He’d been in total darkness, except for faint flashes of lightning that turned the familiar things in his room eerie.

He’d managed to fall asleep for a while, but a huge crack of thunder had awakened him. He’d come out of a terrifying nightmare to total darkness in an empty house.

The combination had been too much. He’d cried out for his mother. A big, tough kid like him, fourteen, almost fifteen, yelling “Mom” in the darkness. He had reached out his hand, pushing at the darkness.

And then . . . light.

It had appeared not quite all the way inside his closet. He could kind of hide it by closing the closet door. But when he’d tried to close the door all the way, the light had simply passed right through it. Like the door wasn’t even there. So the door was kind of closed, not all the way. He had hung some shirts casually over the top of the door to block most of the light, but that lame deception wasn’t going to last long. Eventually his mom would see . . . well, when she came back, she would.

He pulled the closet door open. The camouflage fell away.

It was still there.

The light was small, but piercing. And it hovered there, unmoving, unattached to anything, no strings. Not a lamp or a lightbulb, just a tiny ball of pure light.

It was impossible. It was something that could not exist. And yet there it was. The light that had simply appeared when Sam had needed it, and had not gone away.

He touched it, but not really. His fingers just went through it, feeling only a warm glow, no hotter than bathwater.

“Yes, Sam,” he whispered to himself, “still there.”

Astrid and Quinn thought today was the beginning, but Sam knew better. Normal life had started coming apart eight months ago. Then, normalcy again. And then, this light.

Fourteen years of normal for Sam. Then normal had started to slip off its track.

Today, normal had crashed and burned.

“Sam?”

It was Astrid calling from the living room. He glanced at the doorway, anxious lest she come in and see. He did his hurried best to hide the light again, and went back to his companions.

“Your mom was writing on her laptop,” Astrid said.

“Probably checking email.” But when he sat down at the table and looked at the screen, it was open to a Word document, not a browser.

It was a diary. Just three paragraphs on the page.

It happened again last night. I wish I could take this to G. But she'll think I'm crazy. I could lose my job. She'll think I'm on drugs. If I had a way to put cameras all over, I could get some proof. But I have no proof, and C's "mother" is rich and generous to CA. I'd be out the door. Even if I tell someone the whole truth, they'll just put me down as an overwrought mother.

Sooner or later, C or one of the others will do something serious. Someone will get hurt. Just like S with T.

Maybe I'll confront C. I don't think he'll confess. Would it make any difference if he knew everything?

Sam stared at the page. It hadn't been saved. Sam hunted around on the computer's desktop and found the folder labeled “Journal.” He clicked on it. It was password protected. If his mother had saved this final page, it too would have been under a password.

“CA” was easy. Coates Academy. And “G” was probably the head of the school, Grace. “S,” too, was easy: Sam. But who was “C”?

One line seemed to vibrate as he stared at it: “Just like S with T.”

Astrid was reading over his shoulder. She was trying to be subtle, but she was definitely peeking. He closed the laptop.

“Let's go.”

“Where?” Quinn asked.

“Anywhere but here,” Sam said.

FOUR

297 HOURS, 40 MINUTES

“LET’S HEAD FOR the plaza,” Sam said. He closed the door of his home behind him, locked it, and stuck the key in his jeans.

“Why?” Quinn asked.

“It’s where people will probably go,” Astrid said. “There’s nowhere else, is there? Unless they go back to the school. If anyone knows anything, or if there are any adults, that’s where they’d be.”

Perdido Beach occupied a headland southwest of the coastal highway. On the north side of the highway the hills rose sharply, dry brown and patchy green, and formed a series of ridges that ran into the sea northwest and southeast of town, limiting the town to just this space, confining it to just this bulge.

There were just over three thousand residents in Perdido Beach—far fewer now. The nearest mall was in San Luis. The nearest major shopping center was down the coast twenty miles. North, up the coast, the mountains pressed so close to the sea that there was no space for building, except for the narrow strip where the nuclear power plant sat. Beyond that was national parkland, a forest of ancient redwoods.

Perdido Beach had remained a sleepy little town of straight, tree-lined streets and mostly older, Spanish-style stucco bungalows with sloped orange tile roofs or old-style flat roofs. Most people had a lawn they kept well-trimmed and green. Most people had a fenced backyard. In the tiny downtown, ringing the plaza, there were palm trees and plenty of angled parking spaces.

Perdido Beach had a resort hotel south of town, and Coates Academy up in the hills, and the power plant, but aside from that, only a smattering of businesses: the Ace hardware, the McDonald’s, a coffee shop called Bean There, a Subway sandwich shop, a couple of convenience stores, one grocery store, and a Chevron station on the highway.

The closer Sam and Astrid and Quinn got, the more kids they encountered walking toward the plaza. It was like somehow all the kids in town had figured out that they wanted to be together. Strength in numbers. Or maybe it was just the crushing loneliness of homes that were suddenly not homey anymore.

Half a block away, Sam smelled smoke and saw kids running.

The plaza was a small open space, a sort of park with patches of grass and a fountain in the middle that almost never worked. There were benches and brick sidewalks and trash cans. At the top of the square the modest town hall and a church sat side by side. Stores ringed the plaza, some of them closed up forever. Above some of the stores were apartments. Smoke was pouring from a second-story window of an apartment above an out-of-business flower shop and a seedy insurance agency. As Sam came to a panting stop, a jet of orange flame burst from a high window.

Several dozen kids were standing, watching. A crowd that struck Sam as very strange, until he realized why it was strange: there were no adults, just kids.

“Is anyone in there?” Astrid called out. No one answered.

“It could spread,” Sam said.

“There’s no 911,” someone pointed out.

“If it spreads, it could burn down half the town.”

“You see a fireman anywhere?” A helpless shrug.

The day care shared a wall with the hardware store, and both were only a narrow alley away from the burning building. Sam figured they had time to get the kids out of the day care if they acted fast, but the hardware store was something they could not afford to lose.

There had to be forty kids just standing there gawking. No one seemed about to start doing anything.

“Great,” Sam said. He grabbed two kids he sort of knew. “You guys, go to the day care. Tell them to get the littles out of there.”

The kids stared at him without moving.

“Now. Go. Do it!” he said, and they took off running.

Sam pointed at two other kids. “You and you. Go into the hardware store, get the longest hose you can find. Get a spray nozzle, too. I think there’s a spigot in that alley. Start spraying water on the side of the hardware store and up on the roof.”

These two also stared blankly. “Dudes: Not tomorrow. Now. Now. Go! Quinn? You better go with them. We want to wet down the hardware—that’s where the wind will take the fire next.”

Quinn hesitated.

People were not getting this. How could they not see that they had to do something, not just stand around?

Sam pushed to the front of the crowd and in a loud voice said, “Hey, listen up, this isn’t the Disney Channel. We can’t just watch this happen. There are no adults. There’s no fire department. We are the fire department.”

Edilio was there. He said, “Sam’s right. What do you need, Sam? I’m with you.”

“Okay. Quinn? The hoses from the hardware store. Edilio? Let’s get the big hoses from the fire station, hook ’em up to the hydrant.”

“They’ll be heavy. I’ll need some strong guys.”

“You, you, you, you.” Sam grabbed each person’s shoulder, shaking each one, pushing them into motion. “Come on. You. You. Let’s go!”

And then came the wailing.

Sam froze.

“There’s someone in there,” a girl moaned.

“Quiet,” Sam hissed, and everyone fell silent, listening to the roar and crackle of the fire, the distant car alarms, and then, a cry: “Mommy.”

Again. “Mommy.”

Someone mocked the voice in falsetto. “Mommy, I’m scared.”

It was Orc, actually finding the situation funny. Kids drew away from him.

“What?” he demanded.

Howard, never far away from Orc, sneered. “Don’t worry, School Bus Sam will save us all, won’t you, Sam?”

“Edilio. Go,” Sam said quietly. “Bring everything you can.”

“Man, you can’t go up in there,” Edilio said. “They’ll have air tanks and stuff at the fire station. Wait, I’ll bring it all.” He was already running, shepherding his crew of strong kids ahead of him.

“Hey, up there,” Sam yelled. “Kid. Can you get to the door or the window?”

He stared up, craning his neck. There were six windows on the front of the building upstairs, one in the alley. The far left window was where the fire was, but now smoke was drifting out of the second window, too. The fire was spreading.

“Mommy!” the voice cried. It was a clear voice, not choking from the smoke. Not yet.

“If you’re going in there, wrap this around your face.” Somehow Astrid had come up with a wet cloth, borrowed from someone and soaked.

“Did I say I was going in there?” Sam asked.

“Don’t get hurt,” Astrid said.

“Good advice,” Sam said dryly, and wrapped the wet fabric around his head, over his mouth and nose.

She grabbed his arm. “Look, Sam, it’s not fire that kills people, it’s smoke. If you get too much smoke, your lungs will swell up, they’ll fill with fluid.”

“How much is too much?” he asked, his voice muffled by the cloth.

Astrid smiled. “I don’t know everything, Sam.”

Sam wanted to take her hand. He was scared. He needed someone to lend him some courage. He wanted to take her hand. But this wasn’t the time. So he managed a shaky smile and said, “Here goes.”

“Go for it, Sam,” a voice yelled in encouragement. There was a ragged chorus of cheers from the crowd.

The entrance to the building was unlocked. Inside were mailboxes, a back door to the flower shop, a dark, narrow stairway heading up.

Sam almost made it to the top of the stairs before he ran into an opaque wall of swirling smoke. The wet cloth did nothing. One breath and he was on his knees, choking and gagging. Tears filled his stinging eyes.

He crouched low and found more air. “Kid, can you hear me?” he rasped. “Yell, I need to hear you.”

The “Mommy” was faint this time, from down the hall to the left, halfway to the other side of the building. Maybe the kid would jump out the window into someone’s arms, Sam told himself. It would be stupid to get himself killed if the kid could just jump.

The stink of the smoke was intolerable, awful, everywhere. It had a sourness to it, like smoke plus curdled milk.

Sam stayed on his knees and crawled down the hallway. It was strange. Eerie. The ratty hall runner below him seemed so normal: faded Oriental pattern, frayed edges, a few crumbs, and a dead roach. An overhead lightbulb was on, filtering pale light down through the ominous gray.

The smoke was swirling slowly lower, pressing down on him, forcing him lower and lower to find air.

There had to be six or seven apartments. No way to know which was the right one, the kid wasn’t yelling anymore. But the apartment on fire was probably the one just to his right. Smoke was shooting out from below that door, thick, fast, and furious as a mountain stream. He had seconds, not minutes.

He rolled onto his back. The smoke pouring from under the door was like a waterfall in reverse, falling upward in a cascade. He kicked at the door, but it was no

good. The lock was higher up; all his kick did was rattle the door. To break it open he would have to stand up, straight into that killing smoke.

He was scared. And he was mad, too. Where were the people who were supposed to do this? Where were the adults? Why was this up to him? He was just a kid. And why hadn't anyone else been crazy enough, stupid enough to rush into a burning building?

He was mad at all of them and, if Quinn was right and this was something God had done, then he was mad at God, too.

But if Sam had done this . . . if Sam had made all this happen . . . then there was no one to be mad at but himself.

He took in all the breath he could manage, jumped to his feet, and slammed against the door all in one frantic motion.

Nothing.

And slammed again.

Nothing.

And again, and he had to breathe now, he had to, but the smoke was everywhere, in his nose, his eyes, blinding him. Again and the door opened and he fell in and hit the floor, facedown.

The smoke trapped in the room erupted into the hallway, exploded out like a lion escaping its cage. For a few seconds there was a layer of breathable air at floor level and Sam took in a breath. He had to fight to keep from coughing it back out. If he did that, he was going to die, he knew it.

And for just a second it was partly clear in the apartment. Like a break in the clouds that gives you a little tease of clear blue sky before drawing the dark curtain once more.

The kid was on the floor, gagging, coughing, just a little kid, a girl, maybe five at most.

"I'm here," Sam said in his strangled voice.

He must have looked terrifying. A big shape wreathed in smoke, face covered, black soot in his hair, smearing his skin.

He must have looked like a monster. That was the only explanation. Because the little girl, the terrified, panicky little girl, raised both of her hands, palms out, and from those chubby little hands came a blast, an explosion, jets of pure flame.

Flame. Shooting out of her tiny hands.

Flame!

Aimed at him.

The blast narrowly missed Sam. It passed his head with a whoosh and hit the wall behind him. It was like napalm, jellied gasoline, liquid fire that stuck to the wall where it hit and burned with mad intensity.

For a second he could only stare, frozen in amazement.

Insane.

Impossible.

The little girl cried out in terror and raised her hands again. This time she wouldn't miss.

This time she would kill him.

Not thinking, just reacting, Sam extended his arm, palm out. There was a flash of

light, bright as an exploding star.

The kid fell on her back.

Sam crawled to her, shaking, stomach clenched, wanting to scream, thinking, no, no, no, no.

He scooped the kid into his arms, afraid she would wake up, and afraid that she wouldn't. He stood up.

The wall to his right fell in with a sound like ripping cardboard. Plaster was falling away, revealing the wall's structure, the lathe boards and two-by-fours. The fire was inside the wall.

A blast of heat, like opening an oven, staggered Sam. Astrid had said it wasn't the fire that killed you. Well, she hadn't seen this fire, or guessed that a little kid could shoot flame from her hands.

Sam held the child in his arms. Fire to his back and to his right, crisping his eyelashes, baking his flesh.

A window straight ahead.

He stumbled forward. He dropped the kid like a sack of dirt and slammed the window up with both hands. Smoke roiled around him, the fire chasing it toward this fresh source of oxygen.

Sam felt in the gloom for the child and found her. He lifted her, and there, miraculously, was a pair of hands waiting to take the kid. Hands reaching through the smoke, seeming almost supernatural.

Sam collapsed against the sill, half hanging out of the window, and someone grabbed him, and dragged and slid him down the aluminum ladder. His head smacked the rungs and he did not mind one tiny bit because out here was light and air and through squinting, weeping eyes he could see the blue sky.

Edilio and a kid named Joel manhandled Sam down to the sidewalk.

Someone sprayed him with a hose. Did they think he was on fire?

Was he on fire?

He opened his mouth and gulped greedily at the cold water. It washed over his face.

But he couldn't hold on to consciousness. He floated away. Floated on his back on gentle surf.

His mother was there. She was sitting on the water just beside him. Her chin rested on her knees. She wasn't looking at him.

"What?" he said to her.

"It smelled like fried chicken," she said.

"What?" he said.

His mother reached over and slapped him hard across the face.

His eyes flew open.

"Sorry," Astrid said. "I needed to wake you up."

She knelt beside him and placed something against his mouth. A plastic mask. Oxygen.

He coughed, and breathed. He pulled the mask away and threw up, right on the sidewalk, doubled over like a drunk in an alleyway.

Astrid looked away discreetly. Later he would be embarrassed. Right now he was just glad to be able to throw up.

He breathed more oxygen.

Quinn was holding the garden hose. Edilio was racing to hook one of the bigger fire hoses up to the hydrant. There was a trickle, then, as Edilio worked the long-handled wrench and opened the hydrant all the way, a gusher. The kids on the other end had to wrestle the hose like they were fighting a python. It would have been funny some other time.

Sam sat up. He still couldn't talk.

He nodded to where half a dozen kids knelt around the little firestarter. She was black, black by race and from the coating of soot. Her hair was gone on one side, burned away. On the other side she had a little girl's pigtail held with a pink scrunchy.

Sam knew from the reverential way the kids knelt there. He knew, but he had to ask, anyway. His voice was a soft croak.

Astrid shook her head. "I'm sorry, Sam," she said.

Sam nodded.

"Her parents probably had the stove on when they disappeared," Astrid said. "That's most likely what caused the fire. Or maybe a cigarette."

No, Sam thought. No, that wasn't it.

The little girl had the power. She had the power Sam had, at least something like it.

The power he had used in panic to create an impossible light.

The power he had used once and almost killed someone with.

The power he had just used again, dooming the very person he was trying so hard to save.

He was not the only one. He was not the only freak. There was—or had been—at least one other.

Somehow, that realization was not comforting.

FIVE

291 HOURS, 07 MINUTES

NIGHT CAME TO Perdido Beach.

The streetlights turned on automatically, doing little to push back the darkness, doing a lot to cast deep shadows on frightened faces.

Close to a hundred kids milled around the plaza. Everyone seemed to have a candy bar and a soda. The little store, the one that sold mostly beer and corn chips, had been looted. Sam had snagged a PayDay and a Dr Pepper. The Reese's and Twix and Snickers were all gone by the time he got there. He'd left two dollars on the counter as payment. The money was gone within seconds.

The apartment building had burned half away before the fire had run out of energy. The roof had collapsed. Half the upper floor was gone. The ground floor looked like it would survive, though the shop windows were smoke-blackened on the inside. Smoke rose now in tendrils, not billows, and the stench was everywhere.

But the hardware store and the day care had been saved.

The body of the little girl still lay on the sidewalk. Someone had put a blanket over her. Sam was grateful for that.

Sam and Quinn sat on the grass, toward the center of the plaza, near the dead fountain. Quinn rocked back and forth, hugging his knees.

Bouncing Bette came over and stood awkwardly in front of Sam. She had her little brother with her. "Sam, do you think it's safe to go to my house? We have to get something."

Sam shrugged. "Bette, I don't know any more than you do."

Bette nodded, hesitated, and walked away.

All the park benches were taken. Some little family units draped sheets over the few benches, making limp pup tents. Many kids went home to their empty houses, but others needed people around them. Some found comfort in the crowd. Some just needed to see what was going on.

Two kids Sam didn't know, probably fifth graders, came up and said, "Do you know what's going to happen?"

Sam shook his head. "No, guys, I don't."

"Well, what should we do?"

"I guess just hang out for a while, you know?"

"Hang out here, you mean?"

"Or else go to your house. Sleep in your own bed. Whatever feels right."

"We're not scared or anything."

"You're not?" Sam asked dubiously. "I'm so scared, I wet myself."

One kid grinned. "No, you didn't."

"Nah. You're right. But it's okay to be scared, man. Every single person here is scared."

It was happening a lot. Kids coming to Sam, asking him questions for which he had no answers.

He wished they would stop.

Orc and his friends dragged lawn chairs out of the hardware store and set themselves up right in the middle of what had once been Perdido Beach's busiest intersection. They were just beneath the stoplight, which continued changing from green to yellow to red.

Howard was berating some lower-ranking toady who had lit a Prest-O log and was trying to get it to grow into a bonfire. Orc's crew brought a couple of wood axe handles and wooden baseball bats out of the hardware store and tried unsuccessfully to burn them.

They also carried metal bats and small sledgehammers from the hardware store. Those they kept.

Sam didn't bring up the little girl, the way she was just lying there. If he brought it up, then it would become his job to do something. To dig a grave and bury her. To read the Bible or say words. He didn't even know her name. No one seemed to.

"I can't find him." It was Astrid, reappearing after an absence of at least an hour. She had gone to hunt for her little brother. "Petey's not here. Nobody has seen him."

Sam handed her a soda. "Here. I paid for it. Tried to, anyway."

"I don't usually drink this stuff."

"You see any 'usually' around here?" Quinn snapped.

Quinn didn't look at her. His eyes were restless, going from person to person, thing to thing, like a nervous bird, never making direct eye contact. He looked strangely naked without his shades and fedora.

Sam was worried about him. Of the two of them, it was Sam who was usually too serious.

Astrid let Quinn's rudeness slide and said, "Thanks, Sam." She drank half the can but didn't sit down. "Kids are saying it's some military thing gone wrong. Or else terrorists. Or aliens. Or God. Lots of theories. No answers."

"Do you even believe in God?" Quinn demanded. He was looking for an argument.

"Yes, I do," Astrid said. "I just don't believe in the kind of God who disappears people for no reason. God is supposed to be love. This doesn't look like love."

"It looks like the world's worst picnic," Sam said.

"I believe that's what's called gallows humor," Astrid said. Noticing Sam and Quinn's blank looks, she said, "Sorry. I have this annoying tendency to analyze what people say. You'll either get used to it or decide you can't stand me."

"I'm leaning toward the second choice," Quinn muttered.

Sam said, "What's gallows humor?"

"Gallows, as in, what they hang people from. Sometimes when people are nervous or afraid, they make jokes." Then she added, a bit ruefully, "Of course, some people, when they're nervous or afraid, turn pedantic. And if you don't know what pedantic means, here's a clue: in the dictionary, I'm the illustration they use."

Sam laughed.

A little boy no more than five years old and carrying a sad-eyed gray teddy bear came over. "Do you know where my mom is?"

"No, little man, I'm sorry," Sam said.

"Can you call her on the telephone?" His voice trembled.

"The phones don't work," Sam said.

"Nothing works," Quinn snapped. "Nothing works and we're all alone here."

“You know what I bet?” Sam asked the boy. “I’ll bet they have cookies at the day care. It’s right across the street. See?”

“I’m not supposed to cross the street.”

“It’s okay. I’ll watch while you do, okay?”

The little boy stifled a sob, then walked off toward the day care, clutching his bear.

Astrid said, “Kids come to you, Sam. They’re looking to you to do something.”

“Do what? All I can do is suggest they eat a cookie,” Sam said, with too much heat in his tone.

“Save them, Sam,” Quinn said bitterly. “Save them all.”

“They’re all scared, like us,” Astrid said. “There’s no one in charge, no one telling people what to do. They sense you’re a leader, Sam. They look to you.”

“I’m not a leader of anything. I’m as scared as they are. I’m as lost as they are.”

“You knew what to do when the apartment was burning,” Astrid said.

Sam jumped to his feet. It was just nervous energy, but the movement drew the gaze of dozens of kids nearby. All looking at him like he was going to do something. Sam felt a knot in his stomach. Even Quinn was looking at him expectantly.

Sam cursed under his breath. Then, in a voice just loud enough to carry a few feet, he said, “Look, all we have to do is hang tight. Someone is going to figure out what’s happened and come find us, okay? So everyone just chill, don’t do anything crazy, help each other out and try to be brave.”

To Sam’s amazement he heard a ripple of voices repeating what he’d said, passing it on like it was some brilliant remark.

“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself,” Astrid whispered.

“What?”

“It’s what President Roosevelt said when the whole country was scared because of the Great Depression,” Astrid explained.

“You know,” Quinn said, “the one good thing about this was that I got away from history class. Now history class is following me.”

Sam laughed. Not much, but it was a relief to hear that Quinn still had a sense of humor.

“I have to find my brother,” Astrid said.

“Where else could he be?” Sam asked.

Astrid shrugged helplessly. She looked cold in her thin blouse. Sam wished he had a jacket to offer her. “With my parents somewhere. The most likely places are where my dad works or else where my mom plays tennis. Clifftop.”

Clifftop was the resort hotel just above Sam’s favorite surfing beach. He’d never been inside or even on the grounds.

“I guess Clifftop is more likely,” Astrid said. “I hate to ask, but will you guys go with me?”

“Now?” Quinn asked, incredulous. “At night?”

Sam shrugged. “Better than sitting here, Quinn. Maybe they have TV there.”

Quinn sighed. “I hear the food’s great at Clifftop. Top-notch service.” He stuck a hand out, and Sam hauled him to his feet.

They passed through the huddled crowd. Kids would call out to Sam to ask him what was going on, ask him what they should do. And he would say things like, “Hang in. It’s going to be okay. Just enjoy the vacation, man. Enjoy your candy bars while

you can. Your parents will be back soon and take it all away.”

And kids would nod or laugh or even say “Thanks,” as if he had given them something.

He heard his name being repeated. Heard snatches of conversation. “I was on the bus that time.” Or, “Dude, he ran right into that building.” Or, “See, he said it would be okay.”

The knot in his stomach was growing more painful. It would be a relief to walk out into the night. He wanted to get away from all those frightened faces looking to him, expecting something from him.

They walked close to Orc’s intersection encampment. The lame fire was sputtering, melting the tarmac beneath the embers. A six-pack of Coors beer rested in an ice-filled cooler. One of Orc’s friends, a big baby-faced lump called Cookie, was looking green and woozy.

“Hey. Where do you guys think you’re going?” Howard demanded as they approached.

“For a walk,” Sam said.

“Two dumb surfers and a genius?”

“That’s right. We’re going to teach Astrid how to surf. You have a problem with that?”

Howard laughed and looked Sam up and down. “You think you’re the man, don’t you, Sam? School Bus Sam. Big deal. You don’t impress me.”

“That’s a shame, because I live my entire life in hopes of impressing you, Howard,” Sam said.

Howard’s face grew shrewd. “You need to bring us back something.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I don’t want Orc’s feelings to be hurt,” Howard said. “I think whatever you’re going to get, you should bring him back some.”

Orc was sprawled in a looted chair, legs spread, paying only slight attention. His never-very-focused eyes were wandering. But he grunted, “Yeah.” The moment he spoke, several of his crew discovered an interest in Sam’s group. One, a tall, skinny kid nicknamed Panda because of his dark-ringed eyes, tapped his metal bat on the blacktop, menacing.

“So you’re a big hero or something, huh?” Panda said.

“You’re wearing that line out,” Sam said.

“No, no, not Sammy, he doesn’t think he’s better than the rest of us,” Howard sneered. He did a rough parody of Sam at the fire. “You get a hose, you get the kids, do this, do that, I’m in charge here, I’m . . . Sam Sam the Surfer Man.”

“We’re going to go now,” Sam said.

“Ah ah ah,” Howard said, and pointed upward with a flourish to the spotlight. “Wait till it turns green.”

For a tense few seconds Sam considered whether he should have this fight now, or avoid it. Then the light changed and Howard laughed and waved them past.

SIX

290 HOURS, 07 MINUTES

NO ONE SPOKE for several blocks.

The streets grew emptier and darker as they joined the beach road.

“The surf sounds strange,” Quinn observed.

“Flat,” Sam agreed. He felt like eyes were following him, even though he was out of sight of the plaza.

“Fo-flat, brah,” Quinn said. “Glassy. But there’s a low-pressure front just out there. Supposed to be a long period swell. Instead it sounds like a lake.”

“Weatherman isn’t always right,” Sam said. He listened carefully. Quinn was better at reading the conditions. Something sounded like it might be strange in the rhythm, but Sam wasn’t sure.

Lights twinkled here and there, from houses off to the left, from streetlights, but it was far darker than normal. It was still early evening, barely dinnertime. Houses should have been lit up. Instead, the only lights were those on timers or those left on throughout the day. In one house, blue TV light flickered. When Sam peeked in the window he saw two kids eating chips and staring at the static.

All the little background noises, all the little sounds you barely registered—phones ringing, car engines, voices—were gone. They could hear each footstep they made. Each breath they took. When a dog erupted in frenzied barking, they all jumped.

“Who’s going to feed that dog?” Quinn wondered.

No one had an answer for that. There would be dogs and cats all over town. And there were almost certainly babies in empty homes right now, too. It was all too much. Too much to think about.

Sam peered toward the hills, squinted to shut out the lights of town. Sometimes, if they had the stadium lights of the athletic field turned on, you could see a distant twinkle of light from Coates Academy. But not tonight. Just darkness from that direction.

A part of Sam denied that his mother was gone. A part of him wanted to believe she was up there, at work, like any other night.

“The stars are still there,” Astrid said. Then she said, “Wait. No. The stars are up, but not the ones just above the horizon. I think Venus should be almost setting. It’s not there.”

The three of them stopped and stared out over the ocean. Standing still, all they heard was the odd, placid, metronomic regularity of the lapping waves.

“This sounds bizarre, but the horizon looks higher than it should be,” Astrid said.

“Did anyone watch the sun go down?” Sam asked.

No one had.

“Let’s keep moving,” Sam said. “We should have brought bikes or skateboards.”

“Why not a car?” Quinn asked.

“You know how to drive?” Sam asked.

“I’ve seen it done.”

“I’ve seen heart surgery performed on TV, too,” Astrid said. “That doesn’t mean

I'm going to try it."

Quinn said, "You watch heart surgery on TV? That explains a lot, Astrid."

The road wound away from the shore and up to Clifftop. The resort's understated neon sign, nestled roadside between carefully trimmed hedges, was lit. The grand front entrance was lit up like it was Christmas—the resort had strung strands of twinkling white lights early.

A car sat empty, one door open, trunk popped up, suitcases on a bellman's trolley nearby.

When they approached, the automatic doors of the hotel swung wide.

The lobby was open and airy, with a polished blond wood counter that curved for about thirty feet, a bright tile floor, gleaming brass accents leading toward a more shadowy bar. At the bank of elevators, one stood open, waiting.

"I don't see anyone," Quinn said in a subdued whisper.

"No," Sam agreed. There was a TV in the bar with nothing on. No one at the front desk or the concierge desk, no one in the lobby, no one in the bar. Their footsteps echoed on the tile.

"The tennis court is this way," Astrid said, and led them away. "That's where my mom and Little Pete would have been."

The tennis courts were lit up. No sound of balls being whacked by rackets. No sound at all.

They all saw it at the same time.

Cutting straight across the farthest tennis court, slicing through well-tended landscaping, cutting through the swimming pool, was a barrier.

A wall.

It shimmered ever so slightly.

It did not look opaque, but whatever light came through, it was milky, indistinct, and no brighter than their surroundings. The wall was slightly reflective, like looking into a frosted-glass window. It made no sound. It did not vibrate. It seemed almost to swallow sound.

It could be just a membrane, Sam thought. Just a millimeter thick. Something he could poke with a finger and pop like a balloon. It might even be nothing more than an illusion. But his instinct, his fear, the feeling in the pit of his stomach, told him he was looking at a wall. No illusion, no curtain, but a wall.

The barrier went up and up, but faded against the background of the night sky. It extended as far as they could see to the left and right. No stars shone through it, but eventually, farther up, the stars reappeared.

"What is it?" Quinn asked. There was awe in his tone.

Astrid just shook her head.

"What is it?" Quinn repeated more urgently.

They approached the barrier with slow steps, ready to run away, but needing to get closer.

They entered the chain-link enclosure and crossed the tennis court. The barrier cut right through the net. The net started from a vertical pole and ended in the shimmering blankness of the barrier.

Sam pulled on the net. It stayed firmly in place. No matter how much he yanked, no more net came through the barrier.

“Careful,” Astrid whispered.

Quinn dropped back, letting Sam take the lead. “She’s right, brah, careful.”

Sam was just a few feet away from the barrier, hand outstretched. He hesitated. He spotted a green tennis ball on the ground and picked it up.

He tossed it toward the barrier.

It bounced back.

He caught the ball on the bounce and looked at it. No marks. No sign it had done anything but bounce.

He took the last three steps and, this time, without hesitating, pressed his fingertips against the barrier.

“Aaah.” He yanked his hand away and looked at it.

“What?” Quinn yelled.

“It burned. Oh, man. That hurt.” Sam shook his hand to throw off the pain.

“Let me look at it,” Astrid said.

Sam extended his hand. “It feels okay now.”

“I don’t see any burn mark,” Astrid said, turning his hand with hers.

“No,” Sam agreed. “But, trust me, you don’t want to touch that thing.”

Even now, even with all that was happening, he registered her touch like a very different sort of electric shock. Her hand was cold. He liked that.

Quinn picked up a chair that sat on one of the sidelines. It was a substantial wrought-iron chair. Quinn lifted it high, held it in front of him, and slammed the legs into the barrier.

The barrier did not yield.

Quinn hit it again, even harder, hard enough that the recoil spun him back.

The barrier did not yield.

Suddenly Quinn was screaming, cursing, slamming the chair wildly again and again against the barrier.

Sam couldn’t step close enough to stop him without getting hit. He placed a restraining hand on Astrid’s arm. “Let him get it out.”

Again and again Quinn hurled the chair against the barrier. It left no mark.

Finally Quinn dropped the chair, sat down on the tarmac, put his head in his hands, and howled.

The lights were burning bright inside the McDonald’s when Albert Hillsborough walked in. A smoke alarm was blaring. A separate beep, beep, beep called urgently for attention between the louder, angrier bleats of the alarm.

Kids had gone behind the counter and taken the cookies and Danish pastries from the display case. A box of Happy Meal toys, tie-ins to a movie Albert hadn’t seen yet, was open, the toys scattered. There were no fries in the bin but plenty were on the floor.

Feeling self-conscious, Albert walked around to the kitchen door and tried to open it. It was locked. He went back and hopped the counter.

It felt illegal somehow, being on the far side of the counter.

A basket of burned, black fries sat resting in the hot oil. Albert found a towel, grabbed the basket handle, and lifted it out of the oil. He hooked it in place so that the oil drained properly. The fries had been cooking since that morning.

“I guess those are about done,” Albert said to himself.

The fry timer continued to beep. It took him a second, but he found the right button and pushed it. That killed one noise.

Three tiny, black cookies were on the grill. Hamburgers that, like the fries, were about ten hours past done.

Albert found a spatula, scooped up the burgers, and tossed them into the trash. The burgers had long since stopped smoking, but no one had been around to reset the smoke alarm. It took Albert a few minutes to figure out how to climb up without landing on the searing hot grill so he could push the reset.

The silence was a physical relief.

“That’s better.” Albert climbed down. He wondered if he should turn off the fryers and the grill. That would be the safest thing to do. Turn everything off and go outside. Out into the dark of the plaza, where kids were gathering, scared, looking for a rescue that was very late in coming. But he didn’t really know anyone out there.

Albert was fourteen, the youngest of six kids. The smallest, too. His three brothers and two sisters ranged in age from fifteen to twenty-seven. Albert had already checked his home: none of them were there. His mother’s wheelchair was empty. The couch where she would normally be lying and watching TV and eating and complaining about the pain in her back was abandoned. Her blanket was there, nothing else.

It was weird to be alone, even for a while. Weird not to have some bossy sibling telling him what to do. He couldn’t remember a time when he wasn’t being bossed around.

Now Albert walked the McDonald’s kitchen more alone than he could ever have imagined being.

He found the walk-in freezer. He yanked on the big chrome handle and the steel door opened with a gasp and a breath of cold steam.

Inside were metal racks and box upon box of clearly labeled hamburgers, big plastic bags of chicken nuggets, chicken strips, fries. A smaller number of boxes of sausage patties. But mostly, lots of burgers.

He moved on to the walk-in refrigerator, not so cold and pristine, more interesting. There were plastic-covered trays of sliced tomato, bags of shredded lettuce, big plastic tubs of Big Mac sauce and mayonnaise and ketchup, blocks and blocks of sliced yellow cheese.

He found a tiny break room festooned with posters about safety and the Heimlich maneuver, all in both English and Spanish. The dry goods were stacked against the walls of the break room: giant boxes of paper cups and boxes of waxed-paper wraps. Dull metal cylinders loaded with Coca-Cola syrup.

In the back, near the rear door, were tall, wheeled racks of buns and muffins.

Everything had a place. Everything was organized. Everything was clean, albeit with a sheen of grease.

At some point, and he hadn’t really noticed the exact moment, Albert had stopped just seeing it all as interesting, and started seeing it as inventory. He was mentally translating the separate ingredients into Big Macs, chicken sandwiches, Egg McMuffins.

Albert’s sister, Rowena, had taught him to cook. With their mom incapacitated, the kids had always had to fend for themselves. Rowena had been the unofficial cook until Albert hit his twelfth birthday, and then part of the kitchen duties had devolved to him.

He could make red beans and rice, his mother's favorite dish. He could make hot dogs. He could make French toast and bacon. He had never admitted it to Rowena, but Albert enjoyed cooking. It was a lot better than just doing the cleanup, which, unfortunately, he still had to do even though he was now responsible for the evening meal on Fridays and Sundays.

The manager had a tiny office. The door was ajar. Inside was a cramped desk, a locked safe, a phone, a computer, and a wall shelf straining under the weight of several thick operator's manuals.

He heard sound: voices, and someone banging into a straw dispenser, then apologizing. Two seventh graders were leaning on the counter, staring up at the overhead menu like they were waiting to order.

Albert hesitated, but not for long. He could do it, he told himself, almost surprised by the thought.

"Welcome to McDonald's," Albert said. "May I help you?"

"Are you open?"

"What would you like?"

The kids shrugged. "Two number-one combos?"

Albert stared at the computer console. It was a maze of color-coded buttons. That would have to wait.

"What kind of drink? I mean beverage?"

"Orange soda?"

"Coming right up," Albert said. He found burger patties in a refrigerator drawer below the grill. They made a satisfying sound as he slapped them onto the grill.

He spotted a paper hat resting on a shelf. He put it on.

While the burger patties sizzled, he opened the thick manual and searched the index for French fries.

SEVEN

289 HOURS, 45 MINUTES

LANA LAY IN the dark, staring up at the stars.

She couldn't see the vultures anymore, but they weren't far off. Several had tried to land nearby, and Patrick had scared them off. But she knew they were still out there.

She was scared. Scared of dying. Scared of never seeing her mom and dad again. Her mom and dad, who probably didn't even know she was missing. They called Grandpa Luke every night and talked to her, told her they loved her . . . and refused to let her come home.

"We want you to have a break from the city, sweetheart," her mother would say. "We want you to have some time to think and clear your head."

Lana burned with fury at her parents. Especially her mother. If she let it, the anger could burn so hot, it almost blanked out her pain.

But not quite. Not really. Not for long. The pain was her whole world now. Pain and fear.

She wondered what she looked like right now. She had never been pretty, really—her eyes, she felt, were too small, her dark hair too lank to do more with than let hang there. But now, with her face a mass of bruises, cuts, and caked-on blood, she probably looked like something from a horror movie.

Where was Grandpa Luke? She only half remembered the seconds before the crash, and the crash itself was just a blur, fractured images of space twirling around her as her body was bludgeoned.

It was confusing. Made no sense. Her grandfather had simply disappeared from the truck: one minute there, and the next not there. She had no memory of the truck door opening or closing, and why would the old man have jumped out?

Crazy.

Impossible.

She was sure of one thing: There had been no word of warning from her grandfather. In a heartbeat he was gone and she was plunging down the ravine.

Lana was desperately thirsty. The closest place she knew where she could get a drink was the ranch. It was probably no more than a mile away. If she could somehow get up to the road . . . but even in daylight, even healthy, the climb would have been nearly impossible.

She raised her throbbing head a little and twisted till she saw the truck. It was just a few feet away, wheels up, silhouetted against the stars.

Something scuttled across her neck. Patrick sat up, focused on the faint sound.

"Don't let anything get me, boy," she begged.

Patrick woofed, the way he did when he wanted to play.

"I don't have any food for you, boy," she said. "I don't know what's going to happen to us."

Patrick settled back down, head on paws.

"I guess Mom will be happy," Lana said. "I guess she'll be really happy she made me come here."

She would not have noticed the eyes glittering in the dark, except that Patrick was up all at once, bristling and growling like nothing she had ever heard before.

“What is it, boy?”

Green eyes, hovering, disembodied. Staring straight at her. The eyes blinked at a lazy speed, opened again.

Patrick was barking like crazy now, prancing back and forth.

The mountain lion roared. It was a hoarse, deep-throated, snarling sound.

Lana yelled, “Go away! Leave me alone!” Her voice was pathetic—weak, and aware of its own weakness.

Patrick ran back to Lana, then turned, finding his courage again, and faced the mountain lion.

In a flash, battle was joined, an explosion of snarling, canine and feline, deep, terrible sounds. In half a minute it was over and the mountain lion’s glittering eyes reappeared farther away. They blinked once, stared, then were gone.

Patrick came back slowly. He slouched heavily beside Lana.

“Good boy, good boy,” Lana cooed. “You scared off that old lion, didn’t you, boy? Oh, my good dog. Good boy.”

Patrick wagged his tail weakly.

“Did he hurt you, boy? Did he hurt you, my good boy?”

She ran her one usable hand over her dog. His ruff was wet, slick to the touch. It could only be blood. She probed, and Patrick whimpered in pain.

Then she felt the flow. There was a deep cut in Patrick’s neck. The blood was pumping out, surging with each heartbeat, draining the dog’s life away.

“No, no, no,” Lana cried. “You can’t die. You can’t die.”

If he died, she would be alone in the desert, unable to move. Alone.

The mountain lion would come back.

Then the vultures.

No. No. That wasn’t going to happen.

No.

The fear was too much to contain, it couldn’t be reasoned with, it couldn’t be resisted. Lana cried out in terror, “Mommy. Mommy. Mommy. I want my mom! Help me, someone help me! Mommy, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I want to go home, I want to go home.”

She sobbed and babbled, and the pain of loneliness and fear felt even greater than the agony of her battered body. It choked the air from her lungs.

She was alone. Alone with pain. And soon the mountain lion’s teeth . . .

Patrick had to live. He had to live. He was all she had.

She cuddled her dog as close as she could without her own pain obliterating consciousness. She placed her palm over his wound, pressing as hard as she dared.

She would stop the blood.

She would hold him and stop his life from escaping.

She would hold life inside him and he wouldn’t die.

But blood still drained through her fingers.

She held on and focused all her will on staying awake to hold the wound, to keep her friend alive.

“Good boy,” she whispered through parched lips.

She fought to stay awake. But thirst and hunger, pain and fear, loneliness and horror were too much for her. After a long while Lana fell asleep.

And her hand slipped from the dog's neck.

Sam, Quinn, and Astrid spent much of the night searching the hotel for Little Pete. Astrid figured out how to access the hotel's security system and make a plastic passkey that worked on all doors.

They checked each room. They did not find Astrid's brother, or anyone else.

They came to an exhausted halt in the last room. The barrier cut right through it. It was as if someone had put up a wall in the middle of the room.

"It cuts right through the TV," Quinn said. He picked up a remote control and punched the red power button. Nothing.

Astrid said, "I'd love to know what it looks like on the other side of the barrier. Did someone's half a TV just turn on over there?"

"If so, maybe they could tell me if the Lakers won," Quinn said, but no one, including him, was in the mood to laugh.

"Your brother is probably safely on the other side, Astrid," Sam said, then added, "with your mom, probably."

"I don't know that," Astrid snapped. "I have to assume that he's alone and helpless and that I'm the only one who can do anything to help him."

She crossed her arms over her chest and hugged herself tightly. Then, "I'm sorry. That sounded like I was mad at you."

"No. You just sounded mad. Not at me," Sam said. "We can't do any more tonight. It's almost midnight. I think we should go back to that big room we saw."

Astrid could only nod, and Quinn looked about ready to crash. They found the suite. It had a huge balcony that overlooked the ocean far below. To the left the barrier blocked the view. It traveled far out over the ocean, as far as they could see. It was like a wall extending out from the hotel itself, an endless wall.

The suite had a room with a king-size bed and a room with two queens, all very plush. There was a minibar fridge containing liquor, beer, soda, nuts, a Snickers, a Toblerone bar, and a few other snacks.

"Boys' room," Quinn said, then flopped onto one of the two queens, facedown. Within seconds he was asleep.

Sam and Astrid stood together for a while on the balcony, splitting the Toblerone. Neither of them said anything for a long time.

"What do you think this is?" Sam asked finally. He didn't need to explain what he meant by "this."

"Sometimes I think it's a dream," Astrid said. "It's so strange that no one has shown up. I mean, the place should be crawling with soldiers and scientists and reporters. Suddenly a wall just appears out of nowhere, most of the people in town disappear, and yet there aren't any network satellite trucks?"

Sam had already reached a grim conclusion about that. He wondered if Astrid had, too.

She had. "I don't think it's just a straight wall cutting us off from the south, you know? I think it may be a circle. It may go all the way around us. We may be cut off in every direction. In fact, since no one has come to rescue us, I think that's pretty likely."

Don't you?"

"Yeah. We're in a trap. But, why? And why disappear everyone over the age of fourteen?"

"I don't know."

Sam let the silence linger, not wanting to ask the next question on his mind, not sure he wanted the answer. Finally, "What happens when kids turn fifteen?"

Astrid turned her blue eyes on him, and he met her gaze. "When is your birthday, Sam?"

"November twenty-second," he said. "Just five days before Thanksgiving. Twelve days from now. No, just eleven days now, since it's after midnight. You?"

"Not till March."

"I like March better. Or July, or August. First time I ever wished I was younger."

So that she wouldn't keep looking at him the way she was looking at him and feeling sorry for him, he said, "You think they're all still alive somewhere?"

"Yes."

"You think that because you really think so, or because you just want them to be alive?"

"Yes," she said, and smiled. "Sam?"

"Yeah."

"I was on the school bus that day. Remember?"

"Vaguely," he said, and laughed. "My fifteen minutes of fame."

"You were the bravest, coolest person I'd ever known. Everyone thought so. You were the hero of the whole school. And then, I don't know. It was like you kind of just . . . faded."

He resented that a little. He hadn't faded. Had he? "Well, most days the bus driver doesn't have a heart attack," Sam said.

Astrid laughed. "You're one of those people, I think. You go along in your life just sort of living. And then something goes wrong and there you are. You step up and do what you have to do. Like today, the fire."

"Yeah, well, to tell you the truth, I kind of prefer the other part. The part where I just live my life."

Astrid nodded like she understood, but then she said, "That's not going to happen this time."

Sam hung his head and looked down at the lawn below. A lizard scampered across a stone walkway. Quick, slow, quick, then it disappeared. "Look, don't expect too much from me, okay?"

"Okay, Sam." She said it, but not like she meant it. "Tomorrow we're going to figure this all out."

"And find your brother."

"And find my brother."

She turned away. Sam stayed on the balcony. He couldn't hear the surf. There was very little breeze. But he could smell flowers from the grounds below. And the salt smell of the Pacific hadn't changed.

He had told Astrid he was scared, and he was. But there were other feelings, too. The emptiness of the too-quiet night seeped into him. He was alone. Even with Astrid and Quinn, he was alone. He knew what they did not.

The change was so big that he couldn't get his mind to take it all in.

It was all connected, he was sure of that. What he had done to his stepfather, what he had done in his room, what had happened with the little pigtailed flamethrower, the disappearance of everyone over the age of fourteen, and this impermeable, impossible barrier—all were pieces of the same puzzle.

And his mother's diary, that too.

He was scared, overwhelmed, lonely. But less lonely in one way than he had been these last months. The little firestarter proved that he was not the only one with power.

He was not the only freak.

He held up his hands and looked at his palms. Pink skin, calluses from waxing his surfboard, a life line, a fate line. Just a palm.

How? How did it happen?

What did it mean?

And if he was not the only freak, did that mean he was not responsible for this catastrophe?

He extended his hands, palms out, toward the barrier as if to touch it.

In a panic he could make light.

In a panic he could burn a man's hand off.

But surely he could not have done this.

That brought him a sense of relief. No, he had not done this.

And yet someone or something had.

EIGHT

287 HOURS, 27 MINUTES

“SIT STILL, I’M trying to change your diaper,” Mary Terrafino said to the toddler.

“It’s not a diaper,” the little girl said. “Diapers are for babies. It’s my trainee pants.”

“Oh, sorry,” Mary said. “I didn’t know.”

She finished pulling the training pants up and smiled, but the little girl collapsed in tears.

“My mommy always puts my trainee pants on.”

“I know, sweetie,” Mary said. “But tonight I’m doing it, okay?”

Mary wanted to cry herself. She had never wanted to cry more. Night had fallen. She and her nine-year-old brother, John, had handed out the last of the cheddar-flavored Goldfish. They had handed out all the juice boxes. They were almost out of diapers. Barbara’s Day Care wasn’t set up for overnight care. They only had a limited supply of diapers on hand.

There were twenty-eight kids in the larger of the two rooms. Watching over them were Mary and John and a ten-year-old girl named Eloise, like in the books, who mostly kept an eye on her four-year-old brother. Eloise was one of the fairly responsible ones. A couple of other kids, overwhelmed, not knowing how to cope, had just dropped off siblings and made no attempt to stay and help.

Mary and John had prepared formula and filled bottles. They’d made “meals” of whatever was in the day care and whatever John managed to scrounge up. They had read picture books aloud. They had played the Raffi CDs over and over again.

Mary had said the words “Don’t worry, it’s going to be all right” a million times. She had hugged every kid again and again, so that it seemed like she was on a factory assembly line handing out hugs.

Still, the kids cried for their mothers. Still, they asked, “When is my mommy coming? Why isn’t she here? Where is she?” They demanded in petulant, scared voices, “I want my mom. I want to go home. Now.”

Mary was shaking with exhaustion.

She fell into the rocking chair and just stared at the room. Cribs. Mats on the floor. Tiny bodies curled this way and that. Most asleep. Except for the two-year-old girl who would not stop crying. And the baby who wandered in and out of wailing fits.

Her brother, John, was fighting sleep, his curls bouncing as he jerked his head up only to have it drift lower . . . lower. He was slumped in a chair across the room, rocking a makeshift bassinet that was really just a long plastic planter liberated from the hardware store. She caught his eye and said, “I am so proud of you, John.”

He smiled his sweet smile, and Mary almost fell apart. Her lip quivered. Tears welled in her eyes. There was a lump in her throat and a pain in her chest.

“I have to go pee,” a voice called.

Mary located the source. “Come on, Cassie, let’s go,” she said. The bathroom was just outside the main room. She led the way, then she waited, leaning against the wall. Afterward, she wiped the little girl’s bottom.

“My mommy always does that,” Cassie said.

“I know, sweetheart.”

“My mommy always calls me that.”

“Sweetheart? Oh. Would you like me to call you something else?”

“No. But I just want to know when my mommy is coming. I miss her. I always hug her and she kisses me.”

“I know. But until she comes back, can I give you a kiss?”

“No. Only my mommy.”

“Okay, sweetheart. Let’s go back to bed.”

Back in the main room Mary went to John. “Hey, brother.” She ruffled his red curls. “We’re running out of stuff. We’ll have a problem in the morning. I have to go see what I can round up. Can you hang in here for a while?”

“Yeah. I can wipe butts.”

Mary went out into the night onto the mostly quiet plaza. Some kids were sleeping on benches. Some huddled in little groups around flashlights. She spotted Howard walking along with a Mountain Dew in one hand and a baseball bat in the other.

“Have you seen Sam?” Mary asked.

“What do you want with Sam?”

“I can’t take care of all those littles with just John to help me.”

Howard shrugged. “Who asked you to?”

That was too much. Mary was tall and strong. Howard, though a boy, was smaller. Mary took two steps toward him, pushing her face right into his. “Listen, you little worm. If I don’t take care of those kids, they’ll die. Do you understand that? There are babies in there who need to be fed and need to be changed, and I seem to be the only one who realizes it. And there are probably more little kids still in their homes, all alone, not knowing what’s happening, not knowing how to feed themselves, scared to death.”

Howard took a step back, tentatively lifted the bat, then let it fall. “What am I supposed to do?” he whined.

“You? Nothing. Where’s Sam?”

“He took off.”

“What do you mean, he took off?”

“I mean him and Quinn and Astrid took off.”

Mary blinked, feeling stupid and slow. “Who’s in charge?”

“You think just because Sam likes to play the big hero every couple years that makes him the guy in charge?”

Mary had been on the bus two years ago when the driver, Mr. Colombo, had had his heart attack. She’d had her head in a book, not paying attention, but she had looked up when she felt the bus swerve. By the time she had focused, Sam was guiding the bus onto the shoulder of the road.

In the two years that followed, Sam had been so quiet and so modest and so not involved in the social life of the school that Mary had sort of forgotten that moment of heroism. Most people had.

And yet she hadn’t even been surprised when it was Sam who had stepped up during the fire. And she had somehow assumed that if anyone was going to be in charge, it would be Sam. She found herself angry with him for not being here now: she

needed help.

“Go get Orc,” Mary said.

“I don’t tell Orc what to do, bitch.”

“Excuse me?” she snapped. “What did you just call me?”

Howard gulped. “Didn’t mean nothing, Mary.”

“Where is Orc?”

“I think he’s sleeping.”

“Wake him up. I need some help. I can’t stay awake any longer. I need at least two kids who have experience babysitting. And then I need diapers and bottles and nipples and Cheerios and lots of milk.”

“Why am I going to do all that?”

Mary didn’t have an answer. “I don’t know, Howard,” she said. “Maybe because you’re really not a complete jerk? Maybe you’re really a decent human being?”

That earned her a skeptical look and a derisive snort.

“Look, kids will do what Orc says,” Mary said. “They’re scared of him. All I’m asking is for Orc to act like Orc.”

Howard thought this over. Mary could almost see the wheels spinning in his head.

“Forget it,” she said. “I’ll talk to Sam when he gets back.”

“Yeah, he’s the big hero, isn’t he?” Howard said, dripping sarcasm. “But hey, where is he? You see him around? I don’t see him around.”

“Are you going to help or not? I have to get back.”

“All right. I’ll get your stuff, Mary. But you better remember who helped you. You’re working for Orc and me.”

“I’m taking care of little kids,” Mary said. “If I’m working for anyone, it’s for them.”

“Like I say, you remember who was there when you needed them.” Howard turned on his heel and swaggered away.

“Two babysitters and food,” Mary called after him.

Mary returned to the day care. Three kids were crying, and it was spreading. John was staggering from crib to floor mat.

“I’m back,” Mary said. “Get some sleep, John.”

John simply crumpled. He was snoring before he hit the floor.

“It’s okay,” Mary told the first crying child. “It’s going to be all right.”

NINE

277 HOURS, 06 MINUTES

SAM SLEPT IN his clothes and woke too early.

He had spent the night on the couch in the large main room of the hotel suite. He knew from campouts on the beach that Quinn talked in his sleep.

He blinked and saw Astrid, a slender shadow against the sun. She was standing in front of the window but looking at him. He quickly wiped his mouth on the pillow.

“Sorry, sleep drool.”

“I didn’t mean to wake you up, but look at this.”

The morning sun had come up behind the town, up from behind the ridge. Rays of sunlight that sparkled and danced on the water seemed unable to touch the gray blankness of the barrier. It curved far out to sea, a wall rising from the ocean.

“How high is it?” Sam wondered aloud.

Astrid said, “I should be able to calculate it. You measure from the base of the wall to a point, then you figure the angle and . . . never mind. It has to be at least a couple hundred feet high. We’re three stories up and we’re nowhere near the top. If there is a top.”

“What do you mean if there is a top?”

“I’m not sure. Don’t take anything I say too seriously: I’m just thinking out loud.”

“So think out loud enough for me to hear,” Sam said.

Astrid shrugged. “Okay. There may not be a top. It may not be a wall, it may be a dome.”

“But I see the sky,” Sam argued. “I see clouds. They’re moving.”

“Right. Well, imagine this: You’re holding a piece of black glass in your hand. Like a really big, really dark sunglasses lens. You tilt it one way, it’s opaque. You tilt it another way, it’s reflective. You squint real hard straight into it and you almost think you can see some light coming through. It all depends on the angle and the—”

“You hear that?” Quinn asked. He had arrived unnoticed, scratching himself indiscreetly.

Sam listened hard. “An engine. Not far away, either.”

They ran from the room, pelted down the stairs, and burst through double doors onto the hotel grounds. Around the corner, back to the tennis courts.

“It’s Edilio. The new kid,” Sam said.

Edilio Escobar was seated in the open cage of a small yellow backhoe. As they watched, he maneuvered close to the barrier and lowered the shovel. It bit through grass and came up with a shovelful of dirt.

“He’s trying to dig his way out,” Quinn said. He broke into a run and leaped up impulsively onto the backhoe beside Edilio. Edilio jumped about a foot in the air, but came down grinning.

Edilio killed the engine. “Hey, guys. I guess you kinda noticed this, huh?” He jerked a thumb at the barrier. “By the way, don’t touch it.”

Sam nodded ruefully. “Yeah. We figured that out.”

Edilio revved the engine and dug three more scoops. Then he hopped down, picked

up a shovel, and pried away the last few inches of dirt between the hole and the barrier.

The barrier continued, even underground.

Working together, Edilio, Sam, and Quinn dug five feet down with backhoe and shovel. They found no bottom to the barrier.

But Sam did not want to stop. There had to be a bottom. There had to be. He was hitting rock, unable to get the shovel to bite deep. Each spadeful was lighter than the one before.

“Maybe a jackhammer. Or at least some picks to break it up down here.” Only then, hearing no response, did he realize he was the only one still digging. The others were standing, looking down at him.

“Yeah, maybe,” Edilio said finally. He bent down to give Sam a hand up out of the hole.

Sam clambered up, tossed his shovel aside, and beat the dirt from his jeans. “It was a good idea, Edilio.”

“Like what you did at the fire, man,” Edilio said. “You saved the hardware and the day care.”

Sam didn’t want to think about what he had saved or not saved. “Wouldn’t have saved anything, including my own butt, without you, Edilio. And Quinn and Astrid,” he added as an afterthought.

Quinn shot a hard look at Edilio. “So why are you here?” he asked.

Edilio sighed and propped his shovel against the barrier. He wiped sweat from his face and looked around at the well-tended grounds. “My mom works here,” Edilio said.

Quinn smirked a little. “Is she, like, the manager?”

“She’s in housekeeping,” Edilio said evenly.

“Yeah? Where do you live?” Quinn asked.

Edilio pointed at the barrier. “Over there. About two miles down the highway. We have a trailer. My dad, my two little brothers. They had a bug, so my mom kept them home. Alvaro, my big brother, he’s in Afghanistan.”

“He’s in the army?”

“Special Forces,” Edilio grinned. “The elite.”

He wasn’t a big kid, but he stood so straight, he didn’t seem short. His eyes were dark, seeming almost without whites, gentle but not fearful. He had rough, scarred hands that looked like they belonged on another body. He held his arms slightly out from his trunk, hands turned palm forward just a bit, like he was getting ready to catch something. He seemed both completely still and yet ready to jump into action.

“This is stupid when you think about it. People on the other side of the barrier, they know what’s happened,” Quinn said. “I mean, it’s not like they haven’t noticed that we’re behind this wall all of a sudden.”

“So?” Sam asked.

“So they have better equipment and stuff than we do, right? They can dig a lot deeper, get under the barrier. Or go around it. Or fly over it. This is a waste of time here.”

“We don’t know how far down or high up the barrier extends,” Astrid said. “It looks like it stops a couple hundred feet up, but maybe that’s an optical illusion.”

“Over, under, around, or through,” Edilio said. “There’s got to be a way.”

“Kind of like when your folks came over the border from Mexico, huh?” Quinn said.

Sam and Astrid both aimed shocked looks at Quinn.

Edilio stood even straighter and, despite being six inches shorter than Quinn, seemed to be looking down at him. In a calm, quiet voice Edilio said, “Honduras is where my folks are from. They had to come all the way through Mexico before they even reached the border. My mom works as a maid. My father is a farmhand. We live in a trailer and drive an old beater. I still have a little accent because I learned Spanish before I learned English. Anything else you need to know, man?”

Quinn said, “I wasn’t trying to start anything, amigo.”

“That’s good,” Edilio said.

It wasn’t a threat, not really. And in any case, Quinn had twenty pounds on Edilio. But it was Quinn who took a step back.

“We have to go,” Sam said. To Edilio, he explained, “We’re looking for Astrid’s little brother. He’s . . . he needs someone to look after him. Astrid thinks he may be up at the power plant.”

“My father’s an engineer there,” Astrid explained. “But it’s about ten miles from here.”

Sam hesitated before asking Edilio to join them. It would annoy Quinn. Quinn wasn’t acting like himself, which wasn’t really strange, given what was going on, but Sam found it unsettling. Edilio, on the other hand, had kept his head together at the fire. He’d stepped up.

Astrid made the decision for him. “Edilio? Would you like to come with us?”

Now Sam was a little peeved. Did Astrid think Sam couldn’t take care of things? She needed Edilio?

Astrid rolled her eyes at Sam. “I thought I would cut to the chase and avoid more male posturing.”

“I wasn’t posturing,” Sam grumbled.

“How are you going to travel?” Edilio asked.

“I don’t think we should try to drive a car, if that’s what you mean,” Sam said.

“I maybe got something. Not a car, but better than walking ten miles.” Edilio led them to a garage door hidden away around the back of the pool changing room. He raised the garage door, revealing two golf carts with the logo of Clifftop Resort on the sides. “The groundskeepers and the security guys use them to get around and go over to the golf course on the other side of the highway.”

“Have you driven one of these before?” Sam asked.

“Yeah. My dad picks up a shift sometimes at the golf course. Groundskeeping. I go with him, help out.”

That simplified the decision. Even Quinn had to see the logic. “Okay,” Quinn said grudgingly. “You drive.”

Sam said, “We can try the direct road to the highway. It’s the first right.”

“You’re avoiding downtown,” Astrid said. “You don’t want kids coming up to you, asking you what they should do.”

“You want to get to PBNP?” Sam asked. “Or do you want to watch me stand around telling people they have nothing to fear but fear itself?”

Astrid laughed, and it was, in Sam's opinion, probably the sweetest sound he had ever heard.

"You remember," Astrid said.

"Yeah. I remember. Roosevelt. The Great Depression. Sometimes, if I really strain my brain, I can even do multiplication."

"Defensive humor," Astrid teased.

They motored across the parking lot and onto the road. There they took a sharp cut-back right turn onto a narrow, newly paved section. The golf cart slowed going uphill to barely better than walking speed. They soon saw that the road dead-ended into the barrier. They stopped and stared solemnly at the abrupt end of the pavement.

"It's like a *Road Runner* cartoon," Quinn said. "If you go paint a tunnel onto it, we can go through, but Wile E. Coyote will smash into it."

"Okay. Back down to the cliff road then, but cut through the back streets to the highway—don't go near the plaza," Sam said. "We need to find Little Pete already. I don't want to have to stop and talk to a bunch of kids."

"Yeah, plus we don't want anyone stealing the cart," Edilio said.

"Yeah. There's that," Sam admitted.

"Stop," Astrid yelled, and Edilio slammed on the brakes.

Astrid jumped off her seat and trotted back to something white by the roadside. She knelt down and picked up a twig.

"It's a seagull," Sam said, puzzled that Astrid should care. "Maybe bashed into the barrier, huh?"

"Maybe. But look at this." She poked the bird's foot with the twig, lifting it up.

"Yeah?"

"It's webbed, of course. Like it should be. But look at the way the toes extend out. Look at the nails. They're talons. Like a bird of prey. Like a hawk or an eagle."

"You sure it's a regular seagull?"

"I like birds," she explained. "This is not normal. Seagulls don't need talons. So they don't have talons."

"So it's a bird freak," Quinn said. "Can we move on now?"

Astrid stood up. "It's not normal."

Quinn barked a laugh. "Astrid, we're not even in the same time zone as normal. This is what you're worrying about? Bird toes?"

"This bird is either a solitary freak, a random mutation," Astrid said, "or it's a whole new species that suddenly appeared. Evolved."

"Again I have to go with 'so what?'" Quinn said.

Astrid was on the verge of saying something. Then she shook her head a little, telling herself no. "Never mind, Quinn. Like you said, we're a long way from normal."

They loaded up again and took off at twelve miles an hour. They turned on Third and cut back, distancing themselves from town, and ran up Fourth, which was a quiet, shady, decidedly shabby, older residential street close by Sam's house.

The only cars they saw were parked or crashed. The only people they saw were a couple of kids crossing the street behind them. They heard TV sounds coming from one house, but quickly determined that it was a DVD.

"At least the electricity is still on," Quinn said. "They haven't taken away our DVDs. MP3s will still work, too, even without web access. We'll still have tunes."

“They,” Astrid noted. “We’ve moved on from ‘God’ to ‘they.’”

They reached the highway and stopped.

“Well. That’s creepy,” Quinn said.

In the middle of the highway was a UPS tractor-trailer. The trailer had broken free and was on its side, like a discarded toy. The tractor, the truck part, was still upright, but off to the side of the road. There was a Sebring convertible smashed against the front. The convertible had not fared well. The impact was head-on. The car was crumpled to about half its usual length. And it had burned.

“The drivers poofed, car driver and truck driver,” Quinn said.

“At least no one got hurt,” Edilio said.

“Unless there was a kid in the car,” Astrid pointed out.

No one suggested checking. Nothing had survived that crash or the subsequent fire. None of them wanted to see if there was a small body in the backseat.

The highway was four lanes, two going each way, not divided, but with a turning lane in the middle. There was always traffic. Even in the middle of the night there was traffic. Now, only silence and emptiness.

Edilio laughed a little shakily. “I’m still expecting some big old truck to come barreling down on us, run us over.”

“It would almost be a relief,” Quinn muttered.

Edilio stepped on the pedal, the electric motor whirred, and they eased out onto the highway, skirting around the overturned UPS trailer.

It was an eerie experience. They were going slower than a strong cyclist on a highway where no one ever traveled at less than sixty miles an hour. They crept past a muffler shop and the Jiffy Lube, past a squat office building that housed a lawyer and an accountant. In several places cars from the highway had plowed into parked cars. A convertible was all the way inside the dry cleaner’s. It had taken out the plate-glass window. Clothing in plastic wrap lay strewn across the car’s hood and into the passenger compartment.

There was a graveyard silence as they drove. The only sound came from the soft rubber tires and the strained whirring of the electric motor.

The town lay to their left. To the right the land rose sharply to a high ridge. The ridge loomed above Perdido Beach, its own sort of wall. The thought had never occurred to Sam so forcefully before that Perdido Beach was already bounded by barriers, by mountains on the north and east, by ocean to the south and west. This road, this silent, empty road, was just about the only way in or out.

Ahead was the Chevron station. Sam thought he saw movement there.

“What do you guys think?” he asked.

“Maybe they have food. It’s a mini-mart, right?” Quinn said. “I’m hungry.”

“We should keep going,” Astrid said.

“Edilio?” Sam pressed.

He shrugged. “I don’t want to be paranoid. But, man, who knows?”

Sam said, “I guess I vote for keeping going.”

Edilio nodded and eased the golf cart to the left side of the road.

“If there are kids there, we smile and wave and say we’re in a hurry,” Sam said.

“Yes, sir,” Quinn said.

“Don’t pull that, brah. We took a vote,” Sam said.

“Yeah. Right.”

There were clearly people at the Chevron station. A slight breeze carried a torn Doritos bag down the highway toward them, a red and gold tumbleweed.

As the golf cart approached, one kid, then another, stepped out into the road. Cookie was the first. The second kid Sam didn't recognize.

“T'sup, Cookie,” Sam called out as they drew within twenty yards.

“T'sup, Sam?” Cookie replied.

“Looking for Astrid's little brother, man.”

“Hold up,” Cookie said. He was carrying a metal baseball bat. The other kid beside him had a croquet mallet with green stripes.

“Nah, man, we're on a mission, we'll catch you later,” Sam said. He waved, and Edilio kept his foot on the pedal. They were within a couple of feet and would soon be past.

“Stop them,” a voice yelled from the Chevron station. Howard was running and behind him, Orc. Cookie stepped in front of the cart.

“Don't stop,” Sam hissed.

“Man, look out,” Edilio warned Cookie.

Cookie jumped aside at the last second. The other kid swung his mallet hard. The wood shaft hit the steel pole that supported the cart's awning. The mallet head snapped off and narrowly missed Quinn's head.

Then they were past and Quinn yelled back, “Hey, you almost knocked my head in, jerkwad.”

They were maybe thirty feet on and pulling away when Orc yelled, “Catch them, you morons.”

Cookie was a big kid, not fast. But the other kid, the one holding the broken mallet, was smaller and quicker. He broke into a sprint. Howard and Orc were farther back, running full out, but Orc was heavy and slow and Howard pulled away from him.

The kid with the mallet caught up to them. “You better stop,” he said, panting, running alongside.

“I don't think so,” Sam said.

“Dude, I'll stab you with this stick,” the kid threatened, but he was panting harder. He made a weak stab with the shattered end of the mallet.

Sam caught it and twisted it out of his hands. The kid tripped and sprawled. Sam tossed the stick aside contemptuously.

Howard was almost in range, coming up directly behind the cart. Astrid and Quinn watched calmly as Howard pumped hard, skinny arms windmilling. He threw a glance back and realized Orc wasn't going to catch up.

“Howard, what do you think you're doing, man?” Quinn asked in a perfectly reasonable voice. “You're like a dog chasing a truck. What are you going to do if you catch us?”

Howard got the point and slowed down.

Edilio said, “It's a low-speed chase, man. Maybe we'll be on the news.”

That got a nervous laugh.

Five minutes later, no one was laughing. “There's a truck coming up fast,” Astrid said. “We need to pull over.”

“They won’t run us down,” Quinn said. “Even Orc’s not that crazy.”

“They may or may not want to run us down,” Astrid said, “but that’s a fourteen-year-old driving a Hummer. You really want to be on the road?”

Quinn nodded. “We’re in for a pounding.”

TEN

274 HOURS, 27 MINUTES

THE HUMMER WEAVED back and forth across the road, but there was no way to pretend it wasn't going to catch them.

"Keep going or pull off?" Edilio asked. His hands were white-knuckled on the wheel.

"They're going to kick our butts now," Quinn yelled. "We should have just stopped. I told you we should have just stopped, but no."

The Hummer closed the distance with shocking speed.

"They're going to hit us," Astrid yelled.

Quinn jumped off the cart and ran. The Hummer shuddered to a stop. Cookie and the Mallet Kid piled out and went after Quinn.

"Pull over," Sam said. He jumped off and ran to Quinn's aid.

Quinn tried to leap the ditch beside the road, but landed badly. The two thugs were on him before he could recover. Cookie pounded him in the back with his fist.

Sam made a flying leap at Cookie. He grabbed Cookie in the crook of one arm and yanked him forward with his momentum.

Cookie landed hard on his belly, and Sam rolled free. Cookie had dropped his bat to pound Quinn with his fists, and Sam dived for it. Mallet, Edilio, and Quinn had a brief but violent tussle that left Edilio and Quinn standing and the other kid down. But it had given Orc and Howard time to climb down from the truck.

Orc swung his bat and caught Edilio behind the knees. Edilio dropped like a sack of cement.

Gripping Cookie's bat, Sam raced to get between Orc and Edilio.

"I don't want to fight you," Sam shouted.

"I know you don't want to fight me," Orc said confidently. "Nobody wants to be fighting me."

Astrid came striding up. "All of you stop it," she yelled. Her fists were balled up. There were tears in her eyes. But she was angry, not sad. "We don't need this crap."

Howard slid between Orc and Astrid. "Step off, Astrid, my man Orc has to teach this punk a lesson."

"Step off?" Astrid shot back. "You don't tell me to step off you . . . you invertebrate."

"Astrid, stay out of this, I got this," Sam said. Edilio tried to stand firm, but he could barely stand at all.

Surprisingly, Orc said, "Hey. Let Astrid talk."

Pumped on adrenaline, Sam almost didn't hear him. But then he processed what Orc had said and kept his mouth shut.

Astrid took a deep breath. Her hair was flying wild. Her face was red. Finally, struggling for calm, she said, "We're not looking for a fight."

"Speak for yourself," Cookie muttered.

"This is crazy," Astrid said. "We're just looking for my brother."

Orc's slit eyes narrowed further. "The retard?"

“He’s autistic,” Astrid snapped.

“Yeah. Little Pe-tard,” Orc sneered, but he didn’t push it.

“You should have stopped, Sammy.” Howard made a *tsk-tsk* sound, shaking his head regretfully.

“That’s what I said, and I’m the one who ends up getting pounded?” Quinn gestured wildly, angry at Sam.

Howard nodded toward Quinn, amused. “You should have listened to your bro there, Sam. I told you last night, you need to take care of my man Orc.”

“Take care of him? What does that mean?” Astrid demanded.

Howard turned cold eyes on her. “You have to show Captain Orc some respect, that’s what I mean.”

“Captain?” Sam resisted the urge to laugh.

Howard stepped close, brave with Orc standing right behind him. “Yeah. Captain. Someone had to step up and take charge, right? You were busy, I guess, maybe surfing or whatever, so Captain Orc volunteered to be in charge.”

“In charge of what?” Quinn asked.

“Stopping everybody running crazy, that’s what.”

“Yeah,” Orc agreed.

“Kids were busting everything up, taking anything they wanted,” Howard went on.

“Yeah.”

“And all those booger-eaters, all those little kids running around, no one to even stop them crying or change their diapers. Orc made sure they were taken care of.” Howard grinned a huge grin. “He comforted them. Or at least made sure someone did.”

“That’s right,” Orc said, as if it was the first time he’d heard it put that way.

“No one else wanted to get things under control, so Orc did,” Howard said. “And so he is the Captain now, until the adults come back.”

“Only they ain’t coming back,” Orc said.

“That’s totally right,” Howard said. “What the Captain said.”

Sam glanced at Astrid. The truth was, someone needed to get people to stop acting crazy. Orc would not have been Sam’s choice for that job. But he didn’t want to do it himself.

The fight had mostly gone out of the situation. And now that the two sides were lined up face-to-face, there was no question who would win if it started up again. It was four to four, but the four bullies included Orc, and he counted for three at least.

“We just want to go look for Little Pete,” Sam said finally, swallowing his anger.

“Yeah? If you’re looking for something, it’s best if you go kind of slow,” Howard said with a smirk.

“You want the golf cart,” Sam said.

“That’s what I’m talking about, Sammy,” Howard said, spreading his hands wide in a gesture of conciliation.

“It’s, like, people pay taxes, right?” Mallet said.

“Exactly,” Howard agreed. “It’s a tax.”

“Who are you, anyway?” Astrid challenged Mallet. “I’ve never seen you at school.”

“I go to Coates Academy.”

Sam said, "My mom's the night nurse up there."

"Not anymore," the kid said.

"Why are you down here?" Astrid again.

"I didn't get along with the kids up there." Mallet tried to toss the line off like it was a joke, but the effect was undermined by the fear in his eyes.

"Are there any adults up there?" Sam asked hopefully.

"Aw," Howard said. "Sammy wants his mommy."

"Take the golf cart," Sam said.

"Don't waste your time trying to look all bad at me. See, I know you, man," Howard said. "School Bus Sam. Mr. Fireman. You go all heroic, but then you disappear. Don't you? It kind of comes and goes with you. Everyone last night is all, 'Where's Sam? Where's Sam?' And I had to say, 'Well, kids, Sam is off with Astrid the Genius because Sam can't be hanging out with regular people like us. Sam has to go off with his hot blond girlfriend.'"

"She's not my girlfriend," Sam said, and instantly regretted it.

Howard laughed, delighted to have provoked him. "See, Sam, you always got to be in your own little world, too good for everyone, while me and Captain Orc and our boys here, we're always going to be around. You step away, and we step up."

Sam could feel Astrid and Quinn watching, waiting for him to deny what Howard was saying. But what was the point? Sam had felt the expectations of so many kids in the plaza, kids waiting for him to step up, like Howard said. And all he had wanted to do was run away. He had jumped at the chance to go off with Astrid.

"I'm bored with this," Orc grunted.

Howard grinned. "Okay, Sam. You can go find Little Pe-tard, but when you come back, you better have a nice present for the Captain. Captain runs the FAYZ, man."

"The what?" Astrid asked.

Howard was clearly pleased to be asked. "I came up with that myself. FAYZ. Spelled F-A-Y-Z. It stands for Fallout Alley Youth Zone. Fallout Alley, and nothing but kids."

Howard laughed his mean laugh. "Don't worry, Astrid, it's just a FAYZ. Get it? It's just a FAYZ."

The sun was hot on her face. Lana opened her eyes. Ominous winged shapes floated above her, crossed the sun, floated back. The vultures watched her and waited, confident of a meal.

Her tongue was swollen so that it filled her mouth, almost gagging her. Her lips were cracked. She was dying.

She looked around for the body of her poor dog. He should have been right there beside her. But there was no body.

She heard a familiar bark.

"Patrick?"

He came bounding over to her, excited, urging her to come and play.

She lifted her one good arm and touched Patrick's neck. His fur was matted with dried blood. She probed where the fatal bite had been. The wound was closed. There was still a scab on the site, but it was no longer bleeding, and judging from Patrick's behavior, he had never felt better.

Had she dreamed it all? No, the dried blood was proof.

She strained to recall her last conscious moments from the night. Had she prayed? Was that it, a miracle? She didn't remember doing that, she wasn't a person who thought about prayer.

Had she caused this? Had she somehow healed Patrick?

She almost laughed. She was getting delirious. She was losing her mind. Imagining things.

Crazy from the pain and thirst and hunger.

Crazy.

She smelled something foul. Sickly sweet and foul.

She looked at her shattered right arm. The flesh, especially the taut, stretched flesh that barely contained her shattered arm bones, was dark, black edging toward green. The smell was awful.

Lana took several deep breaths, shaky, fighting the upsurge of terror. She'd heard of gangrene. It was what happened when flesh died or circulation was cut off. Her arm was dying. The smell was the odor of rotting human flesh.

A vulture fluttered to a landing just a few feet away. It stared at her with beady eyes and bobbed its featherless neck. The vulture knew that smell, too.

Patrick came bounding back, barking, and the vulture reluctantly flapped away.

"Not getting me," Lana croaked, but the weakness of her own voice just scared her further. The vultures were going to get her. They were.

But there was Patrick, healed after a seemingly fatal wound.

Lana laid her left hand on the flesh just below the bone on her right arm. The flesh was hot to the touch. It felt puffy beneath the crust of dried blood.

She closed her eyes and thought, whatever did it, however it happened for Patrick, I want it now for me. I don't want to die. I don't want to die.

She drifted off then, thinking of home. Of her room. Posters on the walls, a dreamcatcher hanging in front of one window, forgotten stuffed animals in a wicker basket, a closet bursting with clothing, her collection of Asian fans, which everyone thought was weird.

She wasn't mad at her parents anymore. She just missed them. She wanted her mother more than anything. And her dad, too. He would know how to save her.

She dreamed feverish dreams, images that made her gasp and pant and caused her heart to beat like a jackhammer.

She felt herself floating on a thin crust of land. The land was like the skin of a balloon. Below, an open space full of swirling clouds and sudden jets of flame. And farther down still, a monster, something out of her childhood, the monster that had often startled her from sleep.

It was chiseled of living stone, a rough, slow-moving, cunning beast with burning black eyes.

And within that terrible beast, a heart. Only this heart glowed green, not red. And this heart was like an egg, cracked open so that brilliant, painful light escaped.

She woke with a start from the sound of her own cry.

She sat up, as she always did when waking from a nightmare in her own bed.

She sat up.

The pain was terrible. Her head pounded, her back, her . . . She stared at her right

arm.

For a while she forgot to breathe. Forgot even the pain in her head and back and leg. Forgot them all. Because the pain in her arm was gone.

Her arm was straight. From elbow to wrist it formed a straight line again.

The gangrene was gone as well. The smell of death was gone.

Her arm was still crusted in dried blood but it was nothing, nothing at all compared with what had been there, nothing like what it had been.

Trembling, she lifted her right arm.

It moved.

Slowly she clenched her right fist.

The fingers came together.

It was not possible. It was not possible. What she was seeing could not be.

But pain didn't lie. And the searing pain in her arm was now no more than a dull throb.

Lana placed her left hand on her broken leg.

It wasn't quick. It took a long time and she was terribly weak from thirst and hunger. But she kept her hand there until, an hour later, she did what she had feared she would never do again: Lana Arwen Lazar stood up.

Two vultures sat perched atop the overturned pickup truck.

Lana said, "Guess you waited for nothing."

ELEVEN

273 HOURS, 39 MINUTES

SAM, QUINN, EDILIO, and Astrid moved off on foot, insults and laughter following them.

“Quinn, Edilio, are you guys okay?” Astrid asked.

“Aside from the big bruise I’ll probably have in the middle of my back?” Quinn answered. “Sure. Aside from the fact that I got pounded on for no reason, I’m perfect. Great plan, brah. Worked out well. We gave away the golf cart, and we got beat up and humiliated.”

Sam bit back a desire to yell at his friend. Quinn wasn’t wrong. Sam had voted to ignore the roadblock, and they had paid a price.

Howard’s words stung. It was like the little worm had peeled back his skin and shown the world what Sam was really like. Not about thinking he was too good for everyone, that was wrong, but about him not wanting to step up. Sam had his reasons, but right now they didn’t matter as much as the burning feeling that he was shamed in front of his friends.

“I’ll be fine, no big thing,” Edilio said to Astrid. “If I keep walking, it’ll go away.”

“Oh yeah, great, be a big man, Edilio.” Quinn sneered. “Maybe you enjoy getting pounded on. Me, no. I do not enjoy getting pounded on. And now we’re supposed to walk all the way to the power plant? Why, so we can look for some little kid who probably doesn’t even know he’s missing?”

Again Sam resisted the surge of anger. As mildly as he could he said, “Brother, nobody is making you come.”

“You saying I shouldn’t?” Quinn took two quick steps and grabbed Sam’s shoulder. “You saying you want me to leave, brah?”

“No, man. You’re my best friend.”

“Your only friend.”

“Yeah. That’s right,” Sam admitted.

“All I’m saying is, who died and made you king?” Quinn asked. “You’re acting like you’re the boss here. How did that happen? How come I’m taking orders from you?”

“You’re not taking orders,” Sam said angrily. “I don’t want anyone taking orders from me. If I wanted people taking orders from me, all I had to do was stay in town and start telling people what to do.” In a quieter voice Sam said, “You can be in charge, Quinn.”

“I never said I wanted to be in charge,” Quinn huffed. But he was running out of resentment. He shot a dark look at Edilio, a wary look at Astrid. “It’s just weird, brah. Used to be it was you and me, right?”

“Yeah,” Sam agreed.

In a whining voice Quinn said, “I just want to get our boards and head for the beach. I want everything to go back to how it was.” Then in a startling shout he cried, “Where is everyone? Why haven’t they come for us? Where. Are. My. Parents?”

They began walking again, Edilio hobbling a little, Quinn falling behind and

muttering. Sam walked beside Astrid, still self-conscious in her presence.

“You handled Orc back there,” he said. “Thanks.”

“I tutored him through remedial math.” She made a wry smile. “He’s a little intimidated by me. We can’t count much on that, though.”

They walked down the middle of the highway. It was strange to see the yellow line under their feet, strange.

“Fallout Alley Youth Zone,” Astrid said.

“Yeah. I guess that will stick, huh?”

“Maybe it’s not just a joke,” Astrid said. “Maybe this is about Fallout Alley?”

Sam looked sharply at her. “You mean maybe an accident at the nuclear plant?”

She shrugged. “I’m not sure I mean anything.”

“But you think it could be connected? Like the plant blew up or something?”

“The power is still on. Perdido Beach gets all its power from the plant. The lights are still on. So one way or the other, the plant is still running.”

Edilio stopped. “Hey, guys. Why are we walking?”

“Because that jerk Orc and that tool Howard stole our golf cart,” Quinn said.

“Dude,” Edilio said, and pointed at a car that had plunged off the road and come to a stop in the drainage ditch. There were two bikes mounted on a trunk-top bike rack.

“I feel bad taking someone’s bike,” Astrid said.

“Get over it,” Quinn said. “Haven’t you noticed: It’s a whole new world. It’s the FAYZ.”

Astrid peered up at a seagull floating not far above them. “Yes, Quinn. I did notice.”

They took the two bikes and rode two-on, Quinn perched on Edilio’s handlebars, Astrid on Sam’s. Her hair blew in his face, stinging him a little. Sam was sorry when they located two more bikes.

The highway did not go to the power plant. They had to turn onto a side road. There was an impressive stone guardhouse at the turnoff, and a red-striped gate, like the ones at a railroad crossing. It was lowered to bar the way. They pedaled around it.

The road wound through hillsides carpeted in desiccated grass and wilting yellow wildflowers. There were no homes or businesses near the plant. It was surrounded by hundreds of acres of emptiness in all directions. Steep hillsides and infrequent stands of trees, meadows and dry creeks.

Eventually the road veered down to the tumbled rock shoreline. The view was stunning, but the surf, normally explosive, was gentle, tamed. The road rose and fell, wound back on itself a couple of times, hid behind hills, and then opened on a new panorama of the ocean.

“There’s another security gate up ahead,” Astrid said.

“If there’s a guard there, I’ll kiss him,” Quinn said.

“This is all constantly watched and patrolled,” Astrid said. “They have almost a private army that protects the plant.”

“Not anymore,” Sam said.

They came to a chain-link fence topped with razor wire. The fence extended down to the rocks on the left, and disappeared up into the hills on the right. There was a much more serious guardhouse here, almost a fortress. It looked like it could handle a major attack. The gate was a tall section of chain link that could roll back and forth at

the push of a button.

They stopped pedaling and stood looking up at the obstacle.

“How do we get in?” Astrid wondered.

“Someone climbs the gate,” Sam said. “Rock, paper, scissors?”

The three boys did rock, paper, scissors, and Sam lost.

“Dude. Paper? Come on,” Quinn teased. “Everybody knows you go with scissors on the first round.”

Sam scaled the chain link quickly, but the razor wire gave him pause. He took off his shirt and wrapped it around the most troublesome strand of wire. He carefully swung a leg over and yelped as the wire nicked his thigh. Then he was over. He dropped to the ground, leaving his shirt behind on the wire.

He entered the guardhouse. The air-conditioning was on full blast, making him instantly regret the loss of his shirt.

A bank of color monitors showed the road they had just come down, as well as a rotating array of outdoor scenes: ocean and rock and mountain. It also showed several passcard-protected doors to the plant.

In the restroom he spotted an electronic passcard on a lanyard, hanging from a hook. Some guy had been using the can when he disappeared. Sam hung the lanyard around his neck.

In a closet off the main room he found a gray-green military-style uniform shirt, many sizes too large. Against the wall was a locked rack of automatic weapons, machine pistols. The room smelled of oil and sulfur.

He looked for a long time at the guns. Automatic weapons versus baseball bats.

“Don’t go down that road,” Sam muttered.

He left the gun closet and closed the door firmly. But his hand rested on the knob awhile. Then he shook his head. No. It had not gotten to that point.

Not yet.

The force of the temptation made him queasy. What was the matter with him that he had even considered it for a second?

He pushed the button to open the gate.

“What took you so long?” Quinn asked suspiciously.

“I was looking around for a shirt.”

The power plant stood in perfect isolation, a vast, imposing complex of warehouselike buildings dominated by two immense, concrete bell-jar domes.

All his life Sam had heard about the power plant. It seemed like half the people in Perdido Beach worked here. Growing up he had heard the recited reassurances. And he wasn’t afraid of nuclear power, really. But now, seeing the actual plant—a bright, bristling beast crouched above the sea and beneath the mountains—it made him nervous.

“You could pile every house in Perdido Beach into this place,” Sam said. “I’ve never seen it up close. It’s big.”

“It kind of reminds me of when I was in Rome and saw Saint Peter’s, this really big cathedral,” Quinn said. “It’s, like, you know, you feel small looking at it. Like maybe you should kneel down, just to be on the safe side.”

“Stupid question, right, but we aren’t going to get radioactive, are we?” Edilio asked.

“This isn’t Chernobyl,” Astrid said tartly. “They didn’t even have containment towers there. That’s what the two big domes are. The actual reactors are under the containment domes so if anything does happen, the radioactive gas or steam is contained inside.”

Quinn slapped Edilio on the back, fake friendly. “And that’s why there’s nothing to worry about. Except, huh, they call this area Fallout Alley. I wonder why? What with everything being totally safe and all.”

Quinn and Sam knew the story, but for Edilio’s benefit, Astrid pointed at the more distant of the two domes. “See how the color is different, the one dome looks newer? The dome over there was hit by a meteorite. Almost fifteen years ago. But what are the odds of that ever happening again?”

“What were the odds of it happening once?” Quinn muttered.

“A meteorite?” Edilio echoed, and he glanced up at the sky. The sun was well past its high point and settling toward the water.

“A small meteorite moving at high speed,” Astrid said. “It hit the containment vessel and blew it up. Vaporized it. It hit the reactor and just kept going. Actually, it was good it was moving so fast.”

Sam saw the picture in his head. He could imagine the big space rock hurtling down at impossible speed, trailing fire, blowing the concrete dome apart.

“Why is it good that it was so fast?” Sam asked.

“Because it drilled into the earth and carried ninety percent of the uranium fuel down with it into the crater. It pushed it almost a hundred feet down. So they basically just filled in the hole, paved it over, and rebuilt the reactor.”

“I heard a guy was killed,” Sam said.

Astrid nodded. “One of the engineers. I guess he was working in the reactor area.”

“You telling me there’s a bunch of uranium under the ground and no one is supposed to think that’s dangerous?” Edilio said skeptically.

“A bunch of uranium and one dude’s bones,” Quinn said. “Welcome to Perdido Beach, where our slogan is ‘Radiation? What radiation?’”

Astrid led the way. She had visited the plant many times with her father. She found an unmarked, unremarkable door in the slab side of the turbine building. Sam swiped the passcard in the slot, and the door clicked open.

Inside they found a cavernous space with a high ceiling of interlaced I beams and a painted concrete floor. There were four massive engines, each bigger than a locomotive. The noise was incredible.

“These are the turbines,” Astrid shouted over the hurricane howl. “The uranium creates a reaction that heats up water which makes steam, which comes here, spins the turbines, and generates electricity.”

“So, you’re saying it doesn’t involve giant hamsters on a wheel?” Quinn yelled. “I was misinformed.”

“I guess we better look here first,” Sam shouted. He looked at Quinn.

Quinn performed a languid, mocking salute.

They spread out through the turbine room. Astrid reminded them that Little Pete usually wouldn’t come when called. The only way to find him was to look in every corner, every space where a little kid could possibly stand, sit, or hide.

Little Pete was not in the turbine room.

Astrid finally signaled them to move on. After passing through two sets of doors, they could hear normal speech again.

“Let’s go to the control room,” Astrid suggested, and led the way down a gloomy corridor and into a dated-looking control room. It looked like a set from a NASA space launch, with old-school computers, flickering monitors, and way too many panels with way too many glowing lights, switches, and ancient data ports.

There, sitting on the control room floor, rocking slightly back and forth, playing a muted handheld video game, was Little Pete.

Astrid did not run to him. She stared with what looked to Sam like something close to disappointment. She seemed almost to shrink down a little.

But then she forced a smile and went to him.

“Petey,” Astrid said in a calm voice. Like he had never been missing, like they’d been together all along and there was nothing weird about seeing him all alone in the middle of a nuclear plant control room playing Pokémon on a Game Boy.

“Thank God he wasn’t in with the reactors,” Quinn said. “I was going to say a big N-O to searching that.”

Edilio nodded agreement.

Little Pete was four years old, blond like his big sister, but freckled and almost girlish, he was so pretty. He didn’t look at all slow or stupid; in fact, if you didn’t know better, you’d have thought he was a normal, probably smart, kid.

But when Astrid hugged him, he seemed barely to notice. Only after almost a minute did he lift one hand from the video game control and touch her hair in an abstracted way.

“Have you had anything to eat?” Astrid asked. Then she revised the question. “Hungry?”

She had a particular way of talking to Little Pete when she wanted his attention. She held his face in her hands, carefully blocking his peripheral vision, half covering his ears. She put her face close to his and spoke calmly but with slow, careful enunciation.

“Hungry?” she repeated slowly but firmly.

Little Pete’s eyes flickered. He nodded yes.

“Okay,” Astrid said.

Edilio was inspecting the dated-looking electronics that covered most of one wall. He frowned and wrinkled his brow. “Everything looks like it’s normal,” he reported.

Quinn scoffed. “I’m sorry, are you a nuclear engineer as well as a golf cart driver?”

“I’m just looking at the readouts, man. I figure green is good, right?” He moved to a low, curved table supporting three computer monitors before three battered swivel chairs.

“I can’t even read this stuff,” Edilio admitted, peering closely at one monitor. “It’s all numbers and symbols.”

“I’m going to the break room to find some food for Petey,” Astrid announced. She started to move away, but Little Pete began to whimper. It was the sound a puppy makes when it wants something.

Astrid looked pleadingly at Sam. “Most of the time he doesn’t realize I’m around. I hate to leave him when he’s relating.”

“I’ll get the food.” Sam said. “What does he like?”

“Chocolate is never refused. He . . .” She started to say more but stopped herself.

“I’ll get him something,” Sam said.

Edilio had moved on to what seemed to be the most up-to-date piece of equipment in the room, a plasma screen mounted on the wall.

Quinn was looking up at the screen as well, rotating slowly in one of the engineer’s chairs. “See if you can get another channel, that one’s boring.”

“It’s a map,” Edilio said. “There’s Perdido Beach. There’s some little towns back in the hills. It goes all the way to San Luis.”

The map glowed pale blue, white, and pink, with a red bull’s-eye in the center.

“The pink is the fallout pattern in case there is ever a release,” Astrid said. “The red is the immediate area where the radiation would be intense. It gets data on wind patterns, the contours of the land, the jet stream, all that, and adjusts it.”

“The red and the pink, that’s the danger?” Edilio asked.

“Yes. That’s the plume where the fallout would be above acceptable levels.”

“That’s a lot of land,” Edilio said.

“But it’s weird,” Astrid said. She guided Little Pete to his feet and went closer to the map. “I’ve never seen it look like that. Usually the plume goes inland, you know, from the prevailing winds coming off the ocean. Sometimes the plume stretches all the way down to Santa Barbara. Or else up across the national park, depending on weather.”

The pink pattern was a perfect circle. The red zone was like a bull’s-eye inside that outer circle.

“The computer’s not getting satellite weather data,” Astrid said. “So it must have reverted to its default setting, which is this red circle with a ten-mile radius, and a pink circle with a hundred-mile radius.”

Sam peered at the map, unable at first to make sense of it. Then he began to locate the town, beaches he knew, other features.

“The whole town’s inside the red zone,” Sam said.

Astrid nodded.

“The red zone goes right to the far south end of town.”

“Yes.”

Sam glanced at her to discover whether she saw what he saw. “It runs right through Clifftop.”

“Yes,” she said slowly. “It does.”

“Are you thinking . . .”

“Yes,” Astrid said. “I’m thinking it’s a pretty amazing coincidence that the barrier seems to line up with the edge of the danger zone.” Then she added, “At least what we know of the barrier. We don’t know that it includes the entire red spot.”

“Does this mean there’s been some kind of radiation leak?”

Astrid shook her head. “I don’t think so. There’d be radiation alarms going off all over the place. But what’s weird is, it’s like cause and effect, only backward. The FAYZ is what cut off the weather data, which caused the computer to default. FAYZ first, then the map goes to default. So why would the FAYZ barrier be following a map whose lines it caused?”

Sam shook his head and smiled a little ruefully. “I must be tired. You lost me. I’ll go find some food.” He headed down the hall in the direction Astrid had indicated.

When he looked back she was standing, staring up at the map, a tight, grim expression on her face.

She noticed Sam watching her. Their eyes locked. She flinched, like he had caught her at something. She put one protective arm around Little Pete, who had buried his face back in his game. Astrid blinked, looked down, took a deep shaky breath, and deliberately turned away.

TWELVE

272 HOURS, 47 MINUTES

“COFFEE.” MARY SAID the word like it might be magic. “Coffee. That’s what I need.”

She was in the cramped, narrow teachers’ room at Barbara’s Day Care, searching the refrigerator for something, anything, to feed a little girl who refused to eat. She had almost fallen into the refrigerator, she was so tired, and then she spotted the coffeemaker.

It’s what her mother did when she was tired. It’s what everyone did when they were tired.

In response to Mary’s desperate, late-night plea for help, Howard had supplied the day care with a single box of diapers. They were Huggies for newborns. Useless. He had sent over two gallons of milk and half a dozen bags of chips and Goldfish. And he had sent Panda, who proved to be worse than useless. Mary had overheard him threatening to smack a crying three-year-old and had shooed him out of the building.

But the twins, Anna and Emma, had come on their own to help out. It wasn’t enough people, not by a long shot, but Mary had been able to get two full hours of sleep.

But then, when she woke that morning—no, it was afternoon, wasn’t it, she had lost track. She was so groggy, she not only had no idea what time it was, for the first few seconds she had no idea where she was.

Mary had never made coffee before, but she had seen it done. With bleary eyes she tried to figure it out. There was a scoop. There were filters.

Her first effort was a long wait for nothing. Only after sitting and staring in a comalike state for ten minutes did she realize she had forgotten to put water in the machine. When she did put the water in, it erupted in a spout of steam. But after five minutes more she had a fragrant pot of coffee.

She poured a cup and took a tentative sip. It was very hot and very bitter. She had no milk to spare, but she did still have some sugar. She started off with two big spoonfuls.

That was better.

Not good, but better.

She carried the cup back into the main room. At least six kids were crying. Diapers needed changing. The youngest kids needed feeding. Again.

A three-year-old girl with wispy blond hair spotted Mary and came running. Without thinking, Mary reached down. The coffee spilled onto the child’s neck and shoulder.

The girl screamed.

Mary shouted in fear. “Oh, God.”

John came running. “What happened?”

The little girl howled.

Mary froze.

“What should we do?” John cried.

Anna came running, a baby in her arms. “Oh, my God, what happened?”

The little girl screamed and screamed.

Mary carefully sat the coffee cup on the counter. Then she ran from the room and from the school.

She ran weeping to her home two blocks away. She fumbled the door open. She could barely see through her tears. Deep sobs racked her whole body.

It was cool and silent inside. Everything just like it always was. Only so quiet, so quiet that her sobs sounded like harsh, animal sounds.

Mary soothed herself. "It'll be all right, it'll be all right." The same lie she'd been telling the kids. She quieted the racking sobs.

Mary sat at the kitchen table. She laid her head on her arms, intending to cry some more, quietly. But the time for tears was past.

For a while she just listened to the sound of her own breathing. She stared at the wood grain of the table. Exhaustion made it swirl.

It was impossible to believe that her mother and father were not home.

Where were they? Where were they all?

Her bedroom, her bed were just up the stairs.

She couldn't do it. She couldn't go to sleep. If she did, she wouldn't wake up for hours and hours.

The kids needed her. Her brother, poor John, coping while she freaked out.

Mary opened the freezer. Ben & Jerry's fudge brownie ice cream. DoveBars. She could eat them and then she would feel better.

She could eat them and then she would feel worse.

If she started, she wouldn't stop. If she started eating when she felt like this, she wouldn't stop until the shame became so great, she would force herself to vomit it all back up.

Mary had suffered from bulimia since she was ten. Binge eating followed by purging, again and again in a quickening cycle of diminishing returns that had left her forty pounds overweight at one point, and her teeth rough and discolored from the stomach acid.

She'd been clever enough to conceal it for a long time, but her parents had found out eventually. Then had come therapists and a special camp and when none of that really helped, medication. Speaking of which, Mary reminded herself, she needed to get the bottle from her medicine cabinet.

She was better now with the Prozac. Her eating was under control. She didn't purge anymore. She had lost some of the extra weight.

But why not eat now? Why not?

The cold air of the freezer wafted over her. The ice cream, the chocolate, there it was. It wouldn't hurt. Not just once. Not now when she was scared to death and alone and so tired.

Just one DoveBar.

She pulled it out of the box and with fumbling, anxious fingers tore open the wrapper. It was in her mouth in a flash, so good, so cold, the chocolate slick and greasy as it melted on her tongue. The crunch of the shell as she bit into it, the soft luscious vanilla ice cream inside.

She ate it all. She ate like a wolf.

Mary grabbed the Ben & Jerry's, and now she was beginning to cry again as she

put it into the microwave and softened it for twenty seconds. She wanted it runny, she wanted it to be like cold chocolate soup. She wanted to slurp it down.

The microwave dinged.

She grabbed a spoon, a big one, a soup spoon. She pried the lid from the ice cream and half spooned, half poured the pint of rich chocolate down her throat, barely tasting it in her eagerness.

She was weeping and eating, licking her hands, shaking the spoon.

She licked the lid.

Enough, she told herself.

She pulled out two large plastic garbage bags, the big black ones. Systematically she filled one with anything she could feed to the children: saltines, peanut butter, honey, Rice Chex, Nutri-Grain bars, cashews.

The second bag she carried upstairs. She piled in pillowcases and sheets, toilet paper, towels—especially towels because they could be substituted for diapers.

She found the bottle of Prozac. She opened it and tipped it into her hand. The pills were green and orange, oblong. She popped one and swallowed it by cupping water from the faucet with her hand.

There were only two pills left.

She dragged the two bags to the front door.

Then she went back upstairs to her bathroom. She carefully locked the door behind her.

She knelt in front of the toilet, raised the lid, and stuck her finger down her throat until the gag reflex forced the food from her stomach.

When she was done she brushed her teeth. She went back downstairs. Took hold of the bags and began dragging them to the day care.

“I’m guessing Little Pete can’t balance on bike handlebars,” Sam said to Astrid.

“No, he can’t,” Astrid confirmed.

“Okay, then, we’ll be on foot. It’s what, like, four o’clock? Maybe we better stay here the night, start out in the morning.” Self-conscious about Quinn’s earlier complaints, Sam said, “What do you think, Quinn? Stay or go for it?”

Quinn shrugged. “I’m beat. Besides, they have a candy machine.”

The plant manager’s office had a couch, which Astrid could share with Little Pete. She offered a still-stiff Edilio the back cushions.

Sam and Quinn searched the facility until they happened upon the infirmary. There were gurneys there, hospital beds on wheels.

Quinn laughed. “Surf’s up, brah.”

Sam hesitated. But then Quinn took off running, got the gurney up to speed, jumped aboard, and even managed to stand up before slamming into a wall.

“Okay,” Sam said. “I can do that.”

They had a few minutes of gurney surfing through the abandoned hallways. And Sam discovered he could still laugh. It seemed like a million years since Sam had surfed with Quinn. A million years.

Sam and Quinn parked their gurneys in the control room. None of them really understood any of the controls, but it felt like the place to be.

They found that Edilio had rounded up five radiation suits, almost like space suits,

each with a hood, a gas mask, and a small oxygen bottle.

“Nice, Edilio,” Quinn said. “Just in case?”

Edilio looked uncomfortable. “Yeah, just in case.”

When Quinn smirked, Edilio said, “You don’t think all that has happened is because of this place? Look at that map, man. Red bull’s-eye that just happens to go right where the barrier goes? Maybe that Howard guy had it right, you know? Fallout Alley Youth Zone? It’s a pretty big coincidence.”

Astrid, weary, said, “Radiation doesn’t cause barriers to appear or people to disappear.”

“It’s deadly stuff, right?” Edilio pressed.

Quinn sighed and pushed his gurney toward a dark corner, bored by the discussion. Sam waited to hear Astrid’s answer.

“Radiation can kill you,” Astrid agreed. “It can kill you quickly, it can kill you slowly, it can give you cancer, it can just make you sick, or it can do nothing. And it can cause mutations.”

“Mutation like a seagull that suddenly has a hawk’s talons?” Edilio asked pointedly.

“Yes, but only over a long, long time. Not overnight.” She stood up and took Little Pete’s hand. “I have to get him to bed.” Over her shoulder she said, “Don’t worry, you won’t mutate in the night, Edilio.”

Sam stretched out on his gurney. The control room had muted lighting that went almost but not quite to dark once Astrid found the switches. The computer monitors and the LCD readouts glowed.

Sam might have chosen to leave more of the lights on. He doubted he would be able to sleep.

He lay remembering the last time he’d gone surfing with Quinn. Day after Halloween. It had only been early November sun, but in memory it was very bright, every rock and pebble and sand crab outlined in gold. In his memory the waves were wondrous, almost living things, blue and green and white, calling to him, challenging him to leave his worries behind and come out and play.

Then the scene shifted and his mother was at the top of the cliff, smiling and waving down to him. He remembered that day. She was almost always asleep during the morning hours when he surfed. But this day she came to watch.

She’d been wearing her blue and white flowery wraparound skirt and a white blouse. Her hair, much lighter than his own, blew in the stiff breeze, and she seemed frail and vulnerable up there. He wanted to yell to her to step back from the edge.

But she couldn’t hear him.

He yelled up to her, but she couldn’t hear him.

He woke suddenly from the memory that had become a dream. There were no windows, no way to see if it was day or night outside. But no one else was awake.

He slid off the gurney and stood up, careful to make no sound. One by one he checked on the others. Quinn silent for once, no sleep-talking; Edilio snoring on the cushions Astrid had given him; Astrid curled on one end of the couch in the office; and Little Pete asleep at the other end.

Their second night without parents. That first night in a hotel, and now here, in this nuclear power plant.

Where tomorrow night?

Sam did not want to go back to living in his home. He wanted his mother back, but not their home.

On the desk in the plant manager's office Sam spotted an iPod. He wasn't optimistic about the musical taste of the manager, who, judging by the family photo on his desk, was about sixty years old. But he didn't think he could go back to sleep.

He crept as silently as he could across the office, almost brushing Astrid's hand. Around the desk, shifting the chair ever so slightly, leaning carefully away from a shelf of trophies—golf, mostly.

A sudden movement at his feet, a rat. He jumped back and slammed into the glass-shelf trophy display.

There was a tremendous crash.

Little Pete's eyes flew open.

"Sorry," Sam said, but before he could speak another syllable, Little Pete began to screech. It was a primitive sound. An earsplitting, insistent, repetitive, panicky baboon sound.

"It's okay," Sam said. "It's—"

His throat seized and choked off any sound. He couldn't speak.

He couldn't breathe.

Sam clutched at his throat. He felt invisible hands wrapped around his neck, steel fingers choking off his air. He slapped and pried at the fingers, and all the while Little Pete screeched and flapped his arms like a bird trying to fly.

Little Pete shrieked.

Edilio and Quinn were up and running.

Sam felt blood in his eyes, darkening his vision. His heart pounded. His lungs convulsed, sucking on nothing.

"Petey, Petey, it's all right," Astrid said, soothing her brother, stroking his head, cuddling him against her. Her eyes were desperate with fear. "Window seat, Petey. Window seat, window seat, window seat."

Sam staggered into the desk.

Astrid fumbled for Little Pete's Game Boy. She turned it on.

"What's happening?" Quinn yelled.

"He heard a loud noise," Astrid yelled. "It startled him. When he's scared, he freaks. It's okay, Petey, it's okay, I'm here. Here's your game."

Sam wanted to yell that it was not okay, that he was choking, but he couldn't make a sound. His head was swimming.

"Hey, Sam, what are you doing?" Quinn demanded.

"He's choking!" Edilio said.

"Can't you shut that stupid kid up?" Quinn yelled.

"He won't stop until everyone is calm," Astrid said through gritted teeth. "Window seat, Petey, go to your window seat."

Sam fell to one knee.

This was crazy.

He was going to die.

Fear took hold of him.

His world was going black.

His hands, palm out, pushed at nothing.

Suddenly there was a brilliant flash of light.

It was as if a small star had gone supernova in the plant manager's office.

Sam fell, unconscious.

He was conscious again ten seconds later, on his back, the scared faces of Quinn and Edilio staring down at him.

Little Pete was silent. His too-pretty eyes were glued to his video game.

"Is he alive?" Quinn asked in a faraway voice.

Sam breathed in, sharp and sudden. Then another breath.

"I'm okay," he rasped.

"Is he okay?" Astrid asked in a voice edged with panic, but controlled to avoid setting Little Pete off again.

"Where did that light come from?" Edilio demanded. "Did you guys see that?"

"Dude: they saw that on the moon." Quinn's eyes were wide.

"We are out of this place," Edilio said.

"Where can we—" Astrid said.

Edilio cut her off. "I don't care. Out of this place."

"You got that right," Quinn said. He reached down and yanked Sam to his feet.

Sam's head was still spinning, his legs wobbly. No point in resisting, the panic was in every face around him. This wasn't the time to argue or explain.

He didn't trust himself to speak, just pointed toward the door and nodded.

They ran.

THIRTEEN

258 HOURS, 59 MINUTES

THEY TOOK NOTHING with them, just ran, with Quinn in the lead and Edilio bunched with Astrid and Little Pete, and Sam woozing along behind.

They ran until they were past the main gate. They stopped, panting, bent over, resting hands on knees. It was very dark. The power plant seemed even more of a living, breathing thing at night. It was illuminated by a hundred spotlights, which just made the hills looming above them darker.

“Okay, what was that?” Quinn demanded to know. “What was that?”

“Petey just panicked,” Astrid said.

“Yeah, I get that part,” Quinn said. “What about that light that went off?”

“I don’t know,” Sam managed to rasp.

“What were you choking on, brah?”

“I was just choking,” Sam said.

“Just choking? Just choking on air?”

“I don’t know, maybe . . . maybe I was sleepwalking or something and grabbed something to eat and choked on it.” It was weak, and Quinn’s disbelieving look, mirrored by Edilio, said they weren’t buying it.

“That’s probably it,” Astrid said.

It was so unexpected, even Sam couldn’t hide a look of surprise.

“What else could have caused him to choke?” Astrid asked. “And the light must have been some internal alarm system going off.”

“No offense, Astrid, but no way,” Edilio said. He put his hands on his hips, squared himself up to Sam, and said, “Man, it’s time you started telling us the truth. I respect you, man. But how am I going to respect you if you lie to me?”

Sam was caught off guard. It was the first time he, or any of them, had seen Edilio angry.

“What do you mean?” Sam stalled.

“There’s something going on, man, and it’s about you, all right?” Edilio said. “That light just now? I saw that light before. I saw it just before I pulled you out that window from that burning building.”

Quinn’s head snapped around. “What? What are you saying?”

Edilio said, “The wall and the disappearing people, that’s not all of it. There’s some other strange thing going on. Something is going on with you, Sam. And Astrid too, since she was pretty quick to try to cover for you just now.”

Sam was surprised to realize that Edilio was right: Astrid knew something, too. He wasn’t the only one keeping secrets. He felt a wave of relief. He didn’t have to be alone on this.

“Okay.” Sam took a deep breath and tried to organize his thoughts before he started blurting it all out.

“First, I don’t know what it is, all right?” Sam said quietly. “I don’t know where it comes from. I don’t know how it happens. I don’t know anything about it except that sometimes . . . it’s this . . . there’s this light.”

“What are you talking about, brah?” Quinn demanded.

Sam held up his hands, turning his palms toward his friend. “I can . . . Dude, I know it sounds like I’m crazy, but sometimes this light just comes shooting out of my hands.”

Quinn barked a laugh. “No, man, that doesn’t sound crazy. Crazy is you saying you’re better than me at riding a curl. This is mentally ill. This is off the hook. Let me see you do it.”

“I don’t know how,” Sam confessed. “It’s happened four times, but I can’t just make it happen.”

“Four times you shot lasers out of your hands.” Quinn was on the line between laughing and yelling. “I’ve known you, like, half your life, and now you’re the Green Lantern? Right.”

“It’s true,” Astrid said.

“Bull. If it’s true, then do it. Show me.”

Sam said, “I’m trying to tell you, it only happens when I’m panicked or whatever. I don’t make it happen, it just happens.”

Edilio said, “Just now you said four times. I saw the flash at the fire. I saw it just now. What’s the other two times?”

“The time before was at my house. It made . . . I mean, I made . . . this light. Like a lightbulb kind of. It was dark. I had a nightmare.” He met Astrid’s steady gaze and suddenly a different lightbulb went off. “You saw it,” he accused her. “You saw the light in my room. You’ve known all along.”

“Yes,” Astrid admitted. “I’ve known since that first day. And I’ve known about Petey for longer.”

Edilio still wanted the basics laid out. “The fire, here, this lightbulb thing, that’s three.”

“First time was Tom,” Sam said. The name meant nothing to Edilio, but it did to Quinn.

“Your stepfather?” Quinn demanded sharply. “Ex-stepfather, I mean.”

“Yeah.”

Quinn was staring hard at Sam. “Brah, you aren’t saying what you sound like you’re saying, right?”

“I thought he was trying to hurt my mom,” Sam said. “I thought . . . I was asleep, I woke up, I come down the stairs, they’re both in the kitchen yelling, I see Tom with a knife, and there’s this flash of light shooting out of my hands.”

Sam felt tears stinging his eyes. It surprised him. He didn’t feel sad. If anything, he felt relieved. He hadn’t told anyone about this before. This was a weight coming off his shoulders. But at the same time, he registered the way Quinn drew back a step, putting distance between them.

“My mom knew, of course. She covered at the emergency room. Tom was yelling that I had shot him. The doctors saw a burn, so they knew it wasn’t a gunshot. My mom told some lie about Tom falling against the stove.”

“She had to choose between protecting you or supporting her husband,” Astrid said.

“Yeah. And Tom realized, once the pain was under control, he realized he would end up in the psychiatric ward if he kept talking about his stepson shooting beams of

light at him.”

“You burned your stepfather’s hand off?” Quinn asked, his tone shrill.

“Whoa, back up. Did what?” Edilio demanded. It was his turn to be surprised.

Quinn said, “His stepfather ended up with a hook, man. They had to cut his hand off, like, right here.” He made a chopping motion on his forearm. “I saw him, like, a week ago, over in San Luis. He’s got one of those hooks now, you know, with, like, two pincers or whatever? He was buying cigarettes and handing the clerk money with his hook.” He pantomimed it, using two fingers for the pincers of the prosthetic arm.

“So you’re some kind of freak?” Quinn asked. He still seemed undecided whether he was mad or found it funny.

“I’m not the only one,” Sam said defensively. “That girl in the fire. I think she started that fire. When she saw me, she panicked. It was like liquid fire came out of her hands.”

Edilio said, “So you shot back. You did your thing at her.” Sam could see only the outline of his face in the darkness. “That’s what’s been dogging you. You think you hurt her.”

“I don’t know how to control it. I don’t ask for it to come. I don’t know how to make it go away. I’m just glad I didn’t hurt Little Pete. I was choking.”

Quinn and Edilio turned their attention to the little boy now. Little Pete rubbed sleep from his eyes and stared past them, indifferent to them, maybe not even aware that they existed. Maybe wondering why he was standing in the damp night air outside a nuclear power plant. Maybe not wondering anything.

“He’s one, too,” Quinn accused. “A freak.”

“He doesn’t know what he’s doing,” Astrid said.

“That’s not exactly reassuring,” Quinn snapped. “What’s his trick? He shoot missiles out of his butt or something?”

Astrid smoothed her brother’s hair down with her hand and let her fingers trace the side of his face. “Window seat,” she whispered. Then, to the others, “‘Window seat’ is a trigger phrase. It helps him find a calm place. It’s the window seat in my room.”

“Window seat,” Little Pete said unexpectedly.

“He talks,” Edilio said.

“He can,” Astrid said. “But he doesn’t much.”

“He talks. Great. What else does he do?” Quinn demanded pointedly.

“He seems able to do a lot of things. Mostly we’re good, the two of us. Mostly he doesn’t really notice me. But once, I was doing his therapy, working with this picture book we work on sometimes. I show him a picture and try to get him to say the word and, I don’t know, I guess I was in a bad mood that day. I guess I was too rough taking his hand and putting his finger on the picture like you’re supposed to do. He got mad. And then, I wasn’t there anymore. One second I was in his room, and then all of a sudden I was in my room.”

There was a dead silence as the four of them stared at Little Pete.

“Then maybe he can zap us out of the FAYZ and back to our folks,” Quinn said finally.

Silence fell again. The five of them stood in the middle of the road, the humming, bright-lit power plant behind them, a dark road descending ahead.

“I keep waiting for you to laugh, Sam,” Quinn said to Sam. “You know: say

‘gotcha.’ Tell me it’s all some trick. Tell me you’re just goofing on me.”

“We’re in a new world,” Astrid said. “Look, I’ve known about Petey for a while. I tried to believe it was some kind of miracle. Like you, Quinn, I wanted to believe it was God doing it.”

“What is doing it?” Edilio asked. “I mean, you’re saying this stuff was happening before the FAYZ.”

“Look, I’m supposedly smart, but that doesn’t mean I understand any of this,” Astrid admitted. “All I know is that under the laws of biology and physics, none of this is possible. The human body has no organ that generates light. And what Petey did, the ability to move things from one place to another? Scientists have figured out how to do it with a couple of atoms. Not entire human beings. It would take more energy than the entire power plant produces, which means that, basically, the laws of physics would have to be rewritten.”

“How do you rewrite the laws of physics?” Sam wondered.

Astrid threw up her hands. “I can just about, barely, follow AP physics. To understand this, you’d have to be Einstein or Heisenberg or Feynman, on that level. I just know that impossible things don’t happen. So either this isn’t happening, or somehow the rules have been changed.”

“Like someone hacked the universe,” Quinn said.

“Exactly,” Astrid said, surprised that Quinn had gotten it. “Like someone hacked the universe and rewrote the software.”

“Nothing but kids left, there’s some big wall, and my best friend is magic boy all of a sudden,” Quinn said. “I figured, okay, at least whatever else, I still have my brah, I still have my best friend.”

Sam said, “I’m still your friend, Quinn.”

Quinn sighed. “Yeah. Well, it isn’t exactly the same, is it?”

“There are probably others,” Astrid said. “Others like Sam and Petey. And the little girl who died.”

“We have to keep this quiet,” Edilio said. “We can’t be telling anyone. People don’t like people they think are better than they are. If regular kids find out about this, it’s going to be trouble.”

“Maybe not,” Astrid said hopefully.

“You’re smart, Astrid, but if you think people are going to be happy about this, you don’t know people,” Edilio said.

“Well, I won’t be the one blabbing about it,” Quinn said.

Astrid said, “Okay, I think probably Edilio’s right. At least for now. And especially we can’t let anyone find out about Petey.”

“I’m not saying anything,” Edilio confirmed.

“You guys know. That’s enough,” Sam said.

They started walking together toward the distant town. They walked in silence. At first, bunched together. Then Quinn moved out in front. And Edilio drifted to one side. Astrid was with Little Pete.

Sam let himself fall behind. He wanted quiet. He wanted privacy. Part of him would have liked to drift farther and farther back until he was left behind, forgotten by the others.

But he was tied to these four people now. They knew what he was. They knew his

secret. And they had not turned against him.

The sound of Quinn singing “Three Little Birds” came drifting back. Sam quickened his pace to catch up with his friends.

FOURTEEN

255 HOURS, 42 MINUTES

SAM, ASTRID, QUINN, and Edilio flopped on the grass of the plaza, exhausted. Little Pete remained standing, playing his game, oblivious, as though an all-night, ten-mile walk were just a stroll. The rising sun silhouetted the mountains behind them and lit the too-calm ocean.

The grass was wet with dew that soaked straight through Sam's shirt. He thought, I'll never be able to sleep here. And then he was asleep.

He woke up with sun in his eyes. He blinked and sat up. The dew had burned off, and now the grass was crisping in the heat. There were a lot of kids around. But he didn't see his friends. Maybe they had gone looking for food. He was hungry himself.

When he stood up he noticed that the crowd was moving, all in one direction, toward the church.

He joined the movement. A girl he knew walked by. He asked what was going on.

She shrugged. "I'm just following everyone else."

Sam kept moving till the crowd began to congeal. Then he hopped up on the back of a park bench, balancing precariously but able to see over everyone's head.

Four cars were making their way down Alameda Avenue. They drove at a stately pace, like a parade. Adding to that impression, the third car in line was a convertible with the top down. All four cars were dark, powerful, and expensive vehicles. The last car in line was a black SUV. They drove with their lights on.

"Is it someone coming to rescue us?" a fifth grader called up to Sam.

"I don't see any police cars, so I doubt it. You might want to hang back, man."

"Is it the aliens?"

"I think if it was aliens, we'd be seeing spaceships, not BMWs."

The procession or parade or convoy or whatever it was drove up alongside the curb at the top of the plaza, just across the street from the town hall, and stopped.

Kids climbed out of each car. They wore black slacks and white shirts. Girls wore pleated black skirts and matching knee-high socks. Both boys and girls had on blazers in a subdued shade of red, with a large crest sewn over the heart. Boys and girls alike wore striped ties of red, black, and gold.

The crest featured ornate letters "C" and "A" in gold thread over a background that showed a golden eagle and a mountain lion. Beneath the crest was the Latin motto of Coates Academy: *Ad augusta, per angusta*. To high places by narrow roads.

"They're all Coates kids." It was Astrid. She and Little Pete stood with Edilio. Sam jumped down to be beside them.

"A well-rehearsed display," Astrid said, as though reading Sam's mind.

As the Coates kids climbed out of the cars, the crowd actually drew back a step. There had always been a rivalry between the kids in town, who thought of themselves as normal kids, and the Coates kids, who tended to be wealthy and, although the Academy tried to disguise the fact, strange.

Coates was the place your rich parents sent you when other schools found you "difficult."

The Coates kids lined up, not quite a drill team in their order and precision, but like they had practiced it.

“Quasi-military,” Astrid said in a low, discreet voice.

Then one boy, wearing a bright yellow V-necked sweater instead of his blazer, stood up in the convertible. He grinned sheepishly and climbed nimbly from the backseat onto the trunk. He gave a little self-deprecating wave, as if to say he couldn’t believe what he was doing.

He was handsome, even Sam noticed that. He had dark hair and dark eyes, not much different from Sam himself. But this boy’s face seemed to glow with an inner light. He radiated confidence, but without arrogance or condescension. In fact, he managed to seem genuinely humble even while standing alone, looking out over everyone else.

“Hi, everyone,” he said. “I’m Caine Soren. You probably figured out that I . . . we . . . are from Coates Academy. Either that or we all just have the same bad taste in clothing.”

There was a bit of a laugh from the crowd.

“A self-deprecating joke to loosen us up,” Astrid said, continuing her whispered commentary.

Out of the corner of his eye, Sam noticed Mallet. The boy was turning away, crouching down, acting like he was trying to hide. Mallet was a Coates kid. What was it he’d said? That he didn’t get along with the kids at Coates? Something like that.

“I know there’s a tradition of rivalry between the kids of Coates Academy and the kids of Perdido Beach,” Caine said. “Well, that was the old days. It looks to me like we’re all in this together. We all have the same problems now. And we should work together to deal with our problems, don’t you think?”

Heads were nodding in response.

His voice was clear and just a little higher, maybe, than Sam’s, but strong and determined. He had a way of looking at the crowd before him that made it seem he was meeting every person’s eye, seeing every person as an individual.

“Do you know what happened?” a voice asked.

Caine shook his head. “No. I don’t think we probably know any more than you. Everyone fifteen and over disappeared. And there’s the wall, the barrier.”

“We call it the FAYZ,” Howard said loudly.

“The phase?” Caine appeared interested.

“F-A-Y-Z. Fallout Alley Youth Zone.”

Caine considered that for a moment, then laughed. “That’s excellent. Did you come up with that?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s vital to keep a sense of humor when the world seems to have suddenly become a very strange place. What’s your name?”

“Howard. I’m the Captain’s number-one guy. Captain Orc.”

An uneasy ripple moved through the crowd. Caine read it instantly. “I hope you and Captain Orc will join me and anyone else who wants to sit down and talk about our plans for the future. Because we do have a plan for the future.” He emphasized this last sentence with a chopping motion, like he was cutting away the past.

“I want my mom,” a little boy cried out suddenly.

Every voice fell silent. The boy had said what they were all feeling.

Caine hopped down from the car and went to the boy. He knelt down and took the boy's hands in his own. He asked the boy's name, and reintroduced himself. "We all want our parents back," he said gently, but loudly enough to be overheard clearly by those nearest. "We all want that. And I believe that will happen. I believe we will see all our moms and dads, and older brothers and sisters, and even our teachers again. I believe that. Do you believe it, too?"

"Yes." The little boy sobbed.

Caine wrapped him in a hug and said, "Be strong. Be your mommy's strong little boy."

"He's good," Astrid said. "He's beyond good."

Then Caine stood up. People had formed a circle around him, close but respectful. "We all have to be strong. We all have to get through this. If we work together to choose good leaders and do the right thing, we will make it."

The entire crowd of kids seemed to stand a little taller. There were determined looks on faces that had been weary and frightened.

Sam was mesmerized by the performance. In just a few minutes' time, Caine had infused hope into a very frightened, dispirited bunch of kids.

Astrid seemed mesmerized too, though Sam thought he detected the cool glint of skepticism in her eyes.

Sam was skeptical himself. He distrusted rehearsed displays. He distrusted charm. But it was hard not to think that Caine was at least trying to reach out to the Perdido Beach kids. It was hard not to believe in him, at least a little. And if Caine really did have a plan, wouldn't that be a good thing? No one else seemed to have a clue.

Caine raised his voice again. "If it's okay with everyone here, I would like to borrow your church. I would like to sit down with your leaders, in the presence of our Lord, and discuss my plan, and any changes you want to make. Are there maybe, oh, a dozen people who could speak for you?"

"Me," Orc said, shouldering his way forward. He still carried his aluminum baseball bat. And he had acquired a policeman's helmet, one of the black plastic helmets the Perdido Beach cops used when they patrolled on bicycles.

Caine fixed the thug with a penetrating stare. "You must be Captain Orc."

"Yeah. That's me."

Caine stuck out his hand. "I'm honored to meet you, Captain."

Orc's mouth dropped open. He hesitated. Sam thought it was probably the first time in Orc's turbulent life that anyone had said they were honored to meet him. And probably the first time anyone had offered to shake his hand. Orc was clearly confused. He glanced at Howard.

Howard was looking from Orc to Caine, sizing up the situation. "He's paying you props, Captain," Howard said.

Orc grunted, shifted the bat from right hand to left, and stuck out his thick paw. Caine grabbed it with both his hands and solemnly looked Orc in the eye as they shook hands.

"Smooth," Astrid said under her breath.

Still holding Orc's hand in his, Caine challenged, "Now, who else speaks for Perdido Beach?"

Bouncing Bette said, "Sam Temple here went into a burning building to rescue a little girl. He can speak for me, anyway."

There was a murmur of agreement.

"Yeah, Sam is a hero for real," a voice said.

"He could have died," another voice seconded.

"Yeah, Sam's the guy."

Caine's smile came and disappeared so quickly, Sam wasn't sure it had happened. For that millisecond it was a look of triumph. Caine walked straight up to Sam, open and forthright, hand extended.

"There are probably better people than me," Sam said, backing away.

But Caine grabbed his elbow and maneuvered him into a handshake. "Sam, is it? It sounds like you truly are a hero. Are you related to our school nurse, Connie Temple?"

"She's my mother."

"I'm not surprised that she would have a brave son," Caine said with deep feeling. "She's a very good woman. I see you're humble as well as brave, Sam, but I . . . I'm asking for your help. I need your help."

With the mention of his mother, everything fell into place. Caine. "C." What were the odds that "C" was some other kid from Coates?

Sooner or later, C or one of the others will do something serious. Someone will get hurt. Just like S with T.

"Okay," Sam said. "If that's what people want."

A few other names were mentioned, and Sam halfheartedly, but loyally, named Quinn.

Caine's eyes flickered from Sam to Quinn, and for just a millisecond there flashed a cynical, knowing look. But it was gone in a heartbeat, replaced by Caine's practiced expression of humility and resolve.

"Then let's go in together," Caine said. He turned and marched purposefully up the church steps. The rest of the chosen fell in behind him.

One of the Coates kids, a dark-eyed, very beautiful girl, waylaid Sam and held out her hand. Sam took it.

"I'm Diana," she said, not letting his hand go. "Diana Ladris."

"Sam Temple."

Her midnight eyes met his and he wanted to look away, feeling awkward, but somehow could not.

"Ah," she said, as if someone had told her something fascinating. Then she let him go and smirked. "Well, well. I guess we'd better go in. We don't want to leave Fearless Leader without followers."

It was a Catholic church, built a hundred years earlier by the rich man who had owned the cannery that now lay rusting and abandoned, a tin-plated eyesore by the marina.

With soaring arches, half a dozen statues of saints, and wonderful well-worn wooden pews, the church was much grander than the small town of Perdido Beach probably deserved. Of the six tall, peaked windows, three retained their original stained-glass representations of Jesus in various parables. The other three had been

lost over time to vandals or weather or earthquakes and had been replaced with cheaper, abstract-patterned stained glass.

When Astrid entered the church she dipped to one knee and made the sign of the cross while looking up at the intimidatingly large crucifix above the altar.

“Is this where you go to church?” Sam asked in a whisper.

“Yes. You?”

He shook his head. It was Sam’s first time inside. His mother was a nonobservant Jew, no one spoke about what his father was, and Sam himself had only a vague interest in religion. The church made him feel small and definitely out of place.

Caine had moved confidently toward the altar. The altar itself was not very grand, just a pale marble rectangle up three maroon-carpeted steps. Caine did not go to the old-fashioned raised pulpit, but stood on the second of the three steps.

In all, fifteen kids were there, including Sam Temple, Quinn, Astrid and Little Pete, Albert Hillsborough, and Mary Terrafino; Elwood Booker, the best ninth-grade athlete, and his girlfriend, Dahra Baidoo; Orc, whose real name was rumored to be Charles Merriman; Howard Bassem; and Cookie, whose real name was Tony Gilder.

From Coates Academy, in addition to Caine Soren, there was Drake Merwin, a smiling, playful, mean-eyed kid with shaggy, sandy-colored hair; Diana Ladriss; and a lost-looking fifth grader with big glasses and a blond bed-head introduced by Caine as Computer Jack.

All of the Perdido Beach kids sat in pews, with Orc and his crew sprawling across the front pew. Computer Jack sat down as far to one side as he could. Drake Merwin stood smirking, arms across his chest, on Caine’s left, and Diana Ladriss watched the crowd from Caine’s right.

It was again brought home to Sam that the Coates kids had rehearsed everything about this morning, from the staged motorcade—which must have taken hours of driving practice to master—to this presentation. They must have started planning and practicing right after the FAYZ came.

That was a troubling thought.

After all the introductions were done, Caine moved briskly to explain his plan.

“We need to work together,” he announced. “I think we should organize so that things aren’t destroyed, and problems can be handled. I think our goal should be to maintain. So that once the barrier comes down, and once the disappeared people come back, they will find that we’ve done a pretty darn good job of keeping things together.”

“The Captain is already maintaining,” Howard said.

“He’s obviously done an excellent job,” Caine allowed, walking down the steps and toward Orc as he spoke. “But it’s a burden. Why should Captain Orc have to do all the work? I think we need a system, and I think we need a plan. Captain Orc,” he addressed the thug directly, “I’m sure you don’t want to have to allocate food and care for the sick and keep the day care functioning, and read all the things you’d have to read, and write all the things you’d have to write, in order to establish a system here in Perdido Beach.”

Astrid whispered, “He’s guessed that Orc is nearly illiterate.”

Orc glanced at Howard, who seemed mesmerized by Caine. Orc shrugged. As Astrid said, the mention of reading and writing made him uncomfortable.

“Exactly,” Caine said as though Orc’s shrug signified agreement. He returned to center stage and addressed the entire group. “We seem to have a reliable source of electricity. But communication is down. My friend Computer Jack thinks we can get the cell phones up and running.” There was an excited murmur, and Caine raised his hands. “I don’t mean that we’ll be able to call anyone outside of . . . what was Howard’s brilliant term? The FAYZ? But we would at least be able to communicate among ourselves.”

Eyes swiveled to Computer Jack, who gulped and bobbed his head yes and pushed his glasses up and blushed.

“It will take time, but together we can do it,” Caine said. He emphasized his certainty by smacking his closed right fist into his left palm. “In addition to a sheriff to sort of make sure the rules are being followed, a job that I think Drake Merwin is qualified to do since his father is a Highway Patrol lieutenant, we’ll need a fire chief to handle emergencies, and I nominate Sam Temple. Based on what people said earlier about his brave action in that fire, I think he’s an obvious choice, don’t you?”

There were nodded heads and murmurs of agreement.

“He’s co-opting you,” Astrid whispered. “He knows you’re his competition.”

“You don’t trust him,” Sam whispered back. It was not a question.

“He’s a manipulator,” Astrid said. “Doesn’t mean he’s bad. He may be okay.”

Mary said, “Sam saved the hardware store and the day care. And he almost saved that little girl. Speaking of which, someone needs to bury her.”

“Exactly,” Caine said. “God willing, we won’t have to face that need again, but someone has to bury the dead. Just as someone needs to help people who get sick or hurt. And someone needs to take care of the little children.”

Dahra Baidoo spoke up and said, “Mary has totally been taking care of the prees—I mean, preschoolers,” she explained. “Her and her brother, John.”

“But we need help,” Mary said quickly. “We’re not getting any sleep. We’re out of diapers and food and”—she sighed—“everything. John and I know the kids now, and we can keep running things, but we need help. We need a lot of help.”

Caine seemed to mist up, almost as if he might shed a tear. He walked quickly to Mary, drew her to her feet, and put his arm around her. “What a noble person you are, Mary. You and your brother will be given the power to draft. . . . How many people will it take to care for the prees?”

Mary calculated in her head. “The two of us and four others, maybe,” she said. Then, gaining confidence, she said, “Actually, we need four in the morning and four in the afternoon and four at night. And we need diapers and formula. And we need to be able to ask people to get us stuff, like food.”

Caine nodded. “The young ones are our greatest responsibility. Mary and John, you have absolute authority to draft whatever people you need, and demand whatever supplies you need. If anyone argues, Drake and his people, including Captain Orc, will make sure you get what you need.”

Mary looked overwhelmed and grateful.

Howard did not.

“Say what, now? I let it go by before, but are you saying Orc works for this guy?” He jerked a thumb at Drake, who just smiled like a shark. “We don’t work for anyone. Captain Orc doesn’t work for anyone, or under anyone, or follow anyone’s orders.”

Sam saw a coldly furious expression appear on Caine's handsome face, then disappear as swiftly as it had come.

Orc must have seen it too, because he stood up, and Cookie along with him. Both clutched bats. Drake, still smiling, stepped between them and Caine. A fight was coming, sudden as a tornado.

Diana Ladris, oddly, was eyeing Sam closely, as if unconcerned by Orc.

Caine sighed, raised his hands, and used both palms to smooth back his hair.

There came a rumble, up through the floor and the pews. A small earthquake, minor, nothing that Sam, like most Californians, hadn't felt before.

Everyone jumped to their feet, everyone knew what you did in an earthquake.

But then came a rending sound, steel and wood twisting, and the crucifix separated from the wall. It ripped free of the bolts holding it in place, like an invisible giant had yanked it away.

No one moved.

A shower of plaster and pebbles fell on the altar.

The crucifix toppled forward. It fell like a chainsawed tree.

As it fell, Caine dropped his hands to his sides. His face was grim, hard, and angry.

The crucifix, at least a dozen feet tall, slammed with shocking force down onto the front-row pew. The impact was as loud and sudden as a car wreck.

Orc and Howard jumped aside. Cookie was too slow. The horizontal bar of the cross caught his right shoulder.

He was on the ground and a red stain was spreading.

It all happened in the space of a few heartbeats. So fast that the kids who'd leaped to their feet didn't have the chance to bolt.

"Help me, help me!" Cookie cried.

He lay bellowing on the floor. Blood was seeping through the fabric of his T-shirt. It pooled on the tile floor.

Elwood shoved the cross off him, and Cookie screamed.

Caine had not moved. Drake Merwin kept his cold gaze on Orc, his arms still crossed, seemingly indifferent.

Diana Ladris maintained her focus on Sam. The knowing smirk on her face didn't waver.

Astrid grabbed Sam's arm and whispered, "Let's get out of here. We have to talk."

Diana saw that as well.

"Ahhh, ahhhh, help me, oh man, I'm hurt!" Cookie cried.

Orc and Howard made no move to help their fallen comrade.

Caine, perfectly calm, said, "This is terrible. Does anyone know first aid? Sam? Your mother was a nurse."

Little Pete, who had sat silent and still as a stone, began to rock faster and faster. His hands flapped as if he were warding off an attack of bees.

"I have to get him out of here, he's spiraling," Astrid said, and bundled Little Pete away. "Window seat, Petey, window seat."

"I'm not a nurse," Sam blurted. "I don't know . . ."

It was Dahra Baidoo who broke from her stunned trance to kneel beside the thrashing, bellowing Cookie. "I know some first aid. Elwood, help me."

"I guess we have our new nurse," Caine said, sounding no more agitated or

concerned than the school principal announcing a name for the honor roll.

Diana turned away, drifted past Caine, and whispered something in his ear. Caine's dark eyes swept across the shocked kids, seeming to size them up in turn. He formed a bare smile, and nodded imperceptibly to Diana.

"This meeting is adjourned till we can help our wounded friend . . . what is his name? Cookie?"

Cookie's voice was even more urgent, demanding help, edging toward hysteria. "It really hurts, it really hurts bad, oh, God."

Caine led Drake and Diana down the aisle, past Sam, following Astrid and Little Pete from the church.

Drake paused halfway, turned back, and spoke for the first time. In an amused voice he said, "Oh, um, Captain Orc? Have your people—the ones who aren't injured—line up outside. We'll work out your . . . um, duties."

With a grin that was almost a snarl, Drake added a cheerful, "Later."

FIFTEEN

251 HOURS, 32 MINUTES

JACK WAS SLOW to realize that he should follow Caine and the rest out of the church. He jumped up too suddenly and banged into the pew, making a noise that drew the attention of the quiet boy Caine had called a hero.

“Sorry,” Jack said.

Jack walked quickly outside. At first he couldn’t see any of the other Coates kids. A lot of people were outside the church, milling around, talking about what had happened inside. Cookie’s cries of pain were only slightly muffled.

Jack spotted the tall blond girl he’d seen inside, and her little brother.

“Excuse me, do you know where Caine and everybody went?”

The girl, he didn’t remember her name, looked him in the eye. “He’s in the town hall. Where else would our new leader be?”

Jack often missed nuance when people talked. But he didn’t miss her cold sarcasm.

“Sorry to bother you.” He pushed his glasses back up on his nose and tried to smile at the same time. He bobbed his head and looked around for the town hall.

“It’s right there.” The girl pointed. Then she said, “My name is Astrid. Do you really think you can get the phones working?”

“Sure. It will take time, though. Right now the signal goes from your phone to the tower, right?” His tone was condescending and he formed his hands into a schematic of a tower with beams radiating toward it. “Then it gets sent on to a satellite, then down to a router. But we can’t send signals to the satellite now, so—”

He was interrupted by a shockingly loud cry of pain from inside the church. It made him flinch.

“How do you know we can’t reach a satellite?” Astrid asked.

He blinked in surprise and made the smug face he made whenever someone questioned his technological expertise. “I doubt you would understand.”

Astrid said, “Try me, kid.”

To Jack’s surprise, she seemed to follow everything he said. So he went on to explain how he could reprogram a few good desktop computers to serve as a primitive router for the phone system. “It wouldn’t be fast. I mean, it couldn’t handle more than, say, a dozen calls simultaneously, but it should work at a basic level.”

Astrid’s little brother seemed to be staring at Jack’s hands, which he was now twisting nervously. Jack was anxious being away from Caine. Before they had come down from Coates Academy, Drake Merwin had warned everyone that they should keep talk with the Perdido Beach kids to a minimum.

A warning from Drake was serious.

“Well, I better go,” Jack said.

Astrid stopped him. “So you’re into computers.”

“Yeah. I’m kind of a tech guy.”

“How old are you?”

“Twelve.”

“That’s young to have those skills.”

He laughed dismissively. “Nothing I’ve been talking about is hard to do. It’s not something most people could do, but it’s not hard for me.”

Jack had never been shy when it came to his tech skills. He’d gotten his first real computer for his fourth Christmas. His parents still told the story of how he had spent fourteen hours on the machine that first day, pausing only for Nutri-Grain bars and juice boxes.

By the time he was five he could easily install programs and navigate the web. By age six his parents were turning to him for computer help. By eight he had his own website and was acting as his school’s unofficial tech support.

At nine, Jack had hacked into the computer system of his local police department to erase a speeding ticket for a friend’s father.

His own parents found out and panicked. The next semester he was at Coates Academy, which was known as a place to send smart, difficult children.

But Jack wasn’t difficult, and he resented it. In any case, it didn’t help him stay out of trouble. On the contrary, there were kids at Coates whom Jack’s parents would have called bad influences. Some of them, very bad influences.

And some were just bad.

“So, what would be hard for you, Jack?” Astrid asked.

“Almost nothing,” he answered truthfully. “But what I would like to do is get some kind of internet working. Here in the . . . in whatever this is.”

“It seems we’re calling it the FAYZ.”

“Yeah. Here in the FAYZ. I mean, I’d estimate there are two hundred and twenty-five or so decent computers, based on the number of homes and businesses. The land area is pretty small, so it would be fairly simple to set up Wi-Fi. That’s easy. And if I had even a pair of old G5s to work with, I think I could stand up a limited local system.”

He smiled happily at the thought.

“That would be great. So, tell me, Comp—should I really call you Computer Jack?”

“That’s what everyone calls me. Or sometimes just Jack.”

“Okay, Jack. What is Caine up to?”

Jack was caught off guard. “What?”

“What’s he up to? You’re a smart kid, you have some idea.”

Jack wanted to leave, but he couldn’t figure out how to do it. Astrid moved in and put her hand on his arm. He stared down at the hand.

“I know he’s up to something,” Astrid said. Her little brother trained his big, vacant saucer eyes on Jack. “You know what I think?”

Jack shook his head slowly.

“I think you’re a nice person,” Astrid said. “I think you’re very smart, so people don’t always treat you very well. They’re scared of your talent. And they try to use you.”

Jack caught himself nodding in agreement.

“But I don’t think that kid Drake is a nice person. He’s not, is he?”

Jack held very still. He didn’t want to give anything away. He was not as quick at understanding people as he was machines. Mostly people weren’t that interesting.

“He’s a bully, isn’t he? Drake, I mean.”

Jack shrugged.

“I thought so. And Caine?”

When Jack didn't answer, Astrid let the question hang there. Jack swallowed and tried to look away, but it wasn't easy.

“Caine,” Astrid repeated. “There's something wrong with him, isn't there?”

Computer Jack's resistance crumbled, but not his caution. He lowered his voice to a whisper. “He can do things,” Jack said. “He can—”

“Jack. There you are.”

Jack and Astrid both jumped. It was Diana Ladris. She nodded cordially at Astrid. “I hope your little brother is all right. The way you rushed out of there, I thought maybe he was sick.”

“No. No, he's fine.”

“He's lucky to have you,” Diana said. As she said it, she took Astrid's hand in hers, like she was determined to shake hands. But Jack knew better.

Astrid pulled her hand away.

Diana had a nice smile, but she didn't use it now. Jack wondered if Diana had been able to finish with Astrid. Probably not; it usually took her longer to read a person's power level.

The mood of confrontation was broken by the sound of a diesel engine. It was a kid who looked like he might be Mexican, driving a backhoe down the street.

“Who is that?” Diana asked.

“Edilio,” Astrid said.

“What's he doing?”

The boy on the backhoe began to dig a trench, right in the grass of the plaza, close to the sidewalk where the little girl's body lay under its blanket, avoided by all.

“What's he doing?” Diana repeated.

“I think he's burying the dead,” Astrid said softly.

Diana frowned. “Caine didn't tell him to do that.”

“What does it matter?” Astrid asked. “It needed to be done. In fact, I think I'll go and see if I can help. You know, if you think that would be okay with Caine.”

Diana didn't smile. She didn't snarl, either, and Jack had seen her do that on more than one occasion. “You seem like a nice girl, Astrid,” Diana said. “I'll bet you're one of those brainy, Lisa Simpson types, all full of great ideas and worried about saving the planet or whatever. But things have changed. This isn't your old life anymore. It's like . . . you know what it's like? It's like you used to live in a really nice neighborhood, and now you live in a really tough neighborhood. You don't look tough, Astrid.”

“What caused it? The FAYZ. Do you know?” Astrid demanded, refusing to be intimidated.

Diana laughed. “Aliens. God. A sudden shift in the space-time continuum. I heard someone call you Astrid the Genius, so you've probably thought of explanations I can't even guess at. It doesn't matter. It's happened. Here we are.”

“What does Caine want?” Astrid asked.

Jack could not believe Astrid hadn't withered in the face of Diana's confidence. Most people did. Most people couldn't stand up to her. If they did, they were sorry.

Jack thought he saw a flicker of appreciation spark Diana's dark eyes.

“What does Caine want? He wants what he wants. And he’ll get it,” Diana said. “Now, run off to the funeral over there. Stay out of my way. And take care of your little brother. Jack?”

The sound of his own name snapped Jack out of his trance. “Yes.”

“Come.”

Jack fell into step behind Diana, ashamed of his instant, doglike obedience.

They marched up the steps of the town hall. Caine, to the surprise of no one who knew him, had taken over the mayor’s office. He was behind a massive mahogany desk, rocking slowly from side to side in a too-big maroon leather chair.

“Where did you go?” Caine asked.

“I went to get Jack.”

Caine’s eyes flickered. “And where was Computer Jack?”

Diana said, “Nowhere. He was just wandering, lost.”

She was covering for him, Jack realized with a shock.

“I ran into that girl,” Diana said. “The blond with the strange brother.”

“Yes?”

“They call her Astrid the Genius. I think she’s involved with that kid, the fire kid.”

“His name is Sam,” Caine reminded her.

“I think Astrid’s someone we need to keep an eye on.”

“Did you read her?” Caine asked.

“I got a partial read, so I’m not sure.”

Caine spread his hands in exasperation. “Why am I begging for information here? Just tell me.”

“She’s on about two bars.”

“Any idea what her powers may be? Lighter? Speeder? Chameleon? Not another Dekka, I hope. She was difficult. And hopefully not a Reader like you, Diana.”

Diana shook her head. “No idea. I’m not even sure she’s two bars.”

Caine nodded. Then he sighed as if the weight of the world were on his shoulders. “Put her on the list, Jack. Astrid the Genius: two bars. With a question mark.”

Jack pulled out his PDA. It no longer got internet, of course, but its other functions still worked. He punched in the security code and opened the file.

The list opened. There were twenty-eight names on it, all Coates kids. In the column after each name was a number: one, two, or three. Only one name had a four after it: Caine Soren.

Jack focused on thumbing in the information.

Astrid. Two bars. Question mark.

He tried not to think about what it meant for the pretty blond girl.

“That went better than I hoped,” Caine said to Diana. “I predicted there’d be some local bully we’d have to deal with. And I said there would be a natural leader. We get the bully working for us, and we keep an eye on the leader until we’re ready to deal with him.”

“I’ll keep an eye on him,” Diana said. “He’s cute.”

“Did you get a reading on him?”

Jack had seen Diana take Sam’s hand. So he was amazed when Diana said, “No. I didn’t have a chance.”

Jack frowned, uncertain if he should remind Diana. But that was stupid. Of course

Diana would know if she'd read Sam or not.

"Do it as soon as you can," Caine said. "You saw the way everyone looked at him? And when I asked for nominations, his was the first name mentioned. I don't like it, his being Nurse Temple's son. That's a bad coincidence. Get a read on him. If he has the power, we may not be able to wait to deal with him."

Lana was healed.

But she was weak. Hungry. Thirsty.

The thirst was the worst thing. She wasn't sure she could stand it.

But she had been through hell and survived. And that gave her some reason for hope.

The sun was up but not yet touching her with its rays. The gulch was in the shade. Lana knew that her best chance was to make it back to the ranch before the ground grew as hot as a pie fresh from the oven.

"Don't start thinking about food," she rasped. She was heartened to discover that she still had a voice.

She tried to climb straight back up to the road, but two skinned knees and two abraded palms later she admitted that wasn't happening. Even Patrick couldn't make the climb. It was just too steep.

That left following the ravine until, hopefully, it came out somewhere. It wasn't an easy walk. In most places the ground was hard, but in other places it shifted and slid and landed her on hands and knees.

Each time she fell, it was harder to get back up. Patrick was panting hard, plodding rather than bounding, just as tired and footsore as she was.

"We're in this together, right, boy?" she said.

Brush tore at her legs, rocks bruised her feet. In places there were thickets of thornbush that had to be bypassed. In one place the thorns couldn't be avoided, and she had to work her way through with time-wasting caution, accumulating scratches that burned like fire on her bare legs.

But once through she laid her hand on the scratches, and the pain ebbed. After ten minutes or so, there was no sign of the scratches.

It was miraculous. Lana was convinced of that. She knew she didn't personally have the power to heal dogs or people. She'd never done it before. But how the miracle came about, she did not know. Her mind was on more pressing issues: how to scale this sudden rise, or skirt that bramble patch, or where, where, where in this parched landscape she could find water and food.

She wished she'd paid a lot more attention to the lay of the land while driving to and from the ranch. Did this gulch head for the ranch, or did it veer past? Was she almost there? Was she now wandering blindly toward the true desert? Was anyone looking for her?

The walls of the ravine weren't as tall anymore, but they were just as steep, and closer. The gulch was narrowing. That had to be good news. If it was narrowing and becoming shallower, didn't that mean she must be nearing the end?

She had her eyes down on the ground, watching out for snakes, when Patrick stopped stock-still.

"What is it, boy?" But she saw what it was. There was a wall across the gulch. The

wall rose impossibly tall, far higher than the gulch itself, a barrier made of . . . of nothing she had ever seen before.

Its sheer size, combined with its utter strangeness in this place, struck fear into her. But it didn't seem to be doing anything. It was just a wall. It was translucent, like watery milk. It shimmered just slightly, as if it might be a video effect. It was absurd. Impossible. A wall where no wall had any business being.

She edged closer, but Patrick refused to come along.

"We have to go see what it is, boy," she urged.

Patrick disagreed. He had no interest in seeing what it was.

Up close she could make out a faint reflection of herself.

"Probably a good thing I can't see myself any better," she muttered. Her hair was stiff with dried blood. She knew she was filthy. She could see that her clothing was ripped, and not in an artistic, trendy way, just ripped to ribbons in places.

Lana covered the last few feet to the barrier and touched it with one finger.

"Ahh!"

She yelped and pulled her finger away. Before the crash she would have described the pain as searing. Now she had higher standards for what counted as real pain. But she wouldn't be touching the wall again.

"Some kind of electric fence?" she asked Patrick. "What is it doing here?"

There was no choice now but to try to scale the side of the gulch. The problem was that Lana was pretty sure the ranch lay to her left, and that side was impossible to climb. She would have needed a rope and pitons.

She figured she could make it up the right side, pushing from tumbled boulder to crumbling ledge. But then, unless she was totally turned around, she'd be placing the gulch between herself and the ranch.

The remaining alternative was to head back the way she came. It had taken half the day to get this far. The day would be over before she made it back to her starting point. She would die back where she started.

"Come on, Patrick. Let's get out of here."

It took what felt like an hour to climb the right-hand slope. All the while under the silent, baleful stare of the wall that Lana had come to think of as a living thing, a vast malevolent force determined to stop her.

When she finally reached the top, she blinked and shaded her eyes and scanned left to right, all the way. That's when she almost fell apart. There was no sign of the road. No sign of the ranch. Just a sheer ridge and no more than a mile of flat land before she would have to start climbing.

And that impossible wall. That impossible, could-not-be-there wall.

One way blocked by the gulch, the other by the mountains, the third by the wall that lay across the landscape like it had been dropped out of the sky.

The only open path was back the way she had come, back along the narrow strip of flat land that followed the gulch.

She shielded her eyes and blinked in the sunlight.

"Wait," she said to Patrick. "There's something there."

Nestled up against the barrier, not far from the foot of the mountains. Was it really a patch of green, shimmering in the rising heat waves? It had to be a mirage.

"What do you think, Patrick?"

Patrick was indifferent. The spirit had gone from the dog. He was in no better shape than she was herself.

“I guess a mirage is all we have,” Lana said.

They set off together. At least it was easier than the climb up out of the gulch. But the sun was like a hammer now, beating down on Lana’s unprotected head. She could feel her body giving up even as her spirit was tortured by doubt. She was chasing a mirage with the last of her strength. She would die chasing a stupid mirage.

But the green patch did not disappear. It grew slowly larger as they closed the distance. Lana’s consciousness was a flickering candle now. In and out. Alert for a few seconds, then lost in a formless dream.

Lana staggered, feet dragging, half blind from the relentless glare of the sun, when she realized that her foot had stepped from dust onto grass.

Her toes registered the sponginess of the grass.

It was a minuscule lawn, twelve feet by twelve feet. In the center was a back-and-forth sprinkler. It was not turned on. But a hose led from the sprinkler. The hose led around a small, windowless wooden cabin.

It wasn’t much of a cabin, no bigger than a single room. Behind the cabin was a half-tumbled wooden shack. And a windmill of sorts, really just an airplane propeller placed atop a ramshackle tower twenty feet tall.

Lana staggered along the hose, following it to its source. It came from a once-painted, now sandblasted steel tank elevated on a platform of railroad ties beneath the makeshift windmill. A rusty pipe jutted up from the ground beneath the windmill. There were valves and connecting pipes. The hose came to an end at a faucet welded into the end of the tank.

“It’s a well, Patrick.”

Lana fumbled frantically with weak fingers at the hose connection.

It came off.

She twisted the knob and it turned. Water, hot and smelling of minerals and rust, came gushing.

Lana drank. Patrick drank.

She let the water flow over her face. Let it wash the blood from her face. Let it soften her crusted hair.

But she had not come this far to let her salvation drain away for a momentary pleasure. She twisted the knob shut again. The last drop quivered on the brass lip, and she took it on her fingertip and used it to clean the crust from her bloodied eye.

Then, for the first time in forever, she laughed. “We’re not dead yet, are we, Patrick?” Lana said. “Not yet.”

SIXTEEN

171 HOURS, 12 MINUTES

“**YOU HAVE TO** boil the water first. Then you put in the pasta,” Quinn said.

“How do you know that?” Sam was frowning, turning a blue box of rotini around trying to find instructions.

“Because I’ve seen my mom do it, like, a million times. The water has to start boiling first.”

Sam and Quinn stared at the big pot of water on the stove.

“A watched pot never boils,” Edilio said.

Sam and Quinn both looked away. Edilio laughed. “It’s just a saying. It’s not actually true.”

“I knew that,” Sam said. Then he laughed. “Okay, I didn’t know it.”

“Maybe you can just zap it up with your magic hands,” Quinn suggested.

Sam ignored him. He found Quinn’s teasing on that front annoying.

The firehouse was a two-story cinder-block cube. Down below was the garage that housed the fire engine and the ambulance.

The second floor was the living area, a large room that encompassed a kitchen, an oblong dining table, and a mismatched pair of couches. A door led to a separate, narrow room lined with bunk beds, space for six people.

The main room was almost but not quite cheerful. There were photos of firefighters, some in stiff formal poses, some goofing with their buddies. There were letters of thanks from various people, including illustrated letters from the first-grade class visit that all began with “Dear Firefighter,” although the spelling was sometimes mysterious.

There was a large round table that had displayed the remains of an abruptly abandoned poker game—fallen hands of cards, chips, cigars in ashtrays—when the three of them first arrived but had since been cleaned off.

And there was a surprisingly well-stocked pantry: jars of tomato sauce, cans of soup, boxes of pasta. There was a red lacquered can of homemade cookies, now pretty stale but not inedible if you microwaved them for fifteen seconds.

Sam had accepted the assignment as fire chief. Not because he wanted to, but because so many other people seemed to want him to. He hoped no one would call on him to actually do anything, because after three days in the firehouse the three of them still barely knew how to start the fire engine, let alone drive it anywhere or do anything with it.

The one time a kid had come rushing up yelling “Fire,” Sam, Quinn, and Edilio had half carried, half dragged a hose and a hydrant wrench six blocks only to discover that the kid’s brother had microwaved a can. The smoke was just from a burned-out microwave oven.

But, on the plus side, they knew where to find all the emergency supplies in the ambulance. And they had practiced with the big hose and the hydrant outside so they could be quicker and more efficient than Edilio had been at the first fire.

And they had totally mastered the fireman’s pole.

“We’re out of bread,” Edilio said.

“Don’t need bread if you have pasta,” Sam said. “They’re both carbs.”

“Who’s talking about nutrition? You’re supposed to have bread with a meal.”

“I thought your people ate tortillas,” Quinn said.

“Tortillas are bread.”

“Well, we have no bread,” Sam said. “Not of any kind.”

“In another week or so, no one will have any bread,” Quinn pointed out. “Bread has to be made fresh, you know. It gets moldy after a while.”

Three days had passed since Caine and his posse had swept into town and basically taken over.

Three days with no one arriving to rescue them. Three days of deepening depression. Three days of growing acceptance that, for now, at least, this was life.

And the FAYZ itself—everyone called it that now—was five days old. Five days with no adults. Five days without mothers, fathers, big brothers and sisters, teachers, police officers, store clerks, pediatricians, clergy, dentists. Five days without television, internet, or phones.

Caine had been welcomed at first. People wanted to know that someone was in charge. People wanted there to be answers. People wanted rules. Caine was very good at establishing his authority. Each time Sam had dealt with him, he came away impressed at the way Caine could act with complete confidence, as if he had been born to the job.

But already, in just three days, doubts had grown, too. The doubts centered on Caine and Diana, but more still on Drake Merwin. Some kids argued you needed someone a little scary around to make sure rules were obeyed. Other kids agreed with that, but pointed out that Drake was more than a little scary.

Kids who defied Drake or any of his so-called sheriffs had been slapped, punched, pushed, knocked down or, in one case, dragged into a bathroom and given a swirlie. Fear of Drake was replacing fear of the unknown.

“I can make tortillas fresh,” Edilio said. “I just need flour, a little shortening, salt, baking powder. We have all that here.”

“Save it for taco night,” Quinn said. He took the pasta from Sam and dumped it into the pot.

Edilio frowned. “You hear something?”

Sam and Quinn froze. The loudest sound was the boiling water.

Then they all heard it. A voice, wailing.

Sam took three steps to the fireman’s pole, wrapped his legs and arms around it, and dropped through the hole in the floor to land in the garishly lit garage below.

The garage was open to the evening air. Someone—a girl, judging by the long reddish hair—was slumped on the threshold, looking like she might be trying to crawl, moving but not really going anywhere.

Three figures advanced up the driveway from the street.

“Help me,” the girl pleaded softly.

Sam knelt beside her. He recoiled in shock. “Bette?”

The left side of Bouncing Bette’s face was covered in blood. There was a gash above her temple. She was panting, gasping, like she had collapsed after a marathon and was trying with her last ounce of energy to crawl across the finish line.

“Bette, what happened?”

“They’re trying to get me,” Bette cried, and clutched at Sam’s arm.

The three dark figures advanced to the edge of the circle of light. One was clearly Orc. No one else was that big. Edilio and Quinn moved into the garage doorway.

Sam disengaged from Bette and took up a position beside Edilio.

“You want me to beat on you guys, I will!” Orc yelled.

“What’s going on here?” Sam demanded. He narrowed his eyes and recognized the other two boys, a kid named Karl, a seventh grader from school, and Chaz, one of the Coates eighth graders. All three were armed with aluminum bats.

“This isn’t your business,” Chaz said. “We’re dealing with something here.”

“Dealing with what? Orc, did you hit Bette?”

“She was breaking the rules,” Orc said.

“You hit a girl, man?” Edilio said, outraged.

“Shut up, wetback,” Orc said.

“Where’s Howard?” Sam asked, just to stall while he tried to figure out what to do. He’d lost one fight to Orc already.

Orc took the question as an insult. “I don’t need Howard to handle you, Sam.”

Orc marched right up to Sam, stopped a foot away, and put his bat on his shoulder like he was ready to swing for a home run. Like a batter ready for the next fastball. Only this was closer to T-ball: Sam’s head was impossible to miss.

“Move, Sam,” Orc ordered.

“Okay, I’m not doing this again,” Quinn said. “Let him have her, Sam.”

“Ain’t no ‘let me,’” Orc said. “I do what I want.”

Sam noticed movement behind Orc. There were people coming down the street, twenty or more kids. Orc noticed it too, and glanced behind him.

“They aren’t going to save you,” Orc said, and swung the bat hard.

Sam ducked. The bat whooshed past his head, and Orc rotated halfway around, carried forward by the momentum.

Sam was thrown off balance, but Edilio was ready. He let loose a roar and plowed headfirst into Orc. Edilio was maybe half Orc’s size, but Orc was knocked off his feet. He sprawled out on the concrete.

Chaz went after Edilio, trying to pull him off Orc.

The crowd of kids who had come running down the street surged forward. There were angry voices and threats, all aimed at Orc.

They yelled, Sam noted, but no one exactly jumped into the unequal fight.

A voice cut through all the noise.

“Nobody move,” Drake said.

Orc pushed Edilio off and jumped to his feet. He started kicking Edilio, landing size-eleven Nike blows into Edilio’s defensive arms. Sam jumped in to help his friend, but Drake was quicker. He stepped behind Orc, grabbed him by the hair, yanked his head back, and smashed his elbow into Orc’s face.

Blood poured from Orc’s nose, and he howled in rage.

Drake hit him again and released Orc to fall to the concrete.

“Which part of ‘nobody move’ did you not understand, Orc?” Drake demanded.

Orc rose to his knee and went for Drake like a linebacker. Drake stepped aside, nimble as a matador. He stuck his hand out and said to Chaz, “Give me that.”

Chaz handed him the bat.

Drake hit Orc in the ribs with a short, sharp forward thrust of the bat. Then again in the kidneys and again in the side of the head. Each blow was measured, accurate, effective.

Orc rolled over onto his back, helpless, exposed.

Drake pushed the thick end of the bat against Orc's throat. "Dude. You really need to learn to listen when I talk."

Then Drake laughed, stepped back, twirled the bat in the air, caught it, and rested it on his shoulder. He grinned at Sam.

"Now, how about you tell me what's going on, Mr. Fire Chief."

Sam had gone up against bullies before. But he'd never seen anything like Drake Merwin. Orc outweighed Drake by at least fifty pounds, but Drake had handled him like a little toy action figure.

Sam pointed at Bette, still cowering. "I think Orc hit her."

"Yeah? So?"

"So I wasn't going to let him do it again," Sam said as calmly as he could.

"It didn't look to me like you were getting ready to rescue anyone. Looked to me like you were about to get your head knocked off your shoulders," Drake said.

"Bette wasn't doing anything wrong," a shrill young voice from the crowd yelled.

Without looking back, Drake said, "Shut up." He pointed at Chaz. "You. Explain what this is about."

Chaz was an athletic-looking kid with nearly shoulder-length blond hair and trendy glasses. He was wearing the Coates uniform, dirty and rumpled after many days' use. "That girl was doing something." He pointed at Bette. "She was using the power."

Sam felt a cold chill run up his spine.

The power, he had said. Like it was just something you mentioned in casual conversation. Like it was a common thing everyone knew about.

Drake smirked. "Why, whatever can you possibly mean, Chaz?" The way he said it was an unmistakable threat.

"Nothing," Chaz said quickly.

"She was doing a magic trick," a voice yelled. "She wasn't hurting anyone."

"I told her to stop." Orc was on his feet again, glaring with undisguised hatred, but also some wariness, at Drake.

"Orc is a deputy sheriff," Drake said reasonably. "So when he tells someone to stop doing something wrong, they have to stop. If this girl refused to obey, hey, I guess she got what she deserved."

"You don't have the right to beat on people," Sam said.

Drake had a shark's grin: too many teeth, too little humor. "Someone has to make people listen to the rules. Right?"

"There are rules against doing magic tricks?" Edilio asked.

"Yes," Drake said. "But I guess some people didn't know that. Chaz? Give the fire chief the latest copy of the rules."

Sam accepted a crumpled, folded piece of paper without looking at it.

"There you go," Drake said. "Now you know the rules."

"No one's doing magic around here," Quinn said, placating.

"Then my work is done," Drake said, and laughed at his own wit. He tossed the

baseball bat to Chaz. "Okay. Everyone go home."

"Bette will stay here for a while," Sam said.

"Whatever."

Drake drew Orc and the others in his wake. The crowd parted for him.

Sam knelt beside Bette. "We're going to get you bandaged up."

"What's this about magic tricks?" Quinn asked her.

Bette shook her head. "It was nothing."

"She made little balls of light come out of her hands," a young voice said. "It was a cool trick."

"Okay, you guys heard what Drake said: everybody out of here," Quinn said in a loud voice. "All of you go home."

Sam, Quinn, and Edilio half carried Bette inside and sat her in the ambulance. Edilio used the sterile wipes to clean the blood from her face, applied an antibiotic cream, and used two butterfly bandages to close the wound.

"You can spend the night here, Bette," Sam said.

"No, I have to get home, my brother will need me," Bette said. "But, thanks." She managed a smile for Edilio. "I'm sorry I got you kicked."

Edilio shrugged, embarrassed. "No big thing."

Sam left to walk Bette home. Quinn and Edilio trudged back up the stairs.

Quinn went to the pot and used the slotted spoon to drain a few pieces of rotini. He tasted one.

"It's like mush, man."

"Overcooked," Edilio agreed, looking over his shoulder.

Quinn said, "Cheerios?"

He poured himself some and began humming to himself, determined not to get into a conversation with Edilio. It was getting so he could barely stand Edilio. His cheerfulness. His competence at just about everything. And just now, the way he had thrown himself against Orc like some kind of Mexican commando.

It was stupid, Quinn thought, stupid going after a guy like Orc. It was too bad what had happened to Bette, but what was the point picking a fight with someone you couldn't beat? If Drake hadn't come along, Edilio would be lucky to be walking right now.

Come to think of it . . .

Sam returned. He nodded at Edilio and barely looked at Quinn.

Quinn gritted his teeth. Perfect. Now Sam was mad at him for not getting his head beat in. Like Sam was such a big hero. Quinn could remember lots of times when Sam had wimped out on waves that Quinn jumped on. Lots of times.

"The pasta didn't survive," Quinn said.

"I got Bette home. I hope she's okay," Sam said. "She said she was okay."

"Bette's got what you have, doesn't she?" Quinn said as Sam sat down and dug in to his own bowl of cereal.

"Yeah. Maybe less of it, I guess. She told me all she can do is make her hands kind of glow."

"So she hasn't burned anyone's arm off yet, huh?" Quinn was tired of the way Sam was looking at him with a mixture of pity and contempt. He was tired of being dissed just because he had some common sense and minded his own business.

Sam looked up, eyes narrowed, like he might make an argument of it. But he pressed his lips into a grim line and pushed his food away and said nothing.

Quinn said, "This is why you can't tell anyone. People will think you're a freak. You see what happens to freaks."

"Bette's not a freak," Sam said in the forced-calm way he had, that gritted-teeth thing he did. "She's just a girl from school."

"Don't be stupid, Sam," Quinn said. "Bette, Little Pete, the girl in the fire, you. If there's four of you, there's more. Normal people aren't going to like that. Normal people are going to think you're dangerous or whatever."

"Is that what you think, Quinn?" Sam asked in a quiet voice. But still he avoided looking Quinn in the eye.

Sam found the rules sheet in his back pocket, unfolded it and spread it on the table.

Quinn said, "I'm just saying look around, man. Kids have enough to be scared of. How are normal people—"

"You want to stop saying 'normal people' like that?" Sam snapped.

Edilio, always the peacemaker now between Sam and Quinn, said, "Read out those rules, man."

Sam sighed. He flattened the paper carefully, scanned down the page, and made a rude noise. "Number one says Caine is the mayor of Perdido Beach and the whole area known as the FAYZ."

Edilio snorted. "Doesn't think much of himself, does he?"

"Number two, Drake is appointed sheriff and has the power to enforce the rules. Number three, I'm fire chief and responsible for responding to emergencies. Great. Lucky me." He glanced up and added, "Lucky us."

"Nice of you to remember the little people," Quinn sniped.

"Number four, no one may enter any store and remove anything without permission from the mayor or the sheriff."

Quinn said, "You have a beef with that? People can't be just looting stuff all the time, grabbing whatever."

"No beef with that," Sam agreed reluctantly. "Five says we all have to help Mother Mary at the day care, provide her with whatever she asks for, and help anytime she says. Okay. Fair enough. Six: thou shalt not kill."

"Really?" Quinn asked.

Sam made a wan smile, the way he did when he was tired of being mad and expected everyone else to be tired of it, too. "Kidding," Sam said.

"Okay, stop goofing and just read the thing."

"Just trying to keep a sense of humor while the world's falling apart around us," Sam said. "Six: we all have to help out on jobs like searching homes or whatever. Seven: we're all supposed to pass information on any bad behavior to Drake."

"So we're all supposed to be informers," Edilio said.

"Don't worry, there's no immigration cops, no Migra," Quinn said. "And, anyway, if someone can figure out how to send you back to Mexico, I'll go with you."

"Honduras," Edilio said. "Not Mexico. For, like, the tenth time."

"Number eight, here it is. I'll read it like it's written," Sam said. "'People will not perform magic tricks or any other action that causes fear or worry.'"

"What's that mean?" Quinn asked.

“It means Caine obviously knows about the power.”

“Big surprise.” Edilio nodded over his bowl of cereal. “Kids talking like it was an act of God. I always said Caine had the power. People saying Caine’s like a mago. You know, like a magician.”

Quinn said, “Nah, man, if he had the power, he wouldn’t be having Orc and Drake trying to stop people using it.”

“Sure he would, Quinn,” Sam said. “If he wanted to be the only one who had it.”

“Paranoid much, brah?”

“Number nine,” Sam continued reading. “‘We are in a state of emergency. During this crisis no one should criticize, ridicule, or hinder any of the people performing their official duties.’”

Quinn shrugged. “Well, we are having a crisis, right? If this isn’t a crisis, I don’t know what would be.”

“So we’re suddenly not allowed to say anything?” Sam was shaking his head in disbelief. The moment of attempted reconciliation was over. Sam was back to being disappointed in Quinn.

“Look, it’s like school, right?” Quinn argued. “You can’t diss the teachers. Not to their faces, anyway.”

“Then you’ll really like number ten, Quinn: ‘The sheriff may decide that the above rules are insufficient to cover some emergency situations. In those cases, the sheriff may formulate whatever rules are needed to keep order and keep people safe.’”

“‘Formulate,’” Quinn snorted. “Sounds like Astrid helped them write it.”

Sam pushed the paper away. “No. Not Astrid’s style.” He folded his hands together, placed them on the table, and announced, “This is wrong.”

Edilio’s worried look mirrored Sam’s. “Yeah, man, this ain’t right. That’s saying Caine and Drake can do whatever they want, anytime they want.”

“That’s what it comes down to,” Sam agreed. “And he’s getting people to start suspecting each other, turn against each other.”

Quinn laughed. “You don’t get it, brah. People are already suspicious. This isn’t normal times, okay? We’re cut off, we have no adults of any kind, no police or teachers or parents, and no offense, but we have some of us, like, mutating or whatever. You act like you expect everything to just go along like normal, like there is no FAYZ.”

Sam was done with his patient act. “And you’re acting like you think Bette deserved that beating. Why are you not pissed off, Quinn? Why are you okay with the idea that a girl we know, a girl who never hurt anyone, gets beat down by Orc?”

“Oh, that’s where you’re going? Like it’s my fault?” Quinn stood up and shoved his chair back. “Look, Sam, I’m not saying it’s right for her to get beat on, all right? But what do you expect? I mean, kids get picked on for wearing the wrong clothes or sucking at sports or whatever. And that’s when there are teachers and parents around. That’s just everyday life. You think now, as messed up as everything is, kids are going to be thinking, ‘Oh, Sam can shoot firebolts out of his eyeballs or whatever, okay, that’s cool?’ No, brah, that’s not the way it is.”

To Quinn’s surprise, and even more, to Sam’s, Edilio said, “He’s right. If there’s more people with, you know, like you and Bette, there’s going to be trouble. Some folks with the power, some folks without. Me, I’m used to being a second-class

citizen.” He shot a dark look at Quinn, which Quinn ignored. “But other people are going to be jealous and they’re going to get scared and, anyway, they’re all weirded out, so they are going to be looking for someone to blame. In Spanish, we say *cabeza de turco*. It means someone you blame for all your problems.”

“Scapegoat,” Quinn translated.

Edilio nodded. “Yeah, that’s it. A scapegoat.”

Quinn spread his hands wide in an expression of aggrieved innocence. “What have I been saying? That’s the way it is: you’re different, you get to be a victim. You try and act all superior, Sam, all righteous, but you haven’t even figured it out yet. Worst that happened to us back then was we get in trouble, get suspended, get an ‘F’ or whatever. Screw up now and it’s a baseball bat up alongside your head. There were always bullies, but the adults were still in charge. Now? Now the bullies rule. Different game, brother, a whole different game. We play by the bully rules now.”

SEVENTEEN

169 HOURS, 18 MINUTES

“I NEED MORE pills,” Cookie cried in a voice that to Dahra Baidoo’s dismay never seemed to weaken or grow hoarse.

“It’s too soon,” Dahra said for the millionth time in the last three days.

“Give me the pills!” Cookie bellowed. “It hurts. It hurts so bad.”

Dahra pressed her hands over her ears and tried to make sense of the text open in front of her. It would probably have been easy to figure out what to do if she still had the internet. Then she could have opened a Google page and punched in “Vicodin” and “overdose.” It was harder to get a straight answer from the thick, dog-eared *Physicians’ Desk Reference* someone had brought her from the only doctor’s office in Perdido Beach.

The problem, among other things, was that she was playing mix-and-match with everything from Advil to Vicodin to Tylenol with codeine. There was nothing in the book about how to control pain by mixing together a little of this and a little of that and not enough of anything.

Dahra’s boyfriend, Elwood, was slumped in a chair, passed out. He had been a faithful friend, at least so far as hanging around and keeping her company. And he always helped her lift Cookie up to slide the bedpan under his butt when he needed to go.

But there were limits to what her boyfriend would do. He wouldn’t clean out the bedpan. He wouldn’t hold the funnel when the boy needed to pee.

Dahra had done that. In the three days since she had accidentally become the person responsible for this squalid, dark, windowless, joyless, subterranean kingdom of misery beneath the church, Dahra had done all sorts of things she never thought she could do. Things she sure didn’t want to do, including giving a diabetic seven-year-old daily insulin injections.

There was a knock at the door and Dahra swiveled her chair away from the desk and the circle of light that spilled over the almost useless book.

Mary Terrafino was there with a girl who looked like she was maybe four.

“Hi, Mary,” Dahra said. “What do we have here?”

“I’m so sorry to bother you,” Mary said. “I know how busy you are. But she has some kind of pain in her stomach.”

The two girls hugged. They hadn’t known each other well before the FAYZ, but now they were like sisters.

Dahra knelt down to eye level with the little girl. “Hi, honey. What’s your name?”

“Ashley.”

“Okay, Ashley, let’s get your temperature and see what’s going on. Can you come over and sit on the table?”

Dahra slid the electronic thermometer into a fresh plastic cover and popped the thermometer into the little girl’s mouth.

“You have the moves down,” Mary said, and smiled.

Cookie bellowed suddenly, so loudly and so obscenely that Ashley almost

swallowed the thermometer.

“I’m running out of pain pills,” Dahra said. “I don’t know what to do. We’ve emptied out the doctor’s office and sometimes we get some meds that people have found when they’re doing house searches. But he’s in so much pain.”

“Is it getting any better? His shoulder, I mean?”

“No,” Dahra said. “It’s not going to get better. All I can do is keep it clean.” She examined the thermometer. “Ninety-eight point nine. That’s well within the normal range. Lie back and let me check something. I’m going to push on your tummy. It might tickle a little.”

“Are you going to give me a shot?” the little girl asked.

“No, honey. I just want to push on your tummy.” Dahra pressed down with her fingertips, pressed the girl’s belly pretty far down and then released suddenly. “Did that hurt?”

“It tickled.”

“What are you checking for?” Mary asked.

“Appendicitis.” Dahra shrugged. “It’s about all I know, Mary. When I look up ‘stomach pain,’ I get everything from constipation to stomach cancer. Probably she needs to poop.” To the little girl she said, “Have you pooped today?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I’ll sit her on the toilet,” Mary said.

“Make her drink some water. You know, like a couple of cups.”

Mary squeezed her hand. “I know you’re not a doctor, but it’s good to have you.”

Dahra sighed. “I’m trying to read that book. But mostly all it does is scare me. I mean, there are a million diseases I’ve never even heard of and I don’t want to even think about.”

“Yeah. I can imagine.”

Mary was stalling. Dahra asked her if there was something else.

“Listen, um, I know this is weird and all,” Mary said, lowering her voice to a confidential level. “But anything I tell you . . .”

“I don’t talk to anyone about what goes on here,” Dahra said a little stiffly.

“I know. Sorry. It’s not . . . I mean, it’s something embarrassing.”

“Mary. I am so past embarrassing. I am way into humiliating and disgusting now, so nothing you tell me is going to bother me.”

Mary nodded. She twisted her fingers together and said in a rush, “Look, I take Prozac.”

“What for?”

“Just some, you know, some issues. The thing is, I ran out. I know it’s not as important as a lot of what you’re doing.” She glanced at Cookie. “It’s just, when I don’t have the pills, I get . . .” She sucked in sharply and let go of a sigh that was almost a sob.

“No problem,” Dahra said. She wanted to push for further information, but instinct told her to drop it. “Let me see what I have. Do you know what strength of pill you take?”

“Forty milligrams, once a day.”

“I have to pee,” Cookie moaned pitifully.

Dahra went to the cupboard where she kept the medications. Some were in large

white pharmacy bottles, some in smaller brown twist-top bottles. And she had some sample packs taken from the doctor's office.

Elwood woke up with a snort. "Oh. Man. I fell asleep."

"Hi, Elwood," Mary said.

"Uh-huh," Elwood said, and rested his head on his hand and fell back to sleep.

"He's nice to stay with you," Mary said.

"He's useless," Dahra said sharply. But then she relented. "But at least he's here. I guess I can give you some twenty-milligram pills and let you take two." She tapped the capsules into her palm. "Here's enough for a week. Sorry, I don't have a bottle or anything."

Mary took the pills gratefully.

"You're a good person, Dahra. When this is all over someday, you know, when we grow up, you can become a doctor."

Dahra laughed bitterly. "After this, Mary, that's the last thing I'd want to be."

The doors of the hospital pushed in suddenly. Both girls turned sharply to see Bouncing Bette. She staggered in with her right hand pressed against her head. "My head hurts," Bette said. She was barely comprehensible. She spoke with noticeable slurring. Her left arm seemed to be lifeless, hanging limp by her side. Her left leg trailed as she took several steps closer.

Dahra ran to catch her as Bette collapsed.

"Elwood, wake up," Dahra yelled.

Dahra, Elwood, and Mary half dragged, half carried Bette to the bed where Ashley had been examined.

"I have to poop now," Ashley said.

"Oh, God, I need some more pills!" Cookie howled.

"Shut up!" Dahra shouted. She put her hands over her ears and squeezed her eyes shut. "Everyone shut up."

Bette was on the table now, whispering, "I'm sorry." It came out, "Mm shreee."

"I didn't mean you, Bette," Dahra apologized. "Just lie back." Dahra looked at her face and said to Elwood, "Get the book."

She propped the *Physicians' Desk Reference* open on Bette's stomach and began thumbing quickly through the index.

"Mm het hur," Bette said. She raised her good arm to touch the bloody lump on the side of her head.

"Did someone hit you, Bette?" Elwood asked.

Bette seemed confused by the question. She frowned as if the question made no sense. She moaned in pain.

"One side of her body isn't working right," Dahra said. "Look at the way her mouth is drooping. And her eyes. They don't match."

"Mmm het hur bad," Bette moaned.

"I think she's saying her head hurts," Mary said. "What do we do?"

"I don't know, how about if I just cut open her head and see if I can fix it?" Dahra was shrill. "Then I'll just do some quick surgery on Cookie. No problem. I mean, I have this stupid book." She snatched the book up and threw it across the room. It skidded across the polished linoleum floor.

Dahra tried taking several deep breaths. The little girl, Ashley, was crying. Mary

was looking at Dahra like she had lost her mind. Cookie was alternating between crying for pills and crying that he needed to pee.

“Ta care mm buh er,” Bette said. She grabbed Mary’s arm. “Mmm il buh.”

Bette’s face contorted in pain. And then her features relaxed.

“Bette,” Dahra said.

“Bette. Uh-uh, don’t do this, Bette.”

“Bette,” Dahra whispered.

She placed two fingers against Bette’s throat.

“What did she say?” Elwood asked.

Mary answered. “I think she was asking us to take care of her brother.”

Dahra lifted her fingers from Bette’s neck. She stroked the girl’s face once, a lingering good-bye.

“Is she . . .” Mary couldn’t finish the question.

“Yes,” Dahra whispered. “There was probably bleeding inside her head, not just outside. Whoever hit her in the head killed her. Elwood, go find Edilio at the firehouse. Tell him we have to bury Bette.”

“She’s with God now,” Mary said.

“I’m not sure there is a God in the FAYZ,” Dahra said.

They buried Bette next to the firestarter in the plaza at one o’clock in the morning. There was no place to keep dead bodies, and no way to prepare the bodies for the grave.

Edilio dug the hole with his backhoe. The sound of it, the straining of the engine, the sudden jerks of the shovel, seemed horribly loud and horribly out of place.

Sam was there, along with Astrid and Little Pete; Mary; Albert, who came over from the McDonald’s; Elwood, standing in for Dahra, who had to stay with Cookie; and the twins Anna and Emma. Bette’s little brother was there too, nine years old, sobbing with Mary’s arm around him. Quinn opted not to attend.

Sam and Edilio had carried Bette’s body the few dozen feet from the church basement to the plaza.

They couldn’t figure out a gentle or dignified way to lower Bette into the hole, so in the end they just rolled her in. She made a sound like a dropped backpack.

“We should say something,” Anna suggested. “Maybe things we remember about Bette.”

So they did, telling what few stories they could remember. None of them had been close friends of hers.

Astrid began the Lord’s Prayer. “Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.” Little Pete said it along with her. More words than anyone had ever heard him speak. The others, all but Sam, joined in.

Then they each shoveled a spadeful of dirt over her and stood back while Edilio used the backhoe to finish the job.

“I’ll make her a cross tomorrow,” Edilio said when he was finished.

As the ceremony was breaking up, Orc and Howard appeared, ghosts in the mist, watching. No one spoke to them. They left after a few minutes.

“I shouldn’t have let her go home,” Sam said to Astrid.

“You’re not a doctor. There was no way you could know she had internal bleeding.

And, anyway, what could you have done? The question is, what are we going to do now?"

"What do you want to do?" Sam asked.

"Orc murdered Bette," Astrid said flatly. "Maybe he didn't mean to, but it's still murder."

"Yes. He killed her. So what do you want to do?"

"At least we can demand that something be done to Orc."

"Demand of who?" Sam said. He zipped his jacket. It was chilly. "You want to go demand justice from Caine?"

"Rhetorical question," Astrid commented.

"Does that mean it's a question I don't expect you to be able to answer?"

Astrid nodded. Neither of them had anything to say for a while. Mary and the twins, with Bette's little brother in tow, headed back to the day care.

Elwood said, speaking to no one in particular, "I don't know if Dahra can keep this up much longer." Then he squared his shoulders and marched back toward the hospital.

Edilio came and stood with Sam and Astrid. "This can't just be something that happened," he said. "You hear me? We let this go, where does it stop? People can't be beating each other up so bad, they die."

"You have a suggestion?" Sam asked coldly.

"Me? I'm the wetback, remember? I'm not from around here, I don't even know these people. I'm not the big genius, and I'm not the one with this power thing, man." He kicked at the dirt, hard, like it was someone he wanted to hurt. He seemed like he might say more, but he bit his lip, spun, and strode away.

Sam said, "Caine has Drake and Orc, Panda and Chaz, and I hear Mallet has made peace with him. And maybe a half dozen other guys."

"Are you afraid of them?" Astrid asked him.

"Yeah, Astrid, I am."

"Okay," she said. "But you were scared of going into a burning building, too."

"You don't get this, do you?" Sam demanded with enough heat that Astrid took a step back. "I know what you want, okay? I know what you and a bunch of other people want. You want me to be the anti-Caine. You don't like the way he's doing things and you want me to go kick him out. Well, here's what you don't know: even if I could do all that, I wouldn't be any better than him."

"You're wrong about that, Sam. You're—"

"That night when I first used the power? When I hurt my stepfather? How do you think I felt?"

"Sad. Regretful." Astrid looked at his face like the answer would be written there. "Scared, probably."

"Yeah. All that. And one more thing." He held up his hand and inches from her nose squeezed his fingers into a tight fist. "I also felt a rush, Astrid. A rush. I thought, oh my God, look at the power I have. Look what I can do. A huge, crazy rush."

"Power corrupts," Astrid said softly.

"Yeah," Sam said sarcastically. "I've heard that."

"Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely. I forget who said it."

"I make a lot of mistakes, Astrid. I don't want to make that mistake. I don't want to

be that guy. I don't want to be Caine. I want to . . ." He spread his arms wide, a gesture of helplessness. "I just want to go surfing."

"You won't be corrupted, Sam. You wouldn't do those things." He had moved back. She moved to close the distance.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Well, two reasons. First, it's not your character. Of course you felt a rush from the power. Then, you pushed it away. You didn't grab at it, you pushed it away. That's reason number one. You're you, you're not Caine or Drake or Orc."

Sam wanted to agree, wanted to accept that, but he felt he knew better. "Don't be so sure."

"And reason number two: you have me," Astrid said.

"Do I?"

"Yes."

That drained the anger and frustration from him like someone had pulled a plug. For a long moment he was lost, gazing into her eyes. She was very close. His heart shifted to a deeper rhythm that vibrated his whole body.

There were just inches between them. He closed the distance by half, stopped.

"I can't kiss you with your little brother watching," he said.

Astrid stepped back, took Little Pete by the shoulders, and turned him so he was facing away.

"How about now?"

EIGHTEEN

164 HOURS, 32 MINUTES

ALBERT LEFT THE funeral ceremony and crossed the plaza toward the McDonald's. He wished he had someone to talk to. Maybe if he flipped the lights on, someone would come in for a very late burger.

But the small crowd dispersed before he could unlock the front door of the McDonald's—his McDonald's—and the plaza was left empty and silent but for a faint hum from power lines overhead.

Albert stood with his keys in one hand and his McDonald's-issue cap in his other hand—he had taken it off out of respect for the dead—and let a sense of gloom and foreboding wash over him. He was a naturally optimistic person, but a nighttime funeral of a young girl murdered by bullies . . . that wasn't something that exactly perked up your mood.

Albert had enjoyed being alone since the fall of the FAYZ. He worried about his brothers and sisters. He missed his mom. But he had gone in an instant from being the youngest of six, the goat, the victim, the overworked and underappreciated youngster, to being a responsible and respected person in this strange new community.

None of which changed the fact that right now, with the smell of fresh-turned earth in his nostrils and disquiet boring holes in his brain, he would have loved to be watching one of his mother's favorite gruesome crime shows and sneaking popcorn out of the bowl on her lap.

The big issues in the FAYZ—the what and the why and the how—didn't bother Albert much. He was a practical person, and, anyway, those were things for someone like Astrid to ponder. As for the events of this night, the killing of Bette, that was for Sam and Caine and those guys to work out.

What had Albert worried was something entirely different: No one was working. No one but Mary and Dahra and occasionally Edilio. Everyone else was moping or wandering or fighting or else just sitting around and playing video games or watching DVDs. They were all like rats living in an abandoned house: they ate what they found, messed wherever they liked, and left things dirtier and more rundown than they found them.

It couldn't last. Everyone was just killing time. But if all they did was kill time, time would end up killing them.

Albert believed that. Knew that. But he couldn't explain it to anyone and make them listen. He couldn't talk with the smooth assurance of a Caine, or the knowing detachment of an Astrid. When Albert spoke, people didn't pay attention the way they did to Sam.

He needed someone else's words to explain what his instincts told him must be true.

Albert dropped his keys into his pocket and marched up the street with a determined stride that echoed off dark storefronts. The smart thing to do would be to head home, get a few hours of sleep. It would be dawn soon. But he wasn't going to sleep, he knew that. Sam and Caine and Astrid and Computer Jack all had their things

they did, their things they knew, but this was Albert's.

"We can't be rats," he muttered to himself. "We have to be . . ." But even trying to explain it to himself, he didn't know the right words.

The county library branch in Perdido Beach wasn't an impressive place. It was a dusty, gloomy, low-ceilinged storefront that hit him with a whiff of mildew when he swung the door open. He had never entered the place before and was a little surprised to find it unlocked with the overhead fluorescent tubes still flickering and buzzing.

Albert looked around and laughed. "No one's been here since the FAYZ," he said to a rack of yellowed paperbacks.

He looked in the librarian's old oaken desk. You never knew where a candy bar might be hiding. He found a can of peppermints. They looked like they'd been there quite a while, treats to be handed out to kids who never came.

He popped one in his mouth and began to walk the meager stacks. He knew he needed to know something, but he didn't know what he needed to know. Most of the books looked like they'd been there, undisturbed, since before Albert was born.

He found a set of encyclopedias—like Wikipedia, but paper and very bulky. He plopped down on the ratty carpet and opened the first book. He didn't know what he was looking for, but he knew where to start. He slid out the volume for "W" and turned to the entry for "work." There were two main entries. One had to do with work in terms of physics.

The other entry talked about work as the "activities necessary for the survival of society."

"Yeah," Albert said. "That's what I'm talking about."

He started reading. He jumped from volume to volume, understanding only part of what he was reading, but understanding enough to follow another lead and then another. It was exactly like following hyperlinks, only slower, and with more lifting.

"Work" led to "labor," which led him to "productivity," which led to someone named "Karl Marx," which led to another old guy named "Adam Smith."

Albert had never been much of a serious student. But what he had learned in school had never mattered much from his point of view. This mattered. Everything mattered now.

Albert drifted slowly off to sleep and woke up with a start feeling eyes watching him.

He spun around, jumped to his feet, and heaved a huge sigh of relief when he saw that it was just a cat. The cat was a yellow tabby, a little fat, probably old. It had a pink collar and heart-shaped brass tag. It stood with perfect confidence and self-possession in the middle of the aisle. The cat stared at him from green eyes. Its tail twitched.

"Hi, kitty," Albert said.

The cat disappeared.

Gone.

Albert recoiled in shock, his face suddenly ablaze with pain. The cat was on him, on his face, digging razor-claws into his head. The cat hissed, needle-teeth exposed by a fierce scowl a millimeter from Albert's eyes.

Albert yelled for help, yelled at the cat. The cat dug its claws deeper. Albert still had a volume of the encyclopedia in his right hand—the "S" book. He slammed it down on his own head.

The cat was gone. The book knocked Albert silly.

And now the cat was clear across the room, sitting calmly atop the librarian's desk.

It was impossible. Nothing moved that fast. Nothing.

Albert drew a shaky breath and began backing toward the door to the street.

Without any movement that Albert's eyes could detect, the cat went from the desk to the back of Albert's neck. It was on him like a mad thing, clawing, scratching, tearing, hissing.

Again, Albert swung the heavy book and again the blow landed on his own flesh because now the cat was perched atop a stack, peering down at Albert, mocking him with cool, green-eyed contempt.

It was going to attack him again.

Instinct made Albert swing the book up to protect his face.

He felt the book jump violently in his hands.

The cat's face, distorted by rage, was an inch from Albert's own face.

But the book was still in place.

And the cat was in the book.

No, *through* the book.

Albert stared in shock as the cat's eyes darkened and its animal soul fled.

He dropped the encyclopedia on the floor.

The book, the heavy blue leather-bound volume, bisected the cat just behind the front paws. It was as if someone had cut the cat in half and sewed it in two pieces to the book. The back of the cat stuck out from the back cover.

Albert was panting as much from terror as exertion. The thing on the floor, that thing wasn't possible. The way the cat had moved, not possible.

"Nightmare. You're having a nightmare," he told himself.

But if it was a dream it was a dream with a lot of the texture of reality. Surely he wouldn't dream the smell of mildew. Surely he wouldn't dream the way the cat's bladder and bowels emptied messily in death.

Albert remembered seeing the librarian's large shoulder bag at her desk. With shaking hands he emptied the contents out onto the desk: lipstick, wallet, compact, a cell phone all scattered.

He picked up the encyclopedia. It was heavy. The weight of the cat added to the book had to be twenty pounds. And the cat-in-the-book was bulky, too big to fit easily into the bag.

But he had to show this to someone. This was an impossible thing. Impossible. Except that it was real. Albert needed someone else to tell him that it was real, someone to confirm that he wasn't dreaming or crazy.

Not Caine. Sam? He would be at the firehouse, but this wasn't a Sam thing, it was an Astrid thing. Two minutes later he was on Astrid's well-lit stoop.

Astrid opened her door cautiously and only after checking the peephole.

"Albert? It's the middle of the . . . oh, my God, what happened to your face?"

"I could use some Band-Aids," Albert said. He'd forgotten what he must look like. He'd forgotten the pain. "Yeah. I could use some help. But that's not why I came here."

"Then . . ."

"Astrid. I need . . ." His words failed him, then. Now safe in Astrid's entryway, the

fear took hold and for a minute he just could not form a word or make a sound.

Astrid drew him inside and closed the door.

“I need . . . ,” he began again, and again couldn’t say more. In a strangled voice he said, “Just look.”

He dumped the cat and the book onto the Oriental rug.

Astrid went completely still.

“It was so fast. It attacked me. I couldn’t even see it move. It was like it was in one place, right? And then it was on me. I mean, it didn’t jump, Astrid. It just . . . appeared.”

Astrid knelt to push gingerly at the book. She tried to make the book fall open, but the body of the cat went through each page and held them together. Not like the cat had made a hole: like the cat had fused together with the paper.

“What is it, Astrid?” Albert pleaded.

She said nothing, just stared. Albert could all but see the wheels turning in her brain. But she gave him no answer, and Albert accepted after a while that no answer would be forthcoming. No explanation was possible for a thing that could not be.

But she had seen the thing, the impossible thing. He wasn’t crazy.

After what felt like a very long time Astrid whispered, “Come on, Albert, let’s do something with those scratches.”

Lana lay in the dark in the cabin listening to the mysterious sounds of the desert outside. Something made a soft, slithery sound like a hand stroking silk. Something else emitted rapid percussive bursts, a tiny insect drummer who slowed after a few seconds and lost his way and fell silent before starting all over again.

The windmill squeaked infuriatingly. Never for long, never in any kind of pattern. There was no real breeze, just whispers that turned the weathered wooden blades a quarter turn . . . squeak . . . or a half turn . . . squeak, squeak . . . or barely nudged them to produce a sound like the shrill peep of a baby bird.

Against all that was the reassuring snore from Patrick. He would snore and stop and snore again and every now and then give up a low yipping sound that Lana found endearing.

Lana’s body was well. Her injuries were all miraculously healed. She had washed away the caked-on blood. She had water and food and shelter.

But Lana’s brain was an engine revved to breakneck speed. It turned over and over, swirling through memories of pain, memories of terror, flashes of her grandfather’s empty seat, the tumble down the slope, the buzzards, the lion.

But as lurid as all those images were, they were just fresh paint splashed on more permanent images. The pictures that lingered were of home. School. The mall. Her dad’s car and her mom’s van. The community pool. The sizzling fantasy skyline of the Las Vegas strip visible from her bedroom window.

Taken all together, the pictures churning and churning in her head fed a constant slow burn of rage.

She should be home, not here. She should be in her room. She should be with her friends. Not alone.

Not alone listening to eerie noises and a squeak and a snore.

If she had been a little more careful. . . . She had tried to stuff the bottle of vodka into her shoulder bag, the cute one with the beadwork she liked. The bag was too

small, but the only bag big enough was her book bag and she hadn't wanted to carry it because it didn't work with her outfit.

For that, she had been caught. For a stupid question of fashion, of looking cool.

And now . . .

A tidal wave of fury at her mother swept across her. It felt like she would drown in all that rage.

Her mother, that's who she blamed. Her father just did what her mom told him to do. He had to back her up even though he was the nicer one, not as strict or as snipey as her mother.

What was the big deal if she gave Tony a bottle of vodka? It's not like he was driving a car.

Lana's mother just didn't understand Las Vegas. Vegas wasn't Perdido Beach. There were pressures on her in Las Vegas. It was a city, not a town, and not just any city. Kids grew up faster in Vegas. Demands were made, even of seventh graders, eighth graders, let alone a ninth grader like her.

Her stupid mother. Her fault.

Although it was kind of hard to blame her mother for the blank, intimidating wall in the desert. Kind of hard to blame her for that.

Maybe it was aliens and right now some creepy monsters were chasing her mother and father through the streets of Las Vegas, like in that movie, *War of the Worlds*. Maybe.

Lana found that thought strangely comforting. After all, at least she wasn't being chased by aliens in giant tripods. Maybe the wall was some kind of defense put up against the aliens. Maybe she was safe on this side of the wall.

The bottle of vodka wasn't the only time she'd snuck something for Tony. Lana had palmed some of her mother's Xanax for him. And she had shoplifted a bottle of wine once from a convenience store.

She wasn't naïve: She never thought Tony loved her or anything. She knew he was using her. But she was using him too, in her own way. Tony had some status in the school, and some of that had been transferred to her.

Patrick snorted and raised his head very suddenly.

"What is it, boy?"

She rolled from the narrow cot and crouched silent and fearful in the dark cabin.

Something was outside. She could hear it moving. Faint sounds of padded feet on the ground.

Patrick stood up but in a strange, slow-motion way. His hackles were raised, the fur on his back bristling. He was staring intently at the doorway.

There was a scratching sound, exactly like a dog might make, trying to get inside.

And then Lana heard, or thought she heard, a garbled whisper. "Come out."

Patrick should be barking, but he wasn't. He was rigid, panting too hard, staring too fixedly.

"You're just imagining things," Lana whispered, trying to reassure herself.

"Come out," the gravelly whisper called again.

Lana discovered that she had to pee. Had to go very badly and there was nothing like a bathroom in the cabin.

"Is someone there?" she cried.

No answer. Maybe it had just been her imagination. Maybe it was just the wind.

She crept to the door and listened intently. Nothing. She glanced at Patrick. Her dog was still bristling, but he had relaxed a bit. The threat—whatever it had been—had moved away.

Lana opened the door a crack. Nothing. Nothing she could see, anyway, and Patrick was definitely no longer worried.

She had no choice: she had to run to the outhouse. Patrick bounded along beside her.

The outhouse was a simple vertical box, undecorated, unadorned, not overly smelly and quite clean. There was no light, of course, so she had to feel her way around, locate the seat and the toilet paper.

At one point she started giggling. It was, after all, a little funny peeing in an outhouse while her dog stood guard.

The walk back to the shack was a bit more leisurely. Lana took a moment to gaze up at the night sky. The moon was already descending toward the western horizon. The stars . . . well, the stars looked odd. But she wasn't quite sure why she thought so.

She resumed the walk back to the cabin and froze. Between her and the front door stood a coyote. But this was like none of the coyotes her grandfather had pointed out to her. None of those had been even as big as Patrick. But this shaggy yellow animal was the size of a wolf.

Patrick had not seen or heard the animal approach and now he seemed almost too shocked to react. Patrick, who had leaped to battle a mountain lion, now seemed cowed and uncertain.

Lana's grandfather had lectured her on desert animals: the coyote that was to be respected but not feared; the lizards that would startle you with their sudden bursts of speed; the deer that were more like large rats than like Bambi; the wild burros so different from their domesticated brothers; and the rattlesnakes that were no threat so long as you wore boots and kept your eyes open.

"Shoo," Lana yelled, and waved her hands as her grandfather had taught her to do if she ever came too close to a coyote.

The coyote didn't move.

Instead it made a sharp yipping sound that caused Lana to jump back. Out of the corner of her eye she saw dark shapes rushing toward her, three or four of them, swift shadows.

Now Patrick reacted. He growled menacingly, bared his teeth and raised his hackles, but the coyote didn't move and his companions were approaching fast.

Lana had been told that coyotes were not dangerous to humans, but there was no way to believe that now. She dodged to the right, hoping to fake out the coyote, but the animal was far too quick to be fooled.

"Patrick, get him," she urged helplessly.

But Patrick wasn't going any further than growling and putting on a show and in seconds the other coyotes would arrive and then . . . well, who knew what then?

Lana had no choice: She had to reach the cabin. She had to reach the cabin or die.

She yelled at the top of her voice and ran straight at the coyote in her path.

The animal recoiled in surprise.

There was a flash of something small and dark and the coyote yelped in pain.

Lana was past him in a heartbeat. Ten steps to the cabin door. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six . . .

Patrick ran ahead of her, panicked, and shot inside.

Lana was on his heels, spun, and slammed the door shut without even slowing down. She skidded to a stop, turned, ran back to the door, and threw herself against it.

But the coyotes did not pursue. They had other problems. She heard wild yelping, canine cries of pain and rage.

After a while the yelping slowed, slurred, and finally stopped. A new coyote voice set up a wild howling, howling at the moon.

Then silence.

In the morning, with the sun bright and all the night's terrors banished, Lana found the coyote dead, a hundred feet from her door. Still attached to its muzzle was half a snake with a broad, diamond-shaped head. Its body had been chewed in half but not before the venom had flowed into the coyote's bloodstream.

She looked for a long time at the snake's head. It was a snake without any doubt. And yet she was sure she had seen it fly.

Lana put that out of her mind. And along with it she dismissed the whisper she had heard because flying snakes and whispering coyotes the size of Great Danes, well, none of that was possible. There was a word for people who believed impossible things: crazy.

"I guess Grandpa wasn't that big an expert on desert wildlife after all," she said to Patrick.

NINETEEN

132 HOURS, 46 MINUTES

“**YOU DON’T** HAVE to like the dude, brah, but he’s doing good stuff.” Quinn was poised to knock on the door of their third house that morning. It was Sam and Quinn and a Coates kid, a girl named Brooke. They were “search team three.”

It was day eight of the FAYZ. The fifth day since Caine had moved in and taken over.

The second day since Sam had kissed Astrid beside a freshly dug grave.

Caine had organized ten search teams to move through the town, each covering a square block to start. The idea was to go into each house on each of the four streets that formed the block. They were to make sure the stove was off, the air-conditioning was off, the TV was off, interior lights were off, and the porch lights lit. They were to turn off automatic irrigation systems and turn off hot water heaters.

If they couldn’t figure any of that out, they would add it to a list for Edilio to follow up on. Edilio always seemed able to figure out mechanical things. He was running around Perdido Beach with a tool belt and two Coates kids as “helpers.”

The search teams were also to search for lost kids, babies who might have been abandoned, might be trapped in cribs. And pets, too.

In each house they made a list of anything useful, like computers, and anything dangerous, like guns or drugs. They were to note how much food there was and collect all the medicines so they could be sent to Dahra. Diapers and formula went to the day care.

It was a good plan. It was a good idea.

Caine had some good ideas, no question. Caine had tasked Computer Jack to come up with an emergency communication system. Computer Jack had the idea of going old school: he’d set up short-wave radios in the town hall, the fire station, the day care, and the abandoned house Drake used for himself and some of his sheriffs.

But Caine had taken no action against Orc.

Sam had gone to him to demand action.

“What am I supposed to do?” Caine had asked reasonably. “Bette was breaking the rules, and Orc is a sheriff. It was a tragedy for everyone involved. Orc feels very bad.”

So Orc still prowled the streets of Perdido Beach. For all Sam knew, Bette’s blood was still on the bully’s bat. And now the fear of the so-called sheriffs was magnified ten times over.

“Let’s just get this over with,” Sam said. He wasn’t going to get into a discussion of Caine in front of Brooke. He assumed the ten-year-old was a spy. In any case, he was in a foul mood because one of the houses they were to visit later was his own.

Quinn knocked. He rang the bell. “Nada.” He tried the door. It was locked. “Bring on the hammer,” Quinn said.

Each search team had a wagon, either taken from the hardware store or borrowed from someone’s yard. They carried a heavy sledgehammer in the wagon.

It had taken them two hours to deal with the first two houses. It was going to be a while before every home in Perdido Beach had been searched and rendered safe.

“You want to do the hammer?” Sam asked, deferring to Quinn.

“I live for the hammer, brah.”

Quinn hefted the hammer and swung it against the door, just below the doorknob. The wood splintered, and Quinn pushed the door back.

The smell hit them hard.

“Oh, man, what died in here?” Quinn said, like it was a joke.

The joke fell flat.

Just inside the door, on the hardwood floor lay a baby’s pacifier. The three of them stared at it.

“No, no, no. I can’t do this,” Brooke said.

The three of them stayed on the porch, no one willing to go in. But no one was willing to close the door and just walk away, either.

Brooke’s hands were shaking so badly, Sam reached for them and held them in his. “It’s okay,” he said. “You don’t have to go in.”

She was chubby, freckled, with straw-dry reddish hair. She wore the Coates uniform and had seemed, up until this moment, almost a cipher. She never joked or played around, just did what she was supposed to do, following Sam’s lead.

“It’s just, after Coates . . .,” Brooke said.

“What about Coates?” Sam asked.

Brooke flushed. “Nothing. Just, you know, all the adults disappearing.” Then, feeling like she had to explain some more, she said, “It’s, like, I don’t want to see any more creepy stuff, okay?”

Sam shot a significant look at Quinn, but Quinn just shrugged and said, “There’s, like, a dead little kid in there. We don’t have to go inside to know that.”

Sam yelled, “Is there anyone in there?” as loud as he could. Then to Quinn, “We can’t just ignore this.”

“Maybe we should just report it to Caine,” Quinn said.

“I don’t see him going house-to-house,” Sam snapped. “He’s sitting on his butt acting like he’s the emperor of Perdido Beach.”

When no one took the bait, Sam said, “Give me one of the big garbage bags.”

Quinn peeled one off.

Ten minutes later Sam was done. He dragged the bag with its sad contents across the carpet to the front door. He hefted it by the drawstrings and carried it out to the wagon.

“Like taking out the trash,” Sam said to no one. His hands were shaking. He felt so angry, he wanted to hurt someone. He felt angry enough that if he could have gotten his hands on whoever caused all this, he would have choked the life out of them.

Mostly Sam was angry at himself. He had never really known this family. It was a one-parent home, the mom and various boyfriends. And the little boy. The family weren’t friends, or even acquaintances, but still, he should have thought to check on the baby. That should have been his first thought. He should have remembered, but he hadn’t.

Without looking back at Quinn and Brooke, Sam said, “Open some windows. Let some air in there. We can come back when it’s not so . . . when the smell is gone.”

“Brah, I’m not going in there,” Quinn said.

Sam quickly closed the distance between them. Seeing his face, Quinn took a step

back. "I picked the baby up and stuffed him in a trash bag, all right? So go in there and open the windows. Do it."

"Man, you really need to step off," Quinn said. "I don't take orders from you."

"No, you take them from Caine," Sam said.

Quinn stuck his hand out, almost taunting. "I'm sorry, am I annoying you? Why don't you just burn my hand off, magic boy?"

Sam and Quinn had had many arguments over the years. But since the coming of the FAYZ, especially since Sam had told Quinn the truth about himself, simple disagreements had turned quickly poisonous. They were in each other's faces now like they might both start swinging. Sam was mad enough to.

Brooke said, "I'll do it, Sam."

Sam, his face still just inches from Quinn's, said, "I don't want it to be this way between us."

Quinn relaxed his muscles. He forced a grin. "No big thing, brah."

To Brooke, Sam said, "Open the windows. Then go tell Edilio to dig another hole. I'll go do my house. It would be nice if you could pull the wagon downtown. But if you can't, I'll understand."

Without another word to Quinn he stormed off but stopped short at the end of the walkway. "Brooke, see if you can find a picture of him and his mom, okay? I don't want him to be buried alone. He should have . . ."

He couldn't say any more. Eyes half blinded by unexpected tears, he marched down the street and stumbled up the steps to his own home, the house he hated, and slammed the door behind him.

It took a while before he even noticed his mother's laptop computer was gone.

He went to the table. He touched the tabletop, right where the laptop had been, as though to reassure himself he wasn't imagining things.

Then he noticed the open drawers. The open cabinets. The food hadn't been taken, just tossed around, some of it ending up on the floor.

He bolted for his room. The light was still there. His weak attempt at camouflaging it had been torn down.

Someone knew. Someone had seen.

But it didn't stop there. In his mother's bedroom the drawers and the closet had been ransacked.

His mother kept a locked, flat, gray metal box in her closet. Sam knew because she'd pointed it out to him on more than one occasion. "If anything ever happens to me, this is where my will is." She was very serious, but then she'd said, "You know, in case I get hit by a bus."

"We don't have any buses in Perdido Beach," he'd pointed out.

"Hmm. I guess that explains why they're never on time," she'd said, and then laughed and hooked him in for a hug.

Holding on to him she had whispered, "Sam, your birth certificate is in there, too."

"Okay."

"It's up to you whether you want to see it."

He had stiffened against her embrace. She was offering him a chance to know what it said on the birth certificate. There would be three names listed: his, his mother's, and his father's.

“Maybe. Maybe not,” he had said.

She held him tightly, but he gently disengaged and stood apart from her. He wanted then to say something. To apologize for what had happened to Tom. To ask her whether he had also, somehow, scared off his true father.

But his was a life with secrets. And even though his mother had made the offer, Sam knew she didn’t want him to violate the code of secrecy.

For months Sam had known about the box. Known where he could find the key.

Now the box was gone.

He had very little doubt who had taken it, who had searched the house.

By now, Caine knew that Sam had the power.

He retrieved his bike. Right now he wanted desperately to be with Astrid. She would make sense of everything.

Most kids now got around on bikes—not always their own—or skateboards. Only the prees walked. And as he crossed through the plaza on his way to Astrid’s home there was a procession of them walking right across the street. Brother John was in the lead. Mother Mary was pushing a two-seat stroller. Some girl in a Coates uniform was carrying a toddler on her hip. Two other kids, drafted for the day, were shepherding the line of some thirty or so preschoolers. They were solemn for a group of little kids but there was at least some horseplay, enough that Mary had to yell, “Julia and Zosia, get back in line.”

The twins, Emma and Anna, brought up the rear. Sam knew them fairly well, having actually gone out with Anna on a date once. Emma had a single stroller, and Anna was pushing a Ralph’s grocery store cart loaded with snacks and diapers and baby bottles.

Sam stopped and waited for them to cross the street. They stuck to the crosswalk, which, he supposed, was a good thing. Best for the prees to learn to cross the street like there might be traffic. Some kids had been doing some driving, often with bad results. Caine had the rules on that too, now: no one was allowed to drive, except for some of Caine’s people and Edilio, who theoretically might have to drive the ambulance or the fire truck. If he ever figured out how.

“T’sup, Anna?” Sam asked politely.

“Hi, Sam. Where have you been?”

He shrugged. “Fire station. I kind of live there now.”

Anna pointed at the littles marching ahead of her. “Baby duty.”

“Drag,” Sam said.

“It’s okay. I don’t mind it.”

“And she’s great at it, too,” Mary called back encouragingly.

“I can change a diaper in under sixty seconds,” Anna said with a laugh. “Less, if it’s number one.”

“Where are you guys all going?”

“The beach. We’re going on a picnic.”

“Cool. See you later,” Sam said.

Anna waved over her shoulder as she passed.

“Hey, wish Anna and me happy birthday, Sam,” Emma called back.

“Happy birthday to both of you,” Sam said. He stood up on the bike’s pedals and picked up speed, heading for Astrid’s.

He felt a little sad thinking back on his one date with Anna. She was a nice girl. But he wasn't all that interested in dating back then, that was the truth. He'd only gone out because he felt like it was required. He didn't want kids to think he was a dork. And his mother kept asking about whether he was going out, so he had taken Anna to a movie. He remembered the movie, in fact: *Stardust*.

His mother had driven them. It was her night off. His mom had dropped them at the theater and picked them up afterward. He and Anna had gone to the California Pizza Kitchen and split a barbeque chicken pizza.

Birthday?

Sam jerked the bike into a sharp turn and pounded the pedals back, back toward where he'd passed the prees. It didn't take long to catch them. They were just reaching the beach, all the toddlers toddling over the low seawall, laughing now as they took off their shoes and ran onto the sand and Mother Mary, sounding just like a teacher, yelled, "Hang on to your shoes, don't lose your shoes, Alex, pick up your shoes and carry them."

Anna and Emma had parked the shopping cart full of snacks and diapers and bottles. Emma was unbuckling her charge from the stroller.

"Check his diaper," Mother Mary reminded her, and Emma did.

Sam threw his bike down and ran, breathless, to Anna.

"What's up, Sam?"

"What birthday?" he panted.

"What?"

"What birthday, Anna?"

It took a while for her to absorb his fear. It took a while for the reason for his fear to dawn on her.

"Fifteen," Anna said in a whisper.

"What's the matter?" Emma asked, sensing her twin's mood. "It doesn't mean anything."

"It doesn't," Anna whispered.

"You're probably right," Sam said.

"Oh, my God," Anna said. "Are we going to disappear?"

"When were you born?" Sam asked. "What time of day?"

The twins exchanged scared looks. "We don't know."

"You know what, no one has blinked out since that first day, so it's probably—"

Emma disappeared.

Anna screamed.

The other older kids took notice, the littles, too.

"Oh, my God!" Anna cried. "Emma. Emma. Oh, God!"

She grabbed Sam's hands and he held her tight.

The prees, some of them, caught the fear. Mother Mary came over. "What's going on? You're scaring the kids. Where's Emma?"

Anna just kept saying, "Oh, my God," and calling her sister's name.

"Where's Emma?" Mary demanded again. "What's going on?"

Sam didn't want to explain. Anna was hurting him with the pressure of her fingers digging into the backs of his hands. Anna's eyes were huge, staring holes in him.

"How far apart were you born?" Sam asked.

Anna just stared in blank horror.

Sam lowered his voice to an urgent whisper. "How far apart were you born, Anna?"

"Six minutes," she whispered.

"Hold my hands, Sam," she said.

"Don't let me go, Sam," she said.

"I won't, Anna, I won't let you go," Sam said.

"What's going to happen, Sam?"

"I don't know, Anna."

"Will we go to where our mom and dad are?"

"I don't know, Anna."

"Am I going to die?"

"No, Anna. You're not going to die."

"Don't let go of me, Sam."

Mary was there now, a baby on her hip. John was there. The prees, some of them, watched with serious, worried looks on their faces.

"I don't want to die," Anna repeated. "I . . . I don't know what it's like."

"It's okay, Anna."

Anna smiled. "That was a nice date. When we went out."

"It was."

For a split second it was like Anna blurred. Too fast to be real. She blurred, and Sam could almost swear that she had smiled at him.

And his fingers squeezed on nothing.

For a terribly long time no one moved or said anything.

The littles didn't cry out. The older kids just stared.

Sam's fingertips still remembered the feel of Anna's hands. He stared at the place where her face had been. He could still see her pleading eyes.

Unable to stop himself, he reached a hand into the space she had occupied. Reaching for a face that was no longer there.

Someone sobbed.

Someone cried out, other voices, then the prees started crying.

Sam felt sick. When his teacher had disappeared he hadn't been expecting it. This time he had seen it coming, like a monster in a slow-motion nightmare. This time he had seen it coming, like standing rooted on the railroad tracks, unable to jump aside.

TWENTY

131 HOURS, 03 MINUTES

“IT JUST HAPPENED,” Drake announced.

Caine sat in his over-large leather chair, the one that had formerly belonged to the mayor of Perdido Beach. It made him look small. It made him look very young. And to make matters worse, he was chewing on his thumbnail, which made it almost seem that he was sucking his thumb.

Diana was on the couch, lying back reading a magazine and barely paying attention. “What happened?”

“The two girls you had me following. They both just took the big jump. They poofed, as that idiot Quinn says.”

Caine jerked to his feet. “Just as I predicted. Just like I said.” Caine did not seem to be happy to have been proven right. He came around from behind his desk and to Drake’s great enjoyment, snatched the magazine out of Diana’s hand and threw it across the room. “You think maybe you could pay attention?”

Diana sighed and sat up slowly, brushed a piece of lint from her blouse. “Don’t get pissy with me, Caine,” she warned. “I’m the one who said we needed to start collecting birth certificates.”

Drake had made time to check out Diana’s psych file the day after the FAYZ came. But her file had been missing by then. In its place she had left Drake’s file lying open on the doc’s desk and drawn a little smiley face beside the word “sadist.”

Drake had already hated her. But after that, hating Diana had become a full-time occupation.

To Drake’s disgust, Caine accepted Diana’s back talk. “Yeah. That was a good idea,” Caine said. “A very good idea.”

“Diana’s boy Sam was there,” Drake said.

Diana did not respond to the provocation.

“He was holding the one girl’s hand when she bugged,” Drake added. “Looking right into her eyes. See, the first girl goes and they all know what’s coming at that point. The second girl, she was weepy over it. I was too far off to hear what she said, but you could tell she was basically wetting herself.”

“Sadism,” Diana said. “The enjoyment of another person’s pain.”

Drake stretched his shark grin. “Words don’t scare me.”

“You wouldn’t be a psychopath if they did, Drake.”

“Knock it off, you two,” Caine said. He slumped back in the oversized chair and started biting his thumb again. “It’s November seventeenth. I have five days to figure out how to beat this.”

“Five days,” Drake echoed.

“I don’t know what we’d do if you bugged out, Caine,” Drake said. He sent Diana a look that said he knew exactly what he would do if Caine wasn’t around anymore.

Computer Jack came bursting into the room in his usual flustered, goggle-eyed way, carrying an open laptop.

“What?” Caine snarled.

“I hacked it,” Computer Jack said proudly. When he got blank looks in reaction, he said, “Nurse Temple’s laptop.”

Caine looked nonplussed. “What? Oh. Great. I have bigger problems. Give it to Diana. And get out.”

Computer Jack handed the laptop to Diana and scuttled from the room.

“Scared little worm, isn’t he?” Drake said.

“Don’t mess with him. He’s useful,” Caine warned. “Drake. What did you see exactly when the girl . . . vacated?”

“The first one, I wasn’t looking right at her when it happened. The second one, I kept my eyes on her. One minute there, the next gone.”

“At one seventeen?”

Drake shrugged. “Close enough, anyway.”

Caine slammed his hand down on the desk. “I don’t want close enough, you idiot,” he shouted. “I’m trying to figure this out. You know, it’s not just me, Drake. We all get older. You’ll be there someday too, waiting to disappear.”

“April twelfth, just one minute after midnight, Drake,” Diana said. “Not that I’ve memorized the exact day, hour, and minute or . . .” She fell silent, reading the computer screen.

“What?” Caine asked.

Diana ignored him but it was clear that she had found something of great interest in the diary of Connie Temple. Diana rose with swift, feline grace and yanked open the file cabinet. She pulled the gray metal box out and placed it almost reverently on Caine’s desk.

“No one’s opened it yet?” she demanded.

“I was more interested in Nurse Temple’s laptop,” Caine said. “Why?”

“Be useful, Drake,” Diana ordered. “Break this lock.”

Drake grabbed a letter opener, inserted the blade in the cheap lock, and twisted. The lock broke.

Diana opened the box. “This looks like a will. And, ah, this is interesting, a newspaper clipping about the school bus thing we’ve all heard about. And . . . here it is.”

She held up a plastic folder protecting an elaborately printed birth certificate. She stared at it and started laughing.

“That’s enough, Diana,” Caine warned. He jumped up and yanked the birth certificate from her hand. He stared, frowning. Then he sat down hard, like he was a marionette and someone had cut his strings.

“November twenty-second,” Diana said, grinning spitefully.

“Coincidence,” Caine said.

“He’s three minutes older than you.”

“It’s a coincidence. We don’t look alike.”

“What’s the word for twins who aren’t identical?” Diana put her finger to her mouth, a parody of deep thought. “Oh yeah, fraternal twins. Same womb, same parents, different eggs.”

Caine looked like he might faint. Drake had never seen him like that. “It’s impossible.”

“Neither of you knows your real father,” Diana said. Now she was playing nice, as

close to sympathetic as she ever managed to be. “And how many times have you told me you don’t seem to be anything like your parents, Caine?”

“It makes no sense,” Caine breathed. He reached for Diana’s hand and after a hesitation, she let him take it.

“What are you two talking about?” Drake demanded. He didn’t enjoy being the one person not in on the joke. But they both ignored him.

“It’s in the diary, too,” Diana said. “Nurse Temple. She knew you were a mutant. She suspected you had some kind of impossible power, and she was obviously onto some of the others, as well. She suspected you of causing half a dozen injuries where no one could ever figure out a cause.”

Drake barked a laugh, catching on. “Are you saying Nurse Temple was Caine’s mother?”

Caine’s face blazed in sudden rage. “Shut up, Drake.”

“Two little boys born on November twenty-second,” Diana said. “One stays with his mother. One is taken away, adopted by another family.”

“She was your mother and she gave you up and kept Sam?” Drake said, laughing in his enjoyment of Caine’s humiliation.

Caine swiveled away from Diana and extended his hands, palms out, toward Drake.

“Mistake,” Diana said, though whether she was talking to Drake or Caine wasn’t clear.

Something slammed Drake’s chest. It was like being hit by a truck. He was lifted off his feet and thrown against the wall. He smashed a pair of framed prints and fell in a heap.

He made himself shake it off. He wanted to jump up and go for Caine, finish him quick before the freak could hit him again. But Caine was there, looming over him, face red, teeth bared, looking like a mad dog.

“Remember who’s the boss, Drake,” Caine said, his voice low, guttural, like it was coming from an animal.

Drake nodded, beaten. For now.

“Get up,” Caine ordered. “We have work to do.”

Astrid was on the front porch with Little Pete. It was the best place to get some sun. She sat in the big white wicker rocker with her feet propped up on the railing. Her bare legs were blazing white in the sunshine. She had always been pale and was never the kind of person who obsessed over a tan, but she was feeling the need for sunlight today. Days with Little Pete tended to be spent indoors. And after a couple of days of that, the house was turning into a prison.

She wondered if this was how her mother had felt. Did it explain why her mother had gone from spending her every day and every night devoting herself to Little Pete to finding any excuse she could to dump him on anyone who would take him?

The street Astrid lived on had changed in small ways since the FAYZ. Cars sat and never moved. There was never any traffic. The lawns were all getting shaggy. The flowers that Mr. Massilio two doors down always kept so beautiful were fading, limp from lack of care. Flags were up on a couple of mailboxes, waiting for a mailman who was never coming. There was an open umbrella blowing listlessly down the street,

moving an inch or two at a time. A couple of houses away some wild animal, or maybe just a hungry pet, had overturned the garbage can and spilled blackened banana peels and sodden newspapers and chicken bones down the driveway.

Astrid spotted Sam pedaling furiously on his bike. He'd said he would come by to take her to the grocery store and she had been waiting for him with an uncomfortable mix of emotions. She wanted to see him. And she was nervous about it.

The kiss had definitely been a mistake.

Unless it wasn't.

Sam threw his bike on the lawn and climbed the steps.

"Hi, Sam." It was clear that he was upset. She lowered her legs and sat forward.

"Anna and Emma just poofed."

"What?"

"I was standing there. I was watching them. I was holding Anna's hand when it happened."

Astrid rose and without really thinking about it wrapped her arms around Sam like she did when she was trying to comfort Little Pete.

But unlike Little Pete, Sam responded to her touch by awkwardly hugging her back. For a moment his face was in her hair and she heard his ragged breathing close to her ear. And it seemed like they might do it again, the kissing thing, but then, both at once, they pushed away.

"She was scared," Sam said. "Anna, I mean. She saw Emma disappear. They were born just six minutes apart. So, first Emma. Then Anna, waiting for it. Knowing it was coming."

"How horrible. Sam, come inside." She glanced at her brother. He was playing his game, as usual.

Astrid led Sam to the kitchen and poured him a glass of water. He drank half of it in a single gulp.

"I have five days," Sam fretted. "Five. Days. Not even a week."

"You don't know that for sure."

"Don't, okay? Just don't. Don't tell me some story about how it's all going to be fine. It's not going to be fine."

"Okay," Astrid said. "You're right. Somehow, age fifteen is this line, and when you reach it, you poof out."

That confirmation seemed to calm him down. He had just needed to have the truth set out clearly without evasions. It occurred to Astrid that this was a way she could help Sam, not just now, but in the future. If they had a future.

"I was avoiding it. Not thinking about it. I'd kind of convinced myself it wasn't going to happen." He managed a wry grin, mostly, it seemed, for her benefit. He could see his own fear reflected in her and now he was trying to tamp it down. "On the plus side, it means I don't have to worry about how depressing it's going to be having Thanksgiving here in the FAYZ."

"There may be a way to beat it," Astrid said cautiously.

He looked at her hopefully, like maybe she had an answer. She shook her head, so he said, "No one's even looking for a way out of the FAYZ. There may be a way to escape. For all we know, there's a big, wide-open gate in the barrier. Maybe out to sea. Maybe out in the desert or up in the national park. No one has even looked."

Astrid resisted the urge to label that sentiment as “grasping at straws.”

Instead, she said, “If there was a way out there would be a way in. And the whole world must know what’s happened. Perdido Beach, the power plant, the highway suddenly blocked—it’s not like the world hasn’t noticed. And they have more people and more resources than we do. They must have half the scientists in the world working on it. But here we are still.”

“I know. I know all that.” He was calmer now and sat on one of the barstools that lined the kitchen counter. He ran one hand over the smooth granite surface as if appreciating the coolness of the stone. “I’ve been thinking, Astrid. What about an egg?”

“Um. I’m out of eggs.”

“No, I mean, think about an egg. The baby chicken pokes his way out of the egg, right? But if you try to break into the egg, it all comes apart.” He did a crumbling thing with his fingertips to illustrate. When she didn’t respond, he slumped and said, “It made perfect sense when I was thinking about it.”

“Actually, it does make a certain amount of sense,” she said.

He was clearly taken aback. His eyes twinkled in a way she liked, and he smiled lopsidedly. “You sound surprised,” he said.

“I am, a little. It may turn out to be an apt analogy.”

“You’re only saying ‘apt analogy’ to remind me you’re smarter than I am,” he teased.

Their eyes locked. Then both looked away, both smiling with embarrassment.

“I’m not sorry, you know,” he said. “I mean, wrong time, wrong place, and all, but I’m still not sorry.”

“You mean . . .”

“Yeah.”

“No, me neither,” Astrid said. “Um, it was my first time. You know, if you don’t count when I kissed Alfredo Slavin in first grade.”

“First time?”

“Well. Yeah. You?”

He shook his head and winced regretfully. Then he said, “But it was the first time I meant it.”

A comfortable silence fell between them.

Then Astrid said, “Sam, the eggshell thing: what you’re saying is that if people outside try to penetrate the barrier wall, it might be dangerous to us. And the people outside might have figured that out. It may be that only we can safely break the barrier and emerge. Maybe the whole world is waiting, watching, hoping we’ll figure out how to hatch.” She opened the cabinet above her and produced a half-empty bag of cookies. She put them on the counter and took one for herself. “It’s a good theory, but you realize it’s still not likely.”

“I know. But I don’t want to just sit here and wait for the clock to tick down if there’s a way out of the FAYZ.”

“What is it you want to do?”

He shrugged. He had a way of doing that in a way that didn’t express doubt or uncertainty but was more like a person sloughing off a heavy burden, freeing himself up to act. “I want to start by following the barrier and seeing if there just happens to be

some big gate. Maybe you walk through that gate and everyone's there, you know? My mom, your parents. Anna and Emma."

"Teachers," Astrid supplied.

"Don't ruin a happy picture," Sam said.

"What happens if you do find a gate, Sam? You go through it? What happens to all the kids still in the FAYZ?"

"They get out, too."

"You won't know for sure it's a gate unless you go through it. And once you do, there may not be a way back in."

"Astrid, in five days I vacate. I poof. I dig a hole."

"You have to think about yourself," Astrid said without inflection.

Sam looked stricken. "I don't think it's fair to—"

Whatever he had been about to say was lost because at that moment there were two noises in rapid succession. The first was a thump coming from outside. The second was Little Pete's screech.

Astrid ran for the door, burst through, and found Little Pete curled into a ball, shivering, howling, ready to launch a full-scale breakdown.

There was a rock on the plank floor beside him.

And standing on the sidewalk, laughing, were Panda, a Coates kid named Chris, and Quinn. Panda and Chris held baseball bats. Chris was also carrying a white trash bag. Inside the bag, just visible, was the logo of a new model game player.

"Did you throw a rock at my brother?" Astrid yelled, fearless in her outrage. She dropped to her knees beside Little Pete.

Sam was halfway across the lawn, moving with a purposeful stride.

"What did you do, Panda?"

"He was ignoring me," Panda said.

"Panda was just goofing, Sam," Quinn said. He stepped between Sam and Panda.

"Throwing a rock at a defenseless little kid is just goofing?" Sam demanded. "And what are you doing hanging with this creep, anyway?"

"Who you calling a creep?" Panda demanded. He took a tighter grip on his baseball bat, but not really like he meant to start swinging.

"Who do I call a creep? Anyone who throws a rock at a little kid," Sam said, not backing down.

Quinn raised his hands, playing the peacemaker. "Look, take a breath, brah. We were just on a little mission for Mother Mary. She drafted Panda and sent him to look for some little kid's stuffed bear, okay? We were doing a good thing."

"Doing good and stealing someone's stuff?" Sam pointed at the trash bag in Chris's grip. "And on the way back, you figured you'd throw a rock and hit an autistic kid?"

"Hey, step off," Quinn said. "We're bringing the game to Mary so she has something for the kids to do."

Little Pete was screaming in Astrid's ear now, so she couldn't hear everything that was said, just snatches of angry words between an increasingly huffy Quinn and a coldly furious Sam.

Then Sam spun on his heel and stalked back toward her and Quinn gave him the finger behind his back and sauntered off down the street with Panda and the Coates

kid.

Sam threw himself violently into a porch chair. For the ten minutes it took Astrid to soothe her little brother and redirect him to his video game, Sam just seethed.

“He’s becoming useless. Worse than useless,” Sam said. Then, relenting, he said, “We’ll get past it.”

“You mean you and Quinn?”

“Yeah.”

Astrid considered just keeping her mouth shut, not pushing it. But this was a talk she needed to have with Sam sooner or later. “I don’t think he’s going to get over it.”

“You don’t know him that well.”

“He’s jealous of you.”

“Well, of course I am so terribly handsome,” Sam said, straining to make a joke of it.

“He’s one kind of person, you’re another. When life is going along normally, you’re sort of the same. But when life turns strange and scary, when there’s a crisis, suddenly you’re completely different people. It’s not Quinn’s fault, really, but he’s not brave. He’s not strong. You are.”

“You still want me to be the big hero.”

“I want you to be who you are.” She remained beside Little Pete but reached out to take Sam’s hand. “Sam, things are going to get worse. Right now everyone is kind of in a state of shock. They’re scared. But they haven’t even realized how scared they should be. Sooner or later the food supply runs out. Sooner or later the power plant fails. When we’re sitting in the dark, hungry, despairing, who’s going to be in charge? Caine? Orc? Drake?”

“Well,” he said dryly, “you make it all sound like a lot of fun.”

“Okay, I’ll stop nagging you,” Astrid said, sensing that she needed to back off. She was asking the impossible of this boy she barely knew. But she knew it was the right thing to do.

She believed in him. She knew he had a destiny.

She wondered why. It wasn’t logical, really. She didn’t believe in destiny. All her life Astrid had relied on her brain, on her grasp of facts. Now some part of her she barely knew existed, some buried, neglected part of her mind was urging her on—no good reasons, just an instinct that kept pushing her to push him.

But she was sure.

Sure.

Astrid turned her face toward Little Pete so that Sam wouldn’t see the frown of worry on her face, but she didn’t release his hand.

She was sure. Like she was answering two plus two. That sure.

She let go of his hand. She took a deep, shaky breath. And now she was not sure at all. Her frown deepened. “Let’s go get the groceries,” Astrid said.

He was elsewhere, preoccupied, so he didn’t notice the way Astrid stared at her own hands, face screwed up in concentration. She wiped her palms on her shorts.

“Yeah,” he said. “Better go while we still can.”

TWENTY-ONE

129 HOURS, 34 MINUTES

“**SHOW ME YOUR** list,” Howard demanded. He was outside the front door of Ralph’s grocery, seated in a lawn chair, with his feet propped up on a second chair. He had a small combo TV/DVD playing *Spider-Man 3*. He barely looked up as they approached.

“I don’t have a list,” Astrid said.

Howard shrugged. “You need a list. No one goes in without a list.”

Sam said, “Okay, do you have a piece of paper and a pencil?”

“It just so happens I do, Sam,” Howard said. He fished a small spiral notebook from the pocket of an ill-fitting leather jacket and handed it to Astrid.

She wrote and handed it to Howard.

“You can have all the fresh stuff, like produce, that you want. It’s all going to go bad. Ice cream is mostly gone, but there might be some Popsicles.” He glanced at Little Pete. “You like the Popsicles, Pe-tard?”

“Get on with it,” Sam said.

“If you want canned stuff or, like, pasta or whatever, you have to get special permission from Caine or one of the sheriffs.”

“What are you talking about?” Astrid demanded.

“I’m talking about you can have lettuce and eggs and deli and milk because that’s all going to expire soon, but we’re saving up the stuff like canned soup or whatever that won’t spoil.”

Astrid admitted, “Okay, that makes sense, I guess.”

“Likewise paper products. Everyone gets one roll of toilet paper. So make it last.” He glanced at the list again. “Tampons? What size?”

“Shut up,” Sam said.

Howard laughed. “Go ahead on in. But I’ll check everything on the way out, and if it’s not okay, I’ll make you put it back.”

The store was a mess. Before Caine had posted a guard, it had been looted of almost all the snack foods. And the kids who had looted had not been neat or careful. There were broken jars of mayonnaise, displays turned over, shattered glass from smashed freezer doors.

There were flies everywhere. The place had begun to smell like garbage. Some of the overhead lights had burned out, leaving pockets of gloom. Brightly colored posters still hung over their heads touting specials and price reductions.

Sam grabbed a cart and Astrid lifted Little Pete into the seat.

The flowers in the little florist’s corner were all looking tired. A dozen Mylar balloons with “Happy Birthday” or Thanksgiving messages on them still floated but were losing altitude.

“Maybe I should look for a turkey,” Astrid said, looking at the display of Thanksgiving-related food: pumpkin pie mix, mincemeat, cranberry sauce, turkey basters, stuffing.

“You know how to cook a turkey?”

“I can find instructions online.” She sighed. “Or, not. Maybe they have a cookbook around.”

“I guess no cranberry sauce.”

“Nothing canned.”

Sam walked ahead into the produce section, then stopped, realizing Astrid was still staring at the seasonal display. She was crying.

“Hey, what’s the matter?”

Astrid brushed at her tears, but more came. “Grocery shopping was always something the three of us did, my mom and Petey and me. It was a time every week when we could talk. You know, we’d shop kind of slowly and discuss what to eat and talk about other stuff, too. Just casually. I’ve never been in here without my mom before.”

“Me neither.”

“It feels weird. It looks the same, but it’s not.”

“Nothing’s the same anymore,” Sam said. “But people still need to eat.”

That earned a reluctant smile from Astrid. “Okay. Let’s shop.”

They picked up lettuce and carrots and potatoes. Sam went behind the counter to lift a pair of steaks and wrap them up in paper. Flies were thick on some cuts of meat that had been left out when the butchers disappeared. But the meat from inside the case seemed untouched.

“Anything else, ma’am?” he asked.

“Well, since no one else is taking them, I might as well take that roast.”

Sam leaned down to look in the display. “Okay, I give up. Which one is a roast?”

“The big thing there.” She tapped the glass. “I can put it in the freezer.”

“Of course. The roast.” Sam lifted it out and slapped it down on a sheet of waxed butcher’s paper. “You realize it’s, like, twelve dollars a pound or whatever?”

“Put it on my tab.”

They moved on to the dairy case. And there was Panda, standing nervously and holding his bat at the ready.

“You again?” Sam snapped.

Panda didn’t answer.

Astrid screamed.

Sam turned, saw just a flash of Drake Merwin before something hit the side of his head. He staggered into a shelf of Parmesan cheese, knocking the green bottles everywhere.

He saw a bat swinging, tried to block it, but his head was swimming and his eyes would not focus.

His knees collapsed and he hit the floor.

As if from far off he saw kids moving quickly, four or five, maybe. Two grabbed Astrid and held her hands behind her.

There was a girl’s voice, one Sam didn’t recognize until he heard Panda say, “Diana.”

“Bag his hands,” Diana said.

Sam resisted but he didn’t have control of his muscles. Something went over his left hand, then his right. Strong fingers held him securely.

When he could focus at last he stared stupidly at what had been done. His wrists

were lashed together with a plastic tie. And around each hand was a deflated Mylar balloon, duct-taped in place.

Diana Ladriss knelt down, bringing her face to his level. "It's Mylar. It's a reflective surface. So I wouldn't try to turn on your mojo, Sam: you'd fry your own hands."

"What are you doing?" Sam slurred.

"Your brother wants to have a nice conversation with you."

That made no sense and Sam wasn't sure he'd heard right. The only person he ever called "brother" was Quinn. "Let Astrid go," Sam said.

Drake moved past Diana and kicked Sam onto his back, legs twisted beneath him. Drake stood over him and pushed the end of his bat down against Sam's Adam's apple. The same move he had used on Orc the night before. "If you're a good little boy, we'll be nice to your girlfriend and her retarded brother. If you cause trouble, I'll mess her up."

Little Pete had begun his windup to a full howl.

"Shut that kid up or I'll shut him up for you," Drake snapped at Astrid. Then, to Howard, Panda, and the others, he said, "Grab the big hero here and throw him in a grocery cart."

Sam was lifted and dropped into a cart.

Howard was the one pushing. "Sammy, Sammy, Sammy. School Bus Sam is Grocery Cart Sam now, huh?"

Drake leaned over and the last thing Sam saw was a strip of duct tape coming down over his eyes.

They pushed him down the highway in the grocery cart. They pushed him through town. He couldn't see but he could feel the bumps. And he could hear the laughter and taunts of Howard and Panda.

Sam tried to make sense of the route, tried to figure out where they were going. After what seemed like a long time he could feel that they were going uphill.

Howard began to complain. "Man, somebody help me push this thing. Yo, Freddie, man, help me out."

The cart accelerated for a while, then slowed again. Sam could hear heavy breathing.

"Get some of these people just standing around," Freddie demanded.

"Yeah. Hey, you: come here and help me push this cart."

"No, man. No way."

Quinn. Sam's heart leaped. Quinn would help.

The cart came to a stop.

Howard said, "What, you afraid your boy here will find out what you've been up to?"

"Shut up, man," Quinn said.

"Sammy, who do you think gave us the heads-up you were going shopping with Astrid? Huh?"

"Shut up, Howard," Quinn said, sounding desperate.

"Who do you think told us about your powers, Sam?"

"I didn't know they were going to do this," Quinn said. "I didn't know, brah."

Sam found he wasn't even surprised. But still, Quinn's betrayal hurt more than anything Drake had done to him. He wanted to yell at Quinn. He wanted to call him a

Judas. But yelling, shouting, crying would make him seem weak.

“I didn’t know, brother, I’m telling you the truth,” Quinn said.

“Yeah. You thought maybe we just wanted to hold a meeting of the Sam Temple fan club,” Howard said, and laughed at his own wit. “Now grab on and push.”

The cart started moving again.

Sam felt sick inside. Quinn had betrayed him. Astrid was with Drake and Diana. And there was nothing he could do.

It seemed to take forever. But finally they stopped.

Without warning the cart tipped over and Sam landed on pavement. He rolled over onto his hands and knees and tried to surreptitiously scrape the Mylar against the concrete.

The kick to his ribs knocked the wind out of him.

“Hey,” Quinn yelled. “You don’t have to be kicking him.”

Hands grabbed Sam by the arms and then he heard Orc’s voice. “You make any trouble, I’ll beat you down.”

They marched him, stumbling, up a set of steps. There was a door, large from the sound of it. Then their feet echoed on polished linoleum.

They paused. Another door opened. Sam was marched through. Orc kicked him in the back of the knees and he fell facedown.

Orc straddled his back, grabbed his hair, and pulled his head back sharply.

“Take the tape off,” a voice commanded.

Howard picked at the edge of the tape, got a hold, and ripped it off, taking part of Sam’s eyebrows with it.

Sam recognized his surroundings immediately. The school gym.

He was on the polished wood floor with Caine standing calmly before him, arms crossed, gloating.

“Hey, Sam,” Caine said.

Sam swiveled his head to left and right. Orc, Panda, Howard, Freddie, and Chaz all armed with baseball bats. Quinn tried to shrink out of sight.

“You have a lot of guys, Caine. I must be dangerous.”

Caine nodded thoughtfully. “I like to be careful. Of course, Drake has your girlfriend. So if I was you, I wouldn’t try to cause any trouble. Drake is a violent, disturbed boy.”

Howard laughed.

“Let him up,” Caine ordered.

Orc climbed off Sam’s back but not without digging a knee into his ribs first. Sam stood, shaky, but glad to be off the floor.

He studied Caine closely. They’d met at the plaza when Caine had first arrived. Since then, Sam had seen Caine only in passing.

Caine studied him just as closely.

“What is it you want with me?” Sam asked.

Caine started to chew at his thumb, then put his hands down by his side so that he looked almost as if he were standing at attention. “I wish there was some way we could be friends, Sam.”

“I can see you’re dying to be my new homey.”

Caine laughed. “See? You have a sense of humor. That wouldn’t have come from

your mother. She never seemed very funny to me. Maybe it came from your father?"

"I wouldn't know."

"No? Why not?"

"You have my mother's laptop. You have all her personal papers. And you have Quinn answering questions about me. So I'm guessing you already know the answer."

Caine nodded. "Yes. Your father disappeared soon after you were born. I guess he wasn't too impressed with you, huh?" Caine laughed at his own joke, and some of his toadies joined in halfheartedly, not really getting it. "Well, don't feel bad. As it happens, my biological father disappeared, too. And my mother."

Sam didn't answer. His hands were numb from the plastic tie. He was scared but determined not to show it.

"You're not supposed to wear street shoes on the gym floor," Sam said.

"So, your father disappears and you don't even want to know why?" Caine asked. "Interesting. Me, I've always wanted to know who my real parents were."

"Let me guess: you're secretly a wizard who was raised by muggles."

Caine's smile was cold. He raised his hand, palm out. An invisible fist hit Sam in the face. He staggered back. He barely stopped himself from falling, but his head was reeling. Blood leaked from his nose.

"Yeah. Kind of," Caine said.

He extended both hands and Sam felt himself rising off the floor.

Caine raised him about three feet, then laced his fingers together and Sam fell hard.

Sam picked himself up slowly. His left leg was wobbly. His ankle felt sprained.

"We have a system for measuring the power," Caine said. "Diana came up with it, actually. She can read people if she holds their hands, she can tell how much they have. She describes it as being like a cell phone signal. One bar, two bars, three bars. You know what I am?"

"Crazy?" Sam spit out the blood that ran down into his mouth.

"Four bars, Sam. I'm the only one she's ever read who has four bars. I could pick you up, fly you into the ceiling, or slam you against a wall." He illustrated his point with hand motions that made it look as if he were doing a hula dance.

"You could get work with a circus," Sam said brightly.

"Oooh, tough guy." Caine seemed annoyed that Sam hadn't responded with awe.

"Look, Caine, my hands are tied, you've got five of your thugs standing around me with baseball bats, and I'm supposed to be terrified because you can do magic tricks?" Sam made the count "five" rather than "six." He wasn't about to count Quinn as anything.

Caine registered the omission and shot a suspicious glance at Quinn. Quinn still looked like a kid who didn't know where to stand or what to do with himself.

"And one of those five," Sam said, "is a murderer. A murderer and a bunch of cowards. That's your posse, Caine."

Caine's eyes went wide. He bared his teeth, furious, and suddenly Sam was flying across the room.

Flying like he'd been shot out of a catapult.

The gym spun around him.

He hit the basketball hoop hard, head smashing into the glass. He hung for a moment from the hoop and then fell onto his back.

He was dragged by unseen hands of terrifying strength, like he'd been swept back by a tornado. He came to rest at Caine's feet.

He was slow getting back up this time. The flow from his nose had been joined by a trickle of blood from his forehead.

"Several of us developed strange powers, starting a few months ago," Caine said conversationally. "We were like a secret club. Frederico, Andrew, Dekka, Brianna, some others. We worked together to develop them. Encouraged each other. See, that's the difference between Coates people and you townies. In a boarding school it's hard to keep secrets. But soon it became clear that my powers were of a whole different order. What I just did to you? No one else could do that."

"Yeah, that was cool," Sam said with shaky defiance. "Can you do it again?"

"He's baiting you." It was Diana coming into the room and obviously not happy with what she was seeing.

"He's trying to prove he's tough," Caine snapped.

"Yes. And he's proved it. Move on."

"Watch how you talk to me, Diana," Caine grated.

Diana sauntered over to stand beside Caine. She crossed her arms over her chest and shook her head at Sam in mock dismay. "Well, you look pretty bad, Sam."

"He'll look worse," Caine threatened.

Diana sighed. "Here's the deal, Sam. Caine wants some answers from you."

"Why not ask Quinn?"

"Because he doesn't know the answers, but you do, so here's the thing: if you don't answer Fearless Leader's questions, Drake is going to start beating on Astrid. And just so you know: Drake is sick in the head. I'm not saying that to scare you, I'm saying it because it's true. I'm a bad girl, Caine has delusions of grandeur, but Drake is flat-out sick in the head. He could kill her, Sam. And he's going to start up in five minutes unless I go back and tell him not to. So, tick-tock."

Sam swallowed blood and bile. "What questions?"

Diana rolled her eyes and turned to Caine. "See how easy that was?"

Amazingly, Caine took it from Diana. No threats, no attack on her, just seething and resentment and acceptance.

He's in love with her, Sam realized with a shock. The times he had seen them together there had never been any outward sign of affection, but there was no other possible answer.

Caine said, "Tell me about your father."

Sam shrugged, a painful move that made him wince. "He wasn't a part of my life. All I know is, my mom didn't like talking about him."

"Your mother. Nurse Temple."

"Yeah."

"The name on your birth certificate, where it has the father's name? It says 'Taegan Smith.'"

"Okay."

"Taegan. A very unusual name. Very rare."

"So what?"

"Whereas 'Smith' is really common. It's a name a man might use who wanted to hide his real name."

“Look, I’m answering your questions, let Astrid go.”

“Taegan,” Caine repeated. “Right there on the birth certificate. Mother: Constance Temple. Father: Taegan Smith. Date of birth: November the twenty-second. Time of birth: ten twelve P.M. Sierra Vista Regional Medical.”

“So now you can do my horoscope.”

“You’re not interested in any of this?”

Sam sighed. “I’m interested in what’s going on. Why the FAYZ happened. How we make it stop, or else how we escape from it. On the big list of things to worry about, my biological father, who I never knew, who wasn’t anything to me, is way down that list.”

“You bug out in five days, Sam. Interested in that?”

“Let Astrid go.”

Diana said, “Come on, Caine. Get on with it.”

Caine smirked. “I’m very interested in the question of disappearing. You know why? Because I don’t want to die. And I don’t want to suddenly find myself back in the world. I like it here in the FAYZ.”

“Is that what you think happens? We jump back into the world?”

“I’m asking the questions,” Caine snapped.

“Let Astrid go.”

“The point is,” Caine continued, “you and I share something in common, Sam. We were born just three minutes apart.”

Sam felt a tingle go up his spine.

“Three minutes,” Caine said, moving closer. “You go first. And then me.”

“No,” Sam said. “It can’t be.”

“It can,” Caine said. “It is. And you are . . . brother.”

The door burst open. Drake Merwin barreled into the room. He was looking for something. “Is she here?”

“Who?” Diana demanded.

“Who do you think? The blonde and her retard brother.”

“You let her get away?” Caine demanded, forgetting Sam for the moment.

“I didn’t let her get away. They were in the room with me. The girl was pissing me off so I smacked her. Then they disappeared. Gone.”

Caine shot a murderous look at Diana. Diana said, “No. She was months away from turning fifteen. And, anyway, her little brother is four.”

“Then how?” Caine furrowed his brow. “Can it be the power?”

Diana shook her head. “I read Astrid again on the way here. She’s barely at two bars. No way. Two people teleporting?”

The color drained from Caine’s face. “The retard?”

“He’s autistic, he’s like in his own world,” Diana protested.

“Did you read him?”

“He’s a little autistic kid, why would I read him?”

Caine turned to Sam. “What do you know about this?” He raised his hand, a threat. His face inches from Sam’s, he screamed, “What do you know?”

“Well. I know that I enjoy seeing you scared, Caine.”

The invisible fist sent Sam sprawling on his back.

Diana, for the first time, looked worried. Her usual smirk was gone. “The only

time we saw teleporting was Taylor up at Coates. And she could only go across a room. She was a three. If this kid can teleport himself and his sister through walls . . .”

“He could be a four,” Caine said softly.

“Yes,” Diana said. “He could be a four.” When she said the word “four,” she looked straight at Sam. “He could be even more.”

Caine said, “Orc, Howard: lock Sam up, tie him down so he can’t get that Mylar off his hands, then get Freddie to help you. He’s done plastering before, he knows what to do. Get whatever you need from the hardware store.” He grabbed Drake by the shoulder. “Find Astrid and that kid.”

“How am I going to catch them if they can just zap out whenever they want?”

“I didn’t say catch them,” Caine said. “Take a gun, Drake. Shoot them both before they see you.”

Sam charged at Caine and plowed into him before he could react. The momentum carried them both to the floor. Sam headbutted Caine in the nose. Caine was slow to recover, but Drake and Orc swarmed over Sam and kicked him off Caine.

Sam groaned in pain. “You can’t kill people, Caine. Are you crazy?”

“You hurt my nose,” Caine said.

“You’re screwed up, Caine. You need help. You’re insane.”

“Yeah,” Caine said, touching his nose and wincing at the pain. “That’s what they keep telling me. It’s what Nurse Temple . . . Mom . . . told me. Just be glad I need to keep you around, Sam. I need to see you blink out, figure out how to keep it from happening to me. Orc, take this hero away. Drake: go.”

“If you hurt them, Drake, I’ll hunt you down and kill you,” Sam shouted.

“Don’t waste your breath,” Diana said to him. “You don’t know Drake. Your girlfriend’s as good as dead.”

TWENTY-TWO

128 HOURS, 32 MINUTES

ASTRID WANTED TO scream at Drake and Diana, to denounce them, to demand to know what kind of worthless human beings used the FAYZ as an excuse for violence.

But she had to keep Little Pete calm. That was her top priority, her brother. Her blank-faced, helpless, unloving brother.

She resented him. He had turned her into a mother at age fourteen. It wasn't right. This should be her time to shine, to be bold. This was her time to use her intellect, that supposedly great gift. Instead, she was a babysitter.

Astrid and Little Pete were shown, with mock courtesy, into a classroom. It wasn't one of Astrid's classes but might as well have been. Everything was achingly familiar: books open on desks, walls festooned with student artwork and projects.

"Have a seat. Read a book, if you want," Diana said. "I know you like that kind of thing."

Astrid hefted one of the books. "Yes, fourth-grade math. I love that kind of thing."

"You know, I really dislike you," Diana said.

Drake leaned against a wall and smirked.

"Of course you dislike me," Astrid said. "I make you feel inferior."

Diana's eyes flashed. "I don't feel inferior to anyone."

"Really? Because usually a person who does bad things recognizes that there's something a little wrong with them. You know? Even if they suppress it, they know they're sick inside."

"Yeah," Diana said laconically. "I feel bad about that. My evil heart and all. Give me your hand."

"What?"

"I promise not to infect you with my badness. Give me your hand."

"No."

"Drake. Make her give me her hand."

Drake came off the wall.

Astrid stuck out her hand. Diana took it in hers and held it.

"You read people," Astrid said. "I should have figured it out earlier. You have the power, don't you?" She looked at Diana like she was looking at a specimen in a laboratory.

"Yep," Diana said, releasing her. "I read people. But don't worry, I just read power levels, not your secret little thoughts about how much you want to make out with Sam Temple."

Astrid flushed, despite herself. Diana laughed at her.

"Oh, please, that's obvious. He's cute. He's brave. He's smart, but not as smart as you. He's perfect."

"He's a friend," Astrid said.

"Uh-huh. Well, we're about to find out how good a friend he is. He knows we have you. If he doesn't tell Caine everything Caine wants to know, and do whatever Caine tells him to do, Drake here is going to hurt you."

Astrid's insides turned to jelly. "What?"

Diana sighed. "Well, that's why we keep Drake around. He enjoys hurting people. We don't keep him around for his conversational skills."

Drake looked like he'd rather take a shot at Diana. His narrow lizard eyes narrowed further. Diana didn't miss his expression.

"Go ahead, raise a hand against me, Drake," Diana taunted. "Caine would kill you." To Astrid, she said, "Better behave yourself, he's all riled up now."

Diana left.

Astrid felt Drake's eyes on her but she couldn't look at him. She kept her gaze down on the math book. Then glanced at her brother, who sat playing his stupid game, unable, unwilling, uncaring.

Astrid felt ashamed of her own fear. Ashamed that she couldn't look at the thug who leaned insouciantly against the wall.

She had no doubt that Sam would do his best to save her. But Caine might ask for something Sam couldn't give.

She needed to think. She needed to work out a plan. She was scared, she always had been scared of physical violence. She was scared of the emptiness she sensed in Drake Merwin.

She scooted her desk up beside Little Pete's and put a hand on his shoulder. No reaction. He knew she was there, but he showed nothing, absorbed in his game.

Still not looking at Drake, Astrid said, "Doesn't it bother you that Diana treats you like some wild animal she keeps on a leash?"

Drake said, "Doesn't it bother you going around with that retard? Having a little 'tard practically attached to you?"

"He's not retarded," Astrid said evenly.

"Oh. Is that the wrong word? 'Retard'?"

"He's autistic."

"Retarded," Drake insisted.

Astrid looked at him. She willed herself to meet his gaze. "'Retarded' is a word people don't use anymore. When they did use it, they used it to signify an impairment of intelligence. Petey is not intellectually impaired in that way. He has at least normal IQ, and may have a higher than normal IQ. So the word doesn't apply."

"Yeah? Huh. Because I like the word 'retard.' In fact, I'd like to hear you say it. Retard."

Astrid felt dread sap her strength. There was not the slightest doubt in her mind that he meant to hurt her. She held his gaze for a while but then looked down.

"Retard," Drake insisted. "Say it."

"No," Astrid whispered.

Drake sauntered across the room. He was not carrying a weapon. He didn't need to. He placed his fists on her desk and leaned over her.

"Retard," Drake said. "Say, 'My brother is a retard.'"

Astrid didn't trust herself to speak. She was choking back tears. She wanted to believe she was brave, but now, with the thug inches away from her, she knew that she was not.

"My. Brother. Come on, say it with me. My. Say it."

The slap was so quick, she barely registered his hand moving. Her face burned.

“Say it. My . . .”

“My,” she whispered.

“Louder, I want the little retard to hear it. My brother is a retard.”

The second slap was so hard, she almost fell from the chair.

“You can say it while your face is still pretty, or you can say it after I’ve smashed it in—your choice. My brother is a retard.”

“My brother is a retard,” Astrid said, her voice shaking.

Drake laughed delightedly and crossed to Little Pete, who had looked up from his video game and seemed almost to register what was happening. Drake put his face into Little Pete’s space and with one hand yanked Astrid by the hair so that her mouth was close to Little Pete’s ear and said, “One more time, nice and loud.” He pushed Astrid’s face against the side of Little Pete’s head and yelled, “My brother is—”

And Astrid fell back on her bed.

Her bed. Her bedroom.

Little Pete was in the window seat, cross-legged on the bench, video game in his hand.

Astrid knew immediately what had happened. But it was still impossibly disorienting. One second in the school, the next in her room.

She couldn’t look at him. Her face burned from the slaps, but even more from shame.

“Thanks, Petey,” she whispered.

Orc dragged Sam from the gym into the weight room.

Howard looked around, considering what he should do.

“Howard, man, you can’t be down with this,” Sam pleaded. “You can’t be okay with Caine killing Astrid and Little Pete. Orc, even you can’t be okay with this. You didn’t mean to kill Bette. This is way over the line.”

“Yeah. It is over the line,” Howard admitted, preoccupied, his mouth twisted quizzically to one side.

“You have to help me. Let me go after Drake.”

“I don’t think so, Sammy. See, I’ve seen what kind of stuff Drake can do. And we’ve both seen what kind of stuff Caine can do.” To Orc, Howard said, “Let’s put him here on this bench. Faceup. We’ll tie his legs to the upright here.”

Orc lifted Sam and slammed him down onto the weight bench.

“Orc, this is going to be cold-blooded murder,” Sam said.

“Not me, man,” Orc said. “I’m just tying you up.”

“Drake is going to murder Astrid. She helped you get through math. You can stop this, Orc.”

“She wasn’t supposed to tell anyone about that,” Orc grumbled. “Anyway, no more math class.”

They used rope to lash his ankles to the legs of the bench. They tied another rope around his waist.

“Okay, now here’s the good part,” Howard said. “We load some weight on the bar. We tie Sam’s hands to the bar and lower it down on the slide, right? He’ll be busy keeping the bar up off his neck.”

Orc was slow to understand, so Howard showed him. Then Orc piled weight plates

onto the bar.

“What can you bench-press, Sam?” Howard asked. “I’d say put on two forty-fives on each end, right? With the bar, that makes it two hundred pounds.”

“No way he presses two hundred,” Orc opined.

“I think you’re right, Orc. I think he’s going to be busy just keeping that bar from choking him.”

“This isn’t right, Howard,” Sam said. “You know it isn’t right. You don’t do stuff like this, either of you. You’re bullies, you’re not cold-blooded killers.”

Howard sighed. “Sammy, it’s a whole different world, haven’t you noticed? It’s the FAYZ, man.”

Orc lowered the weight. The bar rested on Sam’s bound wrists, which pressed down against his Adam’s apple. He pushed upward with all his strength, but on his best day he couldn’t lift two hundred pounds. All he could do was keep up enough upward pressure to keep breathing.

Orc laughed and said, “Come on, man, we better get back to Caine before we miss more fun.”

Howard followed Orc but paused at the door. “It’s kind of weird, Sam. That first night, man, I thought, ‘old School Bus Sam, he’s going to be running things soon if we don’t look out.’ Everyone was looking to you. You know that. But no, you were too cool to play it that way. Off you go without a word to anyone, off with Astrid.” He laughed. “Of course, she is hot, isn’t she? And now Caine’s running the FAYZ and Drake’s going to take out your girlfriend.”

Sam struggled against the weight, but there was no way to lift it. Even if he’d had a good angle on it, he could not have hefted it.

But Howard, for all his cleverness, had overlooked one thing: in this position, Sam could reach the Mylar with his teeth.

He tried to rip at the fabric, but it was slow work and he had no time. He had no doubt that Little Pete had teleported himself and Astrid to their home. Drake would find them there.

Sam tried to get the Mylar between his teeth, but it was slippery and tough. And when he focused on that, he lost focus on keeping the weight off his neck.

The bar pressed his knuckles into his throat. He pushed upward, but already his arms were cramping. His muscles were weakening.

He could tear at the Mylar and free his hands, or he could keep the bar from choking him. It was impossible to do both.

And even if he did free his hands, so what? He wasn’t like Caine. He didn’t have control of his powers. He might tear the Mylar and then be unable to do anything.

The bar slipped lower.

He had the Mylar between his teeth.

He chewed it, trying to make a small hole he could enlarge.

By now, Drake would be out of the school and on the move. Would he have to stop somewhere first to retrieve the gun?

Astrid would know they were going to come after her. She would know it would be dangerous to stay in her house. Would she move fast enough?

And where could she go?

Sam felt the grind of tooth on tooth. He had made a hole.

But he was gasping for breath.

He barely noticed the door opening.

Quick steps on the carpet and the sound and feel of one of the weight plates sliding off the bar. Sam took a breath.

“Hang on, brah.”

Quinn slid the rest of the weights from the bar.

With quaking arms, Sam pushed the bar up off his neck.

“I didn’t know they would do this, brah, I didn’t know, man,” Quinn said. He was pale. Like he’d never ever seen the sun. “You gotta believe me, Sam.” He was working at the ropes. Sam sat up.

Quinn was a wreck. He had been crying, and his eyes were red and puffy.

“Honest to God, I didn’t know.”

“I have to get to Astrid before Drake does,” Sam said.

“I know. I know. This is messed up.”

With his legs free, Sam stood. “Is this another trick? Are they going to follow me to Astrid?”

“No, man. They’ll beat me up if they find out I let you go.” Quinn spread his hands, pleading. “You have to take me with you.”

“How am I supposed to trust you, Quinn?”

“If you leave me here, what do you think Caine is going to do to me?”

Sam had no time for argument. He decided quickly. “You’d better pray Astrid doesn’t get hurt, Quinn. If you’re doing this to sell me out, you better make sure I’m dead, too.”

Quinn licked his lips nervously. “You don’t have to threaten me, brah.”

“Don’t call me brah,” Sam said. “I’m not your brother.”

TWENTY-THREE

128 HOURS, 22 MINUTES

ASTRID FELT A wave of relief followed by a far stronger wave of self-loathing. She had let Drake terrorize her. She had called Little Pete a retard.

Her hands were trembling. She had betrayed her brother. She hated him for being what he was, for being so needy, and she had betrayed him to spare herself. And now she was far more angry at herself than she had ever been at him.

But now she had to think. Quick. What to do?

Drake would catch her again. Surely Caine or that wicked creature Diana would figure out what had happened.

It would take only a few seconds for Drake to run to report to them. A few seconds more for Caine to realize what had happened. If Diana really could read the power in people, she would know it wasn't Astrid who had teleported them. She would know it was Little Pete.

She and Little Pete had to go. Now. But where?

Somewhere Drake wouldn't look. Somewhere Sam might look.

If he escaped.

If he was even alive.

Her brain was moving in slow motion, spinning in circles, unable to focus. She kept seeing that terrible, sick face, feeling the sharp sting of his hand, the way the heat of it lingered and joined with the hot blush of shame.

"Think, you idiot," she berated herself. "Think. It's all you're good at."

They couldn't go through town. They couldn't take a car—it was too late to start teaching herself to drive.

Her mind was an out-of-focus camera, turning and swirling and coming back again and again to the moment when the fear took over, when she couldn't resist anymore, when she betrayed her brother. Over and over a loop in her head played the words "My brother is a retard."

Clifftop.

The room they had shared there that first night.

Yes. Sam would figure it out. But Quinn had been there, too. He might reach the same conclusion.

Astrid hesitated. No time for hesitation. Drake wouldn't hesitate. By now, he was already after them. He was already on his way.

She couldn't face him again.

"Petey, we have to go." Astrid grabbed his hand and drew him after her. Down the stairs. No time to stop for anything. No time at all.

To the front door. No. Back door was better.

They walked—Little Pete could seldom be induced to run—across the backyard. The natural wood fence was fairly low, but still it was exhausting and time-consuming getting Little Pete to scale it. They ran through the neighbor's backyard.

"Stay off the streets," she told herself.

They went as far as they could, backyard to backyard, then dodged into the street

when their way was blocked, and then back to yards and alleyways again.

They saw no one. But there was no way to know if they were being watched.

They reached the hill that marked the edge of town and the beginning of the Clifftop grounds. They scrambled up through shrubbery clinging to sand. Astrid pulled Little Pete along, desperate to move quickly, but afraid to do anything to set him off.

Clifftop had not changed. The barrier was still there. The lobby was still clean, still bright, still empty.

Astrid had the electronic key they'd made on that first night. She found the suite, opened the door, and collapsed inside onto the bed.

She lay there, panting, staring up at the blank ceiling. The bed was soft. The air-conditioning hummed.

She could explain away the words Drake had put in her mouth. They were meaningless words. Just words. Little Pete didn't care.

But she could not explain away the fear. It shamed her.

She put a cold hand to her face, to see if it really was as hot as it was in her imagination.

"Where are we going, Sam?" Quinn asked anxiously. They were moving at an easy lope, not an all-out run, but a jog they could sustain.

Sam was leading them straight through town, straight through the plaza, as if indifferent to pursuit.

"We're going to find Astrid before Drake does," Sam said.

"Let's go check her house."

"No. The good thing about a genius is, you don't have to wonder if she's doing the stupid thing. She'll know she has to get out of her house."

"Where would she go?"

Sam thought for a moment. "Power plant."

"The power plant?"

"Yeah. So we're going to grab a boat and head up the coast."

"Okay. But, brah . . . I mean, dude, shouldn't we be a little more sneaky instead of just running right through town?"

Sam didn't answer him. Part of the reason he was going in a straight line rather than being sneaky was that he hoped to pick up Edilio at the fire station. The other was that he needed to know whether Quinn would betray him the first chance he got.

And there was a matter of tactics that Sam understood intuitively: Caine had more power, so Sam would need more speed. The longer he let the game go on, the more likely it was that Caine would win.

They reached the fire station. Edilio was sitting in the cab of the fire engine with the engine running. He spotted Sam and Quinn and leaned out of the window. "Good timing, man, I'm going to try it out, take it on a . . ." He fell silent when he saw Sam's blood-streaked face.

"Edilio. Come on. We have to go."

"Okay, man, just let me get—"

"No. I mean right now. Drake's looking for Astrid. He's going to kill her."

Edilio jumped down from the fire engine. "Where to?"

"The marina. We're going to take a boat. I think Astrid will head for the power

plant.”

The three of them jogged toward the marina. Sam knew that Orc and Howard were up at the school with Caine. Drake was on his way to Astrid’s house. That would leave a few thugs still roaming loose, but Sam wasn’t too worried about any of them.

They spotted Mallet and a Coates kid lounging on the steps of town hall. Neither challenged them as they ran past.

The marina wasn’t large, just forty slips, about half of them full. There was a drydock, and the rattling, rusty, tin warehouse that had once been a cannery and now housed boat-repair shops. A lot of boats were up out of the water on blocks, looking ungainly and like a stiff breeze might topple them.

No one was there. No one was blocking their path.

“What do we take?” Sam wondered. He had reached his first goal, but he knew nothing about boats. He looked to Edilio and got a shrug.

“Okay. Something that will carry five people. Motorboat. With a full tank of gas. Quinn, take the boats on the right, Edilio, left. I’ll go to the end of the dock and work back. Go.”

They split up and started working their way along, jumping into each likely looking boat, looking for keys, trying to figure out how to check the gas as time ticked away.

In his mind’s eye Sam saw Drake searching Astrid’s house. A gun in his hand. He would be slowed down a little by fear that Astrid and Little Pete would simply teleport again. Drake wouldn’t know that Little Pete was not really in control of his powers, so he would try to be stealthy, he would be patient.

That was good. The more uncertainty Drake had, the slower he’d go.

Suddenly an engine roared to life. Sam jumped back onto the dock from the boat he’d been exploring. He raced back along the dock and found Quinn sitting proudly in a Boston Whaler, an open motorboat.

“She’s gassed up,” Quinn said over the sluggish chugging of the engine.

“Good job, man,” Sam said. He jumped into the boat beside Quinn. “Edilio, cast off.”

Edilio whipped the ropes off the cleats and jumped in. “I gotta warn you, man: I get seasick.”

“Not our biggest problem, huh?” Sam said.

“I started it, but I don’t know how to drive it,” Quinn said.

“Neither do I,” Sam admitted. “But I guess I’m going to learn.”

“Hey. Hey.” It was Orc’s booming voice. “Don’t you pull away.”

Orc, Howard, and Panda were at the end of the dock.

“Mallet,” Sam said. “He saw us. He must have told them.”

The three bullies started running.

Sam looked frantically at the controls. The engine was chugging, the boat, unmoored, was drifting away from the dock, but too slowly. Even Orc could easily jump the gap.

“Throttle,” Edilio said, pointing at a red-tipped lever. “That makes it go.”

“Yeah. Hang on.”

Sam moved the throttle up a notch. The boat surged forward and slammed into a piling. Sam was knocked almost but not quite off his feet. Edilio snatched at the railing

and held on tight. Quinn sat down hard in the bow.

The bow scraped past the piling and almost by accident ended up aimed toward open water.

“You might want to take it slow at first,” Edilio said.

“Stop! Stop that boat,” Orc yelled breathlessly, pounding down the dock. “I’ll beat your stupid head in.”

Sam steered—he hoped—in the right direction and chugged slowly away. There was no way Orc could clear the distance now.

“Caine will kill you,” Panda shouted.

“Quinn, you traitor,” Howard yelled.

“Tell them I made you do it,” Sam said.

“What?”

“Do it,” Sam hissed.

Quinn stood up, cupped his hands, and yelled, “He made me do it.”

“Now tell them we’re going to the power plant.”

“Dude.”

“Do it,” Sam insisted. “And point.”

“We’re heading to the power plant,” Quinn yelled. He pointed north.

Sam released the wheel, spun, and landed a hard left hook into Quinn’s face. Quinn sat down hard again.

“What the—”

“Had to make it look good,” Sam said. It was not an apology.

The boat was in the clear now. Sam raised his hand, middle finger extended, high above his head, moved the throttle up another notch, and turned north toward the power plant.

“What’s the game?” Edilio asked, mystified. He stood well back from Sam, just in case Sam decided to punch him next.

“She won’t be at the plant,” Sam said. “She’ll be at Clifftop. We’re just going north as long as Orc is watching us.”

“You lied to me,” Quinn accused. He was playing with his chin, making sure his jaw was still attached.

“Yeah.”

“You didn’t trust me.”

Orc, Howard, and Panda disappeared from view, presumably running back to town to report to Caine. As soon as he was sure they were gone, Sam spun the wheel, pushed the throttle all the way up, and headed south.

Drake lived in an empty house just off the plaza. It was less than a minute’s walk away from town hall. It once had belonged to a guy who lived alone. It was small, just two bedrooms, very neat, very organized, the way Drake liked things.

The guy, the homeowner, Drake forgot his name, had been a gun owner. Three guns in all, a twenty-gauge over-under shotgun, a thirty-ought-six hunting rifle with a scope, and a nine-millimeter Glock semiautomatic pistol.

Drake kept all three guns loaded all the time. They were set out on the dining room table, a display, something to be gazed at lovingly.

Now he hefted the rifle. The stock was as smooth as glass, polished to a high shine.

It smelled of steel and oil. He was hesitant about taking the rifle because he'd never fired a long gun before. He had no real idea how to use the scope. But how hard could it be?

He slid into the leather strap and tested his shoulders for freedom of movement. The rifle was heavy, and a little long. The rubber-cushioned butt came down to the back of his thigh. But he could manage it.

Then he hefted the pistol. He squeezed the cross-hatched grip and wrapped his fingertip around the trigger. Drake loved the feel of this gun in his hand.

His father had taught him to shoot, using his service pistol. Drake still remembered the first time. The loading of shells into the clip. Sliding the clip into the butt of the gun. Ratcheting the slide to lift a round into place. Clicking the safety.

Click. Safe.

Click. Deadly.

He remembered the way his father had taught him to grip the butt firmly but not too tight. To rest his right hand in the palm of his left and sight carefully, to turn his body sideways to present a smaller target if someone was shooting back. His father had had to yell because they were both wearing ear protection.

"If you're target shooting, you center the front sight in the notch of the rear sights. Raise it till your sights are sitting right under your target. Let your breath out slowly and squeeze."

That first bang, the recoil, the way the gun jumped six inches, the smell of powder—it was all as clear in Drake's mind as any memory he had.

His first shot had completely missed the target.

Same with the second because after feeling the kick the first time, he had flinched in anticipation.

The third shot he had hit the target, catching just a piece of the lower corner.

He had shot up a box of ammo that first day and by the time he was done, he was hitting what he aimed at.

"What if I'm not shooting targets?" he'd asked his father. "What if I'm shooting at a person?"

"Don't shoot a person," his father had said. But then he relented, relieved no doubt to find something he could share with his disturbing son. "Different people will tell you different techniques. But if it's me, say I'm doing a traffic stop and I think I see the citizen reaching for a weapon, and I'm thinking I may have to take a quick shot? I just point. Point like the barrel is a sixth finger. You point and if you have to fire, you shoot half the clip, bang, bang, bang, bang."

"Why do you shoot so many times?"

"Because if you have to shoot, you shoot to kill. Situation like that, you're not aiming carefully for his head or his heart, you're pointing at the center of mass and you're hoping you get a lucky shot, but if you don't, if all you're hitting is shoulder or belly, the sheer velocity of the rounds will still knock him down."

Drake didn't think it would take six shots to kill Astrid.

He remembered with vivid, slow-motion detail the time he had shot Holden, the neighbor's kid who liked to come over and annoy him. That had been a bullet to the thigh, with a low-caliber gun and still, the kid had nearly died. That "accident" had landed Drake at Coates.

He was holding a nine-millimeter Glock right now, less powerful than his father's forty-caliber Smith & Wesson, but a lot more gun than the target twenty-two he'd used on Holden.

One shot would do it. One for the snooty blonde, one for the retard. That would be cool. He would come back, give his report to Caine, and say, "Two targets, two rounds." That would wipe the smirk off Diana's face.

Astrid's house was not far. But the trick would be to get her before her little brother used the power to disappear again.

Drake hated the power. There was only one reason why Caine and not Drake was running the show: Caine's powers.

But Caine understood that the kids with powers had to be controlled. And once Caine and Diana had all the freaks under control, what was to stop Drake from using his own nine millimeters of magic to take it all for himself?

First things first.

He stared at Astrid's house from halfway down the block. Looking for any sign of which room she might be in.

He crept around to the back and up onto the back porch. The door was locked. Anyone who locked their back door locked their front door. But maybe not their windows. He hopped up onto the deck railing and leaned out to get a purchase on the window. It slid up easily. It was not an easy thing getting through the window without making a lot of noise.

It took him ten minutes to go through every room in the house, look in every closet, under every bed, behind every curtain, even look into the attic crawl spaces.

He felt a moment of panic then. Astrid could be anywhere. He would look like a fool if he didn't get her.

Where would she go?

He checked the garage. Nothing there. No cars, certainly no Astrid. But there was a lawnmower, and where there was a lawnmower, there would be . . . yes, a gas can.

He wondered what would happen if Astrid and the retard magicked their way into a burning building?

Drake opened the gas can, went to the kitchen, and began drizzling the gasoline across the counters, into the family room, a splash for the drapes, trailing into the dining room, across the table, and another splash for the front curtains.

He couldn't find a match. He tore a piece of paper towel and lit it on the stove. He tossed the burning twist of paper onto the dining room table and left by the front door, not bothering to close it.

"That's one place she won't be able to hide," he told himself.

He raced back to the plaza and up the stairs of the church. The church had a steeple. It wasn't very tall, but it would give him a pretty good perspective.

Up the circular stairs. He pushed a hinged hatch and climbed up into a cramped, dusty, cobwebbed space dominated by a bell. He carefully avoided touching the bell—the sound would carry.

The windows were shuttered, covered with angled vents that let airflow through and sound resonate out, but only allowed him to see down. He used the butt of the rifle to knock the first vent out. It tumbled to the ground below.

Kids in the plaza looked up. Let them. He smashed the other three vents out and

they clattered down. Now he had an unrestricted view in every direction across the orange tile roofs of Perdido Beach.

He started from Astrid's house, which was already beginning to smoke. He worked his way methodically, a hunter, looking for any movement. Each time he spotted someone walking or running or biking, he would take a look at them through the rifle scope, line them up in the crosshairs.

He felt like God. All he had to do was squeeze the trigger.

But none of the moving shapes far below was Astrid. There was no way to miss that blond hair. No. No Astrid.

Then, just as he was giving up, he spotted a flurry of activity down at the marina. He swiveled the scope, and suddenly Sam Temple was clear in the bright circle. For a moment the sights were on his chest. But then he was gone. He had jumped onto a boat.

Impossible. Caine had Sam up at the school. How had he gotten away?

Edilio and Quinn were on the boat too, pulling away. Drake could see the water churning from the motor.

Quinn. That's how Sam had gotten away. It had to be.

Drake would have to have a nice talk with Quinn.

On the dock he could make out Orc waving a bat, yelling, unable to do anything. The boat gathered speed and arced north, leaving a long white wake drawn like an arrow on the water.

There was no question Sam would try to find Astrid. And he was heading north.

The power plant. Had to be.

Drake cursed and, again, for just a moment, felt the almost desperate fear of failing Caine. He wasn't worried what Caine would do to him—after all, Caine needed him—but he knew if he failed to carry out Caine's orders, Diana would laugh.

Drake put down the rifle. How could he reach the power plant ahead of Sam?

There was no way. Even if he took a boat he would be playing catch-up. A car? Maybe. But he didn't know the way, and the trip by boat would be more direct. It would take him a while to get down to the marina and . . . but, wait. Wait a minute.

The motorboat was pulling a U-turn.

"Aren't you clever, Sam?" Drake whispered. "But not clever enough."

Through the scope he could just make out Sam's face as he stood at the wheel, wind in his face, having escaped from Caine, having outwitted Orc, and now all cocky and sure of himself as he sped south.

There was no way to take a shot from this distance. Drake knew that.

He traversed the gun sight south and stopped at the barrier. Sam wouldn't have far to go in that direction.

The beach at the bottom of the cliffs? If she was down there, Drake could never reach her before Sam got there in the motorboat. If she was down there, the game was over.

But if not . . . if she was, say, in the hotel, Clifftop? Then, he had a chance if he moved fast.

How great would it be to shoot her right where Sam Temple could watch?

TWENTY-FOUR

127 HOURS, 45 MINUTES

ASTRID ALMOST MISSED spotting the boat. She had gone to the window only to draw the shades. But out of the corner of her eye she saw the motorboat out there, the only thing on the water.

For a brief moment she'd wondered if it was adults, someone coming to rescue them from the FAYZ. But no, if rescue was coming from outside the FAYZ, it wouldn't be a single open boat.

And, anyway, Astrid was convinced, no one was coming. Not now. Probably not ever.

She squinted but could not tell who was on the boat. If only she had binoculars. It seemed like it might be three people. Maybe four. She couldn't tell. But the boat was speeding closer.

She knelt to see what was still available in the minibar refrigerator. During their last stay, she and Sam and Quinn had almost cleaned it out. All that was left to eat were some cashews.

She would need to feed Little Pete sooner rather than later. Before whoever was on the boat got here.

"Come on, Petey," she said, and guided him up from the end of the bed. "Come on, we're going to get some food. Munchy munchy?" she said, using a trigger phrase that sometimes worked. "Munchy munchy?"

They could head for the Clifftop restaurant and probably find something there, maybe cook a chicken sandwich or something, or at least find some yogurt or whatever. Or they could play it safe and just empty out the minibars in other rooms.

She opened the door. Looked out into the hallway. It was empty.

"Candy bars it is," she said, realizing she just didn't have the nerve to go down to the restaurant.

The room next door had a minibar but no key in the lock. She tried three more rooms before realizing that she had just been lucky that first night. The refrigerators were all locked. But, wait, maybe all the keys were interchangeable.

"Come on, back to our room," she said.

"Munchy munchy," Little Pete protested.

"Munchy munchy," Astrid confirmed. "Come on, Petey."

Out in the hallway again and then she heard the ding of an elevator. The smooth electric motors opening the door.

Was it Sam? She froze, poised between fear and hope.

Fear won.

The elevator was at the end of the hall and around a bend. She had seconds.

"Come on," she hissed, and pushed Little Pete forward. With fumbling fingers she slid the passcard into and out of the slot. Too fast. She had to do it slower. Again. Still no green light. One more time and now she could hear the elevator door closing.

It was him. Suddenly she knew it was Drake.

"Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee." It was the only prayer she could

think of.

She tried the key again. The light blinked to green.

She turned the handle.

He was there. At the end of the hall. Standing there with a rifle over his shoulder and a gun in his hand.

Astrid almost collapsed.

Drake grinned.

He raised the handgun and took aim.

Astrid pushed Little Pete into the room and tumbled in after him.

Astrid slammed the door closed and threw the bolt. Then she added the security lock.

An impossibly loud noise.

The door had a hole in it the size of a dime, with the metal puckered out.

Another explosion and the door handle was hanging half off.

Little Pete could save them. He could. He had the power. But he was still calm, still oblivious.

Useless.

The balcony. It was the only way.

“Petey, come on!” she rasped.

“Munchy, munchy,” he argued.

Drake slammed against the door, but it held. The dead bolt was still in place.

He fired again and again, frustrated, blasting away at the dead bolt.

He was frantic that she and Petey would teleport again.

She had to make him believe it had happened.

She dragged Little Pete to the balcony, slid open the door, looked down. The ground was too far. Way too far. But there was a balcony directly below them.

Astrid climbed over the railing, scared to death, shaking, but with no alternative.

How could she get Little Pete to follow? He was fixated on food now.

“Game Boy,” she hissed, and pushed the toy close to his face. “Come on, Petey, come on, Game Boy.”

She guided her brother over, placed his hand on the rail, only one hand because now he was in his game again, lost in his stupid game, too calm to use his power, too unpredictable.

“Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus,” Astrid sobbed.

This wasn’t going to work. She could make it, but how could she get her brother to do it?

He was small. She could swing him. She could hold on for the few seconds it’d take.

“Holy Mary, Mother of God . . .”

She gripped the railing with her left, grabbed Little Pete’s wrist with her right, and yanked him away from the rail. He fell. She caught him, held on by her fingernails, and then he was falling. He slammed onto the porch chair below.

He had landed hard. He was stunned.

Astrid heard Drake slamming against the door again and heard a splintering sound as the dead bolt gave way. Now only the frail chain still held and he would be through

that in a heartbeat.

“. . . pray for us sinners now . . .”

She swung herself down and landed almost on top of Little Pete. No time for the sharp pain in her leg, no time for the blood and the scraped flesh, only time to grab Little Pete, hug him, hold him close, and withdraw back against the sliding-glass door of the balcony.

“Window seat, window seat, baby, window seat,” she whispered, her mouth pressed to his ear.

She heard Drake in the room above.

She heard him slide open the door above and step out onto the balcony.

They were out of sight. Unless he leaned out far enough.

Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death, she finished the prayer silently and held on to her brother.

Amen.

She heard Drake curse in fury.

They had done it. He thought they had disappeared.

Thank you, Lord, Astrid prayed silently.

And then, Little Pete began to moan.

His game had fallen when she had dropped him to the balcony. The back was open. One of the batteries had rolled away. And now Little Pete was trying to make it work and it wouldn't.

Astrid almost sobbed out loud.

Drake stopped cursing.

She looked up and there he was, leaning far out over the railing. The shark grin was wide.

The gun was in his hand, but he couldn't quite get an angle on them, so he swung one leg over the railing, crouched just as Astrid had done, and now he could see them quite clearly.

He aimed.

He laughed.

And then he bellowed in pain and fell.

Astrid leaped to the railing. Drake was on the grass below, sprawled on his back, unconscious, lying on his rifle with the pistol beside him.

“Astrid,” Sam said.

He was above her, still holding the table lamp he'd used to smash Drake's hand, leaning out over the railing.

“Sam.”

“You okay?”

“As soon as I get Petey's battery I will be.” That sounded stupid, and she almost laughed.

“I have a boat down on the beach.”

“Where are we going?”

“How about not here?”

TWENTY-FIVE

127 HOURS, 42 MINUTES

IT HAD BEEN two days since Lana had survived the coyotes. The *talking* coyotes. Two days since her life had been saved by a snake. A *flying* snake.

The world had gone crazy.

Lana had watered the lawn that morning, careful to keep a sharp eye out for coyotes and snakes. She paid close attention to Patrick's every bark, growl, or twitch. He was her early warning system. They'd been owner and pet in the old days, or, maybe you could say, friends. But now they were a team. They were partners in a game of survival: Patrick's senses, her brain.

It was a stupid thing to do, watering the lawn, since she couldn't be sure there would be water enough for her. But the man who had owned this tumbledown desert abode had loved the few square meters of grass. It was an act of defiance against the desert. Defiance, even though he had chosen to live out here in the middle of absolutely nowhere.

Anyway, in a crazy world, why shouldn't she be crazy, too?

The man who owned the cabin was named Jim Brown. She found that out from papers inside his desk. Plain old Jim Brown. There was no picture of him, but he was only forty-eight years old, a little too young, Lana thought, to leave civilization behind and become a hermit.

The shed behind the cabin was stacked to the roof with survival rations. Not a single fresh thing to be found, but enough canned crackers, canned peanut butter, peaches, fruit cocktail, chili, Spam, and military-style meals ready to eat to last Lana and Patrick at least a year. Maybe longer.

There was no phone. No TV or any electronics. No air-conditioning to soften the brutal afternoon heat. There was no electricity at all. The only mechanical things were the windmill that turned the pump that brought water up from the aquifer below, and a foot-powered grindstone used to hone picks and shovels and saw blades. There were more than a few picks, shovels, saws, and hammers.

There was evidence as well of a car or truck. Tire marks led through the sand from a sort of carport that sagged against the side of the house. There were empty oil cans in the trash and two red, twenty-five-gallon steel tanks that smelled like they were full of gasoline.

Out back was a stack of railroad ties, neatly formed into a square pile. Beside this was smaller lumber, a lot of it used two-by-fours scarred by nails.

Hermit Jim, as Lana thought of him, must be out. Maybe he had left forever. Maybe what had happened to her grandfather had happened to him, and now she was the only person left alive in the whole world.

She didn't want to be there if he came back. There was no way to know whether you could trust a man who lived in a searing hot valley between dusty hills at the end of no road, and had a lawn as lush as a putting green.

Lana finished watering the grass and sprayed Patrick playfully with the hose before turning it off.

“Want some chili, boy?” she asked the dog.

She led the way back inside. It was an oven in the cabin, so hot, she started sweating before she had cleared the threshold, but Lana did not think she would ever complain about something so minor. Not after what she had endured.

Heat? Big deal. She had water, she had food, and all her bones were unbroken, which was how she liked them.

The chili came in a big number-ten can. With no refrigeration, they had to eat it before it could go bad, so it was chili, meal after meal, till it was gone. But at least there was fruit cocktail for dessert. Tomorrow, maybe she’d open one of the number-ten cans of vanilla pudding and just eat pudding for a couple of days.

There was no oven, just a one-burner cooktop. No sink. There was a single chair and a table, and an uncomfortable cot against a wall. The one decorative feature was a ratty Persian rug in the center of the only room. The best seat in the house was a smelly but comfortable La-Z-Boy that sat on that rug. It was stuck in the recline position, but that was fine with Lana. She was all about reclining and taking things easy.

The only thing to do was read. Hermit Jim had exactly thirty-eight books. She had inventoried them. There were fairly recent novels by Patrick O’Brian, Dan Simmons, Stephen King, and Dennis Lehane, and some books that she supposed were philosophy by writers like Thoreau. There were classics whose names seemed familiar to her: *Oliver Twist*, *The Sea Wolf*, *The Big Sleep*, *Ivanhoe*.

Nothing had exactly jumped out at her, there were no J. K. Rowling or Meg Cabot books, nothing for kids at all. But over the course of the first day she had read all of *Pride and Prejudice* and now she was starting *The Sea Wolf*. Neither was an easy book. But Lana had nothing but time on her hands.

“We can’t stay here, Patrick,” Lana said as the dog attacked his bowl of chili. “Sooner or later we have to move on. My friends will be worried. Everyone will be. Even Mom and Dad. They must think we’re dead.”

But even as she said it, Lana had her doubts. There wasn’t much to do once she had inventoried the groceries, so she spent most of her time sitting on the wooden chair, reading, or just watching the desert landscape. She would pull the chair into the doorway where she could have some shade and look out across the lawn at the hills around. She had mastered the trick of reading a paragraph at a time, looking up to scan the area for danger, checking Patrick for warning signs, then sinking back into the book for another paragraph.

After a while the unending emptiness took a toll on her never-strong sense of optimism.

The barrier was still there. It was behind the cabin, not in her field of vision unless she stepped away from the cabin.

Lana carried a tin cup of water toward the door, intending to drink it while having another look at the lawn and suddenly there was Patrick, racing toward her. His fur was up. He shook his head like he was having a seizure.

“Get in!” Lana yelled.

She held the door open. Patrick barreled in. She slammed the door and threw the bolt.

Patrick hit the rug, skidded, rolled over twice, and came up to a sitting position.

Something was in his mouth. Something alive.

Lana approached cautiously. She bent down to see.

“A horny toad? That’s what you have? You scared me half to death over a horned toad?” She felt her heart thud heavily as it restarted. “Spit that thing out. Good grief, Patrick, I count on you and you freak out over a stupid horned toad?”

Patrick didn’t want to give up his prize. Lana decided to let him have it. It was dead now, anyway, and she supposed Patrick was entitled to his own version of crazy.

“Take it outside and you can keep it,” she said. She headed for the door but knelt first to straighten the rug. Then she noticed the hatch in the floor.

Lana pulled the rug back farther, folding it up over the La-Z-Boy.

She hesitated, not sure if she wanted to see what was under those floorboards. Maybe Hermit Jim was Serial Killer Jim.

But it wasn’t like she had anything else to do. She shoved the recliner aside and rolled up the rug. There was a recessed steel ring. She pulled it up.

Lying in the space below were neatly stacked metal bricks, each maybe six or eight inches long, half as wide, and a third as thick.

There was no question in Lana’s mind what they were.

“Gold, Patrick. Gold.”

The gold bars were heavy, twenty pounds or more, but she lifted enough out to be able to see the extent of the pile. Her best estimate was that there were fourteen in all, each at least twenty pounds.

Lana had no idea what gold was worth, but she knew what a pair of gold hoop earrings cost.

“That is a lot of earrings,” she said.

Patrick looked into the hole with puzzlement.

“You know what this means, Patrick? All this gold here and all those picks and shovels outside? Hermit Jim is a gold miner.”

She ran outside to the lean-to where Hermit Jim had formerly parked his truck. Patrick bounded along, hoping for a game. Sometimes she tossed a broken axe handle for him to retrieve, but today Patrick was to be disappointed.

For the first time Lana carefully followed the tire tracks. They were fading, but still visible. A hundred feet from the house, they split. Some tracks, older ones, it seemed, headed one direction, southeast, probably toward Perdido Beach. Somewhat fresher tracks headed toward the base of the ridge to the north.

Perdido Beach she believed could be fifteen, maybe twenty miles or so away, a very long walk in the heat. But if the mine was at the base of the ridge, it didn’t look like even a tenth of that distance. Hermit Jim might be there. If he was, so was his truck. If he wasn’t, his truck might still be there, anyway.

Lana felt a profound aversion to the idea of venturing into the wild again. She’d come very, very close to dying the last time. And the coyotes might still be out there, waiting patiently. But the mile to the mine? She could do that.

She filled a plastic jug with water. She filled herself with water and made sure Patrick was hydrated, too. She stuffed her pockets with MREs—meals ready to eat—and packed more into a towel she twisted to form a pouch. She smeared herself with sunscreen from an emergency medical kit.

“Let’s go for a walk, Patrick.”

Edilio grinned as Astrid took her seat on the left side of the Boston Whaler. “Thank God. Now at least we got one smart person on this boat.”

Edilio and Quinn pushed the boat off the sand, back into the gently lapping surf. They climbed aboard, then trailed their legs over the side to clean off clinging sand.

Sam headed the boat out to sea, out toward the barrier. He hoped Drake was dead or at least badly injured. But he wasn’t sure and he wanted to get well away before the psychopath started shooting at them.

It occurred to Sam that never before in his life had he wished someone dead. Eight days had passed since the coming of the FAYZ. Eight days and he’d seen enough craziness to last him a lifetime. And now he was fantasizing about a kid being dead.

Once he pushed the throttle forward and was beyond the range of any bullet, he started to feel better. This was as close as Sam had come to surfing since the coming of the FAYZ. The waves were unimpressive short chop, but the Whaler landed on them with wonderful force that translated up through his legs, rattled his teeth, and brought a smile to his lips. Salt spray was flying, and for Sam it was hard to be grim when the spray was lashing his face.

“Thanks, Edilio. You too, Quinn,” Sam said. He was still furious at Quinn, but they were—literally—all in the same boat now.

“See how much you want to thank me when I hurl all over this boat,” Edilio said. He was looking a little green.

Sam reminded himself to keep a safe distance from the FAYZ barrier, but at the same time he wanted to keep it close. There was still the tantalizing possibility of a gap, a gate, an opening through which they could all sail and say good-bye to this madness.

Far to the north he could see the cliffs that marked the inlet occupied by the power plant. Beyond that, just a smudge in the haze, the outline of the nearest of half a dozen small private islands.

Astrid had dug out the life jackets and was strapping one onto Little Pete. Edilio accepted one too, but Quinn refused.

Astrid also found a small cooler packed with warm sodas, a loaf of bread, and the rest of the makings of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. “We won’t starve,” she said. “At least not right away.”

The barrier was just to their left, a terrible, imposing, blank wall. The waves lapped against it, an impatient sound. The water wanted to escape, too.

Sam was a fish in an aquarium and the FAYZ wall was the side of the tank. It was the same semitranslucent mystery it was on land.

He skimmed along until he was far enough out that Clifftop was no bigger than a LEGO perched above a narrow ribbon of sand. Perdido Beach was like an oil painting, dots and splashes of color that suggested a town without providing any detail.

“I’m going to try something,” he announced.

Sam killed the engine and let the boat wallow. The boat seemed to want to drift along the wall. There was a current, only slight, but definite. The current chased down the side of the wall heading away from land, following the long curve still farther out to sea.

“Do we have an anchor?” Sam asked.

The answer was a retching sound. Sam looked away as Edilio gave up his lunch.

“Never mind,” said Sam, “I’ll look.”

There was no anchor. But he noticed that Astrid was making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. She handed one to Sam.

He had not realized he was hungry. He stuffed half the sandwich in his mouth. “This is why they call you Astrid the Genius,” he mumbled through the peanut butter.

“Man, don’t talk about food,” Edilio groaned.

Sam searched his little boat. No anchor anywhere, but there were some plastic bumpers, which he hung over the side in case he brushed against the barrier. And there was a coil of blue-and-white nylon rope. He tied one end securely to a cleat and tied the other end around his ankle. He stripped off his shirt and kicked off his shoes, leaving him in shorts. Rummaging in one of the holds, he found a long screwdriver.

“What are you doing?” Quinn asked.

Sam ignored him. “Edilio, man, you going to live?”

“I hope not,” Edilio said through gritted teeth.

“I’m going to dive down, see if I can get below the barrier.”

Astrid looked skeptical, worried, but Sam could see she was in her own head, preoccupied. Probably trying to come to grips with almost getting shot.

Quinn said, “I’ll haul you in if you get jammed up.”

Sam nodded, not ready to talk to Quinn. Not sure he would ever be ready to talk to Quinn. Then he dived off the side.

The water was a welcome friend. Cold, a shock, but welcome. He laughed at the taste of salt.

He took a couple of deep breaths, held the last one, and dived. He swam with powerful kicks and his free hand while the other hand held the screwdriver out to fend off the *FAYZ* wall. He had no desire to be pushed up against it. Touching with a finger had hurt. Laying a shoulder or thigh against it would not be pleasant.

Down and down he went. He wished he’d had the foresight to grab some scuba gear or at least a face mask and fins at the marina, but he’d been a bit preoccupied at the time. The water was pretty clear, but still, visibility was reduced in the shadow of the barrier.

When he reached the end of his air he stabbed toward the barrier. The screwdriver hit nothing, and he felt a momentary surge of excitement that disappeared when his next thrust stopped dead against solid resistance.

He shot to the surface and gasped for air.

The barrier extended at least twenty feet down below the surface. If there was a bottom to it, he’d have to find it using an air tank and flippers.

The boat was rocking against the barrier, fifty feet away. He heard the distinct snap and *pff* as Astrid popped open a Coke for Little Pete. Quinn sat on the bow tending the rope, and Edilio was still looking as if he might heave up a part of his liver.

Sam swam to the boat, taking his time, enjoying the water on his skin too much to feel disappointed that he hadn’t found a way out of the *FAYZ*.

He heard the sound of the engine and the smack-on-wave impact long before he saw the boat. He kicked hard to lift his head above the water far enough to see. “Hey,” he yelled.

Quinn had heard the engine at the same time. “Boat coming. Fast,” Quinn yelled.

“Where?”

“From town,” Quinn reported.
“Fast,” he repeated.

TWENTY-SIX

126 HOURS, 10 MINUTES

SAM SWAM AT full speed and soon had his hand on the gunwale of the Boston Whaler. Quinn hauled him aboard. Up and over, falling and rolling onto the deck.

He was on his feet in a flash and saw the big speedboat, the kind they called a cigarette boat, bearing down on them, not a quarter mile away. The boat threw out a huge bow wave. At the wheel was a kid Sam couldn't recognize from this distance. Standing like they were holding on for dear life were Howard and Orc. No Drake.

"We can't outrun them," Quinn said.

Adrenaline seemed to have steadied Edilio's stomach. "Maybe, man, but we don't know till we try."

"No, Quinn's right," Sam said. "Astrid, hold on to Little Pete."

Edilio reeled up the slack in the rope, both hands flying. They couldn't leave it trailing in the water or it would foul the propeller.

As soon as the rope was aboard, Sam gunned the throttle and quickly picked up speed running along the barrier. Orc's boat veered to follow.

Astrid, clutching her little brother, peeked over the side and yelled, "He's chasing, not aiming to intercept us."

It took Sam a second to understand what she meant. The cigarette boat could have set an intercept angle and easily cut them off. But the driver hadn't thought of that.

Almost too late, the speedboat's driver veered right, trying to drop in behind Sam, but the turn was sloppy and the speed too great. The cigarette boat slid sideways into the barrier with a surprisingly loud, bass-drum smack. Then, when the props bit again, the cigarette boat surged forward and shot past the Whaler.

"Hold on," Sam warned.

The wave from the cigarette boat's turn washed over the Whaler and slammed the smaller boat against the barrier. Sam rocked but held on, his bare feet fighting the crazily tilting deck for traction.

The Boston Whaler stayed upright, and as the propeller found water again, it gained speed. They shot to the right of the cigarette boat, close enough that Sam could have stuck his arm out and high-fived Howard.

Now the Whaler was going all out, bouncing from wave top to wave top with the barrier flying by on the left, heading farther from land.

But the speedboat was much faster, and now that the driver had recovered, he came roaring after Sam and was soon churning Sam's wake.

"Pull over, moron," Orc bellowed at Sam.

Sam ignored the demand. His mind was racing. How could he get away? His boat was slower. It was more nimble, but it was definitely slower. And the speedboat was so much bigger, so much heavier, that it could run right over the Boston Whaler.

"Pull over or we'll run you down," Orc shouted again.

"Don't be stupid, Sammy," Howard yelled in a smaller voice, barely audible over the roar of engines and rush of water.

Astrid was suddenly at his side. "Sam. Can you do anything?"

“Maybe. I have an idea.”

In a tight whisper she said, “Are you talking about . . .”

“I don’t know how to do that, Astrid, it just happens. And this isn’t exactly the time for me to consult Yoda on how to use my power.”

Edilio was with them now. “You got a plan, Sam?”

“Not a good one.”

Sam picked up the radio handset beside the throttle. He keyed the button. “This is Sam, are you guys receiving? Over.”

Glancing back, he saw the surprise on Howard’s face. Yes, they were receiving. Howard lifted his handset and frowned at it.

Sam keyed his radio. “You hold down the button, Howard,” Sam said. “Then when you’re done, you say ‘over’ and let go of the button. Over.”

“You have to pull over,” Howard said, his voice harshened by the tinny receiver. “Oh, over.”

“I don’t think we’re going to do that, Howard. Drake tried to kill Astrid. You and Orc almost killed me. Over.”

That occupied Howard for a minute while he thought up a good lie. “It’s okay, Sammy, Caine changed his mind. He says if you behave yourselves, he’ll let you all go free. Over.”

“Yeah. I absolutely believe you,” Sam said.

Sam edged his boat still closer to the barrier. It was so close now, he could have touched it.

He depressed the send button again. “You try to run me down, you may run into the barrier,” Sam warned. “Over.”

There was a silence. Then, a new voice, faint but audible. It had to be coming from a radio onshore. “Get him,” the voice commanded. “Get him or don’t come back.”

Caine. He was using the radio he used to stay in contact with Drake and the day care and the fire station.

Howard said, “Hey, Caine, they have Astrid and the retard, too. And Quinn.”

“What? Say again: Astrid is with them?”

It was Sam who answered him, relishing the moment, even though the triumph was likely to be short-lived. “That’s right, Caine. Your pet psycho failed you.”

“Get them all,” Caine ordered.

“What if they use the power?” Howard whined.

“If they could use the power, they’d already have done so,” Caine said with a smirk that carried across the airwaves. “No excuses: take them down. Caine out.”

Astrid said, “Sam, if you can do it, you need to do it.”

“Do what?” Edilio demanded. “Oh. The thing?”

The radio crackled to life again. Howard said, “You have till I count ten, Sammy. Then we hit it and run you down. Doesn’t have to be like that, but we have no choice. So . . . ten.”

“Edilio, you and Astrid and Little Pete, down on the deck. Quinn, you with them.”

“Nine.”

Edilio pulled Astrid down beside him and lay flat on the deck with Little Pete between them.

“Eight.”

“This better be a good plan, brah,” Quinn said. But he went and crouched with Astrid.

“Seven. Six.”

The bow of the cigarette boat towered above the stern of the Whaler, a huge red cleaver, bouncing up and down, chopping its way toward them. The roar of all three engines bounced off the barrier, twisting and amplifying the sound.

“Five.”

He had a plan. But the plan was suicide.

“Four.”

“Everyone ready?”

“Ready for what?”

“Three.”

“He’s going to hit us.”

“That’s your plan?” Quinn shrilled.

“Two.”

“Pretty much,” Sam said.

“One.”

Sam heard the twin engines of the cigarette boat ramp up. The red meat cleaver bow leaped forward. It was like someone had strapped a rocket to the back.

Sam shoved the throttle of the Whaler into neutral and steered to scrape the left side of the boat into the FAYZ wall.

The Whaler slowed very suddenly.

“Hang on!”

He dropped into a low crouch, kneeling on the wet deck, clutching the wheel with one hand and yanked it to the right, then steadied it. He covered his head with his free arm, shouting to keep his nerve up.

The Boston Whaler slowed.

The speedboat did not.

The tall, dagger-sharp prow ran up over the left half of the Boston Whaler’s stern.

There was a screech of shattered fiberglass. The impact knocked Sam away from the wheel. The back end of the Whaler plunged, and the five of them and the entire boat were suddenly underwater. Sam was yelling into water, yelling and fighting to avoid being sucked up into the propellers that tornadoed the water a millimeter above his head.

The speedboat blocked out the sun, deep red and death white, a knife drawn across the smaller boat. The big twin outboard engines screamed.

But the cigarette boat didn’t entirely crush the smaller boat. Instead, hitting the Whaler at an angle, the cigarette boat went airborne like a stunt car hitting a ramp. It rolled in midair and smashed its topside into the barrier, shattering its windshield and crumpling its railings.

The cigarette boat hit the water hard on its side twenty feet ahead of the Boston Whaler. It landed in a sideways belly flop, plowed so deep, Sam thought it might stay under, but then it wallowed back up like a surfacing submarine and righted itself.

The Whaler had taken a bad beating. The stern was crushed, the railings on the left side were gone, the black-cowled engine was askew but still attached. There was a big divot smashed out of the fiberglass on the bow. Two feet of water sloshed on the deck.

The command console was bent forward and to the side so that the steering wheel was askew and the throttle handle was out of its slot and hanging loose. The engine had been swamped and had sputtered out.

But Sam was not hurt.

“Astrid!” he yelled, terrified when he didn’t see her immediately. Little Pete was alone, staring, almost as if this at least had really penetrated his consciousness.

Quinn and Edilio jumped up and leaned over the back. They had spotted Astrid’s slender hand holding the railing. They pulled her aboard, half drowned and bleeding from a gash in her leg.

“Is she okay?”

Edilio nodded, too waterlogged to answer.

Sam turned the key and hoped. The big Mercury motor roared. The throttle was stiff, jammed, but by pushing with all his might he could shift it forward. The crooked wheel still turned.

The cigarette boat was just ahead, stalled. Orc was in the water, yelling in fury. Howard scampered around looking for a life jacket while the driver tried to restart the engines. Unfortunately, the engines did not appear to be damaged.

It was now or never.

With frantic fingers Sam untied the rope from his ankle and took the loose end in his teeth. He jumped into the water and plowed through the few feet of water separating the Whaler from the speedboat.

“He’s swimming over here. His boat is sinking,” the speedboat driver yelled, misunderstanding.

But Howard knew better. “He’s up to something.”

Sam dove down under the water. It had to be now, before the driver got the engines started. If those props started turning it would be too late, and there was a very good chance that Sam would lose his fingers or even a whole hand.

Fighting his own buoyancy, Sam stayed under, peering through the churn, fingers trying to make sense of . . . there. That was one propeller.

He looped the nylon rope around the rightward prop and twisted it as tight as he could. Then he jetted to his left, blowing out the last of his air so he could stay submerged.

He heard the ignition click, the key being turned over. One twist of the boat driver’s fingers and . . .

The engine gave a start. Sam pushed back in panic.

Both props jerked and churned. Then the right prop seized and the left spun and stopped.

With the last of his strength Sam wound the rope around the left propeller, kicked off from the stern, and surfaced a few feet away for a quick gasp of air.

He heard the engines turn over again, and stall again.

The cigarette boat’s driver now realized what had happened, and Howard was at the stern shouting angry threats.

Sam twisted and started swimming hard for the Whaler, which was bouncing against the barrier.

“Sam.” It was Astrid shouting. “Behind you.”

The blow came out of nowhere.

Sam's head spun. His eyes wouldn't focus. The muscles in his limbs were all slack. He'd been here before. It was just like when he'd fallen off his surfboard and it had come back and hit him. A corner of his mind knew what to do: avoid panic, take a few seconds to let his head clear.

Only this wasn't a surfboard. A second impact hit just beside him, missing his head and hitting his collarbone.

The sharp pain helped Sam focus.

He saw Howard raise the long aluminum boathook for a third blow, and now Sam avoided it easily. As the boathook slapped the water, Sam lunged, bringing all his weight onto it.

Howard lost his balance, and Sam yanked. Howard let go of the boathook and slammed chest first onto one of the engines.

Again Sam turned toward the Whaler, but too late. Orc was on him now, and while one giant hand grabbed for a purchase on Sam's neck, the other pounded at him.

Orc's fist hit water before it hit Sam's nose, so it was slowed down, but still the impact was shocking.

Sam curled into a ball and drove both his legs as hard as he could into Orc's solar plexus. His blow, too, was slowed by the drag of the water, but it pushed Sam forward and Orc back.

Sam was the better swimmer, but Orc was stronger. As Sam tried to escape, Orc grabbed the waist of Sam's shorts and held him firmly.

Howard was on his feet now, shouting encouragement and praise for Orc. The fight was directly beneath the Whaler's crunched bow. Sam somersaulted backward, slammed his bare feet against the hull, and pushed himself down under the water. He hoped when Orc's head submerged, he'd panic and let go. It worked, and Sam was free. Free but trapped in a tight corner between the FAYZ wall and the boat's bow.

Orc's face was a fright mask of rage. He came straight at Sam, and Sam had no choice at all. He waited for Orc, grabbed his shirt as he came in range, twisted and, using Orc's own momentum, drove the bully face first into the FAYZ wall.

Orc screamed. He flailed madly and screamed again.

Sam kicked away using Orc's body as a launchpad. The kick drove Orc sideways into the barrier and he bellowed like a dying bull.

Sam swam, snagged the starboard gunwale, and held on.

"Edilio. Go."

Edilio threw the throttle forward as Sam, with a hand from Astrid and Quinn, pulled himself aboard.

Orc was yelling incoherent, half-drowned curses from the water. Howard was reaching down to him, and the boat's driver was shell-shocked, not sure what to do.

The rope was firmly tied to the deck cleat. The cleat would never hold, but a good sharp snap might finish off at least one of the jammed props.

Edilio turned the Whaler away from the barrier and said, "Watch the rope, Sam."

The warning was just in time, as the slack came off the rope and it shot up out of the water. The rope tightened, nearly snapping Sam's arm in the process.

The Whaler jerked from the impact. The cleat tore from the deck. But the cigarette boat's props were useless now.

"Okay, that was crazy," Edilio said with a laugh.

“I guess you’re over the seasickness now?”

The radio crackled to life, Howard’s familiar voice, subdued and afraid now, whining. “This is Howard. They got away.”

The faint voice from shore answered, “Why am I not surprised?”

Then, Howard again. “Our boat doesn’t work.”

“Sam,” Caine said. “If you can hear me, brother, you better know I’ll kill you.”

“Brother? Why is he calling you brother?” Astrid asked.

“Long story.”

Sam smiled. Plenty of time to tell stories now. They’d done it. They had escaped. But it was a hollow victory.

Now they couldn’t go home.

“Okay,” Sam said. “So it’s escape or nothing.”

He set the tiller on a course that followed the long, curved barrier. Astrid found a cut-top bleach bottle and began the long job of bailing out the boat.

TWENTY-SEVEN

125 HOURS, 57 MINUTES

IT TOOK LANA far longer than she had expected to reach the end of the tire tracks. What had looked like a mile at most must have been three. And carrying the water and the food in the blazing heat had not made it easy.

It was afternoon by the time she dragged her weary feet around an outcropping from the ridge. There, before her amazed eyes, was what looked very much like an abandoned mining town. It must have been quite a camp once: There were a dozen buildings all jumbled together in the narrow, steep-walled crease of the ridge. The buildings were almost indistinguishable from one another now, mere collections of gray sticks, but there might once have been a sort of street, no more than half a block long.

It was a spooky place, silent, gloomy, with wrecked glassless windows like sad eyes staring down at her.

Behind the wreckage of the main street, out of sight of casual passersby—although why anyone would ever come to this desolate, unlovely place Lana could not imagine—was a more sturdy structure. It was built of the same gray lumber, but was still upright and topped with a tin roof. This structure was the size of a three-car garage. The tracks led there.

“Come on, boy,” Lana said.

Patrick ran ahead, sniffed at a weed near the shed’s door, and came back, tail still high.

“So there’s no one inside,” Lana reassured herself. “Or else you would have barked.”

She threw the door open, not wanting to creep in like some girl in a horror movie.

Sunlight came through dozens of holes and seams in the tin roof and knotholes in the wood. Still, it was dark.

The truck was there. Newer than her grandfather’s truck, with a longer bed.

“Hello? Hello?” She waited. Then, “Hello?”

She checked the truck first. The tank was half full. The keys were nowhere to be found. She searched every square inch of the truck and, nothing.

Frustrated, Lana began a search of the rest of the shack. It was mostly machinery. What looked like a rock crusher. Something that looked like a big vat with heat jets positioned beneath. A liquid petroleum gas tank that sat off in a corner.

“Okay. We either find the keys and probably kill ourselves driving,” Lana summarized to an attentive Patrick. “Or we walk however many miles through the heat to Perdido Beach and maybe die of thirst.”

Patrick barked.

“I agree. Let’s keep looking for the keys.”

In addition to the tall double door on the front of the shed, there was a smaller door in the back. Through this Lana found a well-trodden path that wound through ugly piles of rock, past a graveyard of rusted-steel machines, and ended in a timber-framed opening in the ground. It looked like the mountain’s surprised mouth, a crooked square

of black with two broken support beams forming jagged buck teeth.

A narrow train track led into the mine.

“I don’t think we want to go in there,” Lana said.

Patrick moved cautiously closer to the opening. His hackles went up and he growled.

But he wasn’t growling at the opening.

Lana heard the rush of padded feet. Down the side of the mountain, like a silent avalanche, raced a pack of coyotes, maybe two dozen of them, maybe more.

They flowed down the mountain with shocking speed.

And as they came Lana could hear them whispering in strained, glottal voices, “Food . . . food.”

“No,” Lana told herself.

No. She had to be imagining that.

Lana shot a panicked look over her shoulder back at the shack now far below her. The right wing of the pack was already racing to cut her off.

“Patrick,” she yelled, and bolted for the mine entrance.

The instant they were past the threshold of the mine the temperature dropped twenty degrees. Like stepping into air-conditioning. There was no light but that which came from outside, and Lana’s eyes had no time to adjust.

There was a terrible smell. Something foul, sweet, and cloying.

Patrick turned back to face the coyotes and bristled. The coyotes boiled around the entrance to the mine, but stopped there.

Lana, half blind, felt around in the dark for something, anything. She found rocks as big as a man’s fist. She began hurling, not aiming, just frantically flinging the rocks at the coyotes.

“Go away. Shoo. Get out of here.”

None of Lana’s missiles connected with a target. The coyotes sidestepped them daintily, effortlessly, like they were playing a not very challenging game.

The pack split in two, forming a lane. One coyote, not the biggest, but by far the ugliest, walked with head high through the pack. One of his oversized ears was half torn off, he had mange that left bare patches of skin showing on the side of his shrewd muzzle, and the teeth on the left side of his mouth were partly exposed by some long-ago injury that had given him a permanent sideways snarl.

The coyote leader growled at her.

She flinched but raised a large rock in threat.

“Stay back,” Lana warned.

“No human here.” The voice was slurred, like dragged boots on wet gravel, but high-pitched.

For several long seconds Lana just stared. It wasn’t possible. But it sounded as if the voice had come from the coyote.

“What?”

“Go out,” the coyote said. This time it was unmistakable. She had seen his muzzle move, caught the struggle of his tongue behind sharp teeth.

“You can’t talk,” Lana said. “This isn’t real.”

“Go out.”

“You’ll kill me,” Lana said.

“Yes. Go out, die fast. Stay, die slow.”

“You can talk,” Lana said, feeling like she was crazy, really crazy now.

The coyote didn’t respond.

Lana stalled. “Why can’t I stay in the mine?”

“No human here.”

“Why?”

“Go out.”

“Come on, Patrick,” Lana said in a shaky whisper. She began backing away from the coyote pack leader, deeper into the darkness.

Her foot hit something. She glanced down quickly and saw a leg sticking out of overalls caked with blood. She had found the source of the smell. Hermit Jim had been dead for a long time.

She hopped backward over the body, putting it between herself and the coyote.

“You killed him,” Lana accused.

“Yes.”

“Why?” She spotted a lantern, just a big square flashlight, really. She bent quickly and picked it up.

“No human here.”

The coyote yapped a command to his pack and they rushed into the cave and leaped over the body. Lana and Patrick turned and ran.

Lana fumbled with the light as she ran, trying to find a switch. The darkness was quickly total.

A sharp pain in her ankle almost brought her down, but she stumbled on. She found the switch and suddenly the mine shaft was bathed in eerie light that revealed only jagged rock and straining wooden beams. The shadows were like claw fingers closing around her.

The coyotes, startled by the light, fell back. Their eyes glittered. Their teeth were faint white grins.

And then they came for her.

A jawlike vise closed around the muscle of her calf and she fell in a heap. The coyotes swarmed over her. Their stink was in her nose, their weight hammered her down.

She fought to get up onto her elbows. A second vise closed over her upper arm and she fell, knowing she would never get back up. She heard Patrick’s terrified barking, so much deeper and louder than the coyotes’ excited yip yapping.

All at once the coyotes released her. They yelped in surprise and pranced and twisted their heads left and right.

Lana lay bleeding from a dozen bites in an eerie circle of light cast by the lantern.

The pack leader snarled and the coyotes calmed down at least a little, though it was clear that something had frightened them, and was still frightening them.

The coyotes stirred, nervous, jumpy. All ears pricked up and turned toward the deep shadows farther down the shaft. Like they were hearing something.

Lana strained to hear what they heard but the sobbing rasp of her own breathing was too loud. Her heart pounded like a pile driver, like it would break her ribs with its pounding.

The coyotes no longer attacked her. Something had changed. Something in the air.

Something in their unfathomable canine minds. She had gone from prey to prisoner.

The coyote pack leader approached slowly and nosed her. "Walk, human."

She bent low and laid her hand against the worst of the bite wounds. The pain ebbed as the healing began.

But she was still draining blood from a dozen small punctures as she stood and walked deeper into the cave, deeper, with Patrick staying close and the coyotes following behind.

Down and down they went. The train track ran out and they entered what looked like a new section of tunnel. Here the lumber used to shore up the roof was still green, the nail heads still bright. The floor of the shaft was less littered with crumbled rock and decades of dust.

This was where Hermit Jim had been working, digging down, following the seam of bright yellow metal.

As she walked Lana grew afraid in a new way. She had endured the panicky, choking fear of death. This was different. This new sensation turned her muscles to jelly, seemed to sap the heat from her blood and fill her arteries with ice water and her stomach with bile.

She was cold. Cold all the way through.

Her feet weighed a hundred pounds each, the muscles inadequate to lift them and shift them forward.

Every corner of her brain was yammering, "Run, run, run!" But she could not possibly run, could not physically do it. The only way was forward as she felt herself now drawn deeper and deeper by some will that was no part of her.

Patrick finally could take it no longer. He turned tail and ran, shouldering his way past the contemptuous wild dogs.

She wanted to call him. But no sound came from her nerveless lips.

Deeper and deeper. Colder and colder.

The flashlight weakened and as it dimmed Lana became aware that the walls of the cave were glowing a faint green.

It was near now.

It.

Whatever it was, it was near.

The lantern fell from her numb fingers.

Her eyes rolled up into her head and she fell to her knees, indifferent to, unaware even of the pain as her kneecaps landed on sharp rock.

On her knees, eyes blind, Lana waited.

A voice exploded inside of her head. Her back arched in spasm and she fell on her side. Every nerve ending, every cell in her body screamed in pain. Pain like she was being boiled alive.

How long it lasted, she would never know.

The exact words she heard—if they had been words at all—she would never recall.

She would awake later, having been dragged from the cave by two of the coyotes.

They dragged her out of the cave into the night.

And there they waited patiently for her to live or die.

TWENTY-EIGHT

123 HOURS, 52 MINUTES

SAM, EDILIO, QUINN, Astrid, and Little Pete followed the FAYZ wall out to sea. The curve of the barrier took them away from land, then back toward it.

There was no gap in the wall. There was no easy escape hatch.

The sun was setting as they traveled north of a handful of tiny private islands. One of those islands had a beautiful white yacht smashed into it. Sam considered detouring to take a closer look but decided against it. He was determined to survey the entire FAYZ wall. If he was to be trapped like a goldfish in a bowl, he wanted to see the whole bowl.

The FAYZ wall met the shore in the middle of Stefano Rey National Park, having inscribed a long semicircle on the face of the eerily placid sea.

The shoreline was impossible, a fortress of jagged rock and cliffs touched with the golden light of the setting sun.

“It’s beautiful,” Astrid said.

“I’d rather have ugly and a place to land,” Sam said.

The surf was still tame, but it would take very little for the rocks to tear a hole in the hull of the already crippled Boston Whaler.

They headed south, creeping along, hoping for a place to put in before the gas tank ran empty and night fell.

Finally they spotted a minuscule spit of sand, a V shape, no more than twelve feet wide and half as deep. Sam figured he could, with luck, run the boat in there and beach it. But the boat would not survive for long, and they would be on foot, without a map, at the bottom of a seventy-foot cliff.

“How’s the gas look, Edilio?”

Edilio stuck a stick down into the tank and pulled it back up. “Not much. Maybe an inch.”

“Okay. Well, I guess this is it, then. Tighten up your life jackets.”

Sam pushed the throttle forward and aimed straight for the tiny beach. He had to keep up speed or the sluggish swell would shove him into the rocks that crowded in on both sides.

The boat ran up on the sand. The impact jolted Astrid, but Edilio caught her hand before she fell. The four of them quickly piled out. Little Pete could not be induced to get out, or even to acknowledge their existence. So Sam, fearful that at any moment Little Pete might freak out and choke him, or teleport him, or at least start howling, carried the boy ashore.

Edilio took with him the boat’s emergency kit, which amounted to little more than a few Band-Aids, a book of matches, two emergency flares, and a tiny compass.

“How do we get Little Pete up this cliff?” Sam wondered aloud. “It’s not a really hard climb, but . . .”

“He can climb,” Astrid said. “He climbs trees sometimes. When he wants to.”

Sam and Edilio wore identical expressions of doubt.

“He can,” Astrid said. “I just need to remember the trigger words. Something about

a cat.”

“Okay.”

“He followed a cat up a tree once.”

“I don’t know if we have tides anymore,” Quinn said, “but if we do, this beach is going to be underwater soon.”

“Charlie Tuna,” Astrid said.

The three boys stared at her.

“The cat,” she explained. “His name was Charlie Tuna.” She crouched next to Little Pete. “Petey. Charlie Tuna? Charlie Tuna? Remember?”

“This is not too crazy,” Quinn muttered under his breath.

Sam said, “Okay, how about Edilio, you go first, then Astrid so Little Pete will follow you. Quinn and I will come last in case L. P. slips.”

It turned out Astrid was right, Little Pete could climb. In fact, he almost passed Astrid on the way up. Nevertheless, it took them till dark to gain the top of the cliff. By the time they finally collapsed on a bed of grass and pine needles beneath towering trees, they needed every one of the Band-Aids Edilio had brought.

“I guess we sleep here,” Sam said.

“It’s warm out,” Astrid said.

“It’s dark,” Sam said.

“Let’s light a fire,” Astrid said.

“Keep the bears away, huh?” Edilio agreed nervously.

“That’s a myth, unfortunately,” Astrid said. “Wild animals see fire all the time. They’re not especially scared of it.”

Edilio shook his head ruefully. “Sometimes, Astrid, you knowing everything isn’t really helpful.”

“Understood,” Astrid said. “What I meant to say was that bears, like all wild animals, are terrified of fire.”

“Yeah. Too late.” Edilio peered nervously into the blacker-than-black shadows beneath the trees.

Astrid and Edilio watched Little Pete while Sam and Quinn searched for firewood.

Quinn, nervous for more than one reason, said, “This isn’t me dogging you or anything, Sam, but brah, if you really do have some kind of magic, you need to be figuring out how to use it.”

“I know,” Sam said. “Believe me, if I knew how to turn on a light, I would.”

“Yeah. You always have been scared of the dark.”

After a while Sam said, “I didn’t think you knew that.”

“It’s no big thing. Everybody’s scared of something,” Quinn said softly.

“What are you scared of?”

“Me?” Quinn paused, holding his few sticks of firewood, and considered. “I guess I’m scared of being a nothing. A great big . . . nothing.”

They collected enough wood and enough pine needles for kindling and soon they had a cheerful, if smoky, fire burning.

Edilio stared into the flames, “That’s better, even if it doesn’t scare any bears. Plus, I’m not on that boat anymore. I like solid land.”

The warmth of the fire was unnecessary, but Sam enjoyed it anyway. The orange light reflected dully from tree trunks and branches and made the night even darker. But

while the fire burned, they could pretend to be safe.

“Anyone know any ghost stories to tell?” Edilio asked, half joking.

“You know what I’d like?” Astrid asked. “S’mores. I was at camp once. It was an old-fashioned camp with fishing and horseback riding and these awful sing-alongs by the fire. And s’mores. I didn’t like them then, mostly because I didn’t want to be at camp. But now . . .”

Sam peered at her through the flames. The starched white blouses of the pre-FAYZ had given way to T-shirts. And he wasn’t completely intimidated by her anymore, not now that he’d been through so much with her. But she was still so beautiful that sometimes he had to look away. And the fact that he had kissed her meant that now every thought of her came with a flood of overwhelming memories, scents, sensations, tastes.

He fidgeted and bit his lip, using the pain to keep him from thinking any more about Astrid and her shirt and her hair and skin. “Not the time, not the place,” he muttered under his breath.

Little Pete sat, legs crossed, and stared into the fire. Sam wondered what was going on in his head. He wondered what power was concealed behind those innocent eyes.

“Hungry,” Little Pete said. “Munchy, munchy.”

Astrid gave him a hug. “I know, little brother. We’ll get food tomorrow.”

One by one they felt their eyelids grow heavy. One by one they stretched out, fell silent, slept. Sam was the last. The fire was dying. The darkness was moving in from every direction.

He sat cross-legged, crisscross-applesauce they called it when he was in kindergarten, turned his hands around, palms up, and lay them on his knees.

How?

How did it happen? How had this happened to him?

How could he control it, make it happen on command?

He closed his eyes and tried to recall the panic he’d felt whenever he had created light. It wasn’t hard to remember the emotion, but it was impossible to feel it.

As quietly as he could, he stole away from the fire. The darkness under the trees might conceal a thousand terrors. He walked toward his fear.

Pine needles crunched beneath his feet. He walked until he could only just make out the faint glow of the fire’s embers behind him and could no longer smell the piney smoke.

He raised his hands, the way he’d seen Caine do, palms out, like he was signaling someone to stop, or else like he was a pastor blessing a congregation.

He dredged up the fear of that nightmare in his bedroom, the panic when Little Pete was choking him, the sudden reaction when the firestarter tried to kill him.

Nothing. It wasn’t going to work. He couldn’t simulate fear, and trying to scare himself with a dark forest wasn’t working, either.

He spun. A noise behind him.

“It’s not working, is it?” Astrid said.

“It almost did, you almost scared me enough to make it happen,” Sam said.

Astrid came closer. “I have a terrible thing I want to tell you.”

“A terrible thing?”

“I betrayed Petey. Drake. He wanted me to call him a name.” She was twisting her

fingers together so hard, it looked painful.

Sam took her hands in his. "What did he do?"

"Nothing. Just . . ."

"Just what?"

"He slapped me a couple of times, it wasn't so bad, but—"

"He hit you?" It felt like he had swallowed acid. "He hit you?"

Astrid nodded. She tried to explain, but her voice betrayed her. So she pointed at the side of her face, at the place where Drake's hand had hit her with enough force to jerk her head sideways. She steadied and tried again. "No big deal. But I was scared. Sam, I was so scared." She stepped closer, wanting maybe to have his arms around her.

Sam took a step back. "I hope he's dead," he said. "I hope he's dead, because if he isn't, I'll kill him."

"Sam."

His fists were clenched. It felt like his brain was boiling inside his skull. His breath came shallow and harsh.

"Sam," Astrid whispered. "Try it now."

He stared, uncomprehending.

"Now," she yelled.

Sam raised his hands, palms out, aimed toward a tree.

"Aaaaahhhh!" he yelled, and bolts of brilliant, green-tinged light shot from his hands.

He dropped his hands to his side, panting, stunned by what he had done. The tree was burned through. It fell, slowly at first, then faster, and crashed heavily in a patch of thornbush.

Astrid came up behind him and slid her arms around him. He felt her tears on the back of his neck, her breath in his ear. "I'm sorry, Sam."

"Sorry?"

"You can't summon fear whenever you need it, Sam. But anger is fear aimed outward. Anger is easy."

"You manipulated me?" He untwined her arms and turned to face her.

"It happened with Drake, just like I told you," Astrid said. "But I wasn't going to tell you until I saw you out here trying. You kept saying it was fear that made the power work. So, I thought . . ."

"Yeah." He felt strangely defeated. He had just, for the first time, willed the light to come. But he felt sad, not elated. "So, I have to be mad, not scared. I have to want to hurt people."

"You'll learn to control it," Astrid said. "You'll get better at it, so that you can use the power without having to feel anything."

"Well, won't that be a happy day?" Sam said with bitter sarcasm. "I'll be able to burn someone without feeling anything."

"I'm sorry, Sam. I really am. Sorry for you, I mean, sorry this has to happen. You're right to be afraid of the power. But the truth is, we need you to have this power."

They stood, distant from each other though only a foot apart. Sam's mind was far away, playing out memories from a time that seemed like a million years ago. A

million years, or maybe just eight days.

“Sorry,” Astrid whispered again and threaded her arms beneath his to pull him against her.

He rested his chin on her head, looking past her, seeing the fire, seeing the darkness everywhere else, the darkness that had scared him ever since he was a baby.

“Sometimes you catch the wave. Sometimes the wave catches you,” he said at last.

“It’s the FAYZ, Sam. It’s not you: it’s just the FAYZ.”

TWENTY-NINE

113 HOURS, 33 MINUTES

LANA'S FOOT CAUGHT a root and she fell onto her hands and knees. Patrick bounded over to look at her, but kept his distance.

Nip, the coyote who was Lana's personal tormentor, snapped his jaws at her.

"I'm getting up, I'm getting up," Lana muttered.

Her hands were scraped. Again.

Her knees were bloody. Again.

The pack was well out in front, weaving through sagebrush, leaping ditches, stopping to sniff at gopher holes, then moving on.

Lana could not keep up. No matter how fast she ran, the coyotes always outpaced her, and when she fell behind, Nip would snap at her heels, and occasionally draw blood.

Nip was a low-ranked coyote, anxious to prove himself to Pack Leader. But he wasn't vicious, not like some of them, so he wouldn't rip and tear at her with his teeth, he would only snarl and snap. But when she delayed the pack with her slow, clumsy human running, then Pack Leader would snarl at Nip and slash at him while Nip whimpered and abased himself.

Patrick was lowest of all in status, lower even than Lana. He was a big, strong dog, but he bounded along with his tail wagging, his tongue lolling, which the swift, efficient coyotes seemed to find contemptible.

The coyotes were solitary hunters, catching even the fastest rabbits or squirrels. Patrick was left to his own devices, and since he was much slower, he was going hungry.

Lana had been offered one of Pack Leader's kills—a half-eaten, still half-alive jackrabbit, but she wasn't that hungry. Yet.

She had almost forgotten that none of this was possible. Amazing how quickly she had come to accept a world defined by a giant barrier. Absurd that she knew she could heal with a touch. Ridiculous that she had accepted the fact that Pack Leader could speak. In words. In English, however garbled.

Madness.

Insanity.

But what had happened down in that mine, down where the seething darkness hid, far from the sun, far from the world of reason, had killed whatever doubt remained for Lana: the world had gone crazy.

She had gone crazy.

Lana's task now was to survive, not to analyze or understand, just to survive.

Her shoes were already beginning to fall apart. Her clothing was ripped in several places. She was filthy. She'd had to urinate and defecate in the open, like a dog.

Her legs and hands had been repeatedly torn by sharp rocks, sliced by thorns, stabbed by mosquitoes. She had even been bitten by a cornered raccoon. But the wounds never lasted long. They hurt, each time they hurt, but Lana healed them.

They had run throughout the night, the coyotes, chasing the next meal.

It had been just twelve hours or so, but already it seemed like forever.

“I’m a human,” she told herself. “I’m smarter than he is. I’m superior. I’m a human being.”

But here in the wild, in the dark desert night, she wasn’t superior. She was slower and more clumsy and weaker.

To keep her spirits up, Lana talked to Patrick, or to her mother. That, too, was crazy.

“Really enjoying my time here, Mom,” Lana said. “I’m losing a little weight. The coyote diet. Don’t eat anything and run all the time.”

Lana fell into a hole and felt her ankle twist and break. The pain was excruciating. But the pain would last only a minute. The exhaustion was far deeper, the despair more painful.

Pack Leader appeared, looking down at her from a jutting rock.

“Run faster,” Pack Leader ordered.

“Why are you keeping me prisoner?” she demanded. “Kill me or let me go.”

“The Darkness says no kill,” Pack Leader said in his tortured, high-pitched, inhuman voice.

She did not ask him what he meant by “the Darkness.” She had heard its voice in her head, down at the bottom of Hermit Jim’s gold mine. It was a scar on her soul, a scar her healing power could not touch.

“I’m only slowing you down,” Lana sobbed. “Leave me here. Why do you want me around?”

“Darkness say: You teach. Pack Leader learn.”

“Learn what?” she cried. “What are you talking about?”

Pack Leader leaped at her, knocked her flat on her back, and stood over her with his teeth bare above her exposed throat. “Learn to kill humans. Gather all packs. Pack Leader leader of all. Kill humans.”

“Kill all humans? Why?”

Pack Leader was salivating. A long string of slobber fell from his muzzle onto her cheek. “Hate human. Human kill coyote.”

“Stay out of towns and no one kill coyote,” Lana argued.

“All for coyote. All for Pack Leader. No human.” With his strained, unworldly voice, Pack Leader couldn’t really rant for long, but the fury and hatred came through in very few words. She didn’t know what a sane coyote would sound like if it could talk, but there was no doubt in her mind that this was an insane coyote.

Animals didn’t get grandiose ideas about obliterating a whole species. That thought had not come from Pack Leader. Animals thought about food and survival and procreation, if they thought at all.

The thing in the cave. The Darkness. Pack Leader was its victim, as well as its servant.

The Darkness had filled Pack Leader with this evil ambition. But it had not been able to teach Pack Leader the ways to take on the humans. When Lana appeared at the gold mine, the Darkness had seized the opportunity to use her.

There were limits to the power of the Darkness, no matter how terrifying it might be. It needed to use the coyotes—and Lana—to carry out its will. And there were limits to what the Darkness knew, as well.

She knew what she had to do.

“Go ahead, kill me,” Lana said. She arched her neck, presenting it for him, defiant. “Go ahead.”

One quick bite and it would all be over. She would let the wound bleed. She wouldn’t heal it but would let her arteries pump her life out onto the desert sand.

At that moment, part of Lana wasn’t sure she was bluffing. The Darkness had opened a door in her mind, a door to something almost as frightening as the Darkness itself.

“Go ahead,” she challenged the coyote. “Go ahead and kill me.”

The coyote leader faltered. He let loose an anxious, mewling sound. He had never caught helpless prey that did not struggle for life.

It was working. Lana pushed Pack Leader’s wet muzzle away. She stood up, her ankle still painful.

“If you’re going to kill me, kill me.”

Pack Leader’s brown and yellow eyes burned holes in her, but she did not back down. “I’m not afraid of you.”

Pack Leader flinched. But then his eyes went to Patrick, and back, with a sly sideways leer. “Kill dog.”

It was Lana’s turn to flinch. But she knew instinctively that she could not show weakness. “Go ahead. Kill him. Then you’ll have no way to threaten me.”

Again Pack Leader’s scarred face showed confusion. The thought was complicated. It was a thought with more than one move, like trying to play chess and anticipate what would happen two or three moves further on.

Lana’s heart leaped.

Yes, they were stronger and faster. But she was a human being, with a human brain.

The coyotes had changed in some ways from what they had been: some had muzzles and tongues that now allowed tortured speech, and they were bigger than they should have been, stronger than they should have been, even smarter than they had any right to be. But they were still coyotes, still simple, driven by hunger, by the desire for a mate, by a need for a place within the pack.

And the Darkness had not taught them how to lie or bluff.

“The Darkness says you teach,” Pack Leader said, falling back on familiar territory.

“Fine,” Lana said, her brain buzzing, trying to decide where to lead this conversation. Looking for the advantage. “You leave my dog alone. And you get me some decent food. Some food that humans eat, not filthy half-chewed rabbits. And then I’ll teach.”

“No human food here.”

That’s right, you filthy, mangy animal, Lana thought as the next move fell into place. No human food here.

“I noticed,” she said, tamping down the triumph in her voice, keeping her face carefully neutral, giving nothing away. “So take me to the place where the grass grows. You know what I’m talking about. The place where the patch of green grows in the desert. Take me there, or take me back to the Darkness and tell the Darkness you cannot control me.”

Pack Leader didn't like that, and he expressed his frustration not in human speech but in a series of angry yipping sounds that reduced the rest of the pack to anxious skulking.

He twisted away from her in a pantomime of frustration, unable to control or hide his simple emotions.

"See, Mom," Lana whispered as she pressed healing hands on her ankle. "Sometimes defiance is a good thing."

Finally, without a word, Pack Leader trotted off toward the northeast. He moved, and the pack followed, but slowly, at a pace that Lana could match.

Patrick fell into step beside his master.

"They're smarter than you, boy," Lana whispered to her dog. "But they're not smarter than me."

"Wake up, Jack."

Computer Jack had fallen asleep at the keyboard. He was spending nights in the town hall, working to deliver on his promise of assembling a primitive cell phone system. It wasn't easy. But it was fun.

And it took his mind off other things.

It was Diana who had awakened him, shaking his shoulder.

"Oh, hi," Computer Jack said.

"That computer keyboard face? It's not a great look for you."

Jack felt his face and blushed. There were imprints of the square keys on his cheek.

"Big day today," Diana said, moving across the room to the small refrigerator. She pulled out a soda, popped it open, raised the window shade, and drank while looking down at the plaza.

Computer Jack adjusted his glasses. One side was a little askew. "It's a big day? Why?"

Diana laughed in her knowing way. "We're going home for a visit."

"Home?" It took Jack a few seconds to click. "You mean to Coates?"

"Come on, Jack, say it like you're excited."

"Why are we going to Coates?"

Diana came to him and put her hand against his cheek. "So smart. And yet, so slow sometimes. Don't you ever read that list Caine has you keep? You remember Andrew? It's his happy fifteenth. We have to get up there before the hour of doom."

"Do I have to go? I have all this work to do. . . ."

"Fearless Leader has a plan that includes you," Diana said. She spread her hands, dramatic, like she was a magician revealing the payoff of an illusion. "We're going to film the big moment."

Jack was both frightened and excited by the idea. He loved anything involving technology, especially when it gave him an opportunity to show off his technical knowledge. But, like everyone, he'd heard what happened to the twins, Anna and Emma. He did not want to see anyone die, or disappear, or whatever it was they did.

Yet . . . it would be fascinating.

"The more cameras the better," Jack mused aloud, already working on the problem, already picturing the layout. "If it happens in a flash, we'll have to get lucky to get a shot at the precise second. . . . Digital video, not stills. As expensive and high end as Drake can find. Each one has to have a tripod. And we'll need lots of light. It

would be best if we had a simple background, you know, like a white wall or something. No, wait, maybe not white, maybe green, that way I can chroma key. Also . . .” He stopped himself, embarrassed that he’d gotten carried away, and not liking what he was about to say.

“Also what?”

“Look, I don’t want Andrew to get hurt.”

“Also what, Jack?” Diana pressed.

“Well, what if Andrew doesn’t want to just stand there? What if he moves? Or tries to run away?”

Diana’s expression was hard to read. “You want him tied down, Jack?”

Jack looked away. He hadn’t meant to say that. Not exactly. Andrew was nice enough . . . for a bully.

“I didn’t say I want him tied down,” Jack said, emphasizing the word “want.” “But if he moves out of frame, out of where the cameras are pointed . . .”

Diana said, “You know, Jack, sometimes you worry me.”

Computer Jack felt a flush crawl up his neck. “It’s not my fault,” he said hotly. “What am I supposed to do? And, anyway, who do you think you are? You do whatever Caine says, same as me.”

It was as angry as Jack had ever allowed himself to be in front of Diana. He flinched, waiting for her biting reply.

But she answered softly. “I know what I am, Jack. I’m not a very nice person.” She pulled a rolling chair up and sat down close to him. Close enough that her nearness made him uncomfortable. Jack had only recently begun to really notice girls. And Diana was beautiful.

“Do you know why my father sent me to Coates?” Diana asked.

Jack shook his head.

“When I was ten years old, Jack, younger than you, I found out my father had a mistress. Do you know what a mistress is, Jack?”

He did. Or at least thought he did.

“So I told my mother about the mistress. I was mad at my father because he wouldn’t get me a horse. My mom freaked out. Big scene between my mom and dad. Lots of screaming. My mom was going to get a divorce.”

“Did they get a divorce?”

“No. There wasn’t time. Next day my mom slipped and fell down the big staircase we have. She didn’t die, but she can’t really do anything anymore.” She pantomimed a person barely able to hold their head up. “She has a nurse full time, just has to lie there in her room.”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Yeah.” She clapped her hands together, signaling the end of sharing time. “Come on, let’s go. Pack up your little techie bag. Fearless Leader doesn’t like hanging around.”

Jack obeyed. He began stuffing things—small tools, a thumb drive, a juice box—into his Hogwarts shoulder bag.

“It doesn’t mean you’re bad just because your mom got hurt in an accident,” Jack said.

Diana winked. “I told the police my dad did it. I told them I saw him push her.

They arrested him, it was all over the news. Messed up his business. The cops finally realized I was lying. Dad sent me to Coates Academy, the end.”

“I guess that’s worse than what I did to get sent to Coates,” Jack conceded.

“And that’s only part of the story. What I’m saying is that you don’t seem like a bad person, Jack. And I have a feeling that later on, when you realize what’s going on, you’re going to feel bad about it. You know, guilty.”

He stopped packing, stood with a set of earbuds dangling. “What do you mean? What do you mean about what’s going on?”

“Come on, Jack. Your little PDA of doom? The list you keep for Caine? All the freaks? You know what that list is about. You know what’s going to happen to the freaks.”

“I’m not doing anything, I’m just keeping the list for you and Caine.”

“But how will you feel then?” Diana asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t be deliberately obtuse, Jack. How will you feel when Caine starts going down that list?”

“It’s not my fault,” Jack said desperately.

“You’re a deep sleeper, Jack. Just now, while you were sleeping? I held your pudgy little hand. Probably as close as you’ll ever get to holding hands with a girl. Assuming you even like girls.”

Jack knew what she was going to say next. She saw his fear and smirked triumphantly.

“So, what is it, Jack? What’s your power?”

He shook his head, not trusting himself to talk.

“You haven’t added your own name to the list, Jack. I wonder why? You know Caine uses freaks who are loyal to him. You know as long as you are completely loyal you’ll be fine.” She leaned so close he was breathing her exhalation. “You’re a two bar, Jack. You used to be a nothing. Which means your powers are developing. Which means, surprise, that people can acquire the power late. Isn’t that so?”

He nodded.

“And you didn’t bother to tell us. I wonder what that means in terms of your loyalty?”

“I’m totally loyal,” Computer Jack blurted. “I am totally loyal. You don’t have to worry about me.”

“What is it you can do?”

Jack crossed the room on shaking legs. Without warning life had turned suddenly dangerous. He opened the closet. He drew out a chair. The chair was steel, functional, no-frills, but very solid. Except for the back of the chair where the metal crossbar had been squeezed till it formed the perfect impression of fingers. As if it were made of clay, not steel.

He heard Diana’s sudden, sharp gasp.

“I stubbed my toe,” Jack explained. “It hurt a lot. I grabbed the chair while I was hopping around and yelling.”

Diana examined the metal, tracing the outline of his grip with her fingers. “Well, well. You’re stronger than you look, aren’t you?”

“Don’t tell Caine,” Jack pleaded.

“What do you think he would do to you?” Diana asked.

Jack was terrified now. Terrified of this impossible girl who never seemed to make sense. Suddenly he knew the answer. He had a way to push back.

“I know you did a reading on Sam Temple. I saw you,” he accused. “You told Caine you didn’t, but you did. He’s a four bar, isn’t he? Sam, I mean. Caine would lose it if he knew there was another four bar out there.”

Diana didn’t even hesitate. “Yes. Sam is a four bar. And Caine would freak. But, Jack: your word against mine? Who do you think Caine will believe?”

Jack had nothing else. No threat. His will crumbled. “Don’t let him hurt me,” he whispered.

Diana stopped. “He will. He’ll put you on the list. Unless I protect you. Are you asking me to protect you?”

Jack saw a ray of hope in his personal darkness. “Yes. Yes.”

“Say it.”

“Please protect me.”

Diana’s eyes seemed to melt, from ice cold to almost warm. She smiled. “I’ll protect you, Jack. But here’s the thing. From now on you belong to me. Whenever I ask you to do something, Jack, you’re going to do it. No questions asked. And you will not tell anyone else about your power, or about our deal.”

He nodded again.

“You belong to me, Jack. Not Caine. Not Drake. Me. My own little Hulk. And if I ever need you . . .”

“Whatever you want, I’ll do it.”

Diana planted a butterfly kiss on Jack’s cheek, sealing the deal. And she breathed into his ear, “I know you will, Jack. Now, let’s go.”

THIRTY

108 HOURS, 12 MINUTES

QUINN WAS SINGING a song. The lyrics were a sort of gloomy homage to surfing.

“That’s perky,” Astrid commented dryly.

Quinn said, “It’s Weezer. Me and Sam saw them down in Santa Barbara. Weezer. Jack Johnson. Insect Surfers. Awesome concert.”

“Never heard of any of them,” Astrid said.

“Surfer bands,” Sam said. “Well, not Weezer so much, they’re more ska-punk. But Jack Johnson, you’d probably like him.”

They were walking out of Stefano Rey National Park, downhill, down the dry side of the ridge. The trees were smaller and more sparse, mixing with tall, sere grasses.

That morning they had stumbled on a campground. The bears had gotten to a lot of the food there, but enough had survived for the five of them to eat a hearty breakfast. They now had backpacks and food and sleeping bags belonging to strangers. Edilio and Sam each had a good knife, and Quinn was charged with carrying the flashlights and batteries they had found.

The food had improved everyone’s mood quite a bit. Little Pete had come very close to actually smiling.

They walked with the barrier on their left. It was an eerie experience. Trees were often cut in half by the barrier, with branches extending into it and disappearing. Or else poking out of it. The branches that came out of the barrier did not fall, but they were clearly dying. The leaves were limp—cut off, it seemed, from nutrition.

From time to time Sam would check out some gully or peer behind a boulder, always looking for a place the barrier did not reach. But that soon came to seem pointless. The barrier reached into every ditch, every culvert. It wrapped itself around every rock, sliced through every bush.

It did not fail.

It did not end.

The workmanship of the barrier was, as Astrid had observed, impeccable.

“What kind of music do you like?” Sam asked.

“Let me guess,” Quinn interrupted. “Classical. And jazz.” He stretched the word “jazz” out to comic length.

“Actually—”

“Snake,” Edilio yelled. He danced backward, tripped, and fell, bounced back up looking sheepish. Then, in a calmer tone, he said, “There’s a snake there.”

“Let me see,” Astrid said eagerly. She approached cautiously while Sam and Quinn stayed even more cautiously out of range.

“I don’t like snakes,” Edilio admitted.

Sam grinned. “Yeah, I kind of got that from the way you moved away so gracefully.” He brushed some clinging dirt and dry leaves off Edilio’s back.

“You should look at this,” Astrid called urgently.

“You look at it,” Edilio said. “I saw it once already. One look at a snake is all I need.”

“It’s not a snake,” Astrid said. “At least it’s not just a snake. It should be fairly safe, he’s down a hole.”

Sam approached reluctantly. He didn’t really want to see the snake. But he also didn’t want to look like a coward.

“Just don’t startle it,” Astrid said. “It may be capable of flight. At least short flights.”

Sam froze. “Excuse me?”

“Just step lightly.”

Sam crept closer. And there it was. At first he just saw the triangular head peeking up from the bottom of a foot-deep hole padded with fallen leaves. “Is that a rattlesnake?”

“Not anymore,” Astrid said. “Come around behind me.” When Sam was in position she said, “Look. About six inches below his head.”

“What is that?” Flaps of leathery skin, not covered with scales, but gray and ribbed with what looked like pink veins, hung flat against the snake’s body.

“They look like vestigial wings,” Astrid said.

“Snakes don’t have wings,” Sam said.

“They didn’t used to,” she said darkly.

The two of them drew slowly back. They rejoined Edilio, Quinn, and Little Pete, who was gazing up at the sky like he was expecting someone from that direction.

“What was it?” Quinn asked.

“A rattlesnake with wings,” Sam said.

“Ah. That’s good, because I was thinking we didn’t have quite enough to be worried about,” Quinn said.

“I’m not surprised,” Astrid said. When the others stared at her she explained. “I mean, it’s obvious that there’s some sort of accelerated mutation at work in the FAYZ. In fact, given Petey and Sam and the others, the mutation must have preceded the FAYZ. But I suspect the FAYZ is accelerating the process. We saw the gull that had mutated. Then there was Albert’s teleporting cat. Now this.”

“Let’s get moving,” Sam said, mostly because there was no point standing around moping. Everyone walked more carefully now, eyes down, very aware of what they might step on.

They stopped for lunch when Little Pete started losing it and staged a sit-down strike. Sam helped make the food, then took his can of peaches and his Power Bar and sat alone at a distance from the others. He needed to think. They were all waiting for him to come up with a plan, he could feel it.

They were a little bit above the valley floor still, out in the open with no shade. The ground was rocky. The sun beat down. It didn’t look like there was much in the way of shelter or shade ahead of them. Just the barrier extending on and on, forever and ever. From this height he should have been able to see over the top of it, but Astrid was right: no matter where you stood, the barrier seemed to be equally tall, equally impenetrable.

It glowed a little in the sunlight, but mostly the barrier never changed, day or night. It was always the same faintly shimmering gray. It was just reflective enough that sometimes you could almost believe you saw an opening, trees that extended beyond the barrier, or a feature of the land that seemed to pass through a hole in the barrier.

But it was always an optical illusion, a trick of the light.

He felt rather than heard Astrid come up behind him.

"It's a sphere, isn't it?" he said. "It goes all the way around us. All the way under us and all the way over us."

"I think so," she said.

"Why do we see the stars at night? Why can we see the sun?"

"I'm not sure we're seeing the sun," Astrid said. "It may be an illusion. It may be some kind of reflection. I don't know." She stepped deliberately on a small twig and snapped it in half. "I really don't know."

"You hate saying 'I don't know,' don't you?"

Astrid laughed. "You noticed."

Sam sighed and hung his head. "This is a waste of time, isn't it? I mean, trying to find a gate. Trying to find a way out."

"There may not be an out," Astrid confirmed.

"Is the world still there? I mean, on the other side of the barrier?"

She sat beside him, close enough to be companionable, but not touching. "I've been thinking a lot about it. I liked your egg idea. But to tell you the truth, Sam, I don't think the barrier is just a wall. A wall doesn't explain what's happening to us. To you and Petey and the birds and Albert's cat and the snakes. And it doesn't explain why everyone over fourteen disappeared all at once. And keeps disappearing."

"What would explain all that?" He held up a hand. "Wait, I don't want to make you say it again: you don't know."

"Remember when Quinn said 'someone hacked the universe'?"

"You're getting your ideas from Quinn now? What happened to you being a genius?"

She ignored the gibe. "The universe has certain rules. Like the operating system software for a computer. None of what we're seeing can be happening under the software of our universe. The way Caine can move things with his mind. The way you can make light come from your hands. These aren't just mutations: they are violations of the laws of nature. At least the laws of nature as we understand them."

"Yeah. So?"

"So." She shook her head ruefully, disbelieving her own words as she said them. "So I think it means . . . we're not in the old universe anymore."

Sam stared at her. "There's only one universe."

"The theory of multiple universes has been around for a long time," Astrid said. "But maybe something happened that began altering the rules of the old universe. Just a little, just in a small area. But the effect spread, and at some point it became impossible for the old universe to contain this new reality. A new universe was created. A very small universe." She took a deep breath, a relieved sound, like she'd just set down a heavy load. "But you know what, Sam? I'm smart, but I'm not exactly Stephen Hawking."

"Like if someone installed a virus in the software of the old universe."

"Right. It started small. Some changes in individuals. Petey. You. Caine. Kids more than adults because kids are less fully formed, they're easier to alter. Then, on that morning, something happened that tipped the balance. Or maybe several somethings."

“How do we get through that barrier, Astrid?”

She laid her hand over his. “Sam, I’m not sure there is a ‘through.’ When I say we’re in a different universe, I mean we may not have any point of contact with the old universe. Maybe we’re like soap bubbles that can drift together and join. But maybe we’re like soap bubbles a billion miles apart.”

“Then what’s on the other side of the barrier?”

“Nothing,” she said. “There is no other side. The barrier may be the end of all that is, here in this new universe.”

“You’re depressing me,” he said, trying and failing to make it lighthearted.

She twined her fingers through his. “I could be wrong.”

“I guess I’ll find out in . . . what is today? In less than a week.”

Astrid had no answer for that. They sat together and gazed out over the desert. In the distance a lone coyote trotted along, nose down to catch a scent of prey. A pair of buzzards inscribed lazy circles against the sky.

After a while Sam turned toward Astrid and found her lips waiting. It felt easy and natural. As easy and natural as something could feel that made Sam’s heart threaten to break out of his chest.

They drew apart, saying nothing. They leaned against each other, both reveling in that simple physical contact.

“You know what?” Sam said at last.

“What?”

“I can’t spend the next four days in a permanent cringe,” Sam said.

Astrid nodded, a movement he felt rather than saw.

“You make me brave, you know?” Sam said.

“I was just thinking that I don’t want you to be brave anymore,” Astrid said. “I want you to be with me. I want you to be safe and not go looking for trouble, just stay with me, stay close to me.”

“Too late,” he said with forced lightness. “If I blink out, where does that leave you and Little Pete?”

“We can take care of ourselves,” she lied.

“You’re very confusing, you know that?” Sam said.

“Well, you’re not as smart as I am, so you’re easy to confuse.”

He grinned. Then grew serious again. He stroked her hair with one hand. “The thing is, Astrid, I can spend the time being afraid, trying to find a way to escape. Or I can spend the time standing up. Maybe then, if I do disappear, maybe at least you and Little Pete . . .”

“We could all just—” she began.

“Nah. We couldn’t. We couldn’t just hide out in the woods eating dehydrated camping food. We can’t just hide.”

Astrid’s lip trembled and she brushed at a tear just forming.

“We have to go back. At least, I do. I have to stand up.”

As if to illustrate the point, Sam stood up. He took Astrid’s hand and drew her after him. Together they walked back to the others.

“Edilio. Quinn. I have made a lot of mistakes. And maybe I’m making one now, too. But I’m tired of avoiding a fight. And I’m tired of trying to run away. I’m very, very worried I’m going to get you all killed. So you guys all have to decide for

yourselves whether you want to go with me. But I have to go back to Perdido Beach.”

“We’re going to fight Caine?” Quinn asked in alarm.

“About time,” Edilio said.

“Welcome to McDonald’s,” Albert said. “How may I help you?”

“Hey, Albert,” Mary said. She looked up at the menu, which had a number of items covered over with taped-on black construction paper. Salads had disappeared quickly. Milk shakes were gone because the machine had broken down.

Albert waited patiently and smiled at the little girl with Mary. Mary noticed and said, “Oh, I’m sorry, I should introduce you. This is Isabella. Isabella, this is Albert.”

“Welcome to McDonald’s,” Albert said.

“Isabella is new. A search team just found her and brought her in.”

“My mom and dad are gone,” Isabella said.

“I know. My parents are gone, too,” Albert replied.

“I guess a Big Mac and a Biggie fries for me,” Mary said. “And a kid’s meal for Isabella.”

“Chicken nuggets or hamburger?”

“Nuggets.”

“And would you like that Big Mac with a bagel bun, an English muffin bun, or on a waffle?”

“Waffle?”

Albert shrugged. “Sorry, Mary, but there’s no fresh bread to be found anywhere. I’m using anything frozen I can get for buns. And of course there’s no lettuce, but you know that.”

“Still have special sauce?”

“I have about fifty gallons of Big Mac sauce. And as far as pickles, I’m good forever. Let me get your order started. I’d go with the bagel bun, if I was you.”

“Bagel, then.”

Albert dropped a fresh basket of fries into hot oil. Then an order of nuggets in a second basket. He punched both timers. He moved with ease to the grill and slapped three patties down.

He laid out the bagel, squirted on some sauce, sprinkled onions, placed two pickle chips in the center of the bagel top.

He waited and watched Mary trying to cheer Isabella up in the dining area. The little girl was solemn and seemed on the edge of tears.

Albert flipped the burgers and settled the burger press in place to speed cooking.

The fry timer went off. He lifted the basket, shook it to throw off extra oil, and tossed the fries into the bin. A quick pass with the salt shaker. Then up came the nuggets.

Albert enjoyed the balletic moves he had practiced and perfected over the last—how many days had it been? Eight? Nine? Nine days running the McDonald’s.

“Cool,” Albert said with quiet satisfaction.

Since the incident everyone now referred to as “Albert’s Cat,” Albert had stayed in, or at least close to, the McDonald’s. There were no supernatural, teleporting cats in the McDonald’s.

He assembled the order onto two trays and carried them out to the only occupied

table.

“Thanks,” Mary said gratefully.

“We ran out of our regular promo,” Albert said. “But I got some toys, you know, little stuff from Ralph’s or whatever. So there is a toy in the Happy Meal. Just not the regular one.”

Isabella pulled a tiny plastic doll with bright pink hair from her bag. She did not smile. But she did hold on to the doll.

“So, how long can you keep this place open?” Mary asked.

“Well, I have lots of burger patties. The day of the FAYZ there was a delivery truck coming through. You must have seen it plowed into that old house up behind the muffler place, right? Anyway, when I got there the engine was still running, so the cooling unit was still on. I have my walk-in packed. Plus I have burgers stashed in freezers all over town.” He nodded in satisfaction. “I have sixteen thousand, two hundred and eighty patties—including Quarter Pounders. I’m selling about two hundred and fifty a day. So I’m good for about two months, give or take. Fries will run out sooner.”

“Then what?”

Albert hesitated, like he wasn’t sure if he should get into it, but then, glad to have someone to share his worries with, he said, “Look, we can’t live forever on the food we have. I mean, okay, we have all the food here, all the food at the grocery store, and a bunch of food in all the different houses, right?”

“That’s a lot of food. Sit with us, Albert.”

He was uncomfortable doing so. “It says in the manual we don’t sit down with customers. But I guess I could take a break and sit at this next table.”

Mary smiled. “You’re into this.”

Albert nodded. “When the FAYZ comes down I want the district manager to come here and say, ‘Wow, good job, Albert.’”

“It’s more than a good job. You make people think maybe there’s some hope, you know?”

“Thanks, Mary, that’s cool of you to say that.” He thought it was the nicest thing anyone had ever said to him and it gave him a nice glow. Lots of kids just came in and complained that he didn’t have exactly what they wanted.

“But you’re worried about what happens next?” Mary prompted.

“There’s a lot of food now. But already there are shortages. You almost can’t find a candy bar or chips anymore. Sodas will run out before too much longer. And eventually we’ll be out of everything.”

“How long is eventually?”

“I don’t know. But pretty soon people will be fighting over food. We’re using food up. We’re not growing more food or making or creating new things.”

Mary had taken two bites of the Big Mac. “Does Caine know this?”

“I’ve told him. But he’s got his mind on other things.”

“This is kind of a major problem,” Mary said.

Albert didn’t want to talk about sad things, not while someone was enjoying his food. But Mary was the one asking, and as far as Albert was concerned, Mary was a saint just like the ones in the church. He shrugged and said, “I’m just trying to do my thing here.”

“Can we grow food?” Mary wondered aloud.

“I guess that’s up to Caine or . . . whoever,” Albert said cautiously.

Mary nodded. “You know what, Albert? I don’t really care who is running things, but I have to look out for my kids.”

“And I have this place,” Albert agreed.

“And Dahra has the hospital,” Mary added. “And Sam used to have the fire station.”

“Yeah.”

It was a weird moment for Albert. He admired Mary, he thought she was the most beautiful person he’d ever known aside from his mom, and he wanted to trust Mary. But he didn’t know for sure that he could. He was troubled by what was going on in Perdido Beach. But what if Mary felt differently? What if she told Drake that Albert was complaining, maybe without even meaning to?

Drake could order him to shut down. And Albert didn’t know what he would do with himself if he lost the restaurant. The work had kept him from thinking much about what had happened. And for the first time in his life, Albert was an important person. At school he was just another kid. Now he was Albert Hillsborough: businessman.

All things considered, Albert would want Caine and Drake gone. But the only other person who might step up and run things was off somewhere, a hunted person.

“How’s the burger?” he asked Mary.

“You know what?” She smiled and licked ketchup from her finger. “I think I actually like it better with the bagel bun.”

THIRTY-ONE

100 HOURS, 13 MINUTES

THEY DROVE WITH maddening slowness from Perdido Beach to Coates. Panda at the wheel, even more nervous than usual, terrified, it seemed to Jack. It was dark, and Panda kept saying he had never driven in the dark. It had taken him five fumbling minutes just to find the lights and figure them out.

Caine sat beside him chewing on his thumb, quiet, but preoccupied. He had cross-examined Jack repeatedly on the procedure for recording Andrew's big exit. Somehow what had started out as Caine's brainstorm had become Jack's responsibility. If it worked then Caine would reclaim it as his own. But if it failed, Jack would no doubt take the blame.

Diana, who sat beside Jack, for once had little to say. Jack wondered if she dreaded the return to Coates as much as he did.

Jack was wedged in between Diana and Drake. Drake was holding a handgun, an automatic, more gray than black, in his lap.

Jack had never seen a gun up close. He had certainly never seen a gun in the hands of a boy he thought was probably crazy.

Drake could not leave the gun alone. He kept thumbing the safety on and off. He rolled down the window and aimed it at stop signs as they passed, but did not fire it.

"You know how to shoot that thing? Or are you going to shoot yourself in the foot?" Diana finally asked.

"He's not going to shoot it," Caine snapped before Drake could answer. "It's just a prop. We want Andrew to behave. And you know how difficult he can be. The gun keeps people calmed down."

"Yeah, I know, it makes me feel really calm," Diana said.

"Shut up, Diana," Drake said.

Diana laughed in her drawly way and fell silent again.

Jack was sweating, although it was a cool evening and Caine had the windows down. Jack felt like he might throw up. He'd considered saying he was too sick to go, but he knew Caine wouldn't let him stay home. He'd felt worse and worse all day as he raced to assemble the equipment they would need. He had spent the day with Drake, searching homes for cameras and tripods. Jack had already had enough of Drake Merwin to last him forever.

They neared the gate. It was an impressive thing, two sides of filigreed wrought iron, twenty feet high and hanging from pillars of stone that were even taller. The Coates motto, *Ad augusta, per angusta*, was on two gold-tinged plaques that came together when the gates were closed.

"Honk the horn. Whoever's on gate must be asleep," Caine ordered.

Panda tapped the horn. When there was no response, he leaned on it. The sound was flat, swallowed up by the trees.

"Drake," Caine said.

Drake climbed out, gun in hand, and advanced to the gate. He swung it open and stepped through to the stone guardhouse. He emerged a few seconds later and climbed

back into the car.

“No one in the guardhouse.”

Caine frowned in the rearview mirror. “That’s not like Benno. Benno follows orders.”

Benno was the thug Caine had left in charge at Coates. Jack had never liked the boy—no one did—but Caine was right: Benno was the kind of bully who did what the bigger bullies told him to do. He didn’t make his own judgments. And he wasn’t stupid enough to think he could override Caine’s orders.

“Something isn’t right,” Panda said.

“Everything isn’t right, Panda,” Diana said.

Panda pulled through the gate. It was another quarter mile to the school. They drove in silence. Panda pulled the car up to the end of the driveway, to the turnaround in front of the main building.

Lights were on in every window. One of the second-floor windows had been blown out so that an entire classroom could be clearly seen.

Desks were piled against one wall. The chalkboard was cracked and scarred. All the drawings and posters and exhortations that had once adorned the classroom walls were charred, curled by heat. A massive slab of brick and lathe wall lay on the lawn.

“Well, that’s not good,” Diana drawled.

“Who has the power to do that?” Caine demanded angrily.

“The kid we’re here to see,” Diana said. “Although that’s a lot of damage for a three bar.”

“Benno’s lost control up here,” Drake commented. “I told you Benno was a wimp.”

“Come on,” Caine said and stepped out onto gravel, followed by the rest of them. “Go up the stairs, Panda, open the door. Let’s see what’s waiting for us.”

“No way,” Panda said, his voice shaky.

“Coward,” Caine said. He raised his hands, palms out, and suddenly Panda was flying through the air. He slammed into the door and fell in a heap. Panda rose slowly, then he fell down again. “My leg is hurt. I can’t move it.”

At that moment the front door opened, smacking Panda where he lay. Light spilled out from inside and Jack saw half a dozen shapes, shapes like apes walking on all fours, pushing their way out, crying, howling, terrified.

They tumbled down the steps. Each carrying a rough-hewn cement block that they dragged as they ran. But of course Jack knew they weren’t carrying the blocks. Their hands were encased in cement.

Jack had tried not to think about it. He had tried to put it out of his mind, this crude, cruel solution to the problem of disloyal kids with powers. But since discovering his own power he had thought of little else.

They had discovered early on that the supernatural powers seemed to be focused through the hands.

No, Jack corrected himself harshly, *they* hadn’t discovered it, *he* had discovered it. He had observed it. And he had told Caine about it. And Caine had ordered Drake to do this horrible thing.

“Remember who owns you,” Diana whispered in Jack’s ear.

“Feed us! Feed us! We need food!” the concrete-blocked victims cried.

It was a chorus of weak, desperate voices, so raw with need that Jack panicked. He couldn't be here. He couldn't be with these people. He turned away, but Drake grabbed his shoulder and yanked him forward.

No escape.

The freaks cried for food.

A girl named Taylor, her arms red and raw above the block, face streaked with filth, stinking of her own bodily fluids, collapsed at Jack's feet. "Jack," she croaked. "They're starving us. Benno was feeding us, but he disappeared. We haven't eaten. . . . Please, Jack."

Jack doubled over and threw up in the gravel.

"Rather overdramatic, Jack," Diana remarked.

Caine was walking up the steps now and Drake rushed to catch up.

Diana half lifted Jack and propelled him forward, past the kids with the cinder-block hands.

Jack saw Caine silhouetted in the doorway, Drake rushing to move in front, good little dog that he was.

There was a boom, like the crack of a supersonic jet going overhead.

Drake fell back against Caine. The gun went flying from his hand. Caine kept his footing, but Drake clutched at his ears, on his knees, moaning.

Caine reached back over his shoulder with one hand, not even looking back. He spread his fingers, bared his palms.

The fallen portion of wall came apart, brick by brick. One by one, as though each brick had sprouted wings, they lifted off and flew.

The bricks hurtled past Caine's head and through the open door as fast as machine gun bullets.

The door slammed shut. The bricks smashed through. Wood splintered with a sound like a jackhammer. In seconds the door was a shattered mess.

Caine laughed, taunting whoever was on the other side of the door. "Is that you, Andrew? Is that you, thinking you can fight me?"

Caine advanced, still directing the Gatling gun flow of bricks above his head.

"You've got your mojo working, Andrew," Caine yelled. "But you're still just second best."

Caine stepped through the decimated doorway.

Diana, ducking beneath the brick stream, her expression wild with excitement, said, "Come on, Jack. You don't want to miss the show."

Inside was the grand hallway that Jack knew well. Three stories high, dominated by a massive chandelier. Twin staircases led to the landing on the second floor.

The bricks had already hammered one of those staircases to splinters. The noise was like a chainsaw chewing on metal.

Andrew, a boy Jack had known as a fairly nice kid, not even really much of a bully until his powers had come, stood shell-shocked not ten feet from Caine. There was a wet stain in the crotch of his pants.

The barrage of bricks stopped as suddenly as it had begun.

Andrew made an abortive move for the second staircase.

"Don't make me destroy that staircase, too," Caine warned. "It would be very inconvenient."

The fight went out of Andrew. He let his hands drop to his sides. He looked like a kid whose mother had just caught him doing something wrong. Guilty. Scared. Looking for a way to bargain.

“Caine. I didn’t know it was you, dude. I thought we were, like, you know, being attacked by Frederico.” His voice shook. He tried to cover the telltale stain with his hands.

“Freddie? What has Frederico got to do with anything?”

“Man, Benno disappeared, right? And someone had to run things, right? Frederico tried to take over, even though Benno was more my friend than his and then—”

“I’ll handle Freddie later,” Caine interrupted. “Who do you think you are, trying to run things, Andrew?”

“What was I supposed to do, Caine?” Andrew wheedled. “Benno poofed. Frederico was all, like, I’m taking over. But me, I was standing up for you, Caine.” The idea had obviously just occurred to Andrew. “That’s all I was doing, I was standing up for you. Frederico was, like, Caine sucks, forget Caine, I’m taking over.”

Caine tuned Andrew out and aimed a furious glare at Jack. “How did we miss Benno’s birthday?”

Jack had no answer. His insides turned to water. He shrugged, helpless. Then he began to fumble for his PDA, wanting to prove that Benno’s birthday was not due yet.

Diana said, “Caine, you think maybe sometimes the school records could be wrong? Like maybe some senile school secretary wrote down a one instead of a seven or whatever? Don’t blame Jack. You know Jack is too anal to make a mistake with a number.”

Caine stared hard at Jack. Then he shrugged. “Yeah, whatever. Besides, we still have Andrew getting ready for his big jump.”

Andrew licked his lips, then tried to laugh. “I’m not going to vacate. I’m not taking the exit. See, Benno was asleep. He had powers, but the dude was asleep. So I don’t think if you have powers you poof, not if you’re awake and you’re, you know, ready.”

Diana laughed out loud, a jarring sound.

Caine flinched. Then he said, “That’s an interesting theory, Andrew. We’re going to put it to the test.”

“What’s that mean?”

“We just want to watch,” Drake said.

“Just don’t . . . you’re not going to plaster me, right? I’m still your guy, Caine, I would never use my powers against you. If I knew it was you, I mean.”

Diana snapped, “You’re letting these freaks starve. I can see why you’d be worried about being plastered.”

“Hey, we’re running out of food,” Andrew whined.

“Drake, shoot the creep,” Diana said.

Drake just laughed.

“I think we’ll do this in the dining hall,” Caine said. “Jack, do you have your gear?”

Jack jumped six inches, startled at being addressed again. “No. No. I-I-I have to go back and get it.”

“Drake, take I-I-I and get the stuff,” Caine said. “Diana, take Andrew’s hand and lead him to the dining hall.”

It was a sound that was almost quaint when the sun was shining. But now, in the dark, the yip-yip-howl sent shivers down their spines.

“It’s just a coyote,” Sam said. “Don’t worry about him.”

They could barely see where they were placing their feet, so they moved slowly, tentatively.

“Maybe we should have camped back in that gulch,” Edilio said.

“As soon as we find a fairly flat place to lay out our sleeping bags, I’m all for stopping,” Sam said.

Hours before, they had come to a deep, steep-sided gulch, impossible to bypass, and almost impossible to climb. Little Pete had gone into a complete meltdown while being hauled bodily up the far side of the gulch, and they had all been terrified he might do something.

“Hawaii,” Quinn began saying, as Little Pete howled. “Hawaii.”

“Why you keep saying Hawaii, man?” Edilio had asked him.

“If he freaks and decides to take us on a Little Pete magical mystery tour, I want it to be Hawaii, not back to Astrid’s house.”

Edilio thought that over for a while. “I’m down with that. Hawaii, L. P., Hawaii.”

But Little Pete had not choked anyone, had not teleported anyone or otherwise violated the original laws of physics.

The barrier was farther and farther off to their left, all but invisible in the light of the rising moon. Sam was still determined to follow it, but no longer with any real hope of finding a gate, just because it was the only way he knew to find his way home. Sooner or later the barrier would curve back around to Perdido Beach.

There was a startlingly loud yip, yip, yip.

“Jeez, that was close,” Edilio said.

Sam nodded. “That direction. Maybe we veer off a little, huh?”

“I thought coyotes were nothing,” Edilio grumbled.

“They are. Normally.”

“Tell me you’re not thinking about coyotes growing wings,” Edilio said.

“I think we’re getting more sand and less rock,” Astrid observed. “Petey hasn’t tripped in a while.”

“I can’t see well enough to be sure,” Sam said. “But let’s pull up in five minutes, either way. Everyone start looking for firewood as you go.”

“If I can’t see the ground how am I going to see firewood?” Quinn asked.

“Hey. Look.” Sam pointed. “There’s something over there. I think. Looks like . . . I don’t know, a building or something.”

“I can’t see a thing,” Quinn said.

“It’s just darker than the regular darkness. I’m not seeing stars.”

They veered toward it. There might be food or water or shelter.

Suddenly Sam’s feet landed on a springy surface that reminded him of the soft pine needle flooring of the forest. He bent down and felt what could only be grass.

“Guys, hold up.”

Sam was cautious about using the flashlights. They had a limited supply of batteries and an unlimited supply of darkness. “Quinn. Give us some light here.”

There was no mistaking the green color, even in the harsh white light.

Cautiously Quinn played the light around and illuminated a cabin. Beside it was a

windmill.

They approached cautiously, the five of them bunched up around the doorway as Quinn shone the light on a door handle, and Sam touched it, gripped it, and froze.

He heard the sound of running, scuffling steps in the darkness behind them.

“Get inside, you idiots!” a voice, a girl’s voice, screamed.

Quinn swiveled the light, a rush of motion, something pelting toward him.

Other things moving, like a sea of gray in the gloom.

The beam bounced from a bounding dog onto the terrified face of a ragged, filthy girl.

“Run! Run!” she screamed.

Sam grabbed the door handle and twisted it. But before he could throw it open the girl plowed into Sam and bowled him over so that he sprawled onto the wooden floor and gathered a rug as he slid. A dog landed on his chest and bounced off.

Quinn shouted in pain and shock. He had lost the light. It was still shining across a planked floor and he scrambled after it. In the beam Sam saw Astrid’s legs, Edilio falling.

There came a chorus of angry canine yipping and the girl who had run Sam down was fighting to stand up and a dog was barking and snarling and there were other snarls too as swift bodies came in a rush.

“The door! Get the door!” the girl screamed.

Something was on her, something quick and furious, snarling.

Sam lurched to his feet, grabbed the door, and tried to slam it closed, but a furry body was in the way. There was a canine protest, a snarl, and sudden pain in his leg. An iron jaw closed around his knee, bone-crushingly strong.

Sam fell against the door and it closed. He slipped and landed on his butt against the door and the animal, the wild, snarling thing, had its muzzle in his face. Teeth snapped an inch from his eyes.

He shoved his hands outward and encountered rough fur over writhing muscle.

There was a terrible, sharp pain in his shoulder, and he knew the beast’s jaws had closed on his flesh, and now the animal was shaking him, tearing at his flesh, ripping it, digging deeper.

Sam cried out in fear and beat with nerveless fists against the beast. It was futile. The beast shifted its jaws with lightning speed from shoulder to Sam’s neck. Blood sprayed down his chest.

Sam raised his hands, palms out, but the onslaught was too ferocious. His jugular was pumping his brain dry. His hands were no longer his. His entire body now seemed far away. He spiraled down and down into darkness.

A soft, heavy thud.

And the iron jaw loosed its hold.

Another heavy thud.

Sam’s eyes rolled up in his head, but before he passed out, he caught a glimpse of the wild, ragged girl standing over him. The girl raised her hands, both together, over her head. All was in slow motion for Sam, and there were sparks in his eyes as the girl brought down something heavy and rectangular and yellow on the coyote’s head.

THIRTY-TWO

97 HOURS, 43 MINUTES

LANA LIT ONE of Hermit Jim's lanterns and surveyed the scene. The cabin was just as she had left it. Only now there were two dead coyotes, three scared kids, a creepy, staring four-year-old, and one nearly dead boy on the floor.

She kicked Nip with her toe. No reflex. He was dead, his brain smashed by a solid gold bar. She'd pounded him again and again until her arms were tired.

The other coyote she didn't know well enough to name. But he had died the same way, too intent on his prey to realize his peril.

Patrick lay in a corner, abashed, confused, not knowing how to behave. One of the kids, a surfer-looking dude, seemed to mirror that confusion.

"Good boy," Lana said, and Patrick thumped his tail weakly on the floor.

"Who are you?" Lana asked the surfer kid.

"Quinn. My name is Quinn."

"How about you?" the pretty blond girl asked.

Lana was inclined to dislike her at first sight: she looked like the kind of too-perfect girl who would blow off someone like Lana. On the other hand, she was shielding the strange little boy, cradling him in her arms, so maybe she wasn't all bad.

A kid with a round face and dark crew cut knelt over the wounded kid. "Guys, he's hurt bad."

The blonde scrambled to him. She tore the wounded boy's shirt open. A river of blood ran down his chest.

"Oh, God, no," the blonde cried.

Lana pushed her aside and laid a hand against the pumping wound. "He'll live," Lana said. "I'll fix him."

"What do you mean, you'll fix him?" the blonde demanded. "We need stitches, we need a doctor. Look at how he's bleeding."

Lana said, "What's your name?"

"Astrid, what does it matter? He's . . ." She stopped talking then and leaned in close to see. "The bloodflow is slowing."

"Yeah. I noticed that, too," Lana said dryly. "Relax. He'll be fine. In fact . . ." She tilted her head to get a better look at him. "In fact, I'll bet when he's not covered in blood, he's cute. Your boyfriend?"

"That's not what it's about," Astrid snapped. Then, in a low voice, like she didn't want the others to hear, she said, "Kind of."

"Well, I know how crazy this sounds, but he'll be fine in a few minutes." She pulled her hand away to reveal that the jagged wound was already closed. She covered the wound again. "Don't ask me how."

"No way," the crew-cut kid breathed.

Outside, the coyote pack yipped madly and thudded against the door. But the latch held firm. Lana wedged the back of a chair under the handle and calculated her next move.

The door would not hold forever. But the pack would be aimless, unsure of what to

do until Pack Leader came back from his private hunt.

“His name’s Sam,” Astrid said. “That’s Edilio, this is my brother, Little Pete, and I’m Astrid. And I think you just saved our lives.”

Lana nodded. Better. The girl was showing Lana respect. “My name’s Lana. And listen, people, the coyotes aren’t done with us. We need to make sure that door will hold.”

“I’m on it,” Edilio said.

The wounded boy woke with a start.

He stared at the dead coyotes. He reached for his neck. He stared at the blood on his hand.

“You’ll live,” Lana said. “And I’ll fix the rest of it. Just let me keep my hand on it.”

He seemed dubious. He glanced at Astrid.

“She saved our lives,” Astrid said. “And she just closed up a wound that was gushing blood a minute ago.”

Sam allowed her to place her hand against his neck.

“Who are you?” he asked in a croak of a voice.

“Lana. Lana Arwen Lazar,” she said.

“Thanks.”

“No problem. But don’t be too grateful: your life may not stay saved.”

He nodded. He listened to the frenzy outside, and flinched when one of the coyotes threw himself against the door.

“Is that a gold bar Edilio is using as a hammer?” Edilio had broken down the bed and was hammering one of the rails over the door.

Lana laughed sardonically. “Yeah. We have a lot of gold. Patrick and me, we’re rich.”

She moved her hand down his neck to his shoulder. “It works better if you take off your shirt,” she said.

He winced in pain. “I don’t think I can.”

Lana slid her hand under his shirt, feeling the gruesome mess of secondary wounds. “It’ll feel better in a few minutes.”

“How do you do that?” he asked.

“There are a lot of weird things going on.”

The boy nodded. “Yeah. We noticed. Thanks for saving my life.”

“You’re welcome, but like I said, it may be temporary. They’re not really trying to get in yet. When Pack Leader gets here, that could change. They’re strong, you know, and smart.”

“You’re bleeding yourself,” he said.

“I’ll fix that,” she said, almost indifferent. “I’ve gotten kind of used to being cut up one way or another.”

She pressed her blood-covered hand against her leg.

“Who is this Pack Leader?” Sam asked.

“He’s the head coyote. I tricked him into letting me come here. I hoped I’d be able to get away. Or at least have something to eat besides roadkill. Coyotes are smart, but they’re still just smart dogs, basically. Are you guys hungry? I am.”

Sam nodded. Then he climbed stiffly to his feet, moving like an old man.

“As soon as I’m done with my leg, I’ll do yours,” Lana said. “We have a pretty good supply of food and plenty of water, at least for a while. The question is whether Pack Leader will be able to find a way in here.”

Astrid said, “You’re talking about this coyote like he’s a person.”

Lana laughed. “Not a person you’d want to hang out with.”

“Is he . . . is he just a coyote?” Astrid asked.

Lana stared at the girl. Now she could see the intelligence beneath the pretty-girl looks. “What do you know about that?” Lana asked cautiously.

“I know some animals are changing. We’ve seen a seagull with talons. And we saw, well, a snake with what looked like little stub wings.”

Lana nodded. “Yeah, I’ve seen those. Up close. They scare the coyotes half to death, I can tell you that. They can’t quite fly, but the rattlers use the wings to get just a little more range than they used to have. They actually saved my butt once. And I saw them kill a coyote just a few hours ago. Pack Leader said—”

“‘Said’?” Edilio echoed.

“I’ll tell you all about it, but let’s eat first. I’ve had nothing to eat. Although I was offered some raw squirrel. Canned pudding, that’s what I want. I’ve been dreaming about it.”

She hauled out a can and feverishly worked the can opener. She didn’t wait for a dish or spoon, but thrust her hand in and scooped some into her mouth. Then she stood transfixed, overwhelmed by the wonderful sweetness of it.

She was crying when she said, “I’m sorry, I’ve forgotten how to be polite. I’ll get you guys your own can.”

Sam hobbled over and scooped some pudding of his own, following her lead. “I’m way past polite myself,” he said, although she could see he was a little appalled by her wolfish behavior. She decided then that she liked him.

“Listen, Sam, and everyone, you need to know something so it won’t freak you out: Pack Leader can speak. I mean, human words. Like Smart-Girl Barbie there was saying, he’s some kind of mutant or whatever. I know you think I’m probably crazy.”

She had Hermit Jim’s tin cup now and used it to scoop up another helping of wonderful, wonderful pudding. Blondie—Astrid—was opening a can of fruit cocktail.

“What do you know about the FAYZ?” Astrid asked.

Lana stopped eating and stared at her. “The what?”

Astrid shrugged and looked embarrassed. “That’s what people are calling it. The Fallout Alley Youth Zone. FAYZ.”

“What does that mean?”

“Have you seen the barrier?”

She nodded. “Oh, yeah. I’ve seen the barrier. I touched the barrier, which, by the way, is not a good idea.”

Sam said, “As far as we can tell, it goes clear around in a big circle. Or maybe a sphere. We think the center is the power plant. It seems like a ten-mile radius from there, you know, twenty miles across.”

“Circumference of 62.83 miles, with an area of 314.159 square miles,” Astrid said.

“Point 159,” Quinn echoed from his corner. “That’s important.”

“It’s basically pi,” Astrid said. “You know, 3.14159265. . . . Okay, I’ll stop.”

Lana hadn’t stopped being hungry. She took a scoop of the fruit cocktail. “Sam,

you think the power plant caused it?"

Sam shrugged, and then he hesitated, surprised. Lana guessed that he felt no pain in his shoulder. "No one knows. All of a sudden every single person over the age of fourteen disappears and there's this barrier and people . . . animals . . ."

Lana slowly absorbed this new information. "You mean all the adults? They're gone?"

"Poof," Quinn said. "They ditched. They blinked out. They vacated. They took the off-ramp. They cut a hole. They emigrated. Adults and teenagers. Nothing left but kids."

"I've done all I can to strengthen the door," Edilio announced. "But all I have is nails. Someone can break it in eventually."

"Maybe they didn't all ditch," Lana said. "Maybe we did."

Astrid said, "That's definitely one of the possibilities, not that it makes any real difference. It's effectively the same thing."

So the blonde was definitely a brain. Lana wondered about her little brother. He was awfully quiet for a little kid.

"My grandfather disappeared while he was driving the truck," Lana said, recalling that terrible day. "The truck crashed. And I was dying. I mean, bones sticking out. Gangrene. Then, it was like I could just heal. My dog. Myself. And I don't know why."

From beyond the wooden door came a sudden chorus of excited yelps.

"Pack Leader's here," Lana said. She crossed to the sink and picked up Hermit Jim's kitchen knife. She turned to Sam, her expression fierce. "I'll stab him in his heart if he comes in here."

Sam and Edilio both drew their knives.

From outside the door, just inches away, came the strangled, snarling, high-pitched voice. "Human. Come out."

"No," Lana yelled.

"Human. Come out."

Lana said, "Not by the hair of my chinny chin chin."

Astrid smiled. "Nice," she whispered.

"Human. Come out. Human teach Pack Leader. Human say."

"Lesson number one, you filthy, ugly, nasty, mangy animal: Never trust a human."

That resulted in a protracted silence.

"The Darkness," Pack Leader growled.

Lana felt fear contract her heart. "Go ahead. Go tell your master in the mine all about it." She started to say that she wasn't afraid of the Darkness. But those words would have sounded false.

"What's this about a mine?" Sam asked.

"Nothing."

"Then why is that coyote out there talking about it? What's this darkness thing?"

Lana shook her head. "I don't know. They took me there. It's an old gold mine. That's all."

Sam said, "Look, you saved our lives. But we still want to know what's going on."

Lana twined her fingers together around the knife hilt to keep herself from shaking. "I don't know what's going on, Sam. There's something down in that mine. That's all I

know. The coyotes listen to it, they're scared of it, and they do what it says."

"Did you see it?"

"I don't know. I don't remember. I don't really want to remember."

There was a loud thump at the door and it rattled on its hinges.

"Edilio, let's find more nails," Sam said.

The dining hall of Coates Academy had always seemed like a strange, unfriendly place to Jack. In terms of design and decor, it was an attempt to be airy and colorful. The windows were tall, the ceiling lofty; the doors were high arches decorated with bright ornamental Spanish tiles.

The long, heavy, dark wood tables of Jack's first year at Coates, tables that had accommodated sixty students each, had just this last year been replaced by two dozen smaller, less formal round tables decorated with papier-mâché centerpieces made by students.

At the farthest end of the dining hall a mosaic had been created of individually painted construction paper squares. The theme was "Forward Together." The squares had been arranged to form a giant arrow pointing from the floor to the ceiling.

But the more they tried to brighten the room, the less friendly it seemed to grow, as if the little touches of color and whimsy just accented the crushing size, age, and irreducible formality of the room.

Panda, his leg not broken but badly sprained, slumped into a chair and looked mournful and resentful. Diana stood to one side, not liking what she was about to witness, and not keeping that feeling a secret.

"Get up on the table, Andrew," Caine ordered, pointing to one of the large round tables in front of the arrow mosaic.

"What do you mean, get up on the table?" Andrew demanded.

Some kids poked their heads into the dining hall. Drake said, "Shoo." And they disappeared.

"Andrew, you can climb up on the table or I can levitate you up there," Caine said.

"Get up, moron," Drake snapped.

Andrew climbed onto a chair, then onto the table. "I don't see what . . ."

"Tie him up. Computer Jack? Start setting up."

Drake pulled rope from the bag he'd retrieved from the car. He tied one end around a table leg, measured out about six feet, cut the rope, then tied the end around Andrew's leg.

"Man, what is this?" Andrew said. "What are you doing?"

"It's an experiment, Andrew."

Jack began setting up lights and tripods for cameras.

"This is bogus, man. This isn't right, Caine. It's not right."

"Andrew, you're lucky I'm giving you a chance to survive the big blink," Caine said. "Now stop sniveling."

Drake tied Andrew's second leg and then hopped onto the table to tie Andrew's hands firmly behind him.

"Dude, I need my hands free for the power."

Drake looked at Caine, who nodded. Drake untied Andrew's hands and glanced at the chandelier above. He tossed the rope end up over the chandelier, an ornate, heavy

iron thing that Coates kids joked was the tenth Nazgul.

Drake cinched the rope up around Andrew's chest, pulled it up under his armpits, and hauled him up till his feet barely touched the table top.

"Make sure his hands can't aim in this direction," Caine said. "I don't want that shock wave thing of his knocking cameras over."

So Drake suspended each hand by the wrist, leaving Andrew looking like a boy who was trying to surrender.

Jack watched the LED viewfinder of one of the cameras. Andrew would still be able to move out of frame by swaying one way or the other. Jack didn't want to say anything, he felt sorry for Andrew, but if the video got messed up . . .

"Um. He could still move left or right a little."

Drake then ran ropes from Andrew's neck, four of them leading to tables on four sides. Andrew could move no more than a foot in any direction.

"What's the time, Jack?" Caine asked.

Jack checked his PDA. "Ten minutes."

Jack busied himself with the cameras, four of them on tripods, three video, and one a motorized still camera. He had two lights on poles shining down on Andrew.

Andrew was lit up like he was some kind of movie star.

"I don't want to die," Andrew said.

"Me neither," Caine agreed. "That's why I really hope you can beat the poof."

"I would be, like, the first, huh?" Andrew said. He sniffed. Tears were starting to flow.

"First and only," Caine said.

"This isn't fair," Andrew said. Jack adjusted the lens to encompass Andrew's entire body.

"Five minutes," Jack said. "I'm going to go ahead and start the video running."

"Do what you have to do, Jack, don't announce it," Caine said.

"Can't you help me out, Caine?" Andrew pleaded. "You're a four bar. Maybe you and me, if we both used our power at the same time, right?"

No one answered him.

"I'm scared, okay?" Andrew moaned, and now the tears were flowing freely. "I don't know what's going to happen."

"Maybe you wake up outside the FAYZ," Panda said, speaking for the first time.

"Maybe you wake up in hell," Diana said. "Where you belong."

"I should pray," Andrew said.

"God forgive me for being a creep who starves people?" Diana suggested.

"One minute," Jack said softly. He was nervous about when to start the still camera. No one figured Andrew's birth certificate was exact to the minute—Benno's had been off by weeks. He could disappear early.

"Jesus, forgive me for all the bad stuff I did and take me to my mom I miss her so bad and please let me live I'm just a kid so let me live okay? In Jesus' name, amen."

Jack switched on the still camera.

"Ten seconds."

The room erupted with a sonic explosion from Andrew's upraised hands. Waves of shattering sound began to crack the plaster ceiling.

Jack covered his ears and stared in fascination and horror.

“Time,” Jack remembered to yell over the barrage of noise. Chunks of plaster were falling from the ceiling like hail. The bulbs in the chandelier all shattered, sending down a snowfall of glass dust.

“Plus ten,” Jack yelled.

Andrew was still there, hands high, crying, sobbing, beginning to hope maybe, beginning to hope.

“Plus twenty,” Jack said.

“Keep it up, Andrew,” Caine yelled. He was on his feet now, eager, hoping it was true that the blink could be beaten.

The ceiling was cracking more deeply, and Jack wondered if it would fall.

The sonic blast ended.

Andrew stood, exhausted, but still there. Still standing.

“Oh, God,” he said. “Oh thank—”

And he was gone.

The ropes fell, suddenly released.

No one said a word.

Jack pushed rewind on one of his high-speed video cameras. He backed it up ten seconds. Then he hit play and watched it on the tiny LCD screen, frame by frame.

“Well,” Diana was saying, “so much for the theory that you don’t ditch if you have powers.”

“He stopped blasting,” Caine said. “Then he blinked out.”

“He stopped blasting and then ten seconds later, he ditched,” Diana said. “Birth certificate records are never going to be a hundred percent, precisely accurate. Some nurse writes down the time, maybe it’s five minutes one way or the other. Some are probably off by a half hour.”

“Did you get anything, Jack?” Caine asked. He sounded disheartened.

Jack was advancing, frame by frame. He saw Andrew projecting sonic blasts. He saw him stop, worn out from the effort. He saw the nervous half smile, the moment when he opened his mouth, each syllable, and then . . .

“We need to play this on a bigger monitor,” Jack said.

They carried the cameras to the computer center and left the tripods and lights behind. There they found a twenty-six-inch monitor, crystal clear. Jack didn’t waste time downloading, just hooked up the leads and started playing. Caine, Drake, and Diana crowded around over his shoulder, eager faces lit with blue light. Panda limped over to a chair and slumped down.

“Look,” Jack explained. “Right here. Watch what happens.”

He advanced the file frame by frame.

“What is that?” Diana asked.

“He’s smiling. See?” Jack said. “And he’s looking at something. And what’s weird is that it’s not possible because this frame is, like, a thirtieth of a second but he’s got time to go from this expression . . .” He backed it up a frame. “To this expression. To this, see here where he’s moved his head again. And right here, the ropes are slipping away, his hands are free. Move it ahead just three frames and he’s completely gone.”

“What does it mean, Jack?” Caine almost implored.

“Let me look at the other cameras,” Jack stalled.

Of the two remaining video cameras only one had a shot of the actual moment.

This one, too, showed a blurry picture of Andrew moving in a sudden jerk from one posture to another. In this one too, the ropes were loose and his arms were extended.

“He’s reaching out for a hug,” Diana said.

The still camera was unlikely to yield anything useful, Jack knew, but he attached it and fast-forwarded to the right time signature. When the photo loaded up there was a collective gasp.

Andrew was clearly visible, smiling, happy, transformed, with arms outstretched. The thing he was reaching toward looked like a light flare, a reflection of something, except that it was an almost fluorescent green and all the lights had been white.

“Zoom in on that green blob,” Caine said.

“It’s a depth-of-field problem,” Jack said. “Let me try to enhance it.” It took a few seconds for the image to focus into the green cloud. It took several layers of enhancement before they could see what looked like a hole ringed by needle-sharp teeth.

“What is that thing?” Drake wondered aloud.

“It looks like . . . I don’t know,” Jack said. “But it doesn’t look like something you’d be reaching out for.”

“He was seeing something different,” Diana said.

“It altered time somehow, accelerated Andrew’s time,” Jack said, thinking out loud. “So for Andrew, it was all lasting a lot longer than it was for us. For him it may have been ten seconds, or even ten minutes, although for us it was less than the blink of an eye. It was just sheer luck we caught any of it.”

Caine surprised him then and actually patted him on the back. “Don’t sell yourself short, Jack.”

Diana said, “He didn’t just poof. He saw something. He reached out to it. That green thing, what looks like some kind of a monster to us, must have looked like something else to Andrew.”

“What, though?”

“Whatever he wanted it to be,” Diana said. “Whatever he wanted so badly at that moment that he reached for it. If I had to guess? I’d say Andrew saw his mommy.”

Drake spoke for the first time in a while. “So this big blink thing isn’t just some thing that happens.”

“No, there is deception involved,” Caine said. “A trick. A lie.”

“A seduction,” Diana said. “Like one of those carnivorous plants that attracts the bug with perfume and bright colors and then . . .” She closed her hand around an imaginary bug.

Caine seemed mesmerized by the frozen image. In a dreamy voice he said, “Is it possible to say no? That’s the question. Can we say no to the bright flower? Can we say no . . . and survive?”

“Okay, I get the mommy thing. But I got another question,” Drake said harshly. “What’s that thing with the teeth?”

THIRTY-THREE

88 HOURS, 24 MINUTES

ALL THROUGH THE night the coyotes slammed against the door, trying to break it down. But Sam and Quinn and Edilio had stripped the cabin of everything that could be used to strengthen the door, and it would hold. Sam was confident of that.

For a while, at least.

“They’re locked out,” Sam said.

“And we’re locked in,” Lana agreed.

“Can you do it?” Astrid asked Sam.

“I don’t know,” Sam admitted. “I guess. But I have to go out there to do it. If it works, okay. Maybe. If it doesn’t . . .”

“More pudding, anyone?” Quinn, trying to lighten the mood.

“Better to stay in here,” Astrid opined. “They’ll have to come through the door. That means one or two at a time. Wouldn’t that be easier, Sam?”

“Yeah. It’ll be a party.” He held out his tin cup. “Quinn: pudding me.”

After several long hours the coyotes tired of slamming against the door. The trapped kids grabbed a few hours of sleep each, two at a time, always making sure two were awake.

The sky began to lighten to pearl gray, not enough to see clearly, but enough for Edilio to find a knothole that gave him a dim view of the front yard.

“There’s got to be, maybe, a hundred of them out there,” he reported.

Lana got up from repairing her clothing with a needle and thread and looked for herself. “That’s more than one pack,” she said.

“You can tell that?” Astrid asked, yawning and rubbing sleep from her eyes.

“I know a little about coyotes now,” Lana said. “If we see this many, it means there’s at least twice as many around here. Some have to be out hunting. Coyotes hunt day and night.”

She sat back down and picked up her sewing. “They’re waiting for something.”

“What?”

“I didn’t see Pack Leader. Maybe he left. Maybe they’re waiting for him to come back.”

“Sooner or later they’ll lose interest, won’t they?” Astrid asked.

Lana shook her head. “Normal coyotes, sure. But these aren’t normal coyotes.”

They waited and every hour or so Sam or Edilio would check the view, and every time they saw coyotes.

Suddenly there came the sound of a hundred canine voices raised in excited yips.

Patrick stood up, bristling.

Sam ran to the peephole. Lana shone the flashlight on him.

“They have fire,” Sam said.

Lana pushed past him and climbed up to see for herself. “It’s Pack Leader,” she confirmed. “He has a burning branch.”

“It’s not just a burning branch, it’s a torch,” Sam said. “It’s not just something he found. It’s only burning at one end, a branch wouldn’t do that. Someone with hands

had to have made it. Someone gave it to him.”

“The Darkness,” Lana whispered.

“This cabin will burn like a match,” Sam said.

“No. I don’t want to burn,” Lana cried. “We have to get out, make some kind of a deal with Pack Leader.”

“You said he’d kill us,” Astrid said. She had her hands over Little Pete’s ears.

“They want me alive, they want me to teach them human ways, that’s what the Darkness said, he can’t kill me, he needs me.”

“Try,” Sam said.

“Pack Leader,” Lana shouted. “Pack Leader.”

“He doesn’t hear you.”

“He’s a coyote, he can hear a mouse in its hole from fifty feet away,” Lana snapped. Raising her voice to a scream then, “Pack Leader. Pack Leader. I’ll do whatever you want.”

Sam was back at the spy hole. “He’s right outside,” he whispered.

“Pack Leader, don’t,” Lana begged.

“They’re all backing away.”

“Oh, God.”

“Smoke,” Edilio said, and pointed a flashlight beam at the door’s threshold.

Lana hefted a gold brick and began beating at the boards they had nailed over the door. Edilio grabbed her arms.

“You want to burn alive?” Lana demanded.

Edilio released her.

“We’re coming out,” Lana shouted as she banged at the boards. “We’re coming out.”

But the boards were no easier to remove than they had been to put up. A yellow tongue licked beneath the door.

Sam pulled back suddenly from the spy hole. “Fire.”

“I don’t want to burn,” Lana wailed.

“It’s the smoke that kills you,” Sam whispered, looking at Astrid. “There’s got to be a way out.”

Astrid said, “You know the way out.”

From the back wall now, smoke snuck in through cracks and seams.

Lana hammered at the boards. Smoke was gathering under the rafters. The cabin was burning quickly. Already the heat was becoming intolerable.

“Help me,” Lana cried. “We have to get out.”

Edilio sprang into action, helping to pull boards away.

Sam leaned over Little Pete’s head and kissed Astrid on the mouth. “Don’t let me turn into Caine,” he said.

“I’ll keep an eye on you,” she said.

“Okay. Everyone get back from the door,” Sam said, but too quietly for it to register above the panic sounds.

He grabbed Lana’s hand as she swung with a gold brick. “What are you doing?” she cried.

“You saved my life with your power,” Sam said. “My turn.”

Lana and Edilio and Quinn shrank back from the doorway.

Sam closed his eyes. It was easy to find the anger. He was angry at so many things. But for some reason, when he tried to focus on the outrage of this attack, his mind's eye did not call up pictures of the coyote leader, or even of Caine. The picture in his mind was of his own mother.

Stupid. Wrong. Unfair of him, even cruel.

But still, when he reached for his anger, it was his mother he saw.

"It wasn't my fault," he whispered to that image.

He raised his hands. Fingers splayed wide.

But at that moment the half-burned door burst open.

Flames and smoke were everywhere, a torrent of choking smoke.

And through the inferno leaped a coyote as big as a Great Dane.

That, Sam thought, made it easier.

A flash of green-white light erupted from his upraised hands and the coyote dropped to the floor. An eight-inch hole was burned clear through his body.

A second flash, like a thousand flashbulbs, and the front of the cabin blew apart.

The sudden vacuum swallowed some of the flame, not all, just a pause in the inferno and Sam was moving, dragging Astrid by the arm, Astrid dragging Little Pete in turn. The others shook off their shock and followed.

They advanced through the hole in the cabin and the coyotes surged forward, a mass of dangerous teeth beneath cold, focused eyes.

Sam let go of Astrid, raised his hands and the light exploded again. A dozen coyotes caught fire and fell or writhed or ran screeching into the night like mad sparklers in the retreating gloom.

"Pack Leader," Lana warned in a voice reduced to a croak by the smoke that swirled around them. She was leaning on Edilio's arm, the two of them safely out of the cabin but far from safe on the lawn.

The cabin fell with a crash behind them and burned like a bonfire. The orange light revealed a hundred staring, uncomprehending canine faces. Their eyes and teeth shone.

Pack Leader stood out from his pack, facing Sam, bristling, fearless.

Pack Leader barked a command and the entire pack moved as one, a wave of snarling fury.

Sam held his hands high and beams of purest green-white light fired. The first wave of coyotes caught fire instantly. They turned in terror and raced back through their brothers and sisters, setting off complete panic.

The pack turned tail and ran into the night. And Pack Leader was no longer fearless, no longer leading, but following, racing to keep up with his beaten army. Some burned as they ran and set alight dry shrubbery.

Sam lowered his hands to his sides.

Astrid was beside him.

"Dude," Quinn said in an awestruck voice.

"I don't think they'll come back," Sam said.

"Where to now, man?" Edilio asked him.

Sam stood gazing out at empty desert, so dark still that it swallowed all the light of the burning cabin. He wanted to cry. He hadn't known he had that much anger inside. It made him sick. His mother had done her best, she wasn't to blame. He wanted to

throw up.

Astrid saw that Sam was in no condition to talk, so she said, "We'll head back to Perdido Beach. We'll go back, and we'll make things right."

"And Caine will just step aside," Quinn said. "No problem, la di da."

Astrid flared. "I'm not saying it will be easy. It will be a test for us."

Edilio shook his head. "Isn't going to be a test. It's going to be a war."

"Sun will be up soon. We'll be able to see something," Drake said.

"See what?" Panda whined. "There's nothing but desert out there."

"Caine says he's probably staying close to the barrier, to find his way back."

Panda sounded nervous when he said, "Caine thinks Sam is coming back?"

Panda was still sulking about his sprained ankle and almost useless, so Drake had grabbed two other Coates kids. The first was a fat Chinese-American kid called Chunk. Chunk was a low-level bully, not someone Drake would normally have hung out with. Plus, he would not shut up but chattered away, mostly bragging about what bands he'd seen in concert and what movie stars he'd met. Chunk's father was a talent agent in Hollywood.

If there still was a Hollywood.

The other kid was a girl, skinny little black girl named Louise, one of the drivers. With Panda semiseless, Drake needed a driver.

After the Andrew poof, Caine and Diana, along with the creepy little nerd, Jack, had gone to deal with Frederico and try to get things back under control at Coates. Caine had sent Drake off with orders to see if he could find Sam.

Drake didn't like having to follow this order. He was sleepy and, as he pointed out to Caine, there was a lot of emptiness out there, let alone at night, so how was he supposed to find Sam, even if he was still following the barrier?

"There's a road goes up Piggyback Mountain," Caine said. "Remember? The field trip? You can see for miles."

So despite it still being dark, and despite the fact that Louise was a much crazier driver than cautious Panda, and despite Panda's whining and Chunk's babble, they had driven up Piggyback Mountain and after a time found the lookout.

They had been there for a while, listening to coyote howls from down in the valley, Drake threatening to punch Chunk if he didn't shut up about how he had met Christina Aguilera one time.

Drake was steaming, unhappy to be up here in the middle of nowhere, with no food or sodas or anything, just a bottle of water and these idiots.

"So what happened with Andrew?" Louise asked during one of Chunk's rare silences.

"He ditched, man. He cut a hole," Panda said.

"I still got more than a year, I'm only thirteen," Louise said, like anyone cared. "Someone will come rescue us in a year, right?"

"Sooner would be better," Drake drawled, "what with me having a month."

"I got till June," Chunk said. "You know what that makes me? I'm a Cancer."

"Got that right," Drake muttered.

"Sign of the crab," Chunk added.

"I have to go," Drake said. He climbed down out of the SUV they were in and

walked to the edge of the lookout, up to the railing. He started peeing over the side and that's when he saw it. It looked like a match being carried through the night. Impossible to tell distances.

"Chunk! Get the binoculars."

Chunk came hustling up a few seconds later. Drake had watched as the tiny, flickering light went racing in zigzags far below.

Chunk said, "This is like being up in the Hollywood Hills, you know? Up on Mulholland Drive, which is where all these famous actors and stuff live. One time I went to this guy's house, he was, like, a director that my dad reps, right? And—"

Drake yanked the binoculars from Chunk's hands and tried to capture the spark in his field of vision. Almost impossible. He would catch it and then lose it. Even when he managed to follow it for a few seconds, he couldn't make anything out, it was just an orange flame wandering through a featureless void. But it was almost surely moving too fast to be carried by a person, even a fast person.

Then the spark stopped moving. And gradually Drake realized the flame was growing.

He peered intently and thought he could make out some kind of structure, like a house or something in the spreading glow.

Panda had limped over to join them. Drake handed him the binoculars. "What do you think that is?"

Panda peered through the binoculars and at that moment there was a flash of light and he tore the binoculars away and yelled.

The second flash was even clearer, and now there were sparklers making light trails through the darkness of early morning.

Panda looked again. "There's some kind of house . . . and a tower or something. And there's, like, . . . like dogs or something."

A third blinding light and now even more of the number of crazily weaving sparklers.

"I don't know, man," Panda said.

"I think maybe we just found what we were looking for," Drake said.

Chunk, scared, said, "You think that's this kid you're trying to catch? Dude's got the power, man. Like in that movie—"

Drake yanked the gun from his belt and said, "No, Chunk: this is the power. And I've got it."

That shut Chunk up for a few seconds.

"The fire is spreading," Louise pointed out. "It's probably all dry down there and bushes and stuff catching fire."

Drake had noticed the same thing. He glanced back in the direction they'd come from, tried to make sense of the topography. "Coates is back that way. The barrier is over that way." He pointed. "There's no wind, so the fire is going to climb the hill. Which means they'll be coming this way, toward Coates. They'll pass down below us."

"What are you going to do, shoot them when they walk past?" Chunk asked, eager and afraid.

"Yeah, that's right, three thousand feet down this hill and I'm going to shoot them with a handgun," Drake said sarcastically. "Moron."

“So what do we do?” Panda asked. “No wonder Caine’s scared of this guy. Dude can do all that?”

“That’s a four bar, right there, I bet,” Chunk opined. “I seen all kinds of stuff at Coates with Benno and Andrew and Frederico, none of them could do that kind of stuff. You think he can take Caine down?”

Drake spun and smacked Chunk in the mouth with the back of his free hand. When Chunk staggered back, Drake moved in and kicked him in the groin.

Chunk grabbed himself and fell to his knees. He whimpered, “Why’d you do that, man?”

“Because I’m sick of listening to you,” Drake snapped. “I’m sick of all this powers crap. You saw what we did to freaks at Coates? Who do you think it was that took care of that? All these kids with their stupid so-called powers. Starting fires and moving stuff around and reading your mind and all? Who do you think it was grabbed them one by one in their sleep and beat them down and when they woke up their hands were setting up in a block of cement?”

“It was you, Drake,” Panda said, placating him. “You got them all.”

“That’s right. And I didn’t even have a gun then. It’s not about who’s got powers, morons. It’s about who’s not afraid. And who’s going to do what has to be done.”

Chunk was climbing to his feet now with a hand from Panda.

“It’s not Sam Temple or even Caine you little worms need to worry about, it’s me,” Drake said. “Mr. Laser Hands down there isn’t going to make it to where he can fight Caine. I’m going to take him down long before that.”

THIRTY-FOUR

87 HOURS, 46 MINUTES

THEY WERE SIX now. Sam, Edilio, Quinn, Lana, Astrid, and Little Pete. All plans for following the FAYZ wall home were abandoned for now. The fire, a patchwork of brilliant yellow and orange, was climbing the hills to the north, cutting them off. They could only keep moving south.

Dawn came at last, an unsatisfying gray that bleached the color from everything, even the fire.

They could see where they were placing their feet, now, but that didn't stop them from tripping and stumbling. They were lead-footed from exhaustion.

Little Pete silently collapsed and was left behind until Astrid noticed. After that Edilio and Sam took turns carrying him on their backs, which made their progress even slower and more treacherous.

Little Pete slept that way for a while, maybe two hours, then, when the boys couldn't manage another step, he woke up and set off on his own, and now they were all following him, too tired to argue or try to redirect him, since he was going mostly in the right direction.

"We gotta stop, man," Edilio said. "The girls are tired."

"I'm fine," Lana said. "I've been running with coyotes. Walking with you guys is like standing still."

"I've had it," Sam agreed, and stopped right where he was, which happened to be beside something that was either a very big bush or a small tree.

"Petey," Astrid shouted. "Come back. We're stopping."

Little Pete had stopped walking, but he would not come back. Astrid wearily trudged to him, every sore footstep communicating the pain she was in.

"Sam," Astrid yelled. "Quick."

Sam thought he was too far gone to respond, but he somehow started his feet moving again and went up to where Little Pete was standing and Astrid kneeling.

There was a girl lying in the dirt. Her clothing was a mess, her black hair ratty. She was Asian, pretty without being beautiful, and little more than skin and bones. But the first thing they noticed was that her forearms ended in a solid concrete block.

Astrid made a quick sign of the cross and pressed two fingers against the girl's neck. "Lana," Astrid cried.

Lana sized up the situation quickly. "I don't see any injuries. I think maybe she's starving or else sick in some other way."

"What's she doing out here?" Edilio wondered. "Oh, man, what did someone do to her hands?"

"I can't heal hunger," Lana said. "I tried it on myself when I was with the pack. Didn't work."

Edilio untwisted the cap from his water bottle, knelt, and carefully drizzled water across the girl's cheek so that a few drops curled into her mouth.

"Look, she's swallowing."

Edilio broke a tiny bite from one of the PowerBars and placed it gently into the

girl's mouth. After a second the girl's mouth began to move, to chew.

"There's a road over there," Sam said. "I think so, anyway. A dirt road, I think."

"Someone drove by and dumped her here," Astrid agreed.

Sam pointed at the dirt. "You can see how she dragged that block."

"Some sick stuff going on," Edilio muttered angrily. "Who would do something like this?"

Little Pete stood staring down at the girl. Astrid noticed. "He doesn't usually stare at people that way."

"I guess he's never seen what some creeps can do," Edilio said.

"No," Astrid said thoughtfully. "Petey doesn't relate to people usually. They're not totally real to him. I cut my hand once, really badly with a kitchen knife, I was bleeding all over and he didn't even blink. And I'm the person he's closest to in the whole world."

Lana said, "Sam, can you, you know, like burn that concrete off her hands?"

"No. I can't aim that precisely."

"I don't even know what can be done," Edilio said as he fed the girl another microscopic bite of food. "You try and break that stuff off with a sledge hammer or something, or even a hammer and a chisel, it's going to really hurt. Probably break every bone in her hands, man."

"Who would have done this to her?" Lana wondered.

"That's a Coates Academy uniform," Astrid answered. "We're probably not far from there."

"Shh," Lana hissed. "I hear something."

Everyone instinctively ducked down. In the silence they could clearly hear a car engine. It was being driven erratically, revving one minute, slowing the next.

"Come on, let's find out who it is," Sam said.

"How we going to move this girl?" Edilio asked. "I can maybe carry her, but I can't carry her and that block, man."

"I'll grab her, you grab the block," Sam said.

"This thing is really heavy," Edilio said. "I better not even meet the *pendejo* who did this. Do this to a person? What kind of animal does something like that?"

The car turned out to be an SUV. It was driven, as far as Sam could tell, by a lone boy.

"I know him," Astrid said. She waved. The SUV lurched to a halt. Astrid leaned against the open window. "Computer Jack?"

Sam had seen the techie wizard around town but had never really spoken to him.

"Hi," the boy said. "Oh, good. You found Taylor. I was looking for her."

"You were looking for her?"

"Yeah. She's sick. You know, like in the head. She wandered away from school, and so I was looking for her and—"

Right at that moment, Sam knew it was a trap. A split second too late.

Drake rose up from behind the third row of seats. He had a gun pointed at Astrid's head, but he was looking straight at Sam. "Don't even think about it. However fast you think you are, all I have to do is squeeze the trigger."

"I'm not moving," Sam said. He raised his hands in surrender.

"Ah ah ah, no no no, Sam boy. I know all about the power. Keep your hands by

your side.”

“I have to help carry this girl,” Sam said.

“No one’s carrying her anywhere. She’s done for.”

“We’re not leaving her here,” Astrid said.

“The guy holding the gun makes the decisions,” Drake said, and grinned. “And if I were you, Astrid, I wouldn’t push me. Caine wants to try to take you and your little brother alive. But if you two try and do your disappearing act, I’ll shoot Sam.”

“You’re a psychopath, Drake,” Astrid said.

“Wow. Such a big word. I guess that’s why you’re Astrid the Genius, huh? You know what else is a good word? Retard.”

Astrid flinched like he had hit her.

“My brother is a retard,” Drake mimicked. “I wish I had recorded it. Okay. We’re going to climb in the truck here one by one. Nice and slow.”

“Not without the girl,” Sam said flatly.

“That’s right,” Edilio agreed.

Drake sighed theatrically. “Okay. Pick her up. Throw her in the front seat next to Jack.”

Doing that took some effort. The girl was alive, but not really conscious and was too weak to move.

Quinn had gone rigid with fear and indecision. Sam could see the conflict on his face. Should he stick with Sam or try and ingratiate himself with Drake?

Sam wondered what he would decide. For now, his friend was staring wide-eyed, blank, mouth trembling, eyes darting, looking for an answer.

“It’ll be all right, Quinn,” Sam whispered.

Quinn didn’t even hear him.

Astrid climbed in. She sat directly behind Jack. “I really thought there might be some hope for you, Jack.”

“Nah,” Drake said. “Jack’s like a screwdriver or a pair of pliers. He’s just a tool. He does what we tell him to do.”

Little Pete and Lana shared the middle bench with Astrid. Edilio and Sam were in the back row. Drake pressed the gun to the back of Edilio’s head.

“Your problem’s with me, Drake,” Sam said.

“You might take a chance if it’s only your own life on the line,” Drake said. “But you won’t risk me shooting your pet Mexican here, or your girlfriend.”

They drove in jerks and starts, Jack frequently weaving off the road onto the shoulder. But they didn’t crash, which was Sam’s only hope. They pulled up outside Coates Academy.

Sam had been once before, brought there to see where his mother worked. The gloomy old building looked like it had been shelled. One entire room upstairs was exposed. The main door had been blown apart.

“Looks like a war zone,” Edilio commented.

“The FAYZ is a war zone,” Drake said darkly.

The sight of the place brought Sam a wave of sad memories. His mother had done her best to portray her job as something she was excited about, and Coates as a place where she was going to love working. But even then Sam had known that she was only here because he had broken up his mother’s marriage.

He felt within him the residue of his rage at his mother. It was childish. Shameful, really. Wrong. And it was the wrong time to be thinking about all that, now, where he was, with what was happening, what was likely to happen.

What was that phrase of Edilio's? *Cabeza de turco*? Scapegoat? He needed someone to blame, and his anger had been building at his mother since long before the FAYZ.

But as mad as I am, Sam thought, it must be worse for Caine. I was the son she kept. He was the one she gave away.

When they pulled up, Panda and a couple of kids Sam didn't know were waiting. They were armed with baseball bats.

"I want to see Caine," Sam said as they climbed out.

"No doubt," Drake said. "But first we have things to take care of. Line up. Walk single file around the building."

"Tell Caine his brother is here," Sam insisted.

"You're not dealing with Caine, Sammy, you're dealing with me," Drake said. "I'd just as soon shoot you. I'd just as soon shoot all of you. So don't piss me off."

They did as ordered. They turned the corner and came to the commons area behind the main building. There was a small performance stage made to look like a gazebo.

More than two dozen kids lined a low railing around the gazebo. They were all tied to it by a rope leash that gave them no more than a few feet of movement. Neck to rail, like tethered horses. Each of the kids was weighed down by a concrete block that encased their hands. Their eyes were hollow, their cheeks caved in.

Astrid used a word that Sam had never imagined coming from her.

"Nice language," Drake said with a smirk. "And in front of the Pe-tard, too."

A cafeteria tray had been placed in front of each of the prisoners. It must have been a very recent delivery because some were still licking their trays, hunched over, faces down, tongues out, licking like dogs.

"It's the circle of freaks," Drake said proudly, waving a hand like a showman.

In a crusty old wheelbarrow to one side, three kids were using a short-handled shovel to mix cement. It made a heavy sloshing sound. They dumped a shovelful of gravel into the mix and stirred it like lumpy gravy.

"Oh, no," Lana said, backing away, but one of the Coates kids smashed her behind the knee with his baseball bat, and she crumpled.

"Gotta do something with unhelpful freaks," Drake said. "Can't have you people running around loose." He must have seen Sam start to react because he stuck his gun against Astrid's head. "Your call, Sam. You so much as flinch and we'll get to see what a genius brain really looks like."

"Hey, I got no powers, man," Quinn said.

"This is sick, Drake. Like you're sick," Astrid said. "I can't even reason with you because you're just too damaged, too hopelessly messed up."

"Shut up," Drake snapped. "Okay, Sam. You first. It's easy to do. You just stick your hands in and then, presto, no more powers."

Quinn pleaded. "Sam's a freak, I'm not, man, I have no powers. I am just a normal person."

Sam walked with shaky steps to the wheelbarrow. The kids mixing the concrete looked very unhappy about what they were doing, but Sam didn't kid himself: they

would do what they were told.

There was a hole dug in the dirt, about a foot long, half as wide, and maybe eight inches deep.

The cement mixers slogged a shovelful of concrete into the hole, filling it a third of the way.

“Stick your hands in, Sam,” Drake ordered. “Do it or pop-goes-the-genius.”

Sam plunged his hands into the cement. The kid with the shovel dumped a load of wet, heavy cement into the hole and used a trowel to poke it down. Then half a shovelful and the boy used the trowel to smooth it over and return the excess to the wheelbarrow.

Sam knelt there, hands encased, his brain crazed with desperate plans and wild calculations. If he moved, Astrid would die. If he did nothing, they would be slaves.

“Okay, Astrid, your turn,” Drake said.

Another hole and the same process. Astrid was crying, saying, “It’ll be okay, Petey, it’ll be okay,” through her tears.

One of the mixers got busy digging a third hole. He did it with quick, practiced moves, slicing the turf with a trowel.

“Takes about ten minutes is all, Sam,” Drake said. “If you’re going to do something brave, you’ve got about eight minutes. Tick-tock.”

“This is how you have to deal with freaks,” Quinn said. “No choice, Drake.”

Sam could feel the concrete hardening. Already if he tried to move his fingers, he found they were imprisoned. Astrid was more upset than Sam had ever seen her. She was crying openly. Her fear fed his. He couldn’t bear it. For himself it was bad enough, but seeing her this way . . .

And yet, Astrid wasn’t returning his gaze, she was focused entirely on Little Pete. Almost as if she was crying for his benefit, communicating her terror to him.

Of course she was. But it wasn’t working. Little Pete was in his game, in another world.

“I think time’s about up for you, Sam,” Drake said with a laugh. “Try pulling your hands out. Can’t do it, can you?”

Drake stepped up behind him and swatted him on the back of his head.

“Come on, Sam. Even Caine’s scared of you, so you must be tough. Come on, show me what you’ve got.” He hit Sam again, this time with the barrel of the gun. Sam collapsed facedown in the dirt.

Sam raised himself up. He tugged as hard as he could, but his hands were imprisoned. His flesh itched. He fought against a tide of panic. He wanted to scream curses, but that would only entertain Drake.

“Yeah, take it like a man,” Drake crowed. “After all, you’re fourteen, right? So how long till you vacate? It’s all just a passing phase here in the FAYZ, right?”

The mixers dug the concrete block out of the dirt, and now, as he tried to stand, Sam felt the terrible weight of the thing. He could stand, but not without struggling.

Drake got up close to him. “So who’s the man here? Who brought you and the rest of these freaks down? Me. And me without any powers at all.”

Sam heard a door slam. He craned his head and saw Caine and Diana coming across the lawn.

Caine walked at a languid pace across the lawn, smiling more broadly the closer he

got.

“Well, if it isn’t the defiant Sam Temple,” he said. “Let me shake your hand. Oh, sorry, my bad.” He laughed, a sound that seemed more a release of tension than anything else.

“I got him,” Drake announced. “I got them all.”

“Yes, you did,” Caine said. “Good work, Drake. Very good work. And I see Sam’s little friends are likewise caught.”

“Why don’t you give Drake a little scratch behind the ears, Caine, he’s been such a good dog,” Diana said.

The mixers had dug Astrid’s hands out of the dirt. She was crying hysterically, unable to stand all the way up. Little Pete went to her, walking like he was in a dream, head down over his Game Boy.

Astrid bumped her concrete block into Little Pete.

And suddenly Sam knew what she was doing. He had to provide distraction. He had to keep the focus away from Astrid and Little Pete.

“You don’t want to mess with this girl, her name is Lana,” Sam said, jerking his chin toward her. “She’s a healer.”

Caine’s eyebrows shot up. “A what? A healer?”

“She can heal anything, any kind of injury,” Sam said. Astrid, barely able to move, was slowly, rhythmically swinging her block back and forth in a narrow arc, bumping it against Little Pete’s Game Boy.

“She healed me,” Sam said. “Coyote bit me. Want to see?”

Caine said, “I have a better idea. Drake: give the girl something to heal.”

Drake laughed out loud, a gleeful sound. He pressed the muzzle of his pistol against Sam’s knee.

“No,” Diana yelled.

The explosion was shocking. The pain, at first, didn’t register, but Sam collapsed. He fell on his side like a felled tree. The leg, blown half off, buckled and twisted beneath him.

And then came the pain.

Drake smiled hugely and yelled an exultant, “Yeah!”

Astrid, startled, slammed the concrete block so hard against Little Pete that she knocked the Game Boy from his hands and knocked him back a step.

Diana frowned, alarmed. For the first time she really registered Little Pete’s presence.

Through a red mist of pain Sam saw her eyes fly open, her finger stab toward Little Pete.

“Drake, you idiot, the kid. The kid.”

Astrid dropped to her knees, slammed the concrete block down on the Game Boy.

There was no flash of light. No sound.

But suddenly the concrete encasing Astrid’s hands was gone. Simply gone.

So was the concrete block on Sam’s hands.

And every one of the other children.

Astrid was on her hands and knees, knuckles pressed into the soft dirt.

The concrete blocks were gone like they had never existed, though the hands of those who had been trapped longest were masses of pale, dead, sloughing skin.

Caine was quick. He backed away, turned, and ran for the building. Diana seemed torn, uncertain; then she bolted after Caine.

Little Pete picked up his game. The block had disappeared a split second before smashing down on the game. It was dirty and had a piece of grass sticking out of it now, but it still worked.

Drake stood rooted. The gun was still in his hand, smoking from the bullet he had fired into Sam's knee.

He blinked.

He raised the gun and fired at Little Pete. But his aim was wild. His aim was off because of the blinding flash of greenish-white light.

Drake's arm, the entire arm holding the gun, burst into flame.

Drake screamed. The gun fell from his melting fingers.

The flesh burned black. The smoke was brown.

Drake screamed and stared in stark horror as the fire ate away at his arm. He broke and ran, the wind fanning the flames.

"Good shot, Sam," Edilio said.

"I was aiming at his head," Sam said, gritting his teeth through the pain.

Lana knelt beside Sam and laid her hands on the bloody mess of his knee.

"We have to get out of here," Sam managed to say. "Forget me, we have to run. Back to . . . Caine will . . ."

But that was the last of his strength. It felt as if a black hole was swallowing him up. He swirled down and down into unconsciousness.

THIRTY-FIVE

86 HOURS, 11 MINUTES

“WHERE ARE WE?” Sam woke up all at once and was embarrassed to find that he was being half dragged down the road by Edilio and a kid he didn’t know.

Edilio stopped. “Can you stand?”

Sam tested his legs. Lana’s healing of his leg had been complete. “Yeah. I’m fine. Feel okay, actually.”

He looked back and realized they had been leading a sort of ragtag parade. Astrid and Little Pete, Lana holding a boy’s hand while her dog bounded into the woods to chase a squirrel. Quinn walked by himself along the shoulder of the road, shunned and ashamed. And there were almost two dozen kids, the liberated freaks from Coates.

Edilio saw the look on his face. “You got yourself a crowd of followers, Sam.”

“Caine hasn’t come after us?”

“Not yet.”

The group of them was straggling down the road, bunched here and there, spread out elsewhere, wandering, undisciplined.

Sam winced when he saw the hands of the Coates kids. The concrete had leached all the moisture from their skin. Their skin was white and loose, hanging in tatters in some cases, like the tattered bandages of some horror movie mummy. Their wrists revealed red circles where the concrete had rubbed the flesh bloody. They were filthy.

“Yeah,” Edilio said, knowing what he was seeing. “Lana’s going through them one at a time. Healing them. She’s amazing.”

Sam thought he heard something extra in Edilio’s voice. “She’s cute too, huh, Edilio?”

Edilio’s eyes went wide and he started blushing. “She’s just . . . you know . . .”

Sam slapped his shoulder. “Good luck with that.”

“You think she . . . I mean, you know me, I’m just . . .” Edilio stammered his way to a stop.

“Dude, let’s see if we can stay alive. Then you can ask her out or whatever.”

Sam surveyed the scene. They were on the Coates road, passing the iron gate, still many miles from Perdido Beach.

Astrid noticed that he was awake and hurried her pace. “About time you woke up,” she said.

“Well,” he played along with her bantering tone, “usually after I get shot and then fire lasers out of my hands, I like to enjoy a brief nap.” He caught Lana’s eye and mouthed the word “thanks.”

Lana shrugged as if to say “no biggie.”

“Caine won’t let this stand,” Astrid said, turning serious.

“No. He’ll come after us,” Sam said. “But not just yet. Not until he’s come up with a plan. He’s lost Drake. And he’s gotta be worried that we have all these kids with powers who hate his guts.”

“What makes you think he won’t just come after us?”

“Think about when he first came rolling into Perdido Beach,” Sam said. “He had a

plan. He trained his people and rehearsed.”

“So we go back to Perdido Beach?” Astrid asked.

“Orc is still there, and a few others. There may be trouble with them.”

“We need to get some food for these kids,” Edilio said. “That’s first.”

“Three or four miles to Ralph’s,” Sam mused. “Can they make it?”

“I guess they have to,” Edilio said. “But they’re scared, too. I mean, you got some messed-up kids here. What they been through and all?”

“We’re all scared, there’s not much we can do about that,” Sam said. But he didn’t like the sound of that. It was glib. It was meaningless: sure, they were all scared, but there was something they could do about it.

In fact, they had to do something about it.

Sam stopped in the middle of the road and waited for the others to catch up.

“Listen,” he said. He raised his hands to get their attention, calm them down, but they had seen what happened when Sam raised his hands. They flinched and seemed about ready to dart off the road and into the woods.

Sam dropped his hands hastily. “Sorry. Let me start over: Could I have everyone’s attention?” Sam said, using a gentler voice. He kept his hands by his sides. He waited patiently until he was sure everyone was listening. Quinn still hung back.

“Some bad stuff has happened to all of us,” Sam said. “Some very bad stuff. We’re beat up, we’re tired. We don’t know what’s going on. The whole world has gone bizarre on us. Our own bodies and minds have changed in ways that are even weirder than puberty.”

That earned a few smiles and one grudging laugh.

“Yeah. I know we’re all shook up. We’re all scared. I know I am,” he admitted with a rueful smile. “So, let’s not try and play like it isn’t scary. It is. But sometimes the worst thing is the fear. You know?” His gaze traveling over the faces, he realized anew that they had another concern, greater even than fear. “Although hunger’s no joke, either. We’re a few miles from a grocery store. We’ll get you all fed there. I know some of you have been in hell since this happened. Well, I would like to tell you it’s over, but it’s not.”

Grim looks on every face.

Sam had said all he had really planned to say, but they still needed something more. He shot a glance at Astrid. She was as solemn as anyone, but she gave him a nod, encouraging him to say more.

“Okay. Okay,” he said so softly that some had to move closer to hear him. “Here’s the thing. We’re not going to give in. We’re going to fight.”

“Got that right,” a voice cried out.

“First thing we need to have clear: there’s no line between freak and normal here. If you have the power, we’ll need you. If you don’t, we’ll need you.”

Heads were nodding. Looks were being exchanged.

“Coates kids, Perdido Beach kids, we’re together now. We’re together. Maybe you did things to survive. Maybe you weren’t always brave. Maybe you gave up hope.”

A girl sobbed suddenly.

“Well, that’s all over now,” Sam said gently. “It all starts fresh. Right here, right now. We’re brothers and sisters now. Doesn’t matter we don’t know each other’s names, we are brothers and sisters and we’re going to survive, and we’re going to win,

and we're going to find our way to some kind of happiness again."

There was a long, deep silence.

"So," Sam said, "my name is Sam. I'm in this with you. All the way." He turned to Astrid.

"I'm Astrid, I'm in this with you, too."

"My name is Edilio. What they said. Brothers and sisters. *Hermanos*."

"Thuan Vong," said a thin boy with yet-unhealed hands like dead fish. "I'm in."

"Dekka," said a strong, solidly built girl with cornrows and a nose ring. "I'm in. And I have game."

"Me too," called a skinny girl with reddish pigtails. "My name's Brianna. I . . . well, I can go real fast."

One by one they declared their determination. The voices started out soft and gained strength. Each voice louder, firmer, more determined than the one before.

Only Quinn remained silent. He hung his head, and tears rolled down his cheeks.

"Quinn," Sam called to him.

Quinn didn't respond, just looked down at the ground.

"Quinn," Sam said again. "It starts fresh right now. Nothing before counts. Nothing. Brothers, man?"

Quinn struggled with the lump in his throat. But then, in a low voice, he said, "Yeah. Brothers."

"Okay. Now let's get everyone some food," Sam said.

When they started out again, they no longer spread in every direction. They didn't march like an army, but they came as close as a bunch of traumatized kids could. They walked with their heads a little higher.

Someone actually laughed. It was a good sound.

In a low voice Astrid said, "Nothing to fear but fear itself."

"I don't think I said it quite that well."

Edilio slapped him on the back. "You said it well enough, man."

"Sam's back."

"What?"

"Sam. He's back. He's coming down the highway."

Howard's chest tightened. He was halfway down the steps of town hall, on his way to McDonald's for one of Albert's waffle-burgers.

It was Elwood, Dahra Baidoo's boyfriend, who had delivered the news. He sounded relieved, there was no denying it. He sounded glad. Howard made a mental note that Elwood was disloyal, but he realized at the same time that he might have bigger issues to worry about than Elwood's loyalty.

"If Sam's coming back, it's on the end of a leash held by Drake Merwin," Howard blustered.

But Elwood was off to tell Dahra and was no longer listening.

Howard looked around, feeling a little lost, not quite sure what to do. He spotted Mary Terrafino pushing a shopping cart loaded with juice boxes, A&D ointment, and some bruised apples across the plaza toward the day care. Howard trotted down the steps and caught up with her.

"T'sup, Mary?" he asked.

“Um, your time?” Mary said, and laughed at her own wit.

“Yeah, you think? My time’s up?”

“Sam’s on his way.”

“You saw him?”

“I had three different people tell me he’s coming down the highway. You better rush out and stop him, Howard,” Mary crowed.

“He’s one guy, we’ll kick his butt.”

“Good luck with that,” Mary said.

Howard wished Orc was here. With Orc at his side, he didn’t have to put up with any of Mary’s lip. But one-on-one was a different story.

“You want me telling Caine you’re on Sam’s side?” Howard demanded.

“I didn’t say I was on anyone’s side. I’m on the side of the prees I take care of. But here’s what I notice, Howard: I notice you hear Sam’s name and all of a sudden you’re ready to wet yourself. So, you know what? Maybe it’s you who is disloyal. After all, if Caine is so great, why would you be scared of Sam? Right?” She leaned against her basket and got it rolling again.

Howard swallowed hard and argued with his own fear. “It’s no big thing,” he told himself. “We have Caine and Drake and Orc. We’re cool. We’re cool.”

He believed that for a good twenty seconds before he broke and ran for Orc.

Orc was in the house he had taken over and now shared with Howard, just across the street from where Drake lived. It was on a short street, the closest place to town hall that you could live. Kids called it Bully Row.

Orc was asleep on the couch with a DVD of a kung fu movie playing at blasting volume on the TV. Orc had taken to staying up through the night and sleeping days.

It was a lousy house, in Howard’s opinion, badly decorated and smelling of garlic, but Orc hadn’t cared. He wanted to stay close to the action in town. And he wanted to stay close enough to keep an eye on Drake across the street.

Howard searched for the remote and shut off the TV. There were empty beer cans on the glass-topped coffee table, and cigarettes in an ashtray. Orc was now drinking a couple beers a day.

Since Bette. That’s when the drinking had started in earnest. Howard was worried about Orc. Not that he exactly liked him, but Howard’s fate was bound up with Orc’s and he didn’t like the picture of what his world would be like if Orc dumped him.

“Orc, get up, man.”

No response.

“Orc. Get up. We have trouble.” Howard poked him in his shoulder.

Orc opened one slit eye. “Why are you bothering me?”

“Sam Temple is coming back.”

It took Orc a while to process that. Then he sat up quite suddenly and grabbed his forehead. “Oh, man. Headache.”

“It’s called a hangover,” Howard snapped. Then, when Orc shot him a murderous look, he softened and said, “I have some Tylenol in the kitchen.” He filled a glass of water and tapped two pills into his palm and brought them back for Orc.

“What’s the big deal?” Orc asked. He’d never been exactly quick, but now Orc’s thick-headedness was really irritating Howard.

“The big deal? Sam is coming back. That’s the big deal.”

“So?”

“Come on, Orc. Think about it. You figure Sam is cruising into town and he doesn’t have some kind of plan? Caine isn’t here, man, he’s up the hill. Drake, too. Which means it’s you and me in charge.”

Orc reached for one of the beer cans, rattled it, sighed contentedly when he heard an inch of beer sloshing. He poured it down his throat.

“So we have to go kick Sam’s butt?” Orc asked.

Howard hadn’t thought that far ahead. If Sam was back, that wasn’t good. Sam was back and Caine wasn’t? It was hard to figure that out.

“We go spy him out, man. We see what he’s up to.”

Orc squinted. “If I see him, I’ll kick his butt.”

“We have to at least figure out what he’s after,” Howard cautioned. “We should get whoever is around at town hall. Mallet, maybe. Chaz. Whoever we can find.”

Orc stood up, belched, and said, “I gotta pee. Then we’ll get the Hummer. Go kick some butt.”

Howard shook his head. “Orc. Listen to me. I know you don’t want to hear this, but backing Caine may not be the winning move.”

Orc stared his blank, stupid stare.

“Orc, man, what if Sam wins this? I mean, what if Sam gets over on Caine? Where does that leave us?”

Orc didn’t answer for so long, Howard was sure he hadn’t heard him. Then Orc heaved up a sigh that was almost a sob. He grabbed Howard’s arm, something he never did.

“Howard: I killed Bette.”

Howard said, “You didn’t mean to, Orc.”

“You’re the smart one,” Orc said sadly. “But sometimes you’re dumber than me, you know that?”

“Okay.”

“I killed someone didn’t do me any harm. Astrid ain’t ever going to even look at me again unless she’s hating me.”

“No, no, no,” Howard argued. “Sam is going to need help. He’s going to need someone tough. If we go to him now, eat crow, you know, say, ‘Yeah, you’re the man, Sammy.’”

“You kill somebody, you burn in hell,” Orc said. “My mom told me that. Once my dad was beating on me, we was in the garage, so I grabbed up a hammer.” Orc now pantomimed the scene. Grabbing the hammer, looking at it, raising it. Then he let it drop. “She said, ‘You kill your father, you’ll burn in hell.’”

“What happened then?”

Orc held up his left hand. He pushed it close to Howard’s face. There was a scar, almost perfectly round, no more than a quarter inch across.

“What’s that?” Howard asked.

“Power drill. Three-sixteenths bit.” Orc laughed ruefully. “Guess I’m lucky it wasn’t the three-quarter-inch, huh?”

“That’s messed up, man,” Howard said. He’d always known that Orc came from a tough home. But a power drill was off the hook. He himself came from a fairly average home, neither of his parents was a drunk or violent or anything. Howard did

what he had to do to survive, being small and weak and not popular. He liked being in charge, having people scared of him, so being Orc's friend had worked out for him.

But now Howard was starting to see that though Orc was stupid, he wasn't wrong. Orc and School Bus Sam, the big hero, were never going to get along.

And now, Howard was as trapped as Orc.

Trapped.

"Okay, then," Howard said. "We go to Caine."

Orc belched loudly. "Caine's mad at us."

"Yeah," Howard said. "But he still needs us."

THIRTY-SIX

84 HOURS, 41 MINUTES

“**HOLD HIM DOWN,**” Diana yelled.

The sound of her voice was far off. Drake Merwin heard it bubbling up through a red scream that filled his brain.

Screaming, screaming, screaming everywhere, all through his brain, from a million mouths, rising and falling, gasping for breath.

“I can hold him,” a voice said. Caine. “Back away on three. One . . . two . . .”

Drake flailed madly, unbound, shrieking, thrashing, hurting himself but unable to stop. The pain . . . he had never felt anything like it, never imagined anything could be like it.

A force pressed down on him like a thousand hands holding him with firm pressure.

“You have the saw?” Diana’s voice asked. Not smug now, not smug at all, but raw and horrified.

Drake struggled against the invisible force, but Caine had him pinned down with his telekinetic power. Drake could only scream and curse, and could barely move his facial muscles enough for that.

“I am not doing this,” Panda said, weeping. “I’m not sawing off his arm, man.”

The words sent a shock of terror to join the pain. His arm? They were . . .

“He’ll kill me if I do it,” Panda said.

“I’m not doing it,” various voices chimed in. “No way.”

“I’ll do it,” Diana said, disgusted. “You’re all such big tough guys. Give me the saw.”

“No, no, no!” Drake screeched.

“It’s the only way to stop the pain,” Caine said, almost showing some emotion, some pity. “The arm is done for, Drake-man.”

“The girl . . . the freak . . .,” Drake gasped. “She could fix it.”

“She’s not here,” Caine said bitterly. “She’s gone with Sam and the rest of them.”

“Don’t cut off my arm,” Drake cried. “Let me die. Just let me die. Shoot me.”

“Sorry,” Caine said. “But I still need you, Drake. Even one-handed.”

There was the sound of someone bursting into the room. “All I could find was Tylenol and Advil,” Computer Jack said.

“Let’s get this over with,” Diana snapped.

Impatient to maim him. Looking forward to it.

“You do this, he’s going to kill you,” Panda warned.

“Oh, Drake’s already decided he wants to do that,” Diana said. “Tighten the tourniquet.”

“He’s going to bleed to death,” Jack warned. “There must be big arteries in his arm.”

“He’s right,” Caine said. “We need a way to seal the stump.”

“It’s already cauterized,” Diana said. “I just need to cut below the burn.”

“Yeah, okay,” Caine agreed.

"I can't reach him through your force field," Diana said. "Can you pull it back to keep his left side paralyzed, and maybe Panda and some of these other supposedly tough guys can grab on to his stump."

"Let me get a towel, at least. I don't want to touch that," Panda said with revulsion.

"Nobody cuts my arm," Drake rasped. "I'll kill anyone who touches me."

"Let him up, Caine," Diana snapped.

The elephant was off Drake's chest, he could move again. But now Diana's face was inches from his, her dark hair hanging down on his tear-streaked face.

"Listen, you stupid thug," Diana said. "We're cutting off the pain. As long as that burned stump is there, you'll be like this. You'll be screaming and crying and wetting your pants. Yeah, you've peed yourself, Drake."

Somehow that fact shocked Drake into silence.

"You have one hope. Just one. That we cut off the dead part of your arm and do it without starting the bleeding again."

"Anyone cuts me dies," Drake said.

Diana pulled back, out of Drake's view.

Caine said, "Do it. Panda. Chunk. Grab that stump."

The pressure was on Drake again, immobilizing him. He didn't feel the towel that was wrapped around his arm or the grip of hands. That part of his arm was naked bone, all flesh melted away, nerves burned off, dead. The pain started higher up, where just enough nerve endings still survived to slam his fevered brain with wave upon wave of agony.

"It's not Diana or Panda or Chunk or even me," Caine said. "It's none of us, Drake. It's Sam. It's Sam who did this to you, Drake. You want him to get away with it? Or do you want to live long enough to make him suffer?"

Drake heard a shimmery, metallic sound. The saw was too big for Diana to handle easily. The blade wobbled a little as she lined it up.

"Okay," Diana said. "Hold on to him. I'll be as quick as I can be."

Drake lost consciousness, but his dreams were as pain-racked as his waking. He weaved in and out, awake and screaming, asleep and crying.

He heard a distant thump as his arm dropped to the floor.

And then a sudden frenzy of running and yelling, shouted orders and confusion, a flash of Diana threading a needle with bloody fingers. Hands all over him, the pressure squeezing the air from his lungs.

Staring up from the bottom of a deep well, Drake saw lunatic faces looking down at him, eyes wild, bloody faces like monsters.

"He'll live, I think," a voice said.

"God help us if he lives," a voice said.

"No. God help Sam Temple."

And then nothing.

"Astrid, I need you to start talking to these kids," Sam said. "Find out their powers. Find out how much control they have. We're looking for anyone who might be able to help in a fight."

Astrid looked uncomfortable. "Me? Shouldn't Edilio be doing that?"

"I have a different job for Edilio."

They were in the plaza, sitting wearily on the steps of town hall, Sam, Astrid, Little Pete, and Edilio. Quinn was gone, no one knew where. The liberated Coates kids—the Coates Freaks, as they now proudly called themselves—had been fed at Ralph’s and were being fed again by Albert, who was walking among them handing out burgers. Some of the kids had eaten too much all at once and had thrown up. But most still had room for a hamburger—even if it was on a toasted chocolate chip waffle.

Lana was just about finished healing the hands of the refugees. She was staggering from exhaustion and finally, as Sam watched, her legs folded under her and she fell to the grass. Before he could even get up to help, some of the Coates kids stretched her out with gentleness bordering on reverence. They rolled jackets to make her a pillow and borrowed a blanket from a tattered pup tent to spread over her.

“Okay, I’ll talk to them,” Astrid said. But she still looked reluctant. “I can’t read people like Diana does.”

“That’s what’s bothering you? You’re not my Diana. And hopefully I’m not Caine.”

“I guess I was hoping this would all kind of be over. At least for a while.”

“I think it will be over. For a while. But first we have to plan and make sure we’re ready when Caine comes back.”

“You’re right.” She smiled wanly. “Anyway, it’s not like I was dreaming of a big meal, a hot shower, and hours and hours of sleep.”

“Yeah. You wouldn’t want to start getting soft now, would you?” Something else occurred to him. “But hey, keep L. P. happy, huh? I don’t want you disappearing suddenly.”

“That would be a shame, wouldn’t it?” she said dryly. “Maybe I’ll try Quinn’s trick: Hawaii, Petey, Hawaii.”

Astrid rounded up her brother, made sure he was okay, then plunged into the crowd.

Sam motioned Edilio closer. “Edilio. I have something I need you to do.”

“Whatever you want.”

“It involves driving. And it involves keeping a secret.”

“The secret is no problem. Driving?” He gulped theatrically, like a cartoon character doing a double take.

“I need you to get a truck and go to the power plant.” He explained what he wanted, and Edilio’s expression grew darker with each word. When he was done, Sam asked, “Can you handle that? You’ll need to take at least one other guy with you.”

“I can do it,” Edilio said. “I’m not happy about it, but you know that.”

“Who will you take with you?”

“Elwood, I guess, if Dahra will let me borrow him.”

“Okay. Go take an hour or two to figure out how to drive.”

“A day or two more like it,” Edilio said. But then he executed a mock salute and said, “No problem, General.”

Sam sat alone now, shoulders hunched, head buzzing from lack of sleep and the aftereffects of pain and fear. He needed to think, he told himself, needed to prepare. Caine would be planning.

Caine. His brother.

His brother.

How long did he have? Three days.
In three days he would . . . disappear.
And so would Caine.

Maybe die. Maybe be changed in some way. Maybe just pop neatly back into the old universe with lots of incredible stories to tell.

And leave Astrid behind.

If Caine had been a normal, well-adjusted person, he might spend his last days preparing for whatever the poof meant—death, disappearance, escape. But Sam doubted Caine would do that. Caine would need to triumph over Sam. That need would be even greater than the need to be ready for the end.

“I never have liked birthdays,” Sam muttered.

Albert Hillsborough had finished handing out burgers to grateful Coates kids. He climbed the steps to Sam.

“Glad you’re back, man,” Albert said.

For some reason, Sam felt compelled to stand and offer his hand to the kid. Albert shook it solemnly.

“It’s cool what you’ve done, keeping the Mickey D’s open.”

Albert looked faintly annoyed. “We don’t call it Mickey D’s. It’s McDonald’s. It will always be McDonald’s. Although,” he allowed, “I’ve strayed pretty far from the standard operating manual.”

“I saw the waffle-burgers.”

There was something on Albert’s mind. Whatever it was, Sam didn’t have the time or the energy, but Albert was becoming an important person, someone not to blow off. “What’s up, Albert?”

“Well, I’ve done inventory at Ralph’s, and I think if I had a lot of help, I could put together an okay Thanksgiving dinner.”

Sam stared at him. He blinked. “What?”

“Thanksgiving. It’s next week.”

“Uh-huh.”

“There are ovens at Ralph’s, big ones. And no one has taken the frozen turkeys. Figure two hundred and fifty kids if pretty much everyone from Perdido Beach shows up, right? One turkey will feed maybe eight people, so we need thirty-one, thirty-two turkeys. No problem there, because there are forty-six turkeys at Ralph’s.”

“Thirty-one turkeys?”

“Cranberry sauce will be no problem, stuffing is no problem, no one has taken much stuffing yet, although I’ll have to figure out how to mix, like, seven different brands and styles together, see how it tastes.”

“Stuffing,” Sam echoed solemnly.

“We don’t have enough canned yams, we’ll have to do fresh along with some baked potatoes. The big problem is going to be whipped cream and ice cream for the pies.”

Sam wanted to burst out laughing, but at the same time he found it touching and reassuring that Albert had put so much thought into the question.

“I imagine the ice cream is pretty much gone,” Sam said.

“Yeah. We’re very low on ice cream. And kids have been taking the canned whipped cream, too.”

“But we can have pie?”

“We have some frozen. And we have some pie shells we can bake up ourselves.”

“That would be nice,” Sam said.

“I’ll need to start three days before. I’ll need, like, at least ten people to help. I can haul the tables out of the church basement and set up in the plaza. I think I can do it.”

“I’ll bet you can, Albert,” Sam said with feeling.

“Mother Mary’s going to have the prees make centerpieces.”

“Listen, Albert . . .”

Albert raised a hand, cutting Sam off. “I know. I mean, I know we may have some great big fight before that. And I heard you have your fifteenth coming up. All kinds of bad stuff may happen. But, Sam—”

This time, Sam cut him off. “Albert? Get moving on planning the big meal.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. It will give people something to look forward to.”

Albert left, and Sam fought down a yawn. He noticed Astrid deep in conversation with three of the Coates kids. Astrid had been through all kinds of horror, he thought, but somehow, even with her blouse filthy, her blond hair hanging lank and greasy, her face smudged, she looked beautiful.

When he raised his gaze he could see across the plaza, across the buildings at the far end, clear out to the ocean, the too-placid ocean.

Birthday. Thanksgiving. Poof. And a showdown with Caine. Not to mention just daily life if they somehow all survived. Not to mention finding a way to escape or end the FAYZ. And all he wanted to do was take Astrid’s hand and lead her down to the beach, stretch a blanket out on the hot sand, lie down beside her, and sleep for about a month.

“Right after the big Thanksgiving dinner,” Sam promised himself. “Right after pie.”

THIRTY-SEVEN

79 HOURS, 00 MINUTES

COOKIE ROLLED OVER and stood up. His legs were still weak and shaky. He had to hold himself up by leaning on the table.

But he steadied himself with the arm that had been utterly shattered.

Dahra Baidoo was there, and Elwood, both staring like they were witnessing a miracle.

"I suppose they are," Lana said to herself.

"It doesn't hurt," Cookie said.

He laughed. It was an incredulous, disbelieving sound. He rotated his arm, all the way forward, all the way up. He squeezed his fingers into a fist.

"It doesn't hurt."

"Okay, I never thought I'd see that," Elwood said, shaking his head slowly.

Tears came to Cookie's bloodshot eyes. He whispered to himself, "It doesn't hurt. It doesn't hurt at all."

He took a tentative step. Then another. He had lost a lot of weight. He was pale, and more than pale, almost green. He was shaky, a bear walking on its hind legs and about to topple over. He looked like what he was: a kid who'd taken a round trip to hell.

"Thank you," he whispered to Lana. "Thank you."

"It's not my doing," Lana said. "It's just . . . I don't know what it is."

She was tired. Healing Cookie had taken a long time. She'd been in the hospital since eight o'clock that morning, having been awakened by Cookie's cries of agony.

His injury was even worse than her own broken arm had been. It had taken her more than six hours, and now whatever benefit she'd gained from sleeping in the park was wasted, and she was weary again. Outside, she was pretty sure the sun was shining, but all she wanted now was a bed.

"It's a thing I can do," Lana said, fighting a yawn and stretching to get the kinks out of her back. "Just a . . . a thing."

Cookie nodded. Then he did something no one expected. He got down on his knees before a shocked Dahra.

"You took care of me."

Dahra shrugged and looked mightily uncomfortable. "It's okay, Cookie."

"No." He took her hand awkwardly and leaned his forehead into her. "Anything you ever want. Anything. Anytime. Ever." Tears choked his voice. "Anything."

Dahra pulled him back to his feet. He had been as big and as heavy as Orc. He was still big enough to tower over Dahra. "You need to start eating," she said.

"Yeah, eat," Cookie said. "Then what do I do?"

Dahra looked a little exasperated. She said, "I don't know, Cookie."

Lana had an idea. "Go find Sam. There's a fight coming."

"I can fight," Cookie confirmed. "As soon as I get some food down and, you know, kind of get my strength back."

"McDonald's is open," Dahra said. "Try the French toast-burger. It's better than it

sounds.”

Cookie left. Dahra said, “Lana, I know it’s mostly about Cookie, but I feel like you saved my life, too. I’ve been losing my mind taking care of him.”

Lana was uncomfortable with gratitude. She always had been, even in small things. Now the idea that people were thanking her for performing near-miracles, that was preposterous. She said, “Do you know any place I could sleep? Like, in a bed?”

Elwood guided her and Patrick to his house. It was half a mile from the plaza and Lana was practically sleepwalking by the time they reached it.

“Come on in,” Elwood said. “You want something to eat?”

Lana shook her head. “Just a place to . . . that couch.”

“You could use one of the bedrooms upstairs.”

Lana was already facedown on the couch. And a split second later, she was asleep.

Night had fallen by the time she woke. It took a while to figure out where she was.

Elwood had thoughtfully fed Patrick. There was a clean-licked plate on the kitchen tile. Patrick was curled up before a gas fireplace, though there was no fire.

Lana was ravenously hungry. She searched the kitchen, feeling like a burglar. The refrigerator had been emptied of everything but lemon juice, soy sauce, a carton of very expired half-and-half, and some very, very old lettuce.

The freezer was better. There were frozen buffalo wings, something in a Tupperware container, and a microwavable pepperoni pizza.

“Oh, yes,” Lana said. “Oh, definitely.”

She popped the pizza in the microwave and punched the numbers. It was fascinating watching it rotate. Her mouth watered. It was all she could do to wait till the microwave dinged.

She ate the pizza by ripping it with her bare hands, folding up the gooey slices and scooping up whatever dripped on the counter.

“Oh, you want some, too?” she asked when Patrick showed up wagging his tail and looking eager. She tossed him a piece, which he caught in the air.

“Well. We’ve been through it, huh, boy?”

Lana found the master bedroom shower upstairs and spent half an hour in the stream of hot water. The water ran red and black down the drain.

Then she invited Patrick in, shampooed him up, rinsed him off, and kicked him out to shake like crazy and spray dog water all over the bathroom.

She wrapped herself in a towel and went exploring through the house for clothing. Elwood didn’t seem to have any sisters, but his mother was petite, so with some cinching and tying-off Lana managed to put together an outfit.

She picked her old clothes up and almost fainted from the stench.

“Oh, my God, Patrick: that’s what I’ve been smelling like? I have to burn these things.”

But she contented herself with stuffing the bloodstained, dirt-crusted, sweat-stinking, torn, and shredded clothing into a trash bag. Unfortunately she was stuck with her old shoes: Elwood’s mother’s shoes were two sizes too large.

She trotted down the stairs, feeling better than she had in a very long time. Then she spotted the phone and could not resist the urge to pick it up. Call her mom. Tell her mom . . . well, something. She knew what everyone had told her about the FAYZ. But, still . . .

“No dial tone, Patrick.”

Patrick was not interested.

“You know what, Patrick? I’m just going to sit down and cry for a while.”

But the tears wouldn’t come. So after a while she sighed and carried a warm Diet Pepsi out onto the porch.

It was the middle of the night. The street was quiet. She was in a town she had grown up in but had been away from for years. She’d run into some kids she’d known back in the day, but most of them hadn’t recognized her beneath her coating of filth. Now maybe at least people would know her. Although it occurred to her that Sam and Astrid and Edilio probably wouldn’t recognize her now that she was clean.

“I feel like going somewhere, Patrick,” she said. “But I don’t know where.”

A car turned onto the street. It was moving slowly. Whoever was behind the wheel was clearly not an experienced driver.

Lana stiffened, preparing to rush back inside and lock the door. She raised a cautious wave, but she couldn’t see the driver and the driver didn’t seem to want to stop and chat. The car continued on down the street and turned off.

“Some kind of patrol,” Lana said to Patrick.

She stayed a while longer on the porch before heading back inside.

She instantly recognized the boy standing in the kitchen.

Patrick growled and raised his hackles.

“Hello, freak,” Drake said.

Lana backed away, but too late. Drake leveled his gun at her.

“I’m right-handed. ’Least I used to be. But I can still hit you from this distance.”

“What do you want?”

Drake motioned toward the stump of his right arm. It was gone from just above the elbow. “What do you think I want?”

The one time she’d seen Drake Merwin, he had made her think of Pack Leader: strong, hyper alert, dangerous. Now, the lean physique looked gaunt, the shark’s grin was a tight grimace, his eyes were red-rimmed. His stare, once languidly menacing, was now intense, burning hot. He looked like someone who had been tortured beyond endurance.

“I’ll try,” Lana said.

“You’ll do more than try,” he said. He convulsed in pain, face scrunched. A low, eerie moan escaped his throat.

“I don’t know if I can grow a whole arm back,” Lana said. “Let me touch it.”

“Not here,” he hissed. He motioned with his gun. “Through the back door.”

“If you shoot me, I can’t help you,” Lana argued.

“Can you heal dogs? How about if I blow his brains out? Can you heal that, freak?”

The car Lana had seen driving by was parked, engine running, in the alley behind the house. The boy called Panda was at the wheel.

“Don’t make me do this,” Lana pleaded. “I would help you no matter what. You don’t have to do this.”

But there was no point in arguing. If Drake had ever owned a conscience, it had died along with his arm.

They drove off through the sleeping town.

Out into the night.

Howard had seen with his own eyes the small army Sam had assembled. He'd seen them descending on Ralph's. The grocery store was unguarded, which meant the other sheriffs had decided to get out of the way and make themselves scarce.

"There's too many," Howard had concluded.

So he and Orc had stolen a car and made their way toward Coates Academy. But they had taken a wrong turn somewhere along the road and ended up on a dirt track leading into the desert as night fell.

They had turned around, retracing their way to the main road, but that hadn't worked, either. Finally, they ran out of gas.

"This was your stupid idea," Orc muttered.

"What did you want to do? Stay in town with Sam? He had, like, twenty kids with him."

"I could kick his butt."

"Orc, don't be a moron," Howard snapped in frustration. "If Caine's not there, and Drake's not there, and Sammy is marching back into town like a big deal, what do you think that means? I mean, come on, Orc, do the math."

Orc's pig eyes had narrowed to slits. "Don't call me stupid. If I have to, I'll kick your teeth in."

Howard wasted twenty minutes ameliorating Orc's hurt feelings. Which still left them sitting in a dead car in the middle of nowhere.

"I see a light," Orc said.

"Hey, yeah." Howard jumped from the car and started running. Orc lumbered after him.

The twin beams of a car moved at an intercept angle to them. If they slowed down, the car would miss them, never see them.

"Hurry up," Howard yelled.

"Catch them." Orc urged Howard on as he gave up the race and slowed to a heavy-footed slog.

"Okay," Howard yelled. His foot caught on something, and he sprawled into the dirt. He picked himself up and only then felt the sharp pain in his ankle.

"What the—?" He froze. There was something there in the darkness. Not Orc, something that smelled rank and panted like a dog.

Howard was up and running in a heartbeat. "Something is after me," he yelled.

The car lights were vectoring toward him. He could make it. He could make it. If he didn't fall again. If the monster didn't get him first.

Howard's feet hit blacktop and he was illuminated, brilliant white. The car screeched. It came to a stop.

The monster was nowhere in sight.

"Howard?"

Howard recognized the voice. Panda was leaning out of the window.

"Panda? Man, am I glad to see you. We've been—"

Something dark and swift leaped and caught Panda's arm. He let out a shriek.

From inside the car, a dog barked frantically.

Something hit Howard in the back and he hit the pavement on his hands and knees.

The car lurched forward. The bumper stopped six inches from Howard's head. There came a scream, a male voice. Orc. Orc back in the darkness somewhere. There were dogs everywhere, swarming around Howard. No, not dogs, he thought, wolves. Coyotes.

The car door opened, and Panda fell out, wrapped half around a coyote.

A loud bang and a stab of orange light.

But the coyotes didn't stop.

Another shot, and one of the coyotes yelped in pain. Drake staggered into view, looking like a scarecrow in the headlights.

The coyotes retreated, out of the light but by no means gone. Howard got slowly to his feet.

Drake pointed the gun at Howard's face. "Did you set these dogs on me?"

"They chewed on me too, man," Howard protested. Then he yelled out at the desert, "Orc. Orc, man. Orc."

A voice like wet gravel, but with an eerie high-pitched tone, said, "Give us female."

Howard peered into the night trying to make sense of it. It wasn't Orc. Where was Orc?

"What female?" Drake demanded. "Who are you?"

Slowly, on every side, all around the car the desert moved. Shadows crept closer. Howard shrank back, but Drake stood firm.

"Who's out there?" Drake demanded.

A mange-eaten coyote with a scarred muzzle that gave him a sinister grin stepped into the circle of light. Howard almost fell down when he realized it was this coyote who spoke.

"Give us female."

"No," Drake said, recovering quickly from the shock. "She's mine. I need her to heal my arm. She has the power and I want my arm back."

"You are nothing," the coyote snarled.

"I'm the kid with the gun," Drake said.

The two of them, two of a kind, it seemed to Howard, stared holes in each other.

"What do you want with her?" Drake demanded.

"Darkness say: bring female."

"Darkness? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Give us female," Pack Leader said, returning to his single-minded point. "Or we kill all."

"I'll kill plenty of you."

"You die," Pack Leader said stubbornly.

Howard felt it was time to speak up. "Guys. Guys. We have a standoff here. So why don't we see if we can figure out an arrangement?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Okay, look, Drake, you said something about the female healing your arm?"

"She has the power. I want my arm back."

"And Mr., um . . . coyote . . . you're supposed to take her to some other dog called Darkness?"

Pack Leader eyed Howard in a way that suggested he was considering how to

butcher and eat him.

“Okay,” Howard said shakily. “I think we can work a deal.”

THIRTY-EIGHT

74 HOURS, 10 MINUTES

“ASTRID,” EDILIO SAID. “I’m so sorry about your house.”

Astrid squeezed Edilio’s hand. “Yeah. I have to admit, it was hard for me to see.”

“You could stay over at the firehouse with me and Sam and Quinn,” Edilio offered.

“It’s okay. Petey and I are going to room with Mother Mary and Brother John for a while. They’re hardly ever home. And when they are, well, you know, it’s good to have people around.”

The three of them, Edilio, Astrid, and Little Pete, were in the office that had once belonged to the mayor of Perdido Beach and most recently had been occupied by Caine Soren. Sam had resisted the idea of taking the office, feeling it made him seem self-important. But Astrid had argued that symbols were important and kids wanted to think that someone was in charge.

She settled Little Pete into a chair and handed him a Baggie full of Rice Chex. Little Pete liked to eat them plain, no milk.

“Where’s Sam?” Astrid asked. “And why are we here?”

Edilio looked uncomfortable. “We have something to show you.”

Sam opened the door. He did not smile at Astrid. He looked warily at Little Pete. He said hello, then, “Astrid, there’s something you need to see. And I’m thinking Little Pete shouldn’t see.”

“I don’t understand.”

Sam flopped into the chair last occupied by Caine. Astrid was struck by how alike the two boys looked superficially. And by how different a reaction she had to their similar features. Where Caine hid his arrogance and cruelty beneath a smooth, controlled surface, Sam let his emotions play out on his face. Right now he was sad and weary and concerned.

“I wonder if L. P. could sit with Edilio in the other room.”

“That sounds ominous,” Astrid said. The expression on Sam’s face did not contradict her.

She managed to get Little Pete to move, though not without a struggle. Edilio stayed with him.

Sam had a DVD in his hand. He said, “Yesterday I sent Edilio to the power plant to get two things. First, a cache of automatic weapons from the guardhouse.”

“Machine guns?”

“Yeah. Not just for us to have, but to make sure the other side doesn’t get them.”

“Now we have an arms race,” Astrid said.

Her tone seemed to irritate Sam. “You want me to leave them for Caine?”

“I wasn’t criticizing, just . . . you know. Ninth graders with machine guns: it’s hard to make that a happy story.”

Sam relented. He even grinned. “Yeah. The phrase ‘ninth graders with machine guns’ isn’t exactly followed by ‘have a nice day.’”

“No wonder you looked so grim.” As soon as she said it, she knew she was wrong. He had something else to tell her. Something worse. The DVD.

“I’ve been wondering, like you, why the FAYZ seems to be centered on the power plant. Ten miles in every direction. Why? So Edilio went through some of the security video at the plant.”

Astrid stood up so suddenly, she surprised herself. “I really shouldn’t leave Petey alone.”

“You know what this DVD will show, don’t you?” It wasn’t a question. “You guessed it that first night. I remember, we were looking at the video map. You put your arm around Little Pete and you gave me a very weird look. At the time, I didn’t know what to make of that look.”

“I didn’t know you then,” Astrid said. “I didn’t know if I could trust you.”

Sam slid the DVD into the player and switched on the TV. “The sound quality is pretty bad.”

Astrid saw the control room of the power plant from a high vantage point with a wide angle.

The camera showed the control room. Five adults, three men and two women. One of them was Astrid’s father. The image brought a lump to her throat. There he was, her father, rocking in his chair, joking with the woman at the next station, leaning forward to fill out some paperwork.

And sitting in a chair against the far wall, his face lit by the glow of his omnipresent Game Boy, was Little Pete.

The only sound was muddy, unintelligible conversation.

“Here it comes,” Sam said.

Suddenly a Klaxon sounded, harsh and distorted on the audio.

Everyone in the control room jumped. People rushed to the monitors, to the instrument readouts. Astrid’s father shot a worried glance at his son, but then leaned into his monitor, staring.

Other people swept into the room and moved with practiced efficiency to the untended monitors.

Panicky instructions were shouted back and forth.

A second alarm went off, more shrill than the first.

A strobe warning light was flashing.

Fear on every face.

And Little Pete was rocking frantically, his hands pressed over his ears. He had a look of pain on his innocent face.

The ten adults now in the room were a terrifying pantomime of controlled desperation. Keyboards were punched, switches thrown. Her father grabbed a thick manual and began snapping through the pages, and all the while people shouted and the alarms blared and Little Pete was screaming, screaming, hands over his ears.

“I don’t want to see this,” Astrid said, but she couldn’t look away.

Little Pete jumped to his feet.

He ran to his father, but his father, frantic, pushed him away. Little Pete went sprawling against a chair. He ended up flung against the long table, staring at a monitor that flashed, flashed, flashed a warning in bright red.

The number fourteen.

“Code one-four,” Astrid said dully. “I heard my dad say that one time. It’s the code for a core meltdown. He would make a joke out of it. Code one-one, that was minor

trouble, code one-two, you worry, code one-three, you call the governor, code one-four, you pray. The next stage, code one-five, is . . . obliteration.”

On the tape, Little Pete pulled his hands from his ears.

The Klaxon was relentless.

There was a flash that blanked out the tape. Several seconds of static.

When the picture stabilized, the warning alarm was silent.

And Little Pete was alone.

“Astrid, you’ll notice that the time signature on the tape says November tenth, ten eighteen A.M. The exact time when every person over the age of fourteen disappeared.”

On the tape, Little Pete stopped crying.

He didn’t even look around, he just walked back to the chair where he had been sitting, retrieved his game, and resumed play.

“Little Pete caused the FAYZ,” Sam said flatly.

Astrid covered her face with her hands. She was surprised by the tears she felt rising, and their force. She struggled to keep from sobbing. It was a few minutes before she could speak. Sam waited patiently.

“He didn’t know he was doing it,” Astrid said in a low, unsteady voice. “He doesn’t know what he’s doing. Not the way we do. Not like, if I do ‘this,’ then ‘that’ will happen.”

“I know that.”

“You can’t blame him.” Astrid looked up, eyes blazing defiantly.

“Blame him?” Sam moved to sit beside her on the couch. Close enough that their legs were touching. “Astrid, I can’t believe I’m saying this to you, but I think you overlooked something.”

She turned her tear-stained face to him, searching.

“Astrid, they were having a meltdown. They didn’t seem to be getting it under control. They all looked pretty scared.”

Astrid gasped. Sam was right: she had missed it. “He stopped the meltdown. A meltdown might have killed everyone in Perdido Beach.”

“Yeah. I’m not crazy about the way he did it, but he may have saved everyone’s life.”

“He stopped the meltdown,” Astrid said, still not grasping it fully.

Sam grinned. He even laughed.

“What’s funny?” she demanded.

“I figured something out before Astrid the Genius. I am totally enjoying that. I’m just going to gloat here for a minute.”

“Enjoy it, it may never happen again,” Astrid said.

“Oh, believe me, I know that.” He took her hand, and she was very glad to feel his touch. “He saved us. But he also created this whole weird thing.”

“Not the whole thing,” Astrid said, shaking her head. “The mutations prefigure the FAYZ. Indeed, the mutations were the sine qua non of the FAYZ. The thing without which the FAYZ could not have occurred.”

Sam refused to be impressed. “You can hammer me all you want with your ‘indeeds’ and your ‘prefigures’ and your ‘sine qua nons,’ I am still gloating here.”

She raised his hand to her lips and kissed his fingers.

Then she released him, stood up, paced across the room and back, stopped, and said, “Diana. She talks about it being like cell phone bars. Two bars, three bars. Caine is a four bar. You are, too, I would guess. Petey . . . I guess he’s a five or a seven.”

“Or a ten,” Sam agreed.

“But Diana thinks it’s like reception. Like some of us can get better reception. If that’s true, then we aren’t generating the power, just using it, focusing it.”

“So?”

“So where’s it coming from? To extend the analogy: Where’s the cell phone tower? What is generating the power?”

Sam rose with a sigh. “One thing for sure: This never gets out. Edilio knows, I know, and you know. No one else can ever know.”

Astrid nodded. “People would hate him. Or try to use him.”

Sam nodded. “I wish . . .”

“No,” Astrid said, and shrugged helplessly. “There’s no way to get him to undo it.”

“That’s a pity,” Sam said, making a wry smile that did not reach his eyes. “Because tick-tock, tick-tock.”

Lana stumbled through the night.

Back with the coyotes. A nightmare revisited.

And now, adding to the misery, Drake and Howard stumbled along with her.

Drake with his gun. Drake cursing his pain.

And Howard calling, “Orc, Orc,” into the night.

Greater than any misery, the dread of that mine shaft and what lay at the bottom.

She had disobeyed the Darkness.

What would the seething monster do to her?

“Let’s stop and I’ll try to fix Drake’s arm, okay?” she pleaded.

“No stop,” Pack Leader snarled.

“Let me try, at least.”

Pack Leader ignored her, and they ran and tripped and picked themselves up and ran some more.

No escape now. No possibility of escape.

Unless.

She maneuvered closer to Drake. “What if he won’t let me heal you?”

“Don’t try to play me,” Drake said tersely. “Anyway, now I want to see this thing that has you so terrified.”

“No, you don’t,” Lana promised.

“What is it?” Howard asked, nervous, almost as scared as Lana herself.

Lana had no answer to that question.

Each step was harder than the one before, and several times Pack Leader nipped at her to move her along. When he didn’t, Drake did, waving his gun at her, threatening her with word and gesture and look.

They reached the abandoned mining camp after the moon had set and as the stars were just fading before the promise of dawn.

She had never felt such dread. It was as if her blood had all been drained and replaced with a cold sludge. She could barely move. Her heart beat in loud, shuddering thumps in her chest. She wanted to pet Patrick, to take some tiny measure of comfort

from him, but she couldn't make herself bend, couldn't bring herself to speak. She held herself tightly contained, silent, rigid.

I'm going to die here, Lana thought.

"Human light," Pack Leader slurred. He indicated a flashlight lying wedged between the rocks. Howard leaped at it and switched it on. His hand shook so badly, the light danced across rock walls sending shadows flying like swift-moving ghosts.

Now even Drake seemed leery, frightened of something he couldn't quite explain. He was asking questions, ever more agitated as they stepped into the icebox chill of the mine.

"Someone needs to tell me what we're going to see," Drake insisted.

"I need to know what we're up to," Drake said.

"Maybe we better talk about our deal," Drake said.

"How much farther?" Drake said.

But all the while, they moved down the shaft.

Lana had to force each breath. Had to remind herself: Breathe. Breathe.

Patrick was gone. He'd abandoned them at the mouth of the mine.

"Man, I . . . I can't do this," Howard said. "I gotta . . . I . . ." He was gasping for breath.

"Shut up," Drake snapped, glad to have someone to take out his frustrations on.

Howard turned suddenly and bolted, taking the flashlight with him.

Pack Leader yipped a command and two coyotes went in pursuit.

With the flashlight gone, Lana could see the faint green glow from the walls. Darkness behind. The Darkness ahead.

"Let him go," Drake said.

"Howard's not important," Drake said.

"I'm important," Drake said. His voice was small.

Lana closed her eyes tight, but somehow the green glow penetrated her eyelids, as though it could shine right through her flesh, right through the bone of her skull.

She could go no farther. She sank to her knees.

Close enough. It was there, just ahead, just around that last bend, a moving, sliding, grinding pile of glowing rock.

The soundless voice was a cudgel slamming her head. The Darkness thrust invisible fingers of ice into her mind, and Lana knew that she herself was speaking its words.

"The healer," she cried in a tortured, manic parody of her own voice.

She kept her eyes shut but could feel Drake kneeling beside her.

"Why do you come to me?" Lana cried, a puppet, nothing but a tool for the Darkness to use.

"The coyote . . .," Drake managed.

"Faithful Pack Leader," the Darkness said through Lana. "Obedient, but not yet equal to a human."

Open your eyes, Lana told herself. Be brave. Be brave. See it, face it, fight it. But the darkness was in her skull, pushing and prodding, peeking inside her secrets, laughing at her pathetic resistance.

And yet, she opened her eyes. A lifelong habit of defiance gave her the strength. But she kept her eyes cast down, strong enough to force them open, too terrified to

look on the face of the thing itself.

The rocks under her knees glowed.

She was touching it, touching the hem of it.

Pack Leader groveled, lowering himself to the floor of the cave beside Lana, crawling on his belly.

Suddenly, Lana felt an electric shock of terrifying force. Her back arched, her head went back, her arms flew wide.

A pain like an icicle stabbing her eye and searing her brain.

She tried to scream, but no sound would come out.

Then it was gone and she fell onto her back, legs folded beneath her. She gasped like a landed fish, unable to fill her lungs.

“Defiance,” she croaked in a voice not her own.

“She’s supposed to fix my arm,” Drake said. “If you kill her, she can’t help me.”

“You are bold to make demands,” the Darkness said through Lana.

“I’m not . . . it’s . . . I want my arm back,” Drake shouted raggedly.

Lana found she could breathe again. She sucked in oxygen. She pushed out against the floor, scooted inch by inch away from the Darkness.

Drake shrieked in agony. Lana saw him as she had been, like he’d grabbed a power line. His body jerked like a marionette.

The Darkness released him.

“Ah,” the Darkness said, and twisted Lana’s mouth into a rictus. “I have found a much better teacher for you, Pack Leader.”

Pack Leader had dared to stand up. He kept his tail and head aligned in a submissive posture. He glanced at Drake, who had now been released and was doubled over, clutching his arm in pain.

“This human will teach you to kill humans,” Lana said.

Drake spoke as though each syllable was an effort. “Yes. But . . . my arm.”

“Give me the arm,” Lana said and, unwilling, crawled to Drake.

Drake stood up, shaky but determined. He extended the burned, sawed-off stump.

“I will give you an arm such as no human ever had,” the Darkness said through Lana. “You have no magic within you, human, but the girl will serve.”

Drake moved with surprising speed. He pivoted and yanked Lana up by her hair. “Take my arm,” he hissed.

She placed her trembling hand against the melted flesh, feeling the fresh-cut bone beneath it, wanting to throw up.

The glow deepened. Lana felt her entire body filled with it, not hot but cold, as cold as ice.

Drake’s flesh was growing.

She could feel it moving beneath her fingers. But it wasn’t human flesh.

Not human flesh at all.

“No,” she whispered.

“Yes,” Drake breathed. “Yes.”

THIRTY-NINE

36 HOURS, 37 MINUTES

*“And sometimes when you lie to me
Sometimes I’ll lie to you
And there isn’t a thing you could possibly do
All these half-destroyed lives
Aren’t as bad as they seem
But now I see blood and I hear people scream
Then I wake up
And it’s just another bad dream . . .”*

SAM SANG ALONG to the Agent Orange tune on his iPod, feeling as if the familiar lyrics had crossed the line from being just another self-consciously disturbing song to being too close to describing his life.

He was in the fire station not exactly enjoying a lonely lunch. Quinn was . . . well, he never seemed to know where Quinn was anymore. His friend—was that word even appropriate? His friend Quinn was a shadow who came and went, sometimes joking like his old self, sometimes sitting sullen and watching DVDs he’d seen a million times before.

In any case, he wasn’t there for lunch at the fire station, despite the fact that Sam had made enough soup for extra mouths.

Edilio materialized silently in the doorway. He looked discouraged. Sam realized he’d been singing aloud and, embarrassed, dialed down the music and pulled out the earbuds.

“What did you find, Edilio?”

“If she’s anywhere in Perdido Beach, she’s doing a good job of hiding, Sam,” Edilio said. “We’ve looked. We’ve talked to everyone. Lana’s gone. Her dog is gone. She was in Elwood’s house, then she was gone.”

Sam tossed his music player onto the table. “I have soup. Want some?”

Edilio sagged into a chair. “What’s the song?”

“What? Oh. It’s called ‘A Cry For Help in a World Gone Mad.’”

They shared a mordant laugh.

“Next I’ll dial up that old song, what’s it called?” Sam searched his memory. “Yeah. REM. ‘It’s the End of the World as We Know It.’”

“It is that,” Edilio commented. “I been searching for a girl who can heal people with magic, and taking some time to learn how to shoot a machine gun.”

“How’d that go, by the way?”

“I got four boys can more or less handle it, counting Quinn. But, man, we aren’t exactly the marines, you know? Kid named Tom starts shooting and he almost shoots me. I had to dive into a pile of dog poop.”

Sam tried not to laugh, but neither of them could stop once it started.

“Yeah, you think it’s funny. Wait till it’s you,” Edilio said.

Sam was serious again. “I don’t know what’s holding Caine back. It’s been two

days. What's keeping him?"

"What's the hurry? The more time we have, the more we're prepared."

"Dude, tomorrow night I'm out of here," Sam said.

"You don't know that for sure, man," Edilio said, embarrassed.

"I just wish I knew what was going on up at Coates."

Edilio caught on immediately. "You talking about spying them out?"

Sam pushed his soup away. "I don't know what I'm talking about, man. I'm halfway thinking we should take it to them, you know? Go up there and do this."

"We have guns. We have guys who can drive. We got, in addition to you, four other mutants with powers that might be useful. You know, powers you can fight with, not like this one girl where she can disappear but only if she's really embarrassed."

Sam smiled despite himself. "You're kidding."

"No man, she's really bashful and all, so you say something like, 'you have nice hair,' and suddenly she's invisible. But she's still there. You touch her, but you can't see her."

"That's not exactly going to stop Caine."

"Taylor is working on her teleporting. She can go a couple of blocks now." Edilio shrugged. "But in terms of useful, we got that kid, he's nine, he can do like you do with the light, but not as much."

"Nine. We can't make a nine-year-old hurt someone," Sam protested.

"How about an eleven-year-old who can move so fast, you can barely see her?"

"That girl Brianna?"

"She calls herself the Breeze now. Like, as fast as the breeze."

"The Breeze? Like a superhero name?" He shook his head ruefully. "Great. That's all we need," Sam said. It was one of his mother's favorite phrases, "that's all we need." He felt a sharp pang in his chest, but it passed quickly. "What do we have the Breeze do when she's zipping around?"

Edilio looked uncomfortable. "I guess we give her a gun. She shoots and zooms away and shoots again."

"Oh, God." Sam hung his head. "Eleven years old and we're giving her a gun? To shoot at people? At human beings? It's sick."

Edilio didn't have anything to say to that.

"Sorry, man, I'm not laying this off on you, Edilio. It's just . . . I mean, this is nuts. It's wrong. Bad enough kids our age, but fourth graders and fifth graders?"

There came the clattering of feet on the stairs, and both Sam and Edilio leaped to their feet, expecting the worst.

Dekka, one of the Coates refugees, came barreling into the room and skidded on the waxed floor. Her forehead had been injured, a two-inch gash, and she had refused to let Lana heal it.

"I got that from Drake's shoe when he kicked me," she had said. "Heal up my hands from the plastering, but leave my head. I want something to remember it by."

Sam reflected that that was only the second-most interesting thing about Dekka. Number one would probably be the fact that she seemed to have the power to suspend the force of gravity within a small area.

"What is it, Dekka?" Sam asked.

"That guy Orc. He just walked into town, all raggedy-looking."

“Orc? Just Orc? No Howard?”

Dekka shrugged. “I didn’t see anyone else. He just walked on in, and that guy Quinn told me I better go tell you. He said he was going to follow Orc home.”

That would be the house Orc had shared with Howard. It wasn’t a long walk.

“Maybe I should bring a gun,” Edilio said darkly.

“I think I can handle Orc now,” Sam said. His own confidence surprised him. He’d never before in his life thought he could handle Orc.

Quinn was waiting outside the house. Sam thanked Quinn almost formally. “I appreciate you sending Dekka to me and keeping an eye on things.”

“I do what I can,” Quinn said, more bitterly than he had probably intended.

Sam and Edilio stood by as Quinn knocked on the door. The bully’s all-too-familiar voice yelled, “Come in, morons.”

Orc was popping the top of a can of beer.

“Let me drink this,” Orc muttered. “Then you can kill me or whatever.”

Orc had lived a bad couple of days. He was scratched, bruised, battered. One eye was swollen and black. His pants were torn and filthy. His shirt was barely recognizable as a shirt. It had been ripped to tatters, then knotted crudely back together.

He was still big, but he looked less threatening than they’d ever seen him before.

“Where’s Howard?” Sam demanded.

“With them,” Orc said.

“With who?”

“Drake. That girl, what’s her name, Lana. And a talking dog.” Orc smirked. “Yeah. I’m crazy. Talking dog. Was the dogs that took me down. Ripped a hole out of my guts. Ate my thigh.”

“What are you talking about, Orc?”

He drank deep. He sighed. “Man, that’s good.”

“Talk sense, Orc,” Sam snapped.

Orc belched loudly. He stood up slowly. He set down his beer. With stiff arms he pulled his ragged shirt up and over his head.

Edilio gasped. Quinn turned away. Sam just stared.

Great patches of Orc’s chest and belly were covered by gravel. The individual rocks were the color of muddy water, green-gray. As Orc breathed, the gravel rose and fell.

“It’s spreading,” Orc said. He seemed bemused by it. He touched it with his finger. “It’s warm.”

“Orc . . . how did this happen?” Sam asked.

“I told you. The dogs ate out my leg and my guts and some other parts I ain’t telling you about. Then this stuff kind of filled it in.”

He shrugged, and Sam heard a faint sound like footsteps on a wet gravel driveway.

“It doesn’t hurt,” Orc said. “It did. But it doesn’t hurt now. Itches, though.”

“Mother of God,” Edilio said softly.

“Anyway,” Orc said. “I know you all hate me. So either kill me or get out. I’m thirsty and hungry.”

They left him.

Outside, Quinn walked quickly down the street, stopped suddenly, and threw up

into a bush.

Sam and Edilio caught up with him. Sam put his hand on Quinn's shoulder.

"Sorry," Quinn said. "I guess I'm just weak."

"Worse is coming," Sam said darkly. "But all of a sudden a nice easy blink doesn't seem like the worst thing that could happen, does it?"

"Drake's been gone for two days," Diana said. "We need to look at what we have here."

"I'm busy," Caine snapped.

They were standing on the front lawn of Coates. Caine was supervising an effort to repair the hole caused by the earlier power struggle. He teleported bricks, a few at a time, up to where Mallet and Chaz were attempting to cement them in place.

It had all collapsed twice already. It was one thing to pour concrete into a mold in the ground. It was a lot harder to mortar bricks into place.

"We need to make some kind of deal with . . . with the townies," Diana said.

"Townies. Carefully avoiding having to say 'Sam.' Or 'your brother.'"

"Okay. You caught me," Diana said. "We have to make some kind of deal with your brother, Sam. They still have food. We are running out."

Caine made a show of being distracted as he levitated another stack of bricks out through the front door of the school and up to the second floor, where Mallet and Chaz dodged the arriving load.

"I'm getting better at this," Caine said. "I'm gaining control. Precision."

"Goody for you."

Caine's shoulders sagged. "You know, you could occasionally show some support. You know how I feel about you. But all you ever do is bust me."

"What do you want to do, get married?"

Caine reddened, and Diana erupted in an unusually loud laugh. "You get that we're fourteen, right? I mean, I know you think you're the Napoleon of the FAYZ, but we're still kids."

"Age is relative. I'm one of the two oldest people in the FAYZ. And the most powerful."

Diana bit her tongue. She had a smart-ass answer ready, but she had tweaked Caine enough for one day. She had bigger issues to deal with than Caine's puppy love. And that's all it was. Caine wasn't capable of real love, the deep kind, the kind that would grow over time.

"Of course, neither am I," Diana muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing." She watched Caine as he worked. Not what he was doing, but the boy himself. He was the most charismatic person she'd ever known. He could have been a rock star. And clearly he thought he was in love with her. It was the reason he tolerated her impertinence.

She supposed she liked him. They had been attracted to each other almost from the start. They had been friends . . . no, that wasn't quite the word. Accomplices. Yes, that would do: accomplices. They had been accomplices since Caine first discovered his powers.

She had been the first person he showed. He had knocked a book off the table from

across the room.

She'd been the one who encouraged him to work at it, develop it, practice it in secret. Each time he reached some new level, he would show it off for her. And when she showed even the slightest kindness toward him, a word of praise, an admiring nod, even, he would puff up and seem to shine with some reflected light.

It took so little to manipulate him. It didn't require real affection, just the hint of it.

Diana would task Caine to use his power to trip some snob she didn't like, or humiliate some teacher who had come down on her. And when she reported to Caine that the science teacher had cornered her in an empty lab and tried to feel her up, Caine sent him sprawling down a set of steps and into the hospital.

Diana enjoyed that time. She had a protector who would do her bidding and ask nothing in return. Caine, despite his oversized ego, his looks, his charm, was terribly awkward with girls. He had never even tried to kiss her.

But then he had attracted the attention of Drake Merwin, who had already acquired a reputation as the most dangerous bully in a school with plenty of bullies to go around. And from that point on, Caine had played them off against each other, doing a little for Diana when she asked, and a little with Drake.

As Caine's powers grew, both relationships changed.

And then the school nurse, Sam's mother—Caine's mother too, though none of them knew that then—started to figure out that something was very, very strange about her long-lost little boy.

The bricks collapsed suddenly, a series of thuds as they hit the lawn, and a series of groans and curses from Chaz and Mallet.

Caine seemed almost not to notice. "What do you think it was, Diana?" he said, almost as if he'd read her thoughts.

"I think they didn't set them straight enough," she replied, knowing that wasn't what he meant.

"Not that. Her. Nurse Temple." He repeated the name, drawing it out to get the feel of it. "Nurse. Connie. Temple."

Diana sighed. This was not a conversation she wanted to have. "I didn't really know the woman."

"She has two sons. One she keeps. The other she gives up for adoption. I was a baby."

"I'm not a shrink," Diana said.

"I always had the feeling, you know? That my family wasn't my real family. They never said I was adopted, but my mother—well, the woman I thought was my mother, I don't know what to call her now. Anyway, her, she never talked about having me. You know, you hear moms talking about going into labor and all. She never talked about that."

"Too bad Dr. Phil's not around. You could tell him all about it."

"I think she must have been pretty cold. Nurse Temple. My so-called mother." He was looking at Diana now, head cocked, frowning, skeptical. "Kind of like you, Diana."

Diana made a rude sound. "Don't try to get deep, Caine. She was probably just a screwed-up teenager at the time. Maybe she figured she could handle one kid but not two. Or maybe she tried to adopt both of you out, but no one would take Sam."

Caine was taken aback. "Are you sucking up to me with that?"

"I'm trying to get you to move on. Who cares about your mommy issues? We have enough food for two, maybe three weeks. Then we're down to beans."

"See what I mean? I'll bet she was just like you, Diana. Cold and selfish."

Diana was about to answer when she heard a rushing sound behind her. She spun and saw a wave, a swarm of rough, shaggy yellow beasts. The coyotes seemed to come from everywhere at once, a disciplined, purposeful invasion that would quickly overwhelm her and Caine.

Caine raised his hands, palms out, armed and ready.

"No," a voice yelled. "Don't hurt them, they're friends."

It was Howard, marching up toward them, waving his hands. Behind him came the healer girl, Lana, looking shell-shocked.

And behind them, Drake.

Diana cursed. He was still alive.

And then she saw Drake's arm.

The burned stump, the remains of the arm she had sawed off while Drake screamed and cried and threatened, had been altered.

It was stretched, like it had been turned into dark, bloodred taffy. It wrapped twice around his body.

No.

Impossible.

Howard came rushing up first. "Has Orc shown up here?" But neither Caine nor Diana answered. Both were staring at Drake, who sauntered toward them, all his cockiness restored, no longer the ragged scarecrow who had wept when he saw the melted stump of his hand lying on the tile floor.

"Drake," Caine said. "We thought you were dead."

"I'm back," Drake said. "And better than ever."

The red tentacle unwrapped itself from around his waist, like a python releasing its victim.

"Like it, Diana?" Drake asked.

The arm, that impossible bloodred snake, coiled above Drake's head, swirled, writhed. And then, so fast that the human eye could barely register the movement, it snapped like a bullwhip.

The sound was a loud crack. A mini-sonic boom.

Diana cried out in pain. Stunned, she stared at the cut in her blouse and the trickle of red from her shoulder.

"Sorry," Drake said with no attempt at sincerity. "I'm still working on my aim."

"Drake," Caine said and, despite the blood, despite Diana's wound, he grinned. "Welcome back."

"I brought some help," Drake said. He extended his left hand, and Caine shook it awkwardly with his right. "So. When do we go take down Sam Temple?"

FORTY

26 HOURS, 47 MINUTES

“THEY’LL COME TOMORROW evening,” Sam said. “I believe Caine needs to defeat me. I think it’s an ego thing with him.”

They held the final council of war in the church. The same church where Caine had carried out his smooth takeover. The cross had been propped back up against the wall. It wasn’t where it was supposed to be, but at least it wasn’t on the floor anymore.

From the Perdido Beach kids there were Sam, Astrid, Little Pete, Edilio, Dahra, Elwood, and Mother Mary. Albert had been invited, but he was focusing on his plan for Thanksgiving, and on experimenting with the tortilla-burger. Representing the Coates refugees were three girls: Dekka, little Brianna the Breeze, and Taylor.

“Caine’s a guy who needs to win. He needs to win before he poofs. Or he needs to win before I poof. The point is, he’s not going to just accept us freeing all these kids from Coates and taking over Perdido Beach,” Sam said. “So we need to be ready. And we need to be ready for something else, too: tomorrow is my birthday.” He made a wry face. “Not a birthday I’m exactly looking forward to. But, anyway, we need to decide who takes over for me if . . . when . . . I step outside.”

Several of the kids made sympathetic or encouraging noises about how Sam maybe wasn’t going to blink out, or maybe it would be a good thing, an escape from the FAYZ. But Sam hushed them all.

“Look, the good thing is, when I go, so does Caine. The bad thing is, that still leaves Drake and Diana and other bullies. Orc . . . well, we don’t exactly know what’s going on with him, but Howard’s not with him. And Lana . . . we don’t know what happened to her, whether she left or what.”

The loss of Lana was a serious blow. Every one of the Coates refugees adored her for the way she had healed their hands. And it was reassuring to think that she could heal anyone who was injured.

Astrid said, “I nominate Edilio to take over if . . . you know. Anyway, we need a number two, a vice president or vice mayor or whatever.”

Edilio did a double take, like Astrid must be talking about some other Edilio. Then he said, “No way. Astrid’s the smartest person here.”

“I have Little Pete to look after. Mary has to care for the prees and keep them out of harm’s way. Dahra has responsibility for treating anyone who gets hurt. Elwood has been so busy in the hospital with Dahra, he hasn’t dealt with Caine or Drake or any of the Coates faction. Edilio’s been up against Orc and Drake. And he’s always been brave and smart and able.” She winked at Edilio, acknowledging his discomfort.

“Right,” Sam said. “So unless someone has an objection, that’s the way it is. If I get hurt or I ditch, Edilio’s in charge.”

“Respect to Edilio,” Dekka said, “but he doesn’t even have powers.”

“He has the power to earn trust and to come through when he has to,” Astrid said.

No one objected further.

“Okay, then,” Sam said. “We have our people in position and Edilio tells them when to go. Taylor, I know it’s going to be boring for you, and a little scary, too. Pick

out a friend to go with you, trade off on sleep, but make sure one of you is awake the whole time. And keep practicing. Breeze, your role is critical: you're our communications system once it starts. Dekka? As soon as we hear from Taylor, you and I move out."

"Cool," Dekka said.

"We're going to win this," Sam said.

They all got up to leave. Astrid stayed behind. Sam tapped Edilio's shoulder. "Listen, man, if you can find something useful for Quinn to do . . ."

"I'm on it. He's not a bad shot. I have him on top of the day care with one of the machine pistols."

Sam nodded, patted Edilio on the back, and watched him leave.

"Quinn with a machine gun," Sam said. "I'm asking my friend to shoot people."

"You're asking him to defend himself and defend the prees," Astrid said.

"Yeah, that changes everything," Sam said sarcastically.

"What do you want me to do?" Astrid asked. "You haven't given me a job."

"I want you to find a safe place and hide there till it's all over. That's what I want."

"But—"

"But . . . as of tomorrow afternoon, I need you up there." He pointed upward.

"In heaven?" Astrid asked with a grin.

"Follow me." He led Astrid and her brother to the steeple. The lattice panels were still knocked out, just as Drake had left them. The lights of Perdido Beach looked eerily normal from up here. Many houses still had lights on. The sparse streetlights were lit. The yellow McDonald's sign was brilliant. A breeze stirred carrying the smell of French fries and pine needles, salt spray and seaweed.

Two sleeping bags had been laid out in the snug enclosure. A pair of binoculars and a kid's walkie-talkie lay next to a paper grocery bag.

"I packed you some food and batteries for L. P.'s game in that bag. I don't think the walkie-talkie works very well, but I have the other one. You can see almost everything from up here."

It was a tight space. Little Pete immediately sat down in a dusty corner. Astrid and Sam stood awkwardly close together, crowded by the bell.

"Did you leave me a gun?"

He shook his head. "No."

"You're asking everyone else to do terrible things. You're just asking me to watch."

"There's a difference."

"Is there? What?"

"Well . . . I need you for your brains. I need you to observe."

"That's lame," she said.

He nodded. "Yeah. Well. You haven't been trained to shoot. You'd probably end up shooting yourself in the foot."

"Ah," she said, not convinced.

"Listen, I know this is crazy, but maybe you should think about Quinn's idea, you know, of getting L. P. to zap you to Hawaii. Or whatever. He has the power. In case things don't work out . . ."

"I don't want him to zap me away somewhere," Astrid said. "I don't really think it

would work, for one. And for two . . .”

“Yeah?”

“And for two, I don’t want to leave you.”

He laid his palm gently against her cheek, and she closed her eyes and leaned into him. “Astrid, I’m the one who’s going to be leaving. You know that.”

“No. I don’t know that. I’ve prayed for it not to happen. I’ve asked Mary to intercede.”

“Mary Terrafino?”

“No, duh.” Astrid laughed. “You are such a heathen. Mary. The Virgin Mary.”

“Oh. Her.”

“I know you don’t really believe in God much, but I do. I think He knows we’re here. I think He hears our prayers.”

“You think this is all some master plan of God’s? The FAYZ and all?”

“No. I believe in free will. I think we make our own decisions and carry out our own actions. And our actions have consequences. The world is what we make it. But I think sometimes we can ask God to help us and He will. Sometimes I think He looks down and says, ‘Wow, look what those idiots are up to now: I guess I better help them along a little.’”

“I’ll gladly accept the help,” Sam said.

“Just the same, I wish I had a gun.”

Sam shook his head. “I hurt my stepfather. I hurt Drake. I may have killed Drake. I don’t know. And I don’t know what’s going to happen next. But here’s what I do know: When I hurt someone it makes a mark on me. Like a scar or something. It’s like . . .” He searched for words, and she wrapped her arms tight around him. “It’s like my knee, where Drake shot me? That’s all healed up, thanks to Lana, like it never happened. But me burning Drake? That’s inside me, in my head, and Lana didn’t heal that.”

“If there’s a fight, others will feel that hurt.”

“You’re not others.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because I love you.”

Astrid was silent for so long, Sam thought he must have upset her. Yet she never loosened her hold on him, never pulled away but kept her face buried in his neck. He felt her warm tears on his skin. And at last she said, “I love you, too.”

He sighed with relief. “Well, we got past that.”

But she didn’t join in the nervous laughter. “I have something to tell you, Sam.”

“A secret?”

“I wasn’t sure of it, so I didn’t say anything. It’s hard to separate it from IQ. Intuition is usually just the name we give to heightened but normal perception that takes place below the level of conscious thought.”

“Uh-huh,” he said, using his dumb-guy voice.

“For a long time I wasn’t sure it was anything other than normal intuition.”

“The power,” he said. “I was wondering if you knew. Diana said you were a two bar. I kind of didn’t want to, you know, force you to think about it.”

"I suspected. But it's weird. I touch a person's hand and I sometimes see what looks in my mind like a streak of fire across the sky."

He held her out at arm's length, the better to see her face. "A streak?"

She shrugged. "Weird, huh? I see it as bright or dim, long or short. I don't know what it means, I don't have any control over it and I haven't really tried exploring it yet. But it feels like I'm seeing some measure of, I don't know, significance or something? It's like I'm seeing a person's soul or maybe their fate, but in highly metaphorical terms."

"Highly metaphorical," he echoed. "Your power is the power of metaphor?"

That at last earned him a smile and a shove. "Smart-ass. The point is, I've known from the start that you were important in some way. You're a shooting star across the sky, trailing sparks."

"Do I shoot right into a brick wall tomorrow?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "But I know you're the brightest shooting star in the sky."

Computer Jack woke and felt her soft hand over his mouth. It was dark outside, but the room was bathed in the blue glow of a computer screen. He could see the outline of her face, her dark hair. Her eyes glittered.

"Shh," she cautioned, and put a finger to her lips.

His heart was already pounding. Something was wrong, no question.

"Get up, Jack."

"What's happening?"

"You remember our deal? You remember your promise?"

He didn't want to say yes. He didn't want to. He had always known that whatever Diana wanted, it would be dangerous. And Jack was more terrified than ever.

Drake was back. Drake was a monster.

Diana stroked his cheek with her fingertips. He felt a shiver go up his spine. Then, just ever so softly, she slapped his cheek.

"I asked if you remembered your promise."

He was mute. Too confused to be able to find his voice, too aware of her beside him, too terrified of what she might want.

He nodded.

"Get dressed. Just your clothes. Nothing else."

"What time is it?" he temporized.

"Time to do the right thing." Her soft mouth twitched a wry smile. "Even if it is for the wrong reason."

Jack climbed out of bed, very, very glad that he had found a pair of pajama bottoms to wear. He made her turn away and dressed quickly.

"Where are we going?"

"You're going for a drive."

"I only drove once and I almost ran into a ditch."

"You're a very smart boy, Jack. You'll figure it out."

They crept from the room into the darkened hallway. Down the stairs, careful, careful. Diana inched the outside door open and looked at the courtyard. Jack wondered if Diana had an excuse ready if someone stopped them.

The sound of sneakers on the gravel of the driveway was amplified in the foggy

night air. It was as if they were trying to make noise. Like each step was delivered with a sledgehammer.

Diana led him to an SUV parked haphazardly on the grass. “The keys are in it. Get in. The driver’s seat.”

“Where are we going?”

“Drive to Perdido Beach. And it’s not we. Just you.”

Jack was alarmed. “Me? Just me? No, no, no! If I go, Caine will think it was all my idea. He’ll send Drake after me.”

“Jack, either obey me or I’ll stand here and scream. They’ll come and I’ll say I caught you trying to escape.”

Jack felt his resistance crumble. It was all too plausible. She would do it, and Caine would believe her. And then . . . Drake. He shuddered.

“Why?” Jack pleaded.

“Find Sam Temple. Tell him you escaped.”

Jack gulped and bobbed his head.

“Better yet, find that girl, Astrid.” Diana recovered some of her mocking attitude. “Astrid the Genius. She’ll be desperate to save Sam.”

“Okay. Okay.” He steeled himself. “I better go.”

Diana touched his arm. “Tell them about Andrew.”

Jack froze with his hand on the key. “That’s what you want me to do?”

“Jack, if Sam blinks out, Drake will turn on me, and Caine won’t be able to stop him. Drake is stronger than before. I need Sam alive. I need someone for Drake to hate. I need balance. Tell Sam about the temptation. Warn him that he’ll be tempted to surrender to the big jump, but maybe, maybe, if he says no . . .” She sighed. It was not a hopeful sound. “Now: go.”

She spun on her heel and marched back to the school.

Jack followed her with his eyes till she reached the door. Now was her chance to escape, too. She could get away from Caine and Drake and all they represented. But she was staying.

Was it possible that Diana really did love Caine?

He drew a deep, steadying breath and turned the key. The engine roared. He’d given it too much gas. Too much noise.

“Shh, shh,” he said.

He moved the gear to “D,” for drive.

He pushed the gas pedal down. Nothing happened. He almost panicked. Then he remembered: the emergency brake. He released the brake pull and tried the gas pedal again. The SUV crunched across the gravel at a creeping pace.

“Hey. Where are you going?”

Howard. What was he doing out here in the middle of the night?

Of course: still looking for his bully friend Orc. Always looking out for Orc.

Howard’s expression went quickly from puzzled to questioning to alarmed.

“Hey, man, stop. Stop.”

Jack drove past him.

In the rearview mirror he saw Howard racing back into the school.

He should drive faster. But driving was terrifying for Computer Jack. Too many decisions to make, too much attention demanded, too dangerous, too deadly.

He came to a stop at the iron gate. It was closed. He jumped out and quickly swung the gate open.

He stood still for a moment and listened. The sounds of the woods. Condensation dripping from leaves and tiny animals rustling and a faint breeze that barely pushed the leaves. Then the sound of a car's engine.

Back to the SUV. Into gear and a lurch forward through the gate.

Leave it open and go. It's not like the gate would slow anyone down. But it had slowed him down. They were already after him. Panda would be driving, no doubt, he was the most experienced driver, much more experienced than Jack.

Panda. With Drake beside him. Drake and that monstrous arm of his.

Jack felt the fear rising within him. He squeezed the steering wheel. Too tight. The top of it broke off in his hands.

He threw the six-inch arc of plastic away and whinnied in fear. He forced himself to hold the wheel more carefully, control the panic, focus on the driving. Focus on the road as it wound down the mountain, from dense woods to more open terrain and round the spur.

Lights in the rearview mirror.

Oh, God. Oh, God.

They would kill him. Drake would use that whip hand on him.

"Think, Jack," he screamed with sudden, shocking vehemence. "Think."

This was not a programming issue. It wasn't technological. It was more primitive. It was force and force, violence and violence, hate and fear.

Or was it?

Maybe it was just about clearance. The SUV sat high off the road. The car now rapidly closing the distance was low to the ground.

Sport-utility vehicle. Four-wheel drive.

Jack peered at the roadside. A deep ditch all along the right side. A steep dirt and rock wall to his left.

The car was coming up with such speed. No more than a few hundred feet back.

There. A dirt road to the right. It might go nowhere. It might go twenty feet and stop. No choice. Jack yanked the wheel to his right and even at low speed, he felt he might tip over.

But the SUV righted itself and bounced onto the dirt road. Headlights illuminated a bright, featureless circle of dirt and scrub in the inky, moonless blackness. No way to see . . . no way to know. . . . He was driving on faith, in the hope that the dirt road didn't suddenly end in a cliff.

It was hard to hold on to the steering wheel as it bounced violently. But he couldn't grip it too hard or the wheel would come apart in his powerful hands, and then he would really be finished.

Behind him the lights of the sedan were crazy, up and down, veering wildly. The dirt road was harder for the car. As bad as it was for the SUV, it was impossible for the car.

Slowly, Jack pulled away from the car. Finally, the headlights dwindled away behind him and it became clear that the car had stopped.

Jack slowed his own pace, making it easier for him to control the SUV.

He had left pursuit behind. But how would he get to Perdido Beach? The only way

he knew was the main road. Would this dirt track lead somewhere?
The one thing he knew for sure was that he could not ever turn back.

FORTY-ONE

03 HOURS, 15 MINUTES

THE DAYLIGHT HOURS passed quietly.

Sam knew it would begin soon.

And in just a few hours, it would end.

Sam kept people on watch at the outskirts of town but otherwise advised people to sleep, eat, try to relax. Caine would come in the night. Sam was sure of that.

He had tried to take his own advice, but sleep had been impossible.

He was changing clothes and thinking about the need to eat something despite feeling sick to his stomach, when Taylor suddenly appeared in the firehouse. Sam was wearing boxers.

“They’re coming,” Taylor said without preamble. “Hey, nice abs.”

“Talk to me.”

“Six cars coming down the highway from the direction of Coates. They’ll be at Ralph’s in about a minute. They’re moving slowly.”

“Did you see any faces? Caine or Drake?”

“No.”

Sam went into the bunkroom, shook Edilio’s bed, kicked Quinn’s bed, and yelled, “Guys. Get up.”

“What?” Quinn said, sounding bleary and confused. “I thought we were supposed to get some sleep.”

“You got some. Taylor says they’re on the move.”

“I’m up.” Edilio rolled out of bed fully dressed. He unslung the sinister-looking machine pistol from the bed railing.

Sam slipped into his jeans and hunted for his shoes.

“What do you want me to do now?” Taylor asked.

“Bounce back and see if they go into Ralph’s or split off into groups,” Sam said.

“You might want to keep your clothes on,” Taylor warned. “I could be right back.”

“When you bounce back, go to the plaza. I’m heading straight there,” Sam said.

Taylor vanished.

“You ready?” Sam asked Edilio.

“No. You?”

Sam shook his head. “Let’s make it work, anyway.”

Quinn rolled out of his bunk. “Is it time?”

“Yeah. Evening. Like we figured,” Sam said. “You know where you’re going, right?”

“Straight to hell?” Quinn muttered.

Sam and Edilio dropped down the fireman’s pole and landed in the garage. The walkie-talkie in Sam’s belt crackled, very loud. Astrid’s voice, staticky and strained.

“Sam. I see them.”

Sam keyed the volume down a little and pressed the button. “Taylor just told me,” Sam said. “You and L. P. okay?”

“I’m fine. I see six cars. They’re past Ralph’s. I think they may be turning toward

the school.”

“Why that direction?”

“I don’t know.”

Sam bit his lip and considered. “Keep your head down, Astrid.”

“Sam . . . ,” she began.

“I know,” he said. “Me too.”

He started walking fast, not running. Running would look like panic. To Edilio, he said, “I figured they’d come in the same way they did the first time. It’s the clearest path into the center of town.”

“I thought they might take over Ralph’s and make us come after them,” Edilio said.

“I don’t get it,” Sam admitted. They reached the plaza and Edilio ran ahead to the town hall to check on his troops.

Taylor appeared a dozen feet away, looking in the wrong direction.

“Taylor. Here.”

“Oh. They’re going toward the school. And Caine is definitely with them. Caine and Diana. I didn’t see Drake. Maybe he’s dead.” She said that last part with unmistakable relish. Then, just in case Sam had missed it, she added, “I hope he’s dead, that evil piece of—”

“Did they see you?”

“No. They can’t touch me, anyway. I’m too good at this now. I could bounce right into the school, see what they’re up to.”

Sam pointed a finger at her. “Don’t get cocky. I don’t want to lose you. Keep your distance. Go.”

Taylor winked and blinked out.

Astrid on the walkie-talkie. “They’re getting out of their cars, going into the school.”

Sam looked up at the steeple. She was right up there, so close, he could yell up to her, but her gaze was drawn to the school, not down at him. Sam spotted Quinn running by with his machine gun over his shoulder.

“Good luck, brah,” Sam said.

Quinn stopped dead. “Thanks. Look, Sam . . . I . . .”

“No time for that now,” Sam said firmly, but gently.

Sam stood alone in the plaza, leg propped on the edge of the fountain. The school. Why? And why come in daylight, why not wait till night fell?

Albert came trotting out of the McDonald’s. He handed Sam a bag. “Some nuggets, man. In case you’re hungry.”

“Thanks, dude.”

“We have faith in you, Sam.” Albert took off.

Sam munched a nugget and tried to think. The move to the school was unexpected. Was it an opportunity? If Caine was out of the car, on foot, in a school building that Sam knew a lot better than he did . . .

He keyed the walkie-talkie. “Is there any sign they’re leaving the school?”

“No. They have one guy standing outside as a guard. I think it’s Panda. I definitely did not see Drake.”

He could end this, maybe. Right now, one-on-one with Caine. It would mean none

of these kids would have to be involved. It would mean no one would have to pull a trigger.

Dekka was running toward him. "Sam. Sorry, I couldn't find you."

Maybe just the two of them, Sam and Dekka. It would double his chances. It would be right: one from Perdido Beach, one from Coates, side by side.

"Caine's at the school," Sam said. "I'm thinking maybe we take it to them."

"Is Drake there?" Dekka asked.

"No one has seen him. He may be . . . he may be not showing up."

"Good," Dekka said bluntly.

"We haven't had much time to get to know each other," Sam said. "And now, well, I don't have much time, period. How much control do you have over your power?"

Dekka blew out some air and considered this question. She looked at her hands as if they would give her the answer. "I have to be pretty close. I can rattle a wall pretty good, or send someone flying, but only from a few feet away."

"Yeah?"

"I'm up for it," she said.

Taylor popped in. "They're all inside the school. One guard, as far as I can see. And definitely no Drake."

"Okay," Sam said. "Here's what we do. Dekka and I are going after them. Taylor, I need you to go tell Edilio. Then I need you to climb up the steeple, up where Astrid is. If Dekka and I get in trouble, we may need a distraction."

"Dude. I don't climb. I pop. And I'm on it." Taylor disappeared.

"I'll probably get used to her doing that someday," Sam muttered.

He took a deep, shaky breath. It was his first big tactical decision of the coming battle. He hoped it wasn't a mistake.

Jack had kept the SUV hidden in a patch of trees all through the day. He had slept fitfully, crunched in the driver's seat, all the doors locked, too scared to think about stretching out more comfortably in the back.

Jack didn't care how big a hurry Diana was in for him to reach Sam, he wasn't going to die for her.

Only when the sun set at last did he turn the key and creep from his shady hiding place.

Down dirt roads with no signposts, lights off, moving at a crawl. Around blind corners, up, down, left, right. The SUV had a compass built in to the rearview mirror, but the directions never seemed to make sense. One second it would read south and the next minute east even though he hadn't turned.

It was impossible to know where he was going. He could drive with the lights on and see the road, but then others could see him as well. So he drove in the dark at little more than walking speed. Even at such low speed, the SUV bounced and lurched so badly that Jack felt like he'd been beaten up.

That he absolutely had to get to Sam was clearer than ever. Caine would never forgive Jack for this betrayal. His only salvation lay with Sam. But only if Sam survived the poof. If Sam stepped outside, Caine would win. And then the FAYZ would be too small a place for Jack to hide from Caine and Drake.

Jack checked the dashboard clock. He knew the day and hour of Sam's poof. Just

over two hours left.

The moon rose and the road straightened so that he motored along at a somewhat higher speed than before, anxious to reach safety. A rabbit darted in front of him. Jack jerked the wheel and missed the rabbit but bounced off the road into a field.

He yanked the wheel hard and swerved back onto the road just as a pickup truck shot by coming from the other direction.

Jack cursed and turned in his seat to look back. Brake lights flared and the pickup screeched to a stop.

Jack stepped on the gas. The SUV leaped forward. But now the truck was turning around and coming up fast.

In the darkness it was impossible to see who was driving the truck, but in Jack's mind it could be only one person: Drake.

Weeping, Jack accelerated. The gas tank needle edged closer to empty. But still the pickup truck came on.

The only escape would be to drive into the field where the truck might not be able to follow. Jack slowed just slightly and steered into the fallow field. The ground was plowed up, soft, and the SUV bounced madly across the rows.

The truck kept pace.

In the field ahead of him, powerful headlights snapped on. A tractor was moving with surprising speed to cut him off. Beyond the tractor a dark, dilapidated farmhouse was set far back from the road.

Jack was sick inside. They had him. Somehow, impossibly, they had him trapped.

Jack never saw the dry creek bed. The SUV went airborne for a few feet, he felt weirdly weightless, and then the SUV hit the far bank of the creek and stopped hard. There was a loud bang, the air bag deploying, and a sickening crunch, and Jack found himself lying flat on his back in the dirt, not hurt but too stunned to move.

The SUV's headlights illuminated the field where he lay. Two kids, a boy and a girl, were silhouetted by the glare. Neither of them was Drake Merwin.

Jack dared to breathe. He didn't dare stand up.

"We saw you driving around out here with your lights off," the girl said accusingly.

Jack wondered how she could have seen him on a pitch-black night. He didn't ask, but she provided the answer, anyway.

"Even if you have your headlights off, your brake lights still come on. I guess you didn't think of that."

"I'm not very experienced at driving," Jack said.

"Who are you?" the boy, who looked to be Jack's age, asked.

"Me? I'm . . . Jack. People call me Computer Jack."

The girl had a shotgun in her hands. She aimed the barrel at Jack's face.

"Don't shoot me," he begged.

"You're on our land, and we protect our land," the girl said. "Why shouldn't we shoot you?"

"I have to . . . if I don't . . . Listen, if I don't get to Perdido Beach, something awful is going to happen."

The girl had an odd combination of pigtails and a hard face made even harder by the harsh white light from the SUV. She seemed unimpressed. She was maybe eleven or twelve and it occurred to Jack that there was so much resemblance that the boy had

to be her brother.

The boy said, "He doesn't look dangerous." To Jack, he said, "How come they call you Computer Jack?"

"Because I know a lot about computers."

The boy thought awhile and said, "Can you fix a Wii?"

Jack nodded violently, digging dirt into his hair. "I could try. But really, really, I have to get to Perdido Beach. It's really important."

"Well, my Wii is important to me. So if you fix my Wii, I won't let Emily shoot you. I guess not getting shot would be as important as you getting to Perdido Beach, huh?"

"Hi, Mary," Quinn said. She met him at the door of the day care classroom. "I'm heading up top."

Mary closed the door quickly behind her. "I don't want the kids to see the guns," she said. She herself was staring at the weapon.

"Mary, I don't want to see it my own self," Quinn said.

"Are you scared?"

"Pee-less."

"Me too." She touched Quinn's arm. "God bless you."

"Yeah. Let's hope so, huh?" He wanted to stay and talk to her. Anything to avoid climbing up on the roof with a machine gun. But Mary had her duty, and he had his. He was ashamed to realize that he yearned to go into that day care room and just hide in there with Mary.

He went through the day care to the alleyway in back. He slung the machine pistol carefully and climbed the rickety aluminum ladder.

The day care and the hardware shared a roof. It was flat, gravel and tar, adorned only by several vertical pipes and two ancient air-conditioning units. The roof was encircled by a parapet, a three-foot-high wall topped with cracked Spanish tile.

Quinn went to the corner facing the church and town hall. He watched as Sam and Dekka marched off.

"Don't screw up today," Quinn told himself. "Just don't screw up."

The ladder rattled, and something blurred over onto the roof. Quinn swung his gun around. The blur resolved itself into the figure of Brianna.

"You have got to stop doing that, Brianna," Quinn said.

Brianna smiled and said, "The Breeze. My name is the Breeze."

"You are way too into this," Quinn grumbled. "I mean, what are you, ten?"

"I'm eleven. I'll be twelve in a month." Brianna pulled a claw hammer from her belt and brandished it. "Caine and Drake had me starving to death with a cinder block on each hand. I wasn't too young for Caine and Drake to almost kill me."

"Yeah." Quinn wished she would go away and leave him in peace, but it was her assignment to move between Quinn and Edilio and Sam and anyone else, carrying messages. "So. How fast can you go, Brianna?"

"I don't know. Fast enough that people almost can't see me."

"Doesn't it kind of wear you out?"

"Not really. But it kind of tears up my shoes." She raised one foot to show him a worn sole on her sneakers. "And I have to keep my hair in pigtails or it whips around and stings my eyes." She gave her braided pigtails a toss.

“Must be weird. Having powers.”

“You don’t have any?”

He shook his head. “No. Nothing. I’m just . . . me.”

“You know Sam real well, right?”

He nodded. It was a question he got a lot from Coates kids.

“Do you think he’ll win?” she asked.

“Guess we better hope so, huh?”

Brianna looked at her hands, the hands that had been imprisoned in concrete. “That’s why it doesn’t matter that I’m just eleven: we have to win.”

Sam fought a sense of doom as he walked with Dekka toward the school. He wasn’t afraid of getting hurt, mostly; after all, he expected to end the day by poofing, and then . . . well, he didn’t know what.

The dread was fear of failure. Whatever happened to him, he had Astrid to think about. And Little Pete, because Astrid would be shattered if anything happened to Little Pete. Not to mention the fact that Little Pete might be the only one in all of existence who could end the FAYZ.

He had to beat Caine for her. For them. For all of them, all the kids. And that weighed him down like he was carrying an elephant on his back.

He had to win. Had to make sure Astrid was safe. Then he could blink out if that had to be.

But the closer he got, the more he doubted his decision. He was deviating from the plan, which meant no one would really know what role they were supposed to play. Caine going to the school had thrown everything off.

They stopped a block from the edge of the school grounds. Sam keyed the walkie-talkie.

“Has anything changed?”

“No,” Astrid said. “The cars are parked. Panda is by the front door. The light’s fading fast, so I can’t be totally sure. Sam?”

“Yeah?”

“I think Panda has a gun.”

“Okay.”

“Be careful.”

“Uh-huh.” He signed off. He wanted to tell her one more time that he loved her, but that seemed almost like tempting fate. He was already thinking too much about Astrid and not enough about Caine.

“Okay, Dekka, there’s no way to sneak up. I have to be within sight before I take Panda down.”

Dekka nodded. Her mouth was tight, like she couldn’t open it at all. She was breathing hard, tense. Scared.

“I’m going to count to three. On three we go. All out. As soon as I can, I try to nail Panda. You do your thing when we get to the door. Ready?”

She didn’t answer. For what felt like a very long minute she just stared at emptiness. Then at last she croaked, “I’m ready.”

“One. Two. Three.”

They burst from cover and started running, flat out. They closed the distance to the

edge of the school grounds and were pounding across the turf before Panda spotted them and yelled.

“Don’t do it, Panda,” Sam warned, yelling as loud as he could while running.

Panda hesitated, hefting the gun, not quite raising it to fire.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Sam shouted.

Fifty feet away.

Panda aimed and fired.

The bullet flew wide.

Panda gaped at the weapon like he was seeing it for the first time.

“No,” Sam yelled.

Thirty feet.

Panda raised the gun again. His face was a fright mask of fear and indecision.

Sam dropped to the ground, rolled, and came up in a squatting position as Panda fired again.

Sam extended his arm, fingers splayed. The green-white light missed Panda and burned a hole in the brick beside his head.

Panda threw down the gun, turned, and ran.

Ten feet.

“Dekka, get the door.”

Dekka raised her hands high and gravity beneath the door was suspended. The whole wall, including the door frame, lurched suddenly, as if struck by a truck from the other side. The door swung slowly open. Loose dirt and fallen mortar shot straight up toward the sky.

Dekka dropped her hands and the dirt fell back to earth, the bricks slumped and cracked, the door jamb sagged and splintered.

Sam fired into the dark interior through the open door. He and Dekka barreled through and slammed back against opposite walls, panting and ready. Paper signs and once-colorful posters on the walls burned and curled from Sam’s blast.

There was no sound.

Sam glanced at Dekka. She looked as scared as he felt.

They edged along the hallway, nerves taut, eyes searching each doorway.

The office was on the right side, fronted by a reinforced glass wall. Sam crept closer. Peered inside. Nothing. Lights still on from the day of the FAYZ.

Should he move on without checking the office thoroughly? If one of Caine’s people was in there, Sam and Dekka could end up surrounded. Sam made a motion to Dekka: go in.

Dekka shook her head violently.

“Okay,” Sam said. “I got it.”

He crossed the hallway quickly and opened the door himself. Something large flew at him, he ducked instinctively, but he’d been hit, smacked a glancing blow that spun him around.

A boy with dark hair was crouched atop the school secretary’s desk. He held a wooden club, short and thick, in one hand. The boy grinned. Then he leaped again, fast as a jungle cat.

Sam was caught off guard and landed hard, banging his head on the floor. He saw stars.

He rolled over, but the move was sluggish. The boy had jumped away to safety and was gathering himself for another assault.

Suddenly the boy, the papers and mementos on the desk, and the desk itself lifted off the floor, flew straight up, and smashed into the low ceiling.

The boy had just long enough to register surprise and pain before Dekka restored gravity and he dropped like a rock. Sam reached him before he could recover, knelt with one knee on his chest, and grabbed his head with both his hands.

“Twitch and your head’s a cinder,” Sam said.

The boy went limp.

“Good decision,” Sam said. “Dekka, get his club. Find some duct tape.” To the boy he said, “Who are you? And where’s Caine?”

“I’m Frederico. Don’t burn me up.”

“Where’s Caine?”

“Not here. They all went out the back as soon as we got here. They left me and Panda.”

Sam’s insides twisted. “They left?”

Frederico read the fear in Sam’s eyes. “You can’t beat Caine. Him and Drake, they have it all scoped.”

“I found tape,” Dekka said. “You want me to tie him up?”

“It’s a diversion,” Sam said. He punched Frederico in the nose, hard enough to distract him. Frederico roared in pain.

“Now tape him up. Fast.” He keyed the walkie-talkie. “Astrid.”

Her voice was barely audible. “Sam. Oh, my God.”

“What’s happening?”

Her answer was too garbled to understand. But in snatches of static, he heard fear.

“I screwed up,” Sam said. “It was all a trick.”

FORTY-TWO

02 HOURS, 23 MINUTES

“QUINN. QUINN.”

“Is someone yelling my name?” Quinn wondered.

Brianna pointed at the steeple. Quinn squinted and saw Astrid in dark silhouette waving her arms like a crazy person, pointing, gesticulating, yelling something.

“I’ll go see what she wants,” Brianna volunteered. She blurred, then she stopped suddenly, having just reached the top of the ladder. “Oh, my God, look.”

Racing through the street, coming up from the south, pouring down the alley, came a swarm of rough, yellow canines. They threaded through parked cars, bounded over fire hydrants, paused briefly to sniff at garbage, but overall moved with shocking speed.

They were going straight for the day care.

Brianna began pulling the ladder up. Quinn jumped to help her. They slid it up and out of the way as the first coyotes passed beneath.

“What do I do?” Quinn cried.

“Shoot them,” Brianna said.

“Coyotes? Shoot coyotes?”

“They’re not here by accident,” Brianna yelled.

One coyote, hearing them, glanced up.

“Quiet,” Quinn hissed. He crouched behind the wall and clutched the machine pistol to his chest.

“Quinn, they’re going after the littles,” Brianna said.

“I don’t know what to do.”

“Yes, you do.”

Quinn shook his head violently. “No. No one told me to shoot coyotes.”

Brianna peeked over the side and sat back down very suddenly. “It’s him. Drake. And he’s . . . there’s something wrong with him.”

Quinn didn’t want to look, didn’t want to, but Brianna’s ashen face made looking the less terrifying option. He rose just enough to get a view of the alleyway.

Swaggering along behind the coyotes came Drake Merwin.

He held in his hand a long, thick red whip.

Only he wasn’t holding it in his hand. The whip was his hand.

“Shoot him,” Brianna urged. “Do it.”

Quinn unlimbered the gun. He laid the short barrel on the Spanish tile and aimed. Drake wasn’t running, he wasn’t moving furtively, he was right in the middle of the alleyway in plain view.

“I can’t get a shot at him,” Quinn said.

“You’re lying,” Brianna accused.

Quinn licked his lips. He aimed. He wrapped his finger around the trigger.

Impossible to miss from here. Drake was no more than thirty feet away. Quinn had practiced firing the machine pistol. He had fired it at a tree trunk and seen the way it chewed through wood.

Squeeze the trigger, and the bullets would chew through Drake the same way.
Squeeze the trigger.
Drake passed directly below.
“He’s gone,” Quinn whispered.
“I couldn’t . . .,” he said.
From the day care below there came the screams of terrified children.

Mary Terrafino had had a very bad day. That morning she’d had a major pig-out, a real gorge-a-thon, as she called it. She had found a carton of snack-sized Doritos. She’d sat and torn through twenty-four snack packs.

Then she had vomited it all back up. But even that didn’t seem like enough to cleanse her of the offending food, so she had taken a strong laxative. The laxative kept her running back and forth to the bathroom all day.

Now she was sick to her stomach, wrung out, seething with anger at herself, ashamed.

Mary usually popped her pills in the morning, her Prozac and vitamins. But she was so frazzled as the day wore on that she had also popped a Diazepam she had found in her mother’s bathroom medicine cabinet. The Diazepam spread a gentle mellowness over her mind, like molasses poured into gears. On the drug everything was slow, frustrating, fuzzy. To counteract the Diazepam she poured herself a cup of coffee in a covered safety cup, stirred in sugar, and carried it with her into the classroom.

That’s when Quinn had walked through carrying a machine gun. She had shielded the kids from seeing him, but there was something deeply disturbing about the sight of a machine gun in the real world, not on TV or in a video game, but right there in front of her.

Now she sat cross-legged in circle time. A dozen kids paid varying degrees of attention as she read *Mama Cat Has Three Kittens* and *The Buffalo Storm*. She had read all the books so many times she could do them by heart.

Other kids were in various other corners playing with dress-up costumes, or painting, or stacking blocks.

Her brother, John, was doing diaper check on “the tinies,” as they now called the prees who were still in diapers.

One of Mary’s helpers, a girl named Manuela, was bouncing a little boy on her knee while trying to get a marker stain out of her blouse. She muttered under her breath as she worked.

Isabella, who had become Mary’s shadow since being brought to the day care, sat cross-legged and looked over her shoulder. Mary followed the words with her finger, word by word, thinking maybe she was teaching Isabella to read a little and feeling vaguely good about that.

She heard the sound of the back door opening. Probably Quinn wandering back through.

A scream.

Mary twisted around to see.

Screams, and a torrent of dirty yellow shapes piled into the room.

Screams as the coyotes brushed children aside, knocked them down, overturned

easels and chairs.

Screams from little throats, screams and little faces filled with terror, eyes pleading.

Isabella bolted, panicked. A coyote was on her in a flash, knocked her to the ground, and stood over her, teeth bared, growling. His slavering muzzle was six inches from her throat.

Mary didn't scream or cry, she roared. She leaped to her feet bellowing a word she would never have wanted the prees to hear. She beat the coyote's shoulders with her fists.

"Get off her!" Mary cried. "Get off her, you filthy animal!"

John tried to run to her aid and let loose a strangling cry. A coyote had the back of his hoodie in its jaws and was worrying it, shaking it like a frenzied dog with a chew toy, choking John with each twist.

Manuela stood frozen in a corner, hands over her mouth, rigid with fear.

The coyotes, excited and wild and agitated, yipped and jumped and snapped at everyone around them. A little boy named Jackson yelled at one of the coyotes, "Bad dog, bad dog!"

The animal snapped and made contact, leaving a bloody scrape on Jackson's ankle. Jackson wailed in pain and terror.

"Mary," he cried. "Mary."

Then an aged, mangy coyote snarled and the animals calmed a little. But the children were all crying and wailing and John was shaking and Manuela was clutching two of the prees to her and trying to look brave.

And then Drake stepped into the room.

"You," Mary raged. "How dare you scare these children this way!"

Drake snapped his snakelike arm. The tip of it left a red welt across Mary's cheek.

"Shut up, Mary."

The whip-crack had silenced some of the children. They stared with appalled amazement as the girl they had come to think of as their guardian touched the wound on her face.

"Caine won't like this," Mary warned. "He always said he'd keep the children safe."

"You'll be safe," Drake said. "As long as you keep your mouths shut and do what I say."

"Get these animals out of here," Mary said. "It's almost bedtime." Bedtime, like that would mean anything to the dogs, or to the monster before her.

This time, the whip snapped and wrapped itself tight around Mary's throat. She felt blood pounding in her head, tried and failed to draw breath. She dug her fingernails into the scaly flesh of the whip but couldn't budge it.

"Which part of 'shut up' do you have a problem understanding?" Drake yanked her close. "You're getting all red in the face, Mary."

She struggled, but it was no use. The living whip was as strong as a python.

"Now, you need to understand something, Mary: These dogs, as far as they're concerned, all these little kids are just so many hamburgers. They'll eat them just like they eat rabbits."

He unwrapped his tentacle from her throat. She sank to the floor, sucking air

through a throat that felt as narrow as a straw.

“What do you want?” Mary rasped. “Drake, you have to get these coyotes out of here. You can have me as a hostage. But the children don’t know what’s happening and they are scared.”

Drake laughed cruelly. “Hey, Pack Leader. You guys won’t eat the kids, will you?”

To Mary’s astonishment, the large, mangy coyote spoke. “Pack Leader agreed. No kill. No eat.”

“Until . . .,” Drake prompted.

“Until Whip Hand say.”

Drake beamed. “Whip Hand. That’s their affectionate name for me.”

Isabella, who had shrunk back into a corner, came forward with her hand extended, like she wanted to pet Pack Leader. “He can talk,” Isabella said.

“Stay back,” Mary hissed.

But Isabella ignored her. She laid her hand on Pack Leader’s neck. The coyote bristled and made a low rumbling noise. But he did not snap at her.

Isabella stroked his harsh ruff. “Good doggie,” she said.

“Just don’t get too close,” Drake said coldly. “Good doggie may get hungry.”

“He took the bait,” Panda reported. “He’s got some girl with him, too. She has some kind of mad powers, like . . . like I don’t know what to call it. She kind of makes stuff fly off the ground.”

Diana Ladris said, “It must be Dekka. We predicted she would be a problem. She and Brianna. Maybe Taylor, if she’s improved her skills.”

They were in a home belonging to no one any of them knew. Just a house on a back street a block from the school. The shades were drawn, the lights were left just as they had been. No one came or went through the front door.

“Right now my brother is rushing toward the day care,” Caine said. He could barely contain his glee. “He fell for it. He absolutely fell for it. See, the thing is, I knew he’d try to play hero and come after me.”

“Yes, you’re brilliant,” Diana said dryly. “You’re the master of all you survey.”

“Even you can’t get on my nerves. That’s how happy I am.” Caine smirked.

“Where’s Jack?” Diana asked. When Caine scowled, she said, “See? I still know how to get on your nerves.”

Diana knew that Jack had been driven from the highway into the desert. Panda and Drake had reported that. But she didn’t know what had happened after that. If Caine got his hands on Computer Jack, Diana had no doubt that the techie wizard would give her up. What would Caine do then?

In the meantime, Diana had to play it smart by pretending to be concerned by Jack’s escape or defection or whatever it should be called. It would throw Caine and Drake off the scent.

Unless they captured Jack.

She fought down a wave of fear and hid it by pouring herself a glass of water at the kitchen sink.

In the safe house, in addition to Diana and Caine, were Howard, Chunk, Mallet, and Panda. Panda was badly shaken by his run-in with Sam and Dekka. He would occasionally mutter something like “A hole blown right through the wall, could have

been my head.”

Chunk had tried entertaining them with the same Hollywood stories they’d all heard a million times before. Caine had threatened to turn him over to Drake if he didn’t shut up.

Howard was no less irritating. He sat and stewed and whined from time to time about going to look for Orc. “Orc is a soldier, man, if he made it back here, he’ll be over at the house we used to live in. It’s not that far. I could sneak over there. He’d be good to have around.”

“Orc’s dead in the desert,” Panda said harshly. “You know those coyotes got him.”

“Shut up, Panda!” Howard yelled.

The other person in the little house was Lana. Ever since Lana had demonstrated her healing powers, Caine had insisted on keeping her close. To Diana, she remained a disturbing mystery. Her eyes seemed always to be looking at something far away. She rebuffed attempts at conversation. Not angrily, not like she was upset by any of them, more like she was in a completely different place, worrying, reflecting, seeing something completely different.

There was a shadow over Lana. A hollowness in her eyes.

Caine paced back and forth, from the open kitchen area into the family room, back and forth, back and forth. He had started biting his thumb again in that stupid way he had. He stopped and threw up his hands and asked Diana, “Where is he? Where is Bug?”

Bug was one of the freaks who had signed up with Caine right at the start. Long before the FAYZ, back when Caine was first discovering his powers, learning to control them and learning to recognize others like himself. In those days it was all about getting control of the school environment: Coates had never been a nice place. Half the kids in the school were one kind of bully or another. Caine had just been determined to be the head bully, the bully who could not be bullied himself.

Bug had always been a little creep in Diana’s eyes. He didn’t rise to the level of a true bully, he was closer to being a Howard-like creature, a bootlick, a toady. He was just ten years old, a nose-picking gross-out artist. But then his power manifested one day when Frederico threatened to kick his butt. Bug, in terror, had disappeared.

Only he didn’t really disappear, it was more that he seemed to blend in, like a chameleon. You could still see him if you knew he was there. But his skin and even his clothes would take on the protective coloration of whatever was behind him, like a mirror that reflected his background. The result could be pretty creepy. Bug standing in front of a cactus would seem to be green with needles poking out.

“You know Bug,” Diana said. “He’ll show up to get his strokes. Unless Sam or one of his people spotted him.”

At that moment the front door opened and closed. Something moved that was hard to see, hard to make sense of, like a wave in the wallpaper.

“Here’s Bug now,” Diana announced.

Caine leaped at him. “What did you see?”

Bug shut down the camouflage and emerged clearly, a short, brown-haired, buck-toothed kid with a freckled nose. “I saw a lot. Sam is in town, right across from the day care. He doesn’t look like he’s doing anything.”

“What do you mean he’s not doing anything?”

"I mean, he's standing there eating Mickey D's."

Caine stared. "What?"

"He's eating. Fries. I guess he's hungry."

"Does he know Drake and Pack Leader have the littles?"

Bug shrugged. "I guess so."

"And he's just standing there?"

"What did you expect him to do?" Diana demanded. "He knows we've got the kids. He's waiting to hear what we want."

Caine bit savagely at his thumb. "He's up to something. He probably figures we have a way to watch him. So he's making sure we see him. Meanwhile, he's up to something."

"What can he do? Drake and the coyotes are in there with the kids. He has no choice. He has to do whatever you tell him to do."

Caine wasn't convinced. "He's up to something."

Lana stirred herself, looked at Caine, seeming to hear him for the first time.

"What?" Diana asked her.

"Nothing," Lana said. She patted her omnipresent dog. "Nothing at all."

"I need to go do this now," Caine said.

"The plan was to wait till we were close to the birthday hour. That way he loses no matter what."

"You think he can take me, don't you?"

"I think he's had a couple of days to prepare," Diana said. "And he's got more people. And some of his people, especially the freaks from Coates, really, really want you dead." She stepped closer to him, right up in his face. "Every step of the way, Caine, you listen to me, then you do exactly what I've told you not to do. I told you to let the freaks go who didn't want to play along. But no, you had to listen to Drake's paranoid advice. I told you to go into Perdido Beach and make a quick deal for food. You have to go try and take over. Now you're going to do whatever you want, and you'll probably end up screwing things up."

"Your faith in me is touching," Caine said.

"You're smart. You're charming. You have all this power. But your ego is out of control."

He might have lashed out, but instead, he spread his arms wide in a gesture of helplessness. "What was I supposed to do? Coates? That's it? How do you not see what an opportunity this is? We're in a whole new world. I'm the most powerful person in that whole new world. No adults. No parents or teachers or cops. It's perfect. Perfect for me. All I have to do is take care of Sam and a few others, and I'll have complete control." He was making fists by the conclusion of his rant.

"You'll never have complete control, Caine. This world is changing all the time. Animals. People. Who knows what's next? We didn't make this world, we're just the poor fools who are living in it."

"You're wrong. I'm not a fool. This is going to be my world." He slapped his chest. "Me. I'm going to run the FAYZ, the FAYZ is not going to run me."

"It's not too late to walk away."

He grinned, a dark echo of his once-charming smile. "You're wrong. It's time to win. It's time to send Bug to Sam with my terms."

“I’ll go,” Diana volunteered. It was foolish. She knew what he would say. And she could see the light of suspicion in his eyes.

“Bug. You know what to say. Go.” He pushed Bug away, and the chameleon blended into the background. The door opened and closed.

Caine took Diana’s hand. She wanted to pull it away, but she didn’t. “Everyone out of here,” Caine said.

Howard got heavily to his feet. Lana as well. When it was just the two of them, Caine and Diana, he drew her close into an awkward embrace.

“What are you doing?” she demanded stiffly.

“I’m probably going to die tonight.”

“That’s kind of melodramatic, isn’t it? One minute you’re invincible, and the next —”

He interrupted her with a rushed, lunging kiss. She let him for a few seconds. Then she pushed him back, though not with enough force to free herself from his embrace.

“What was that for?” she asked.

“It’s the least you owe me, isn’t it?” Caine said. He sounded childish, needy.

“I owe you?”

“You owe me. Besides, I thought you . . . you know.” His cockiness had given way to petulance and now his petulance was dissolving into embarrassment and confusion.

“You’re not very good at this, are you?” Diana mocked.

“What am I supposed to say? You’re hot, all right?”

Diana threw her head back and laughed. “I’m hot? That’s what you want to tell me? One minute you’re master of the FAYZ, and the next minute you’re like a pathetic little kid going for his first kiss.”

His face went dark and she knew immediately she had gone too far. His hand, fingers splayed, was in her face. She tensed, awaiting the blast of energy.

For a long time they stood that way, frozen. Diana barely breathed.

“You’re scared of me, after all, Diana,” Caine whispered. “All your attitude and all, and underneath it, you’re scared. I can see it in your eyes.”

She said nothing. He was still dangerous. At this range he had the power to kill her with a thought.

“Well, I don’t want to seem like a pathetic little kid going for his first kiss,” Caine said. “So how about you just give me what I want? How about from now on you just do what I say?”

“You’re threatening me?”

Caine nodded. “Like you said, Diana, we didn’t make the FAYZ, we just live here. Here in the FAYZ it’s all about power. I have it. You don’t.”

“I guess we’ll see if you’re as powerful as you think, Caine,” Diana said, cautious but unbowed. “I guess we’ll see.”

FORTY-THREE

02 HOURS, 22 MINUTES

THE DAY CARE had no window facing the plaza. Sam had snuck around into the alley to peek in one of the high-on-the-wall windows. He had seen the coyotes. He had recoiled from the sight of Drake.

The coyotes had instantly noted his presence. It was all but impossible to sneak up on them. Drake, looking him right in the eye, had uncoiled his whip hand and languidly drawn the shade.

The kids were huddled together, practically on top of one another, solemn and terrified and half watching *The Little Mermaid* on the TV.

Sam returned to the plaza. Neither Drake nor the coyotes could see him there. But he felt eyes on him just the same. He only slowly became aware of the kid standing beside him.

“Who are you? And how did you get there?”

“They call me Bug. I’m good at sneaking up on people.”

“I guess you are.”

“I have a message for you.”

“Yeah? What does my brother want?”

“Caine says it’s you or him.”

“I figured that.”

“He says if you don’t do what he says, he’ll turn Drake and the coyotes loose on the prees.”

Sam stifled the urge to punch the little monster for the smug way in which he had delivered his vicious threat. “Okay.”

“Okay. So, everyone has to come out in the open. All your people. Out in the open, out in the plaza where we can see them. If anyone stays in hiding, you know what happens.”

“What else?”

“Your people all set their guns or whatever on the steps of town hall. All your freaks go into the church.”

“He’s asking me to surrender before we even fight,” Sam said.

Bug shrugged. “He said if you argue, Drake is going to start turning the coyotes loose on one kid at a time. You have to do all this and then Caine and you go mano a mano. If you win, no problem, Drake lets the littles go. All your side goes free. Caine goes back to Coates.”

“Why are you doing this, Bug? You’re okay with this? Threatening little kids?”

Bug shrugged. “Man, I’m not going to mess with Caine or Drake.”

Sam nodded. His mind was already elsewhere, trying to find a way, trying to find a path. “Tell Caine I’ll answer him in an hour.”

Bug grinned. “He said you’d say that. See? He’s smart. He said you have to send your answer back with me. Yes or no, with no extras or anything.”

Sam glanced at the steeple. He wished Astrid was here. She might have an answer.

The terms were impossible. He was absolutely sure, sure beyond any reasonable

doubt, that even if he won, even if somehow Caine admitted defeat, Drake would never just walk away.

One way or the other, he had to beat Drake as well as Caine.

There were a thousand thoughts in his head, a thousand fears, yammering at him, crowding one another, demanding attention as Bug stared at him, impatient to be on his way. There was no time to make sense of it all. No time to plan. Just as Caine had intended.

Sam's shoulders slumped. "Tell Caine I accept."

"Okay," Bug said, no more concerned than he would have been by an announcement that he was having chicken for dinner.

The chameleon blended into the background, all but disappearing. Sam watched him trotting off, a warping of light and image. He soon became impossible to make out.

Sam keyed the walkie-talkie. "Astrid. Now." Edilio had been watching from his post in the hardware store. He came trotting out.

Sam steadied his breathing, kept a careful poker face. There were too many eyes on him. Too many people needing to believe in him.

On that school bus so long ago, no one had even realized there was a problem before Sam was up and taking charge. It was harder being bold when the whole world seemed to be watching your every move.

With Astrid and Edilio beside him, Sam quickly related Caine's terms. "We have very little time. Caine will send that chameleon back to spy, right after he reports back to Caine. Caine will move fast, he won't want to give us any time to prepare."

"Do you have a plan?" Astrid asked.

"Kind of. A piece of a plan, anyway. We need to stall a little. Bug sees Caine, Bug comes back, that's probably five minutes minimum wherever Caine is, probably a little more. Then Bug has to see whether we are doing what we've been told to do. He's going to see people out in the open, and he's going to see our Coates friends heading into the church. Then he'll report that back. Caine will say, 'Make sure they're all in.'"

"More time." Astrid nodded agreement. "We don't hurry. In fact, maybe we have to force some of the kids, maybe they're arguing. You're right, Caine won't show up till he's sure."

"If we're lucky, we have a half hour," Edilio said. He glanced at his watch, not easy to read in the swiftly falling night.

"Yeah. Okay. All I've done so far is screw up. So if this is crazy, someone tell me."

"You're our guy, Sam," Edilio said.

Astrid squeezed his hand.

"Then here's what we do."

Mary read.

She sang.

She did everything short of tap-dance. But there was no distracting the children from the horror before them. With solemn, fearful expressions they followed Drake's every move. The whip hand filled every eye.

Some of the coyotes had gone to sleep. Others, though, eyed the children with a look that could only be described as hungry.

Mary wished she had another Diazepam or maybe three or maybe ten. Her hands shook. Her insides churned. She needed to go to the bathroom, but she needed to stay with the children, too.

Her brother, John, was changing a diaper, no different from usual, except that John's mouth was an upside-down "U" of trembling lips.

Mary read, "I would not eat green eggs and ham. I do not like them, Sam-I-am."

And in her head, going around and around like a crazed merry-go-round she could not stop, was the question: What do I do? What do I do if . . . What do I do when . . . What do I do?

A boy named Jackson raised his hand. "Mother Mary? The dogs stink."

Mary kept reading. "I will not eat them in the rain. I will not eat them on a train . . ."

It was true, the coyotes did stink. The smell of them was suffocating, the heavy scent of musk and dead animals. They urinated freely against crib legs and tables and chose the corner with the dress-up clothes to defecate.

But the coyotes were not at ease, far from it. They were jumpy, nervous, unused to being in an enclosed space, not used to being around humans. Pack Leader maintained order with snarls and yips, but even he was jumpy and unsettled.

Only Drake seemed at ease. He lounged in the glider that Mary used to rock the tinies to sleep at night or feed them a bottle. He was endlessly fascinated by his whip hand, kept holding it up for inspection, coiling and uncoiling it, reveling in it.

Save the kids? Save John? Could she save anyone? Could she save herself?

What do I do?

What do I do when the killing starts?

Suddenly a girl was there. Taylor. Just there in the middle of the room.

"Hi. I brought food," she announced. She held a plastic McDonald's tray. It was piled high with uncooked hamburgers.

Every coyote head snapped around. Drake was too slow to react, caught off guard.

Taylor flung the tray against the common wall shared by the day care and the hardware store. Meat slid down the gaily painted cinder blocks.

Drake's whip hand cracked.

But Taylor was gone.

The coyotes hesitated only a moment. Then they lunged toward the meat. In a flash they were snarling and snapping at one another, pushing, jostling, climbing over one another in a feeding frenzy.

Drake jumped to his feet and yelled, "Pack Leader, get a grip on them." But Pack Leader had joined the frenzy, laying about him viciously to establish his dominance and his share of the sudden bounty.

Two things happened at almost the same instant. The wall shuddered and cracked and the coyotes nearest to it suddenly floated upward, their paws scrabbling in midair.

"Dekka," Drake snarled.

There was a blinding flash of green-white light and like a butane torch cutting through tissue paper, a hole two feet across appeared in the cinder block. The hole was high up on the wall, well above the heads of the children but right about where the suddenly weightless coyotes were floating. One of the coyotes caught a straight blast. The beam of light cut it in two. The segments floated, spraying weightless globules of

red.

The children screamed and John screamed and Drake backed away from the wall, away from the zone of weightlessness.

Edilio's head appeared in the hole. "Mary. Down on the floor."

"Everyone get down!" Mary screamed, and John threw himself onto a runaway toddler.

Edilio yelled, "Sam, go!"

A new hole burned lower down, chest level, and this time the beams of light scoured the room, blasting walls covered in faded art projects, burning through coyotes, setting them alight to float like flaming Macy's parade balloons.

"Okay, Dekka," Edilio yelled.

The coyotes hit the ground hard, some dead, some alive, but none with any desire for a fight. The door flew open, yanked by some unseen hand, and the animals ran over one another trying to escape.

"Pack Leader!" Drake bellowed. "You coward!"

The annihilating beam of light swung toward him. He hit the floor, cursing, and rolled out toward the door.

Quinn felt as well as heard the wall between the day care and the hardware store rumble and crack.

A few seconds later he saw the coyotes pouring in a panicked jumble into the alley and racing off this way and that.

And then Drake appeared.

Quinn shrank down behind the parapet. Brianna rushed boldly to look over.

"It's Drake. Now's your chance."

"Get down, you idiot," Quinn hissed.

She rounded on him, furious. "Give me the gun, you wimp."

"You don't even know how to shoot it," Quinn whined. "Besides, he's probably already gone. He was running."

Brianna looked again. "He's hiding. He's behind the Dumpster."

Quinn nerved himself to look, just a peek, just enough to see. Brianna was right: Drake was behind the Dumpster, waiting.

The back door of the hardware store opened and Sam emerged alone. He looked left and right, but was unable to spot Drake.

Brianna yelled, "Sam, behind the Dumpster."

Sam whirled, but Drake was too quick. He snapped his whip, slashed Sam's defensive arm, and ran straight at and over Sam.

Sam landed on his back and rolled over quickly, but not quickly enough. With inhuman speed, the whip hand sliced the air and cut a bright stripe across Sam's back, right through his shirt.

Sam cried out.

Brianna began hauling the aluminum ladder to the edge, but her speed betrayed her. She lost control of the ladder and it clattered down into the alley.

Drake had his whip around Sam's throat now, choking, squeezing. Killing.

Quinn could see Sam's face turning red. Sam thrust his hands back over his shoulders and fired blind.

The beams singed Drake's face but did not stop him. He threw Sam hard against the alley wall. Quinn heard the sickening crunch of skull on brick. Sam slumped, barely conscious.

"Forget Caine," Drake crowed, "I'm taking you down myself."

He raised his whip hand, ready to bring it down with enough force to lay Sam open from hip to neck.

Quinn fired.

The kick of the gun in his hands surprised him. It had happened without conscious thought. He hadn't aimed, hadn't carefully squeezed the trigger like he'd learned to do, he'd just fired on instinct.

The bullets left pockmarks in the brick.

Drake whirled, and Quinn rose shakily to his feet, standing now in full view.

"You," Drake said.

"I don't want to have to kill anyone," Quinn said in a shaky voice that barely carried.

"You'll die for this, Quinn."

Quinn swallowed hard, and this time took careful aim.

That was too much for Drake. With a furious snarl he ran from the alley.

Sam was slow getting up. To Quinn, he looked like an old man standing up after slipping on the ice. But he looked up at Quinn and performed a sort of salute.

"I owe you, Quinn."

"I'm sorry I didn't get him," Quinn answered.

Sam shook his head. "Man, don't ever be sorry you don't want to kill someone." Then, spotting Brianna, he shook off his weariness and said, "Breeze? With me. Quinn, anyone comes back toward the day care, you don't have to shoot them, all right? But fire into the air so we know."

"I can do that," Quinn said.

Sam ran toward the plaza, confident that Brianna would catch up quickly. She was with him in seconds.

"What's up?" she asked.

"Everyone's putting on a show of complying with Caine's terms. If we're lucky, Bug will report back that we're obeying before Drake gets back to tell Caine that we've retaken the day care."

"You want me to go after Drake?"

"Use those fast feet. Find him if you can, but don't try to fight him, just tell me."

She was gone before he could add, "Be careful."

Sam broke into a trot that seemed painfully slow compared with the way Brianna moved. The kids, the normals, more than a hundred of them, all who could be rounded up on short notice, were milling around at one end of the plaza. Sam was counting on Caine not knowing exactly how many kids were in Perdido Beach, or how many were in town as opposed to hiding in their homes. He needed to make it look convincing, but Caine's demand left room for some few to still be hidden away with Edilio.

Astrid and Little Pete, Dekka and Taylor and the rest of the Coates Freaks were entering the church, protesting loudly, making a show of it.

Sam strode to the fountain and jumped up on the side. "Okay, Bug, I know you're

watching. Go tell Caine we've done what he asked. Tell him I'm waiting. Tell him if he's not a coward, to come here and face me like a man."

He jumped down, ignoring the stares of the hundred or more kids huddled scared and vulnerable in the plaza.

Had Bug seen what went down in the day care? He had certainly heard the shots. Hopefully he would interpret them as coming from Drake himself, or as target practice.

And just as dangerous, would Drake be able to warn Caine? He should find out soon. Either way, Sam doubted that Caine could resist a face-to-face confrontation. His ego demanded it.

Sam's walkie-talkie crackled. He had the volume turned down low and had to hold it to his ear to hear Astrid.

"Sam."

"Are you okay in the church, Astrid?"

"We're both okay. We're all okay. The day care?"

"Safe."

"Thank God."

"Listen, get everyone in there to lie down. Get them under the pews—that may give them some protection."

"I feel useless here."

"Just keep Little Pete calm, he's the wild card. He's like a stick of dynamite. We don't know what he might do."

"I think a vial of nitroglycerin would be a more apt analogy. Dynamite is actually quite stable."

Sam smiled. "You know it always gets me hot when you say 'apt analogy.'"

"Why do you think I do it?"

Knowing that she was right there, just fifty feet away, smiling sadly, scared but trying to be brave, sent a wave of longing and worry through him that almost brought tears to his eyes.

He wished Quinn had been able to eliminate Drake. But he suspected his friend would not have survived with his soul intact if he had. Some people could do things like that. Some couldn't. That second group were probably the luckier ones.

"Come on, Caine," Sam whispered to himself. "Let's do this."

Brianna blurred up next to him. "Drake went to his house. You know, the place where he was staying."

"Is Caine there?"

"I don't think so."

"Good job, Breeze. Now go into the church. Go slowly so Bug can see you if he's watching."

"I want to help."

"That's what I need you to do, Brianna."

She trudged off, making a show of it. Sam was alone. The normals huddled at the far end of the plaza as Caine had ordered. The freaks—Sam hated using the word, but it was hard not to—were in the church.

And now it came down to him and Caine.

Would Caine come?

Would he come alone?

Sam glanced at his watch. In just a little over an hour, it wouldn't matter.
From not far enough away, he heard a coyote howl.

FORTY-FOUR

01 HOURS, 06 MINUTES

“THEY’RE DOING IT,” Bug yelled as he burst through the door.

“All right,” Caine said. “Showtime. Everyone load up. Into the cars.”

There was a scramble for the door. Chaz, Chunk, Mallet, and a much-abashed Frederico, who had finally freed himself from duct-tape bondage, all raced for the station wagon in the garage. Diana, oozing suppressed rage from every pore, followed. Panda grabbed Lana by the arm and pushed her toward the door.

Only then did Caine realize someone was missing. “Where’s Howard?”

“I . . . I don’t know,” Panda admitted. “I didn’t see him leave.”

“Useless worm. Without Orc, he’s dead weight,” Caine said. “Forget him.”

The second car in the garage was a luxury car, an Audi with a sunroof. Panda jumped behind the wheel, and Diana rode shotgun. Caine took the backseat for himself.

Panda pushed the automatic garage door remote control. Both doors rose.

Both cars lurched forward. The Subaru wagon promptly crunched into the side of the Audi.

Chaz was driving the wagon. He rolled down his window. “Sorry.”

“Great start,” Diana said.

“Go,” Caine ordered tersely.

Panda accelerated into the street, keeping his speed to a prudent twenty-five miles per hour. The wagon stayed a block back.

“Bada bum bada bum bada bum bum bum.” Diana began humming the *William Tell Overture*.

“Knock it off,” Caine snapped.

They had gone two blocks when Panda slammed on the brakes.

A dozen coyotes streaked across the street.

Caine rose up through the sunroof and yelled, “What are you doing? Where are you going?”

Pack Leader stopped and glared with yellow eyes. “Whip Hand gone,” he snarled.

“What? What happened at the day care?”

“Whip Hand go. Pack Leader go,” the coyote said.

“No way,” Caine said. To Diana, he said, “They’ve got the day care. What do I do?”

“You tell me, Fearless Leader.”

Caine slammed his fist down on the roof of the car. “Okay, Pack Leader, unless you’re a coward, follow me.”

“Pack Leader follows the Darkness. All others follow Pack Leader. Pack is hungry. Pack must eat.”

“I’ve got food for you,” Caine said. “There’s a plaza full of kids.”

Pack Leader hesitated.

“It’s easy,” Caine said. “You can come with me and take as many kids as you want. Get every one of your coyotes. Bring them all. It’s a buffet.”

Pack Leader yipped a command to his pack. The coyotes circled back toward him.

“Follow us,” Caine cried, caught up in it now, eyes wild and excited. “We go straight toward the plaza. You go straight at the kids there. It will work perfectly.”

“The fire fist is there?”

Caine frowned. “Who? Oh. Sam. Fire fist, huh? Yes, he’ll be there, but I’ll take care of him.”

Pack Leader seemed dubious.

“If Pack Leader is frightened, maybe someone else should be pack leader.”

“Pack Leader no fear.”

“Then let’s kick,” Caine said.

“Oh, man,” Howard said. “Oh God, oh God, what happened to you, Orc?”

He had slipped out of Caine’s hideout and made his way to the house he had once shared with Orc. He found his protector there, sitting on a couch that had broken beneath Orc’s weight, collapsed in the middle. Empty beer bottles were everywhere.

Orc held up a game controller. “My fingers are too big to work this thing.”

“Orc, man, how did this . . . I mean, man, what happened to you?”

Orc’s face was still half his own. His left eye, his left ear and the hair above it, and all of his mouth were still recognizably Orc. But the rest of him was like some slumping statue made of gravel. He was at least a head taller than he had been. His legs were as big around as tree trunks, his arms as thick as fire hydrants. He had burst through his clothing, which now hung from him and provided the barest degree of modesty.

When he shifted in his seat, he made a sound like wet stones.

“How did this happen, dude?”

“It’s a judgment on me,” Orc said flatly.

“What’s that mean, man?”

“For hitting Bette. It’s God, Howard. It’s His judgment on me.”

Howard fought the urge to turn and run screaming. He tried to look at Orc’s one human eye but he found himself looking into the other eye, a yellow oyster beneath a brow of stone.

“Can you move? Can you stand up?”

Orc grunted and stood much more easily than Howard expected.

“Yeah. I still have to be able to get up to pee,” Orc said.

“What happens when it spreads to your mouth?”

“I think it’s done spreading. It stopped a few hours ago, maybe.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Nah. But it itches when it’s spreading.” As if to illustrate, he used one of his sausage-sized stone fingers to scratch the line between his gravel nose and his human cheek.

“Heavy as you are, man, you must be pretty strong just to stand up.”

“Yeah.” Orc dipped his hand into the cooler by his feet and came up with a can of beer. He tilted his head back and opened his mouth. He squeezed the top of the can and it blew out an eruption of liquid and foam. Orc swallowed what landed in his mouth. The rest dribbled down his face onto his rocky chest. “Only way I can open ’em now. My fingers are too big to pull the tab.”

“What are you doing, man? You just been sitting here drinking beer?”

“What else am I gonna do?” He shrugged his slag heap shoulders. His human eye was either crying or teared up. “Thing is, I’m almost out of beer.”

“Man, you have to get back in the game. There’s a war coming. You need to be in on it, making your statement, you know?”

“I just want to get some more beer.”

“Okay, then. That’s what we’ll do, Orc. We’ll get some more beer.”

Stars filled the sky.

The moon glinted off the steeple.

A coyote howled, a wild ululation, a ghostly cry of despair.

In his mind Sam saw the mutants in the church. He saw Edilio concealed with a handful of trusted kids in the smoked-out ruins of the apartment building. He saw Quinn on the roof with the machine gun he might use or not. He saw the kids milling and lost and scared at the south end of the plaza. And Mary and the little kids still in the day care. And Dahra in the church basement awaiting casualties.

Drake had retreated. For now.

What would Orc do?

Where was Caine?

And what would happen in one hour when the clock ticked and marked exactly fifteen years since Sam had been born, linked though he hadn’t known it to a brother named Caine?

Could he beat Caine?

He had to beat Caine.

And somehow he had to destroy Drake as well. If—when—Sam stepped outside, took the big jump, poofed, he didn’t want to leave Astrid to Drake’s mercy.

He knew he should be scared of the end. Scared of the mysterious process that would, it seemed, simply subtract Sam Temple from the FAYZ. But he wasn’t as worried for himself as he was for Astrid.

Less than two weeks ago she had been an abstraction, an ideal, a girl he could check out furtively, but without ever revealing his own interest. And now she was almost all he thought about as his own personal clock ticked down toward a sudden and possibly fatal disappearance.

How would Caine play it, that’s what the rest of his mind turned over and over. Would Caine walk into town like a gunslinger in some ancient cowboy movie?

Would they stand at thirty paces and draw?

Which would be more powerful? The twin with the power of light, or the twin with the power to move matter?

It was dark.

Sam hated the dark. He had always known that when the end came for him it would be in the dark.

Dark and alone.

Where was Caine?

Was Bug watching him even now?

Would Edilio do what Quinn could not?

What surprise would Caine have up his sleeve?

Taylor appeared standing a few feet away. She looked like she'd just come from an interview with a demon. Her face was white, her eyes wide, glittering in the light of streetlamps. "They're coming," she said.

Sam nodded, braced his shoulders, consciously slowed the sudden sprint of his heart. "Good," he said.

"No, not him," Taylor said. "The coyotes."

"What? Where?"

Taylor pointed over his shoulder.

Sam spun. They came at a run, full out from two directions, racing straight for the unprotected crowd of children.

It was like some classroom nature film. Like watching as a lion pride attacked a herd of antelope. Only this herd was human. This herd had no reservoir of lightning speed.

Helpless.

Panic swept them. They surged toward the middle, kids at the edges seeing their doom approach on swift paws.

Sam broke into a run, raised his one good hand, looked for a target, yelled. But then, the loud roar of a car engine.

He skidded to a halt, spun again. Headlights raced down the street past the church. A dusty SUV. It slammed into the curb surrounding the plaza, jumped the sidewalk, and came to a shuddering stop that sent up clods of damp dirt.

Behind it other cars, racing.

Screams as the coyotes neared the human herd.

Sam stretched out his hand and green fire lanced toward the left-side swarm of coyotes.

He couldn't fire at the other column, they were blocked by panicky, running children, all now racing toward Sam for protection and so making it impossible for him to beam.

"Get down, get down, get down," he yelled. "On the ground!" But it was useless.

"Save me!" said Computer Jack, falling from the SUV.

An Audi skidded to a stop in front of the church. Someone was standing up in the sunroof.

A scream of sheer terror and pain. Someone was down, struggling against a coyote twice his size.

"Edilio! Now!" Sam roared.

"Having a bad night, brother?" Caine shouted, exultant. "It's going to get worse."

Caine raised his hands, aimed not at Sam, not at Sam at all. Instead, he directed the impossible energy of his telekinesis at the church. It was as if an invisible giant, a creature the size of a dinosaur, had leaned against the ancient limestone. The stone cracked. The stained-glass window shattered. The door of the church, the weak point, blew inward, knocked clear off its hinges.

"Astrid!" Sam cried.

Screams, panicked screams from the plaza, mixed with snarls and wild yelps as the coyotes fell on the children.

Suddenly the impossibly loud clatter of a machine gun. Fire blasted from the roof of the day care.

Edilio running from the burned building, three others behind him, charging the coyotes.

Caine blasted again and this time the invisible monster, the beast of energy, pushed hard, hard against the front of the church.

The side windows, all the ancient stained glass and the new, exploded in a sparkling shower. The steeple swayed.

“How you going to save them, Sam?” Caine exulted. “One more push and it collapses.”

Jack at Sam’s feet, clutching him, tripping him, strangely strong.

Sam fired blindly at Caine as he fell.

“I can save you! Save me!” Jack pleaded. “The poof, I can save you.”

Sam fell hard, kicked at Jack’s grasping hands, wiggled free, and stood up in time to see the front wall of the church sag and collapse slowly, slowly inward.

The roof shuddered and slumped. The steeple teetered but did not fall. But tons of limestone and plaster and massive wooden beams fell in with a crash like the end of the world.

“Astrid!” Sam cried again, helpless.

He ran straight at Caine, ignoring the massacre behind him, blocking the screams and the ravening growls and the staccato of machine guns.

He aimed and fired.

The beam hit the front of Caine’s car. The sheet metal blistered, and Caine climbed awkwardly out through the sunroof while others Sam didn’t care enough to identify bolted through the doors.

Sam fired and Caine dodged.

A blast hit Sam, stopped him as dead as if he’d run into a wall. He searched wildly for Caine. Where? Where?

Muffled screams from inside the church joined the background roar, a noise out of a child’s hell, high-pitched cries for mother, agonized cries, desperate, pleading.

A flash of movement and Sam fired.

Caine fired back and the statue on the fountain was blown off its pedestal and fell with a splash in the fetid water.

Sam was up and running. He had to find Caine, had to find him, kill him, kill him.

More machine guns firing and Edilio’s voice yelling, “No, no, no, stop firing, you’re hitting kids!”

Sam rounded the burning Audi. Caine running ahead, leaping a fire hydrant.

Sam fired and the ground under Caine’s feet burst into flame and oily black smoke. The pavement itself was burning. Caine went sprawling onto the street, rolled quickly, got to one knee, and Sam took a massive blow that laid him flat on his back, stunned, blood coming from his mouth and ears, limbs all askew, unable to . . . unable . . .

Caine, a wild, bloody, screaming face.

Sam felt hatred burn through him and erupt from his hands.

Caine jumped aside, too slow, and the scourging light seared his side. Shirt burning, Caine screamed and beat at the flame.

Sam tried to stand, but his head was swimming.

Caine bolted into the burned-out apartment building, through the same door Sam had entered to try and save the little firestarter.

Sam wobbled but ran after him.

Up the stairs and to the scorched hallway, still stinking of smoke. The top floor was a wreckage of burned timbers and asphalt-tiled slopes of roof like children's slides, and fragments of walls and incongruous jutting pipes.

A blast and Sam could actually see the half-wall beside him ripple from the impact.

"Caine. Let's finish this," Sam rasped.

"Come get me, brother," Caine cried in a pain-squeezed voice. "I'll bring this place down on us both."

Sam located the sound of his voice and ran down the hallway, ran beneath the stairs, firing the deadly light from his hands.

No Caine.

A creaking door, still hanging from hinges though the wall around it was gone, swung slowly.

Sam kicked it, spun, and fired into the room.

A charred wooden beam flew through the air. Sam ducked under it. The next one hit his left arm, shattering the elbow. More debris, a torrent of it, drove Sam back.

Suddenly, there was Caine, not ten feet from him.

Caine's hands were raised over his head, fingers splayed, palms out. Sam clutched his shattered left elbow with his right hand.

"Game over, Sam," Caine said.

Something blurred behind Caine and he reeled. He clutched his skull.

Brianna stood over him, brandishing her hammer.

"Run, Breeze!" Sam yelled, but too late. Even as he staggered backward, Caine fired at point-blank range and Brianna flew backward into the wall, through the wall.

Caine jumped after her through the opening.

Sam fired into the wall, burned a hole. Through it he could see Caine blowing away the next wall.

Sam felt the floor buckle beneath him.

The building was collapsing.

He turned and ran, but all at once the floor was gone and he was running in midair, falling, and the building with him, all around him, on him.

He fell and the world fell on him.

FORTY-FIVE

14 MINUTES

QUINN WATCHED IN frozen horror as the coyotes attacked the children.

He saw Sam fire and miss.

He saw Sam agonize for a terrible moment as Caine attacked the church.

Sam ran toward the church.

Quinn shouted, "No!"

He aimed.

"Don't hit the kids, don't the kids," he sobbed, and squeezed the trigger. Aiming at the mass of coyotes. So many more than before.

The coyotes barely noticed him.

One fell, twisting, like it had tripped, and didn't get up.

Then he could shoot no more, the beasts were in with the kids. He ran for the ladder and slid and fell and landed hard in the alley.

Run away, his brain screamed, run from it. He took three panicked steps away, toward the beach, running toward the beach, but then, as though some invisible force had taken hold of him, he stopped.

"Can't run away, Quinn," he told himself.

"Can't."

And even as he said the words, he was running back, into the day care, pushing past Mary shielding a child in her arms, past her out to the plaza, wielding the gun as a club now, running and screaming his head off like a lunatic, swinging the gun butt to a sickening crunch on a coyote's skull.

Edilio was there and kids were shooting and Edilio was shouting, "No, no, no," and then blood was in Quinn's eyes and blood was in his brain and blood was everywhere and he lost his mind, lost his mind swinging and screaming and hitting, hitting, hitting.

Mary clutched Isabella to her and huddled with John, and the kids cried hearing the madness outside, the screams and snarls and guns.

"Jesus, save us, Jesus, save us," someone was repeating in a racked, sobbing voice, and Mary knew in some distant way that it was her.

Drake heard the coyote howl in the night and knew in his black heart what it meant.

Enough of licking his wounds.

The battle was joined.

"Time," he said. "Time to show them all."

He kicked his own front door open and marched toward the plaza, shouting, shouting, wishing he could bay at the moon like the coyotes.

He heard guns firing and pulled his pistol from his belt and uncoiled his whip hand and snapped it, loving the crack it made.

Ahead, two figures were moving away from him, also heading for the sound of battle, two figures. One seemed impossibly small. But no, it was the other that was impossibly big. Sumo big. A shuffling, slumping, thick-limbed creature.

The two mismatched ones moved into a pool of light cast by a streetlamp. Drake recognized the smaller one.

“Howard, you traitor,” Drake shouted.

Howard stopped. The beast beside him kept walking.

“You don’t want any of this, Drake,” Howard warned.

Drake whipped him across the chest, tore Howard’s shirt open, left a trail of blood that was black in the harsh light.

“You better be on your way to help take down Sam,” Drake warned.

The rough beast stopped. It turned slowly and came back.

“What is that?” Drake demanded sharply.

“You,” the beast muttered.

“Orc?” Drake cried, half thrilled, half terrified.

“It’s your fault I did it,” Orc said dully.

“Get out of my way,” Drake ordered. “There’s a fight. Come with me or die right now.”

“He just wants some beer, Drake,” Howard said placatingly, clutching the wound in his chest, hunched over in pain, but still trying to manipulate, still trying to be clever.

“God’s judgment on me,” Orc slurred.

“You stupid lump,” Drake said, and whirled his whip hand and brought it down full force on Orc’s shoulder.

“AAHHH!” Orc bellowed in pain.

“Get moving, you moron,” Drake ordered.

Orc got moving. But not toward the plaza.

“You want a piece of Whip Hand, freak?” Drake demanded. “I’ll cut you up.”

Astrid felt a crushing weight on her lower back and legs. She was facedown, lying on top of Little Pete. She was stunned, but had enough presence of mind to understand that she was stunned.

She took a deep breath.

She whispered, “Petey.” She heard the sound through her bones. Her ears were ringing, muffling sound.

Little Pete wasn’t moving.

She tried to draw her legs up, but they wouldn’t move.

“Petey, Petey,” she cried.

She wiped something out of her eyes, dust, dirt, sweat, and blinked to focus on her brother. She had shielded most of his body from the falling wall, but a chunk of plaster the size of a backpack lay on his head.

She bit back a sob. She pressed two fingers against his neck and felt a pulse. She could feel his shallow breathing, the rise and fall of his chest, beneath her.

“Help,” she croaked, unsure if she was shouting or whispering, unable to hear for the ringing.

“Someone help us. Someone help us.”

“Save my brother.”

“Save him,” she pleaded, and the plea became a prayer. “Save Sam. Save us all.”

She began to recite from memory a prayer she’d heard once long ago. Her voice

was faraway, someone else's voice.

"St. Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle. Be our defense against the wickedness and snares of the devil." She could feel more than hear her own sobbing, a racking shudder that twisted the words in her throat.

As if in mocking answer to her plea for mercy, a shower of glass and plaster fragments fell around her.

"May God rebuke him, we humbly pray. And do you, O prince of the heavenly host, by the power of God . . ."

Little Pete stirred and groaned. He moved his head and she could see the deep gash, pushed inward, a cleaver-mark in his head.

". . . cast into Hell Satan and all the evil spirits who prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls."

Someone stood on the rubble above her. She twisted her neck and saw, silhouetted against the high ceiling in a sudden flash of green lightning, a dark face.

"Amen."

"I'm not exactly an angel, let alone an archangel," Dekka said in a voice Astrid could only just make out. "But I can get this stuff off you."

Caine leaped from the wreckage of the building.

He had done it.

He had done it.

Sam was under the tangled debris, buried. Beaten.

But Caine could scarcely enjoy the moment. The pain from the damaged left side of his body was shocking. The dangerous green-white light had fused his shirt to his flesh and the result was beyond any agony he had ever imagined.

He staggered toward the ruined church, trying to make sense of the chaos around him. There was no more gunfire, but there were still screams and cries and snarls. And something else, a series of tiny sonic booms, the crack of a bullwhip. Below that, a bass drum keeping a random beat.

Caine stopped, stared, momentarily forgetting his pain.

On the steps of the town hall a titanic battle raged between Drake and some rough-hewn monster.

Drake cracked his whip hand and fired his pistol.

The monster lunged with clumsy blows that missed again and again as Drake danced around, whipping and whipping and yet not even backing the beast up.

The beast swung and missed Drake by inches. The stony fist slammed one of the limestone pillars in front of the town hall. The pillar cracked and almost shattered. Little stone chips flew.

Caine's gaze was drawn downward by a snarling, slurring, high-pitched voice.

"Female say Pack Leader stop," Pack Leader said angrily.

"What?" Caine could make no sense of it till he saw Diana striding up, dark hair flying, eyes furious.

"I told this filthy beast to stop," Diana said, barely controlled.

"Stop what?" Caine demanded.

"They're still attacking the kids," Diana said. "We've won. Sam is dead. Call them off, Caine."

Caine turned his attention back to the battle between Drake and the monster. "They're coyotes," Caine said coldly.

Diana flew at him. "You've lost your mind, Caine. This has to stop. You've won. This has to stop."

"Or what, Diana? Or what?" Caine demanded. "Go get Lana. I'm hurt. Pack Leader, do what you want."

"Maybe this is why your mother abandoned you," Diana said savagely. "Maybe she could see that you weren't just bad, you were twisted and sick and evil."

Caine reacted with sudden violence, forgetting his powers and slapping her hard across the face.

Diana tripped backward from the blow and sat down hard on the stone steps.

Caine could see her face with sudden, terrible clarity by the glow of a brilliant column of blinding, green-white light.

That light could have only one source.

The light was like a spear aimed at the sky. It arced upward from the midst of the rubble of the apartment building.

"No," Caine said.

But the light burned, burned away rubble and debris, all the crushing weight of the collapsed apartment building.

"No," Caine said, and the light died, snapped off.

Behind him, Drake and Orc carried on their quick-and-slow, nimble-and-heavy, sharp-and-dull battle, but all Caine could see was the blackened, soot-covered, bright-eyed figure who now walked toward him from the rubble.

Caine aimed his hands at the shattered wood and plaster of the church front. He threw his hands toward Sam and a truckload of debris went flying.

Sam raised his hands. Green fire exploded chunks of brick and heavy wooden beams. They burned in midair, turning to cinders before they could hit him.

Dekka raised the debris off Astrid and Little Pete.

But it was no easy thing. Her ability to suspend gravity suspended it under Astrid as well, and she and Little Pete floated up in a spinning galaxy of broken lumber and plaster.

Dekka darted a hand in and yanked Astrid out of the suspension zone. Astrid hit the floor along with Little Pete.

Dekka released her hold on the debris and it slammed down, scarily loud.

"Thanks," Astrid said.

"There's a lot of other people trapped in here," Dekka said, wasting no time in moving off to help others.

Astrid bent down and tried to lift Little Pete. He was limp, just dead weight. She got her arms around his chest and hugged him close like a too-large baby. She hugged him to her and staggered awkwardly from the church, half dragging him, stumbling across rubble.

Lana could heal him, but Lana was gone. All she could think of was to get him to Dahra down in the basement. But what could Dahra do? Was it even possible to reach the so-called hospital, or had the entrance been blocked by falling debris?

For the first time she realized that the front wall of the church was simply gone.

She could see night sky and stars. But she could also see a terrible green-tinged lightning.

Her hearing was returning as the ringing subsided. She could make out animal growls and the sharp crack of a whip and too many voices crying.

Suddenly the debris piled around her began to fly.

Astrid dropped to the ground, shielding Little Pete again, still, always protecting Little Pete. Chunks of wall and shards of wood paneling and odd steel-and-wood joints rose like jets taking off from an airport and accelerated crazily, flying in a stream out through the broken church front.

The green lightning flashed and there came a sound of explosions, a roar of explosions and a brighter light still.

The debris stream stopped.

Astrid climbed up again, hauling Little Pete with her.

Someone ran toward her from the street. He stopped, panting, staring, a frightened animal at bay.

“Caine,” Astrid spat.

He did not speak. She could see that he was hurt. In pain. His face was streaked with sweat and dirt. He stared at her like he was seeing a ghost.

A dangerous light dawned in his clouded eyes.

“Perfect,” he whispered.

Astrid felt herself lifted off her feet. She clung desperately to Little Pete, but he slipped from her hands, escaped her clawing fingers, and fell to the floor.

“Come out and play, brother,” Caine shouted. “I have a friend of yours.”

Astrid floated, powerless, helpless, and Caine strode behind her, using her as a shield. Out through the church front, out onto the steps, looking out on a nightmare scene of mad dogs and raging battles.

Sam was there at the bottom of the steps. He was bloodied and bruised, and one arm hung limp.

“Come on, Sam, burn me now,” Caine shrieked. “Come on, brother, show me what you’ve got.”

“Hiding behind a girl, Caine?” Sam asked.

“You think you can taunt me?” Caine said. “All that matters is winning. So save it.”

“I’ll kill you, Caine.”

“No. No you won’t. Not without killing your girlfriend.”

“We’re both going to blink out of here in about a minute, Caine. It’s over for both of us,” Sam said.

“Maybe for you, Sam. Not for me. I know the way. I know the way to stay.” He laughed in wild triumph.

Astrid said, “Sam, you have to do it. Destroy him.”

Diana was mounting the stairs.

“Yeah, Sam, destroy me,” Caine mocked. “You have the power. Just burn a hole right through her and you’ll get me, too.”

Diana said, “Caine, put her down. Be a man, for once.”

“Put her down, Caine,” Sam said. “It’s the end. Fifteen and out. I don’t know what it is, but it may be death, and you don’t want to die with more blood on your hands.”

Caine laughed mirthlessly. “You know nothing about me. You didn’t grow up not knowing who you were. You didn’t have to create yourself out of your own imagination, out of your own will.”

“I grew up with no father at all,” Sam said. “And no explanation. And no truth. Same as you.”

Caine glanced at his watch. “I think time is up for you, Sam. You go first, remember? And here’s what I want you to know before you go: I’m going to survive, Sam. I’m going to be here still. Me and your lovely Astrid and all of the FAYZ. All of it mine.”

Diana said, “Sam, the way you beat the poof is—”

Caine rounded on her, raised his hand, and blasted her in mid-sentence. She flew through the air, somersaulted backward and landed across the street on the grass of the plaza.

The effort had distracted Caine. He dropped Astrid.

Sam extended his hand, palm out.

FORTY-SIX

01 MINUTES

A CLEAR SHOT.

With a thought, he could kill Caine.

But the world around him faded. Astrid, lying in a heap, seemed bleached, colorless, almost translucent. Caine himself, a ghost.

No sound. The screams of children were muted. The battle between Drake and Orc moved in slow motion, the attacks by the coyotes, all of it frame-by-frame, human and beast and monster.

Sam's body was numb, as if it had died and left only his brain still whirring away inside his skull.

It's time, a voice said.

He knew that voice and the sound of it was a knife in his guts.

His mother stood before him. She was as beautiful as she had always been to him. Her hair stirred in a breeze he did not feel. Her blue eyes were the only true color.

"Happy birthday," she said.

"No," he whispered, though his lips did not move.

"You really are the man now," she said, and her mouth made a wry smile.

"My little man," she said.

"No."

She stretched out her hand to him. "Come."

"I can't," he said.

"Sam, I'm your mother. I love you. Come with me."

"Mom . . ."

"Just reach out to me. I'm safe. I can carry you away, out of this place."

Sam shook his head slowly, slowly, like he was drowning in molasses. Something was happening to time. Astrid wasn't breathing. Nothing was moving. The whole world was frozen.

"It will be like it was," his mother said.

"It was never . . .," he began. "You lied to me. You never told me . . ."

"I never lied," she said, and frowned at him, disappointed.

"You never told me I had a brother. You never told—"

"Just come with me," she said, impatient now, jerking her hand a little like she would when he was a little kid and refused to take her hand to cross the street. "Come with me now, Sam. You'll be safe and out of this place."

He reacted instinctively, the little boy again, reacted to the "mommy" voice, the "obey me" voice. He reached for her, stretched his hand out to her.

And pulled it back.

"I can't," Sam whispered. "I have someone I have to stay here for."

Anger flashed in his mother's eyes, a green light, surreal, before she blinked and it was gone.

And then, out of the bleached, unreal world, Caine stepped into the eerie light.

Sam's mother smiled at Caine, and he stared at her wonderingly. "Nurse Temple,"

Caine said.

“Mom,” she corrected. “It’s time for both my boys to join me, to come away with me. Out of this place.”

Caine seemed spellbound, unable to tear his gaze away from the gentle, smiling face, the piercing blue eyes.

“Why?” Caine asked in a small child’s voice.

Their mother said nothing. Once again, for just a heartbeat, her blue eyes glowed a toxic green before returning to cool, icy blue.

“Why him and not me?” Caine asked.

“It’s time to come with me now,” their mother insisted. “We’ll be a family. Far from here.”

“You first, Sam,” Caine said. “Go with your mother.”

“No,” Sam said.

Caine’s face darkened with rage. “Go, Sam. Go. Go. Go with her.” He was shouting now. He seemed to want to grab Sam physically, push him toward the mother they had not quite shared, but his movements were odd, disjointed, a jerky stick figure in a dream.

Caine gave up trying. “Jack told you,” he said dully.

“No one told me anything,” Sam said. “I have things I have to do here.”

Their mother extended her arms to them, angry, demanding to be heeded. “Come to me. Come to me.”

Caine shook his head slowly. “No.”

“But you’re the man of the house now, Sam,” his mother wheedled. “My little man. Mine.”

“No,” Sam said. “I’m my own man.”

“And I was never yours,” Caine sneered. “Too late now, Mother.”

The face of their mother wavered. The tender flesh seemed to break apart in jigsaw-puzzle pieces. The gently smiling, pleading mouth melted, collapsed inward. In its place a mouth ringed with needle-sharp teeth. Eyes filled with green fire.

“I’ll have you yet,” the monster raged with sudden violence.

Caine stared in horror. “What are you?”

“What am I?” the monster mocked him savagely. “I’m your future. You’ll come to me on your own in the dark place, Caine. You will come willingly to me.”

“No,” Caine protested.

The monster laughed, a cruel sound from that piranha’s mouth.

Slowly the monster faded. Color bled back into the world around Sam and Caine. Orc and Drake accelerated back to normal speed. The air smelled of gunpowder again. Astrid drew breath.

Sam and Caine stood facing each other.

The world was the world. Their world. The FAYZ. Diana stared. Astrid gasped and opened her eyes.

Caine was quick. He raised his hands, palms out.

But Sam was quicker. He leaped toward Caine, stepped inside his reach, and grabbed his brother’s head with his good hand.

Sam’s palm was flat against Caine’s temple, his fingers curved into his hair.

“Don’t make me do this,” Sam warned.

Caine didn't try to back away. His eyes were wild with defiance. "Go ahead, Sam," Caine whispered.

Sam shook his head. "No."

"Pity?" Caine sneered.

"You have to leave, Caine," Sam said softly. "I don't want to kill you. But you can't be here."

Brianna zoomed up, screeched to a halt, and leveled a gun at Caine. "If Sam doesn't get you, I will. You sure aren't faster than the Breeze."

Caine ignored her contemptuously. But he would never get the chance to attack Sam now. Brianna was too fast to defy.

"It's a mistake to let me live, Sam," Caine warned. "You know I'll be back."

"Don't. Don't come back. Next time . . ."

"Next time one of us will kill the other," Caine said.

"Walk away. Stay away."

"Never," Caine said with some of his old bravado. "Diana?"

"She can stay here," Astrid said.

"Can you, Diana?" Caine asked her.

"Astrid the Genius," Diana said in her mocking way. "So intelligent. So clueless."

Diana stepped close to Sam, cupped his cheek with her hand, and planted a light kiss on the corner of his mouth. "Sorry, Sam. The bad girl ends up with the bad boy. It's the way the world works. Especially this world."

She went to Caine. She did not take his extended hand, did not even look at him, but walked beside him as he descended the steps.

The battle between Drake and Orc had staggered to an exhausted draw. Drake was raising his whip hand once more to bring it down on Orc's pylon shoulders, but his movements were slow, leaden.

"Knock it off, Drake," Diana said. "Don't you know when the fight is over?"

"Never," Drake gasped.

Caine raised his hand and almost casually pulled the struggling, cursing Drake after him.

The coyotes, those still alive, followed them out of town.

Edilio raised his gun and took aim at the retreating beasts, human and not. His eyes locked with Brianna's, the two of them ready.

Sam said, "No, man. War's over."

Edilio lowered the gun reluctantly.

"Put it down, Breeze. Let it go," Sam said.

Brianna obeyed, more relieved than anything.

Quinn climbed the steps to stand with Edilio. He was spattered with blood. He threw his own gun down on the ground. He sent Sam a bleak, infinitely sad look.

Patrick bounded up excitedly, and with him, Lana. "Sam, let me see that arm," she said.

"No," Sam said. "I'm fine. Go to the others. Save them, Lana. I couldn't. Maybe you can. Start with Little Pete. He's . . . he's very important."

Astrid had gone back into the church to find her brother. She reappeared, holding him under the arms, dragging him. "Help me," Astrid begged, and Lana ran to her.

Sam wanted to go to Astrid. He needed to. But utter weariness rooted him to the spot. He leaned his good hand on Edilio's strong shoulder.

"I guess we won," Sam said.

"Yeah," Edilio agreed. "I'll get the backhoe. Got a lot of holes to dig."

FINAL

THE FOOD SEEMED almost to crush the tables. Turkey and dressing, cranberry sauce, and the biggest collection of pies Sam had ever seen.

The tables were set up first at the south end of the plaza. But then Albert realized that people didn't want to be away from the rows of graves at the north end, they wanted to stay near them. The dead were to be included in this Thanksgiving.

They ate off paper plates and used plastic forks, sat on the few chairs or on the grass.

There was laughter.

There were snuffles, and tears as well, as people remembered Thanksgivings past.

There was music from a stereo system rigged up by Computer Jack.

Lana had worked around the clock for days to heal everyone who could be healed. Dahra had been at her side, organizing, prioritizing the worst cases, handing out support and pain pills to those who had to wait. Cookie had missed the fight entirely, but had become Dahra's faithful nurse, using his size and strength to lift the injured.

Mary brought the prees out for the big feast. She and her brother, John, prepared plates for them, spoon-fed some of them, and changed diapers on blankets spread on the grass.

Orc sat with Howard in a corner by themselves. Orc had fought Drake to a standstill. But no one—least of all Orc—had forgotten Bette.

The plaza was a disaster. The burned apartment building was a wreck. The church had only three walls now, and the steeple would probably topple over if there was ever a storm.

They had burned the dead coyotes. Their ashes and bones filled several large trash cans.

Sam watched it all, standing a little apart, balancing a plate of food and trying not to spill the dressing.

"Astrid, tell me if this is crazy: I'm thinking if there are any leftovers, we could send them up to Coates," Sam said. "You know, a peace offering."

"No. Not crazy," she said. Astrid put her arm around his waist.

"You know, I've had this plan in mind for a while," Sam said.

"What plan?"

"It involved you and me just sitting on the beach."

"Just sitting?"

"Well . . ."

"He says, allowing his elliptical tone to imply any number of things."

Sam smiled. "I'm all about elliptical implications."

"Are you going to tell me what happened during the big blink?"

"I am. I will. Maybe not today." He nodded toward Little Pete, who hunched over a plate of food and rocked back and forth. "I'm glad he's okay."

"Yeah," Astrid said shortly. Then, "I think the injury, the blow to his head . . . oh,

never mind. Let's not talk about Petey for once. Give your speech and then let's go and see if you even know what 'elliptical' means."

"My speech?"

"Everyone's waiting," she said.

Sure enough, he realized, there were expectant glances in his direction and a feeling of unfinished business in the air.

"Got any more good quotes I can rip off?"

She thought for a moment. "Okay, here's one. 'With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds. . . .' President Lincoln."

Sam said, "Yeah, that's totally going to happen, I'm going to give a speech that sounds like that."

"They're all still scared," she said. Then she corrected herself. "We're all still scared."

"It's not over," Sam said. "You know that."

"It's over for today."

"We have pie," he agreed. Then, with a sigh, he climbed up onto the edge of the fountain. "Um, people."

It wasn't hard to get their attention. They gathered around. Even the littlest ones toned down their giggling, at least a bit.

"First of all, thanks to Albert and his helpers for this meal. Let's give it up for the true Mac Daddy."

A round of hearty applause and some laughter, and Albert waved sheepishly. He frowned a little too, obviously conflicted about the use of the "Mac" prefix in a way that was not approved in the McDonald's manual.

"And we have to mention Lana and Dahra, because without them, there would be a lot fewer of us here."

Now the applause was almost reverential.

"Our first Thanksgiving in the FAYZ," Sam said when the applause died down.

"Hope it's our last," someone shouted.

"Yeah. You got that right," Sam agreed. "But we're here. We're here in this place we never wanted to be. And we're scared. And I'm not going to lie and tell you that from here on, it will all be easy. It won't be. It will be hard. And we'll be scared some more, I guess. And sad. And lonely. Some terrible things have happened. Some terrible things . . ." For a moment, he lost his way. But then he stood up straighter again. "But, still, we are grateful, and we give thanks to God, if you believe in Him, or to fate, or to just ourselves, all of us here."

"To you, Sam," someone shouted.

"No, no, no." He waved that off. "No. We give thanks to the nineteen kids who are buried right there." He pointed at the six rows of three, plus the one who started a seventh row. Neat hand-painted wooden tombstones bore the names of Bette and too many others.

"And we give thanks to the heroes who are standing around here right now eating turkey. Too many names to mention, and they'd all just be embarrassed, anyway, but we all know them."

There was a wave of loud, sustained applause, and many faces turned toward Edilio and Dekka, Taylor and Brianna, and some toward Quinn.

“We all hope this will end. We all hope we’ll soon be back in the world with people we love. But right now, we’re here. We’re in the FAYZ. And what we’re going to do is work together, and look out for each other, and help each other.” People nodded, some high-fived.

“Most of us are from Perdido Beach. Some are from Coates. Some of us are . . . well, a little strange.” A few titters. “And some of us are not. But we’re all here now, we’re all in it together. We’re going to survive. If this is our world now . . . I mean, it is our world now. It is our world. So, let’s make it a good one.”

He stepped down in silence.

Then someone started clapping rhythmically and saying, “Sam, Sam, Sam.” Others joined in, and soon every person in the plaza, even some of the prees, was chanting his name.

Quinn was there, and Edilio and Lana.

Sam said to Quinn, “Would you do me a favor and keep an eye on Little Pete?”

“No prob, brah.”

“Where are you going?” Edilio asked.

“We’re going to the beach.” Sam took Astrid’s hand.

“You want us to come?” Edilio asked.

Lana put her arm through his and said, “No, Edilio: they don’t.”

The boy walked stiffly, favoring the half-healed burn on his side. The coyote walked just ahead, leading the way through the desert. The sun set to the west, sending long shadows from boulders and brush, painting the mountain’s face an eerie orange.

“How much farther?” Caine asked.

“Soon,” Pack Leader said. “The Darkness is near.”

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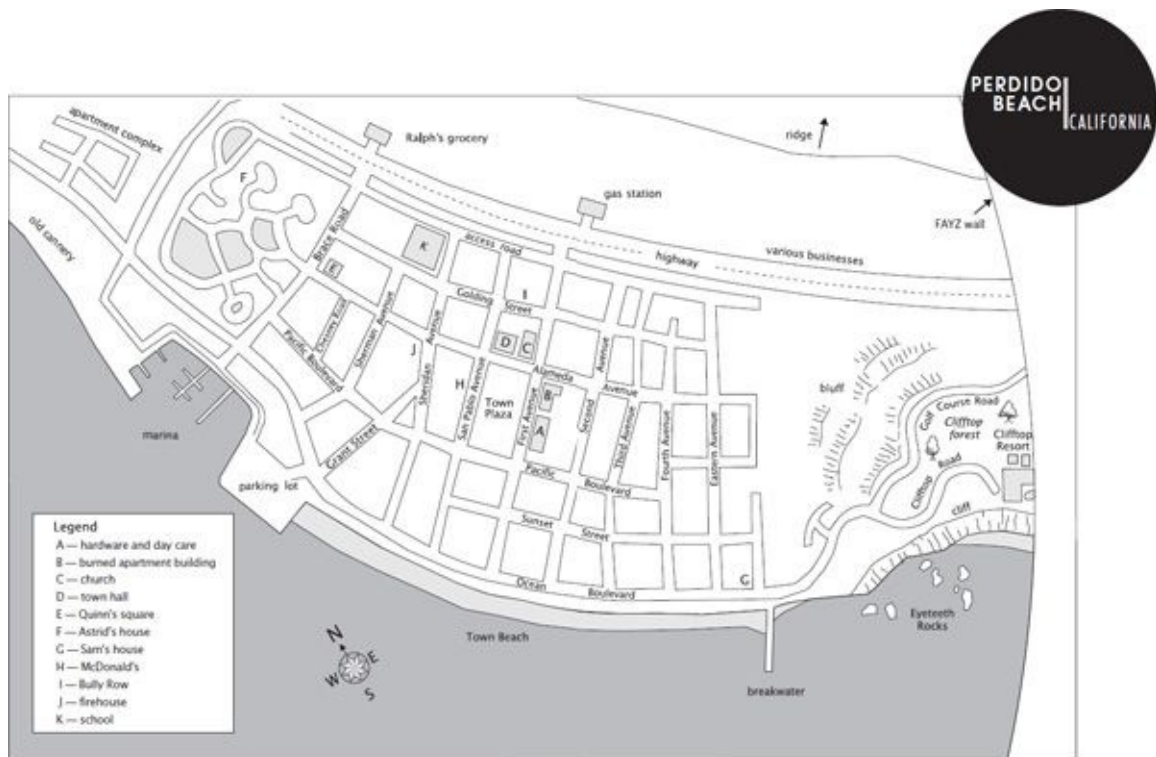
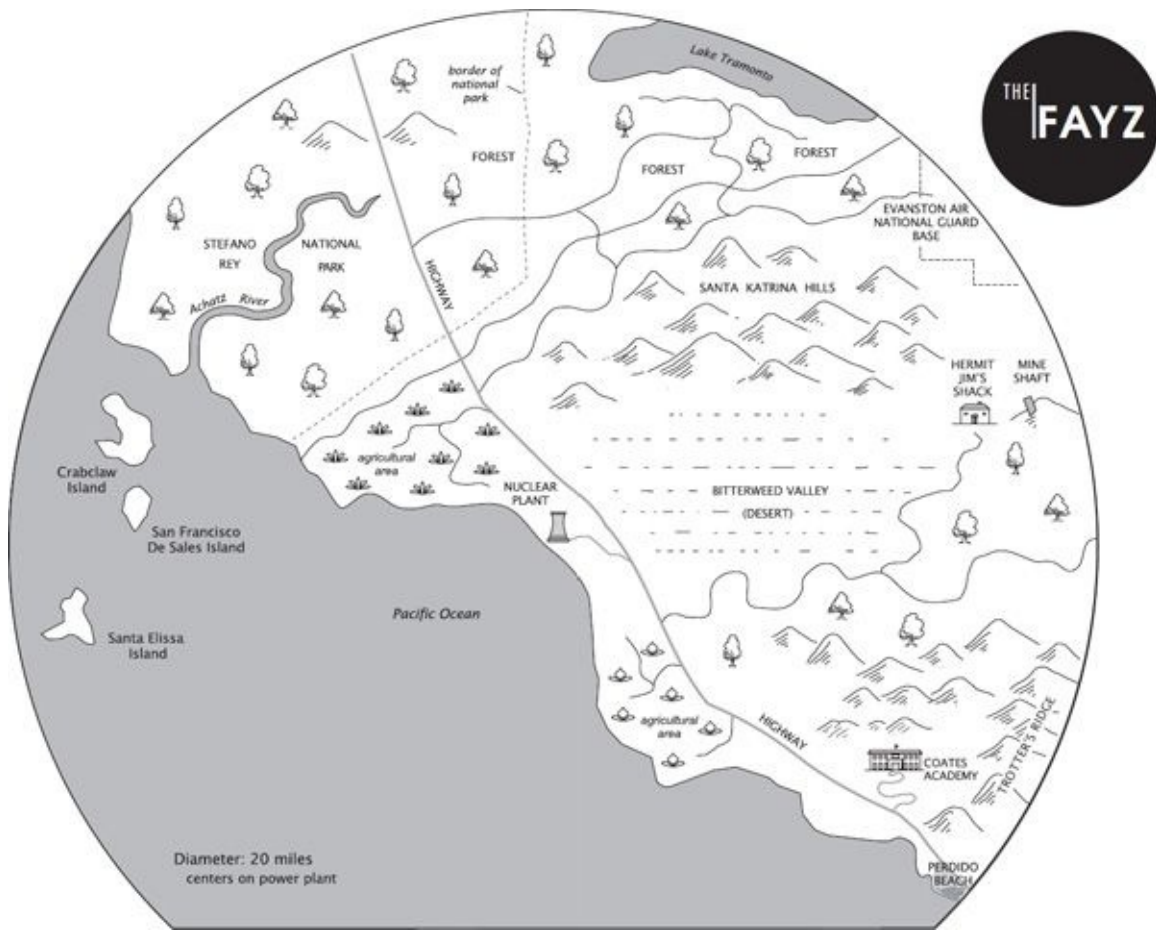
HUNGER

A GONE NOVEL

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MAPS





HUNGER

A GONE Novel



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MICHAEL GRANT

DEDICATION

For Katherine, Jake, and Julia

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Three Days Later

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ONE

106 HOURS, 29 MINUTES

SAM TEMPLE WAS on his board. And there were waves. Honest-to-God swooping, crashing, churning, salt-smelling, white-foam waves.

And there he was about two hundred feet out, the perfect place to catch a wave, lying facedown, hands and feet in the water, almost numb from cold, while at the same time his wet-suit-encased, sunbaked back was steaming.

Quinn was there, too, lolling beside him, waiting for a good ride, waiting for the wave that would pick them up and hurl them toward the beach.

Sam woke suddenly, choking on dust.

He blinked and looked around at the dry landscape. Instinctively he glanced toward the southwest, toward the ocean. Couldn't see it from here. And there hadn't been a wave in a long time.

Sam believed he'd sell his soul to ride just one more real wave.

He backhanded the sweat from his brow. The sun was like a blowtorch, way too hot for this early in the day. He'd had too little sleep. Too much stuff to deal with. Stuff. Always stuff.

The heat, the sound of the engine, and the rhythmic jerking of the Jeep as it labored down the dusty road conspired to force his eyelids closed again. He squeezed them shut, hard, then opened them wide, willing himself to stay awake.

The dream stayed with him. The memory taunted him. He could stand it all so much better, he told himself, the constant fear, the even more constant load of trivia and responsibility, if there were still waves. But there had been no waves for three months. No waves at all, nothing but ripples.

Three months after the coming of the FAYZ, Sam had still not learned to drive a car. Learning to drive would have been one more thing, one more hassle, one more pain in the butt. So Edilio Escobar drove the Jeep, and Sam rode shotgun. In the backseat Albert Hillsborough sat stiff and quiet. Beside him was a kid named E.Z., singing along to his iPod.

Sam pushed his fingers through his hair, which was way too long. He hadn't had a haircut in more than three months. His hand came back dirty, clotted with dust. Fortunately the electricity was still on in Perdido Beach, which meant light, and perhaps better still, hot water. If he couldn't go for a cold surf, he could at least look forward to a long, hot shower after they all got back.

A shower. Maybe a few minutes with Astrid, just the two of them. A meal. Well, not a meal, no. A can of something slimy was not a meal. His hurried breakfast had been a can of collard greens.

It was amazing what you could gag down when you got hungry enough. And Sam, like everyone else in the FAYZ, was hungry.

He closed his eyes, not sleepy now, just wanting to see Astrid's face clearly.

It was the one compensation. He'd lost his mother, his favorite pastime, his privacy, his freedom, and the entire world he'd known . . . but he'd gained Astrid.

Before the FAYZ he'd always thought of her as unapproachable. Now, as a couple,

they seemed inevitable. But he wondered whether he'd have ever done more than gaze wistfully from afar if the FAYZ hadn't happened.

Edilio applied a little brake. The road ahead was torn up. Someone had gouged the dirt road, drawn rough angled lines across it.

Edilio pointed to a tractor set up to pull a plow. The tractor was overturned in the middle of a field. On the day the FAYZ came the farmer had disappeared, along with the rest of the adults, but the tractor had kept right on going, tearing up the road, running straight into the next field, stopping only when an irrigation ditch had tipped it over.

Edilio took the Jeep over the furrows at a crawl, then picked up speed again.

There wasn't much to the left or right of the road, just bare dirt, fallow fields, and patches of colorless grass broken up by the occasional lonely stand of trees. But up ahead was green, lots of it.

Sam turned in his seat to get Albert's attention. "So what is that up there, again?"

"Cabbage," Albert said. Albert was an eighth grader, narrow-shouldered, self-contained; dressed in pressed khaki pants, a pale blue polo shirt, and brown loafers—what a much older person would call "business casual." He was a kid no one had paid much attention to before, just one of a handful of African-American students at the Perdido Beach School. But no one ignored Albert anymore: he had reopened and run the town's McDonald's. At least he had until the burgers and the fries and the chicken nuggets ran out.

Even the ketchup. That was gone now, too.

The mere memory of hamburgers made Sam's stomach growl. "Cabbage?" he repeated.

Albert nodded toward Edilio. "That's what Edilio says. He's the one who found it yesterday."

"Cabbage?" Sam asked Edilio.

"It makes you fart," Edilio said with a wink. "But we can't be too choosy."

"I guess it wouldn't be so bad if we had coleslaw," Sam said. "Tell you the truth, I could happily eat a cabbage right now."

"You know what I had for breakfast?" Edilio asked. "A can of succotash."

"What exactly is succotash?" Sam asked.

"Lima beans and corn. Mixed together." Edilio braked at the edge of the field. "Not exactly fried eggs and sausage."

"Is that the official Honduran breakfast?" Sam asked.

Edilio snorted. "Man, the official Honduran breakfast when you're poor is a corn tortilla, some leftover beans, and on a good day a banana. On a bad day it's just the tortilla." He killed the engine and set the emergency brake. "This isn't my first time being hungry."

Sam stood up in the Jeep and stretched before jumping to the ground. He was a naturally athletic kid but in no way physically intimidating. He had brown hair with glints of gold, blue eyes, and a tan that reached all the way down to his bones. Maybe he was a little taller than average, maybe in a little better shape, but no one would pick him for a future in the NFL.

Sam Temple was one of the two oldest people in the FAYZ. He was fifteen.

"Hey. That looks like lettuce," E.Z. said, wrapping his earbuds carefully around his

iPod.

“If only,” Sam said gloomily. “So far we have avocados, that’s fine, and cantaloupes, which is excellent news. But we are finding way too much broccoli and artichokes. Lots of artichokes. Now cabbage.”

“We may get the oranges back eventually,” Edilio said. “The trees looked okay. It was just the fruit was ripe and didn’t get picked, so they rotted.”

“Astrid says things are ripening at weird times,” Sam said. “Not normal.”

“As Quinn likes to say, ‘We’re a long way from normal,’” Edilio said.

“Who’s going to pick all these?” Sam wondered aloud. It was what Astrid would have called a rhetorical question.

Albert started to say something, then stopped himself when E.Z. said, “Hey, I’ll go grab one of these cabbages right now. I’m starving.” He unwound the earbuds and stuck them back in.

The cabbages were a foot or so apart within their rows, and each row was two feet from the next. The soil in between was crumbled and dry. The cabbages looked more like thick-leafed houseplants than like something you might actually eat.

It didn’t look much different from a dozen other fields Sam had seen during this farm tour.

No, Sam corrected himself, there *is* something different. He couldn’t quite figure out what it was, but there was something different here. Sam frowned and tried to work through the feeling he was having, tried to decide why he felt something was . . . off.

It was quieter, maybe.

Sam took a swig from a water bottle. He heard Albert counting under his breath, shading his eyes with his hand and multiplying. “Totally just a ballpark guess, figuring each cabbage weighs maybe a pound and a half, right? I’m thinking we have ourselves maybe thirty thousand pounds of cabbage.”

“I don’t even want to think about how many farts this all translates to,” E.Z. yelled over his shoulder as he marched purposefully into the field.

E.Z. was a sixth grader but seemed older. He was tall for his age, a little chubby. Thin, dishwater-blond hair hung down to his shoulders. He was wearing a Hard Rock Cafe T-shirt from Cancún. E.Z. was a good name for him: he was easy to get along with, would banter easily, laugh easily, and usually find whatever fun there was to be found. He stopped about two dozen rows into the field and said, “This looks like the cabbage for me.”

“How can you tell?” Edilio called back.

E.Z. pulled one earbud out and Edilio repeated the question.

“I’m tired of walking. This must be the right cabbage. How do I pick it?”

Edilio shrugged. “Man, I think you may need a knife.”

“Nah.” E.Z. replaced the earbud, bent over, and yanked at the plant. He got a handful of leaves for his effort.

“You see what I’m saying,” Edilio commented.

“Where are the birds?” Sam asked, finally figuring out what was bothering him.

“What birds?” Edilio said. Then he nodded. “You’re right, man, there’ve been seagulls all over the other fields. Especially in the morning.”

Perdido Beach had quite a population of seagulls. In the old days they had lived off

bits of bait left by fishermen and food scraps dropped near trash cans. There were no more food scraps in the FAYZ. Not anymore. So the enterprising gulls had gone into the fields to compete with crows and pigeons. One of the reasons so much of the food they'd found was spoiled.

"They must not like cabbage," Albert commented. He sighed. "I don't honestly know anyone who does."

E.Z. squatted down before the cabbage, rubbed his hands in preparation, worked them down beneath the leaves, down to cradle the cabbage. Then he fell back on his rear end. "Ow!" he yelled.

"Not so easy, is it?" Edilio teased.

"Ah! Ah!" E.Z. jumped to his feet. He was holding his right hand with his left and staring hard at his hand. "No, no, no."

Sam had been only half listening. His mind was elsewhere, scanning for the missing birds, but the terror in E.Z.'s voice snapped his head around. "What's the matter?"

"Something bit me!" E.Z. cried. "Oh, oh, it hurts. It hurts. It—" E.Z. let loose a scream of agony. The scream started low and went higher, higher into hysteria.

Sam saw what looked like a black question mark on E.Z.'s pant leg.

"Snake!" Sam said to Edilio.

E.Z.'s arm went into a spasm. It shook violently. It was as if some invisible giant had hold of it and were yanking his arm as hard and as fast as it could.

E.Z. screamed and screamed and began a lunatic dance. "They're in my feet!" he cried. "They're in my feet!"

Sam stood paralyzed for a few seconds, just a few seconds—but later in memory it would seem so long. Too long.

He leaped forward, rushing toward E.Z. He was brought down hard by a flying tackle from Edilio.

"What are you doing?" Sam demanded, and struggled to free himself.

"Man, look. Look!" Edilio whispered.

Sam's face was mere feet from the first row of cabbages. The soil was alive. Worms. Worms as big as garter snakes were seething up from beneath the dirt. Dozens. Maybe hundreds. All heading toward E.Z., who screamed again and again in agony mixed with confusion.

Sam rose to his feet but went no closer to the edge of the cabbage field. The worms did not move beyond the first row of turned soil. There might as well have been a wall, the worms all on one side.

E.Z. came staggering wildly toward Sam, walking as if he were being electrocuted, jerking, flailing like some crazy puppet with half its strings cut.

Three, four feet away, a long arm-stretch away, Sam saw the worm erupt from the skin of E.Z.'s throat.

And then another from his jaw, just in front of his ear.

E.Z., no longer screaming, sagged to the ground, just sat there limp, cross-legged.

"Help me," E.Z. whispered. "Sam . . ."

E.Z.'s eyes were on Sam. Pleading. Fading. Then just staring, blank.

The only sounds now came from the worms. Their hundreds of mouths seemed to make a single sound, one big mouth chewing wetly.

A worm spilled from E.Z.'s mouth.

Sam raised his hands, palms out.

"Sam, no!" Albert yelled. Then, in a quieter voice, "He's already dead. He's already dead."

"Albert's right, man. Don't do it, don't burn them, they're staying in the field, don't give them a reason to come after us," Edilio hissed. His strong hands still dug into Sam's shoulders, like he was holding Sam back, though Sam wasn't trying to escape any longer.

"And don't touch him," Edilio sobbed. "*Perdóneme*, God forgive me, don't touch him."

The black worms swarmed over and through E.Z.'s body. Like ants swarming a dead beetle.

It felt like a very long time before the worms slithered away and tunneled back into the earth.

What they left behind was no longer recognizable as a human being.

"There's a rope here," Albert said, stepping down at last from the Jeep. He tried to tie a lasso, but his hands were shaking too badly. He handed the rope to Edilio, who formed a loop and after six misses finally snagged what was left of E.Z.'s right foot. Together they dragged the remains from the field.

A single tardy worm crawled from the mess and headed back toward the cabbages. Sam snatched up a rock the size of a softball and smashed it down on the worm's back. The worm stopped moving.

"I'll come back with a shovel," Edilio said. "We can't take E.Z. home, man, he's got two little brothers. They don't need to be seeing this. We'll bury him here.

"If these things spread . . .," Edilio began.

"If they spread to the other fields, we all starve," Albert said.

Sam fought a powerful urge to throw up. E.Z. was mostly bones now, picked not quite clean. Sam had seen terrible things since the FAYZ began, but nothing this gruesome.

He wiped his hands on his jeans, wanting to hit back, wishing it made sense to blast the field, burn as much of it as he could reach, keep burning it until the worms shriveled and crisped.

But that was food out there.

Sam knelt beside the mess in the dirt. "You were a good kid, E.Z. Sorry. I . . . sorry." There was music, tinny, but recognizable, still coming from E.Z.'s iPod.

Sam lifted the shiny thing and tapped the pause icon.

Then he stood up and kicked the dead worm out of the way. He held his hands out as though he were a minister about to bless the body.

Albert and Edilio knew better. They both backed away.

Brilliant light shot from Sam's palms.

The body burned, crisped, turned black. Bones made loud snapping noises as they cracked from the heat. After a while Sam stopped. What was left behind was ash, a heap of gray and black ashes that could have been the residue of a backyard barbecue.

"There was nothing you could have done, Sam," Edilio said, knowing that look on his friend's face, knowing that gray, haggard look of guilt. "It's the FAYZ, man. It's just the FAYZ."

TWO

106 HOURS, 16 MINUTES

THE ROOF WAS on crooked. The blistering bright sun stabbed a ray straight down into Caine's eye through the gap between crumbled wall and sagging roof.

Caine lay on his back, sweating into a pillow that had no case. A dank sheet wrapped around his bare legs, twisted to cover half his naked torso. He was awake again, or at least he thought he was, believed he was.

Hoped he was.

It wasn't his bed. It belonged to an old man named Mose, the groundskeeper for Coates Academy.

Of course Mose was gone. Gone with all the other adults. And all the older kids. Everyone . . . *almost* everyone . . . over the age of fourteen. Gone.

Gone where?

No one knew.

Just gone. Beyond the barrier. Out of the giant fishbowl called the FAYZ. Maybe dead. Maybe not. But definitely gone.

Diana opened the door with a kick. She was carrying a tray and balanced on the tray was a bottle of water and a can of Goya brand garbanzo beans.

"Are you decent?" Diana asked.

He didn't answer. He didn't understand the question.

"Are you covered?" she asked, putting some irritation into her tone. She set the tray on the side table.

Caine didn't bother to answer. He sat up. His head swam as he did. He reached for the water.

"Why is the roof messed up like that? What if it rains?" He was surprised by the sound of his own voice. He was hoarse. His voice had none of its usual persuasive smoothness.

Diana was pitiless. "What are you, stupid now as well as crazy?"

A phantom memory passed through him, leaving him feeling uneasy. "Did I do something?"

"You lifted the roof up."

He turned his hands around to look at his palms. "Did I?"

"Another nightmare," Diana said.

Caine twisted open the bottle and drank. "I remember now. I thought it was crushing me. I thought something was going to step on the house and crush it, squash me under it. So I pushed back."

"Uh-huh. Eat some beans."

"I don't like beans."

"No one likes beans," Diana said. "But this isn't your neighborhood Applebee's. And I'm not your waitress. Beans are what we have. So eat some beans. You need food."

Caine frowned. "How long have I been like this?"

"Like what?" Diana mocked him. "Like a mental patient who can't tell if he's in

reality or in a dream?"

He nodded. The smell of the beans was sickening. But he was suddenly hungry. And he remembered now: food was in short supply. Memory was coming back. The mad delusion was fading. He couldn't quite reach normal, but he could see it.

"Three months, give or take a week," Diana said. "We had the big shoot-out in Perdido Beach. You wandered off into the desert with Pack Leader and were gone for three days. When you came back you were pale, dehydrated, and . . . well, like you are."

"Pack Leader." The words, the creature they represented, made Caine wince. Pack Leader, the dominant coyote, the one who had somehow attained a limited sort of speech. Pack Leader, the faithful, fearful servant of . . . of it. Of it. Of the thing in the mine shaft.

The Darkness, they called it.

Caine swayed and before he rolled off the bed, Diana caught him, grabbed his shoulders, kept him up. But then she saw the warning sign in his eyes and muttered a curse and managed to get the wastebasket in front of him just as he vomited.

He didn't produce much. Just a little yellow liquid.

"Lovely," she said, and curled her lip. "On second thought, don't eat any beans. I don't want to see them come back up."

Caine rinsed his mouth with some of the water. "Why are we here? This is Mose's cottage."

"Because you're too dangerous. No one at Coates wants you around until you get a grip on yourself."

He blinked at another returning memory. "I hurt someone."

"You thought Chunk was some kind of monster. You were yelling a word. Gaiaphage. Then you smacked Chunk through a wall."

"Is he okay?"

"Caine. In the movies a guy can get knocked through a wall and get up like it's no big deal. This wasn't a movie. The wall was brick. Chunk looked like roadkill. Like when a raccoon gets run over and over and over and keeps getting run over for a couple of days."

The harshness of her words was too much even for Diana herself. She gritted her teeth and said, "Sorry. It wasn't pretty. I never liked Chunk, but it wasn't something I can just forget, okay?"

"I've been kind of out of my mind," Caine said.

Diana wiped angrily at a tear. "Answer the question: Can you give an example of understatement?"

"I think I'm better now," Caine said. "Not all the way better. Not all the way. But better."

"Well, happy day," Diana said.

For the first time in weeks Caine focused on her face. She was beautiful, Diana Ladrin was, with enormous dark eyes and long brown hair and a mouth that defaulted to smirk.

"You could have ended up like Chunk," Caine said. "But you've been taking care of me, anyway."

She shrugged. "It's a hard new world. I have a choice: stick by you, or take my

chances with Drake.”

“Drake.” The name conjured dark images. Dream or reality? “What’s Drake doing?”

“Playing junior Caine. Supposedly representing you. Secretly hoping you’ll just die, if you ask me. He raided the grocery store and stole some food a few days ago. It’s made him almost popular. Kids don’t have a lot of judgment when they’re hungry.”

“And my brother?”

“Sam?”

“I don’t have another long-lost brother, do I?”

“Bug’s gone into town a couple of times to see what’s going on. He says people still have a little food but they’re getting worried about it. Especially since Drake’s raid. But Sam is totally in charge there.”

“Hand me my pants,” Caine said.

Diana did as he asked, then ostentatiously turned away as he pulled them on.

“What defenses do they have up?” Caine asked.

“They keep people all over the grocery store now, that’s the main thing. Now Ralph’s always has four guys with guns sitting on the roof.”

Caine nodded. He bit at his thumbnail, an old habit. “How about freaks?”

“They have Dekka and Brianna and Taylor. They have Jack. They may have some other useful freaks, Bug isn’t sure. They have Lana to heal people. And Bug thinks they have a kid who can fire some kind of heat wave.”

“Like Sam?”

“No. Sam’s like a blowtorch. This kid is like a microwave. You don’t see any flames or anything. It’s just that suddenly your head is cooking like a breakfast burrito in a KitchenAid.”

“People are still developing powers,” Caine said. “Any here?”

Diana shrugged. “Who knows for sure? Who’s going to be crazy enough to tell Drake? Down in town a new mutant gets some respect. Up here? Maybe they get killed.”

“Yeah,” Caine said. “That was a mistake. Coming down on the freaks, that was a mistake. We need them.”

“Plus, in addition to some possible new moofs, Sam’s people still have machine guns. And they still have Sam,” Diana said. “So how about if we don’t do something stupid like try and fight them again?”

“Moofs?”

“Short for mutant. Mutant freaks. Moofs.” Diana shrugged. “Moofs, muties, freaks. We’re out of food, but we’ve got plenty of nicknames.”

Caine’s shirt was laid over the back of a chair. He reached for it, wobbled, and seemed about to fall over. Diana steadied him. He glared at her hand on his arm. “I can walk.”

He glanced up and caught sight of his reflection in a mirror over the dresser. He almost didn’t recognize himself. Diana was right: He was pale, his cheeks were concave. His eyes seemed too large for his face.

“I guess you are getting better: you’re becoming a prickly jerk again.”

“Get Bug in here. Get Bug and Drake. I want to see them both.”

Diana made no move. “Are you going to tell me what happened to you out there in

the desert with Pack Leader?”

Caine snorted. “You don’t want to know.”

“Yes,” Diana insisted, “I do.”

“All that matters is I’m back,” Caine said with all the bravado he could manage.

Diana nodded. The movement caused her hair to fall forward, to caress her perfect cheek. Her eyes glittered moistly. But her lush lips still curled into an expression of distaste.

“What’s it mean, Caine? What does ‘gaiaphage’ mean?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve never heard the word before.”

Why was he lying to her? Why did it seem so dangerous that she should know that word?

“Go get them,” Caine said, dismissing her. “Get Drake and Bug.”

“Why don’t you take it easy? Make sure you’re really . . . I was going to say ‘sane,’ but that might be setting the bar kind of high.”

“I’m back,” Caine reiterated. “And I have a plan.”

She stared at him, head tilted sideways, skeptical. “A plan.”

“I have things I have to do,” Caine said, and looked down, incapable, for reasons he couldn’t quite grasp, of meeting her gaze.

“Caine, don’t do this,” Diana said. “Sam let you walk away alive. He won’t do that a second time.”

“You want me to bargain with him? Work something out?”

“Yes.”

“Well then, that’s just what I’m going to do, Diana. I’m going to bargain. But first I need something to bargain with. And I know just the thing.”

Astrid Ellison was in the overgrown backyard with Little Pete when Sam brought her the news and the worm. Pete was swinging. Or more accurately he was sitting on the swing as Astrid pushed him. He seemed to like it.

It was dull, monotonous work pushing the swing with almost never a word of conversation or a sound of joy from her little brother. Pete was five years old, just barely, and severely autistic. He could talk, but mostly he didn’t. He had become, if anything, even more withdrawn since the coming of the FAYZ. Maybe it was her fault: she wasn’t keeping up with the therapy, wasn’t keeping up with all the futile, pointless exercises that were supposed to help autistics deal with reality.

Of course Little Pete made his own reality. In some very important ways he had made everyone’s reality.

The yard was not Astrid’s yard, the house not her house. Drake Merwin had burned her house down. But one thing there was no shortage of in Perdido Beach was housing. Most homes were empty. And although many kids stayed in their own homes, some found their old bedrooms, their old family rooms, too full of memories. Astrid had lost track of how many times she’d seen kids break down sobbing, talking about their mom in the kitchen, their dad mowing the lawn, their older brother or sister hogging the remote.

Kids got lonely a lot. Loneliness, fear, and sadness haunted the FAYZ. So, often kids moved in together, into what amounted almost to frat or sorority houses.

This house was shared by Astrid; Mary Terrafino; Mary’s little brother, John; and

more and more often, Sam. Officially Sam lived in an unused office at town hall, where he slept on a couch, cooked with a microwave, and used what had been a public restroom. But it was a gloomy place, and Astrid had asked him more than once to consider this his home. They were, after all, a family of sorts. And, symbolically at least, they were the first family of the FAYZ, substitute mother and father to the motherless, fatherless kids.

Astrid heard Sam before she saw him. Perdido Beach had always been a sleepy little town, and now it was as quiet as church most of the time. Sam came through the house, letting himself in, calling her name as he went from room to room.

“Sam,” she yelled. But he didn’t hear her until he opened the back door and stepped out onto the deck.

One glance was all it took to know something terrible had happened. Sam wasn’t good at concealing his feelings, at least not from her.

“What is it?” she asked.

He didn’t answer, just strode across the weedy, patchy grass and put his arms around her. She hugged him back, patient, knowing he’d tell her when he could.

He buried his face in her hair. She could feel his breath on her neck, tickling her ear. She enjoyed the feel of his body against hers. Enjoyed the fact that he needed to hold her. But there was nothing romantic about this embrace.

At last he let her go. He moved to take over pushing Little Pete, seeming to need something physical to do.

“E.Z.’s dead,” he said without preamble. “I was touring the fields with Edilio. Me, Edilio, and Albert, and E.Z. along for entertainment. You know. No good reason for E.Z. to even be there, he just wanted to ride along and I said okay because I feel like all I ever do is say no, no, no to people, and now he’s dead.”

He pushed the swing harder than she’d been doing. Little Pete almost fell backward.

“Oh, God. How did it happen?”

“Worms,” Sam said dully. “Some kind of worm. Or snake. I don’t know. I have a dead one in there on the kitchen counter. I was hoping you’d . . . I don’t know what I was hoping. I figure you’re our expert on mutations. Right?”

He said the expert part with a wry smile. Astrid wasn’t an expert on anything. She was just the only person who cared enough to try and make sense in a systematic, scientific way of what was happening in the FAYZ.

“If you keep pushing him, he’ll be fine,” Astrid said of her brother.

She found the creature in a Baggie on the kitchen counter. It looked more like a snake than a worm, but not like any normal snake, either.

She pressed gingerly on the bag, hoping it really was dead. She spread waxed paper on the granite counter and dumped the worm out. She rummaged in the junk drawer for a tape measure and did her best to follow the contours of the creature.

“Eleven inches,” she noted.

Then she found her camera and took a dozen photos from every angle before using a fork to lift the monstrous thing back into the Baggie.

Astrid loaded the pictures onto her laptop. She dragged them into a folder labeled “Mutations—Photos.” There were dozens of pictures. Birds with strange talons or beaks. Snakes with short wings. Subsequent pictures showed larger snakes with larger

wings. One, taken at a distance, seemed to show a rattlesnake the size of a small python with leathery wings as wide as a bald eagle's.

She had a blurry photo of a coyote twice the size of any normal coyote. And a close-up of a dead coyote's mouth showing a strangely shortened tongue that looked creepily human. There was a series of grotesque JPEGs of a cat that had fused with a book.

Other photos were of kids, most just looking normal, although the boy called Orc looked like a monster. She had a picture of Sam with green light blazing from his palms. She hated the picture because the expression on his face as he demonstrated his power for her camera was so sad.

Astrid clicked opened the worm pictures and used the zoom function to take a closer look.

Little Pete came in, followed by Sam.

"Look at that mouth," Astrid said, awestruck. The worm had a mouth like a shark. It was impossible to count the hundreds of tiny teeth. The worm seemed to be grinning, even dead, grinning.

"Worms don't have teeth," Astrid said.

"They didn't have teeth. Now they do," Sam said.

"See the things sticking out all around its body?" She squinted and zoomed in closer still. "They're like, I don't know, like minuscule paddles. Like legs, only tiny and thousands of them."

"They got into E.Z. I think they went right through his hands. Right through his shoes. Right through his body."

Astrid shuddered. "Those teeth would bore through anything. The legs push it forward once it's inside its victim."

"Thousands of them in that field," Sam said. "E.Z. goes in, they attack him. But me and Albert and Edilio are outside, we haven't stepped into the field, and they don't come after us."

"Territoriality?" Astrid frowned. "Very unusual in a primitive animal. Territoriality is usually associated with higher life-forms. Dogs or cats are territorial. Not worms."

"You're being very calm about all this," Sam said, almost but not quite accusingly.

Astrid looked at him, reached with her hand to gently turn him away from the horrible image, forcing him to look at her instead. "You didn't come to me so I could scream and run away and you could be brave and comforting."

"No," he admitted. "Sorry. You're right: I didn't come to see Astrid my girlfriend. I came to see Astrid the Genius."

Astrid had never liked that nickname much, but she'd accepted it. It gave her a place in the dazed and frightened community of the FAYZ. She wasn't a Brianna or a Dekka, or a Sam, with great powers. What she had was her brain and her ability to think in a disciplined way when required.

"I'll dissect it, see what I can learn. Are you okay?"

"Sure. Why not? This morning I was responsible for 332 people. Now I'm only responsible for 331. And part of me is almost thinking, okay, one less mouth to feed."

Astrid leaned close and kissed him lightly on the mouth. "Yeah, it sucks to be you," Astrid said. "But you're the only you we have."

That earned her a bleak smile. "So, shut up and deal with it?" he said.

“No, don’t ever shut up. Tell me everything. Tell me anything.”

Sam looked down, unwilling to make eye contact. “Everything? Okay, how about this: I burned the body. E.Z. I burned the mess they left behind.”

“He was dead, Sam. What were you supposed to do? Leave him for the birds and the coyotes?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I know. But that’s not the problem. The problem is, when he burned? He smelled like meat cooking, and I . . .” He stopped talking, unable to go on. She waited while he mastered his emotions. “A dead sixth grader was burning, and my mouth started watering.”

Astrid could too easily imagine it. Even the thought of burning meat made her mouth water. “It’s a normal, physiological reaction, Sam. It’s a part of your brain that’s on automatic.”

“Yeah,” he said, unconvinced.

“Look, you can’t go around moping because something bad happened. If you start acting hopeless, it will spread to everyone else.”

“Kids don’t need my help to feel hopeless,” he said.

“And you’re going to let me cut your hair,” Astrid said, pulling him close and ruffling his hair with one hand. She wanted to get his mind off the morning’s disaster.

“What?” He looked confused by the sudden change of topic.

“You look like a fugitive from some old 1970s hair band. Besides,” she argued, “Edilio let me cut *his* hair.”

Sam allowed himself a smile. “Yeah. I saw. Maybe that’s why I keep accidentally calling him Bart Simpson.”

When she glared at him, he added, “You know, the spiky look?” He tried to kiss her, but she drew back.

“Oh, you’re just so clever, aren’t you?” she said. “How about I just shave your head? Or hot-wax it? Keep insulting me, people will be calling you Homer Simpson, not Bart. Then see how much Taylor makes goo-goo eyes at you.”

“She does not make goo-goo eyes at me.”

“Yeah. Right.” She pushed him away playfully.

“Anyway, I might look good with just two hairs,” Sam said. He looked at his reflection in the glass front of the microwave.

“Does the word ‘narcissist’ mean anything to you?” Astrid asked.

Sam laughed. He made a grab for her but then noticed Little Pete eyeing him. “So. Anyway. How’s LP doing?”

Astrid looked at her brother, who was perched on a kitchen counter stool and gazing mutely at Sam. Or, anyway, in Sam’s direction—she could never be sure what he was really looking at.

She wanted to tell Sam what had been happening with Little Pete, what he had started doing. But Sam had enough to worry about. And for a moment—a rare moment—he wasn’t worrying.

There would be time later to tell him that the most powerful person in the FAYZ seemed to be . . . what would the right term be for what Little Pete was doing?

Losing his mind? No, that wasn’t quite it.

There was no right term for what was happening to Little Pete. But, anyway, this wasn’t the time.

“He’s fine,” Astrid lied. “You know Petey.”

THREE

106 HOURS, 11 MINUTES

LANA ARWEN LAZAR was on her fourth home since coming to Perdido Beach. She'd first stayed in a house she'd liked well enough. But that house was where Drake Merwin had captured her. It felt like a bad place after that.

Then she'd moved in with Astrid for a while. But she quickly discovered that she preferred being alone with just her Labrador retriever, Patrick, for company. So she'd taken a house near the plaza. But that had made her too accessible.

Lana didn't like being accessible. When she was accessible, she had no privacy.

Lana had the power to heal. She'd first discovered this ability the day of the FAYZ, when her grandfather had disappeared. They'd been driving in his pickup truck at the time, and the sudden disappearance of the driver had sent the truck rolling down a very long embankment.

Lana's injuries should have killed her. Almost did kill her. Then she discovered a power that might have lain hidden within her forever, but for her terrible need.

She had healed herself. She'd healed Sam when he was shot; and Cookie, whose shoulder had been split open; and many wounded children after the terrible Thanksgiving Battle.

The kids called her the Healer. She was second only to Sam Temple as a hero in the FAYZ. Everyone looked up to her. Everyone respected her. Some of them, especially the ones whose lives she'd saved, treated her with something like awe. Lana had no doubt that Cookie, for one, would give his life for her. He had been in a living hell until she'd saved him.

But hero worship didn't stop kids from pestering her at all hours, day and night, over every little pain or problem: loose teeth, sunburn, skinned knees, stubbed toes.

So she had moved away from town and now lived in a room in the Clifftop Resort.

The hotel hugged the FAYZ wall, the blank, impenetrable barrier that defined this new world.

"Calm down, Patrick," she said as the dog head-butted her in his eagerness for breakfast. Lana pried the lid off the ALPO can and, blocking Patrick, spooned half of it into a dish on the floor.

"There. Jeez, you'd swear I never feed you."

As she said it she wondered how long she would be able to go on feeding Patrick. There were kids eating dog food now. And there were skin-and-bones dogs in the streets, picking through trash next to kids who were picking through trash to find scraps they'd thrown out weeks earlier.

Lana was alone at Clifftop. Hundreds of rooms, an algae-choked pool, a tennis court truncated by the barrier. She had a balcony that afforded a sweeping view of the beach below and the too-placid ocean.

Sam, Edilio, Astrid, and Dahra Baidoo—who acted as pharmacist and nurse—knew where she was and could find her if they really needed her. But most kids didn't, so she had a degree of control over her life.

She looked longingly at the dog food. Wondering, not for the first time, what it

tasted like. Probably better than the burned potato peels with barbecue sauce she'd eaten.

Once, the hotel had been full of food. But on Sam's orders Albert and his crew had collected it all, centralized it all at Ralph's. Where Drake had managed to steal a good portion of the dwindling remainder.

Now there was no food in the hotel. Not even in any of the mini-bars in the rooms, which once had been stocked with delicious candy bars, and chips and nuts. Now all that was left was alcohol. Albert's people had left the booze, not knowing quite what to do with it.

Lana had stayed away from the little brown and white bottles. So far.

Alcohol was how she had managed to get herself exiled from her home in Las Vegas. She'd snuck a bottle of vodka from her parents' house, supposedly for an older boy she knew.

That was the cleaned-up story she'd managed to sell to her parents, anyway. They had still packed her off for some time to "think about what you've done" at her grandfather's isolated ranch.

Now, in the world of the FAYZ, Lana was a sort of saint. But she knew better.

Patrick had finished his food as coffee brewed in the room. Lana poured herself a cup and dumped in a Nutrasweet and some powdered cream, rare luxuries that she'd found by searching the maids' carts.

She stepped out onto the balcony and took a sip.

She had the stereo on, the CD player that had been in the room. Someone, some previous inhabitant of the room, she supposed, had left an ancient Paul Simon CD in there, and she'd found herself playing it.

There was a song about darkness. A welcoming of darkness. Almost an invitation. She had played it over and over again.

Sometimes music helped her to forget. Not this song.

Out of the corner of her eye she spotted someone down on the beach. She went back inside and retrieved a pair of binoculars she'd liberated from some long-gone tourist's luggage.

Two little kids, they couldn't be more than six years old, playing on the rock pier that extended into the ocean. Fortunately there was no surf. But the rocks were like jumbled razor blades in places, sharp and slick. She ought to . . .

Later. Enough responsibility. She was not a responsible person, and she was sick of having it forced on her.

Various adult vices were spreading through the population of the FAYZ. Some as benign as coffee. Others—pot, cigarettes, and alcohol—were not so harmless. Lana knew of six kids who were confirmed drinkers. They had tried to get her to cure their hangovers.

Some others were smoking their way through bags of weed found in their parents' or older siblings' bedrooms. And on just about any day you could see kids as young as eight choking on cigarettes and trying to look cool. She'd once spotted a first grader trying to light a cigar.

Lana couldn't cure any of that.

Sometimes she wished she was back at Hermit Jim's cabin.

It was not the first time she'd had that thought. She had often thought of the

strange cabin in the desert with its quirky little lawn—now all brown and dead, most likely.

It's where she had found sanctuary after the crash. And then again, briefly, after escaping from the coyote pack.

The cabin itself had been burned to the ground. It was nothing but ash. And gold, of course. Hermit Jim's stash of gold might have been melted, but it would still be there beneath the floorboards.

The gold. From the mine.

The mine . . .

She took a big gulp from the Styrofoam cup and burned her tongue. The pain helped her focus.

The mine. That day was clear in her memory, but it was the clarity of a well-remembered nightmare.

At the time she hadn't known that the FAYZ meant the disappearance of all adults. She'd gone to the mine in search of the hermit, or hoping at least to find his missing truck and use it to get to town.

She'd found the hermit, dead in the mouth of the mine. Not disappeared, dead. Which meant he'd been killed before the FAYZ.

The coyotes had come after her then and driven her deeper into the mine. And there she'd found . . . it. The thing. The Darkness, the coyotes called it: the Darkness.

She remembered the way her feet had felt heavy as bricks. The way her heart had slowed down and thudded, each beat like a blow from a sledgehammer. The dread that went deeper than simple fear. The sickly green glow that made her think of pus, disease, a cancer.

The dream state that had overtaken her . . . the heavy-lidded eyes and mind gone blank and the feeling of being invaded, of . . .

Come to me.

"Ah!"

She had crushed the cup. Hot coffee all over her arm.

Lana was sweating. Her breathing was labored. She took a deep breath and it was as if she'd forgotten how until that very moment.

It was in her head still, that monster in the mine shaft. It had its hook in her. Sometimes she was sure she heard its voice. A hallucination, surely. Surely not the Darkness itself. It was miles away. Far beneath the ground. It couldn't . . .

Come to me.

"I can't forget it," she whispered to Patrick. "I can't get away from it."

In the early days after she had come out of the desert and joined this strange community of children, Lana had felt almost at peace. Almost. There had been, from the start, a sense of damage done, an invisible wound with no specific location except that it was inside her.

That unseen, unreal, unhealed wound had reopened. She told herself at first that it would go away. It would heal. A psychic scab would form. But if that was true, if she was healing, why did it hurt more with each passing day? How had that dreadful voice grown from faint, distant whisper to insistent murmur?

Come to me. I need you.

It had words now, that urgent, demanding voice.

“I’m going crazy, Patrick,” Lana told her dog. “It’s inside me, and I am going crazy.”

Mary Terrafino woke up. She rolled out of bed. Morning. She should go back to sleep: she was exhausted. But she would not fall back to sleep, she knew that. She had things to do.

First things first, she stumbled to her bathroom and used her bare foot to pull the scale across the tile floor. There was a special spot for the scale: aligned with the center of the mirror over the sink, upper-right corner of the scale precisely in line with the tile.

She removed her sleep shirt and stepped onto the scale.

First reading. Step off.

Second reading. Step off.

Three times made it official.

Eighty-one pounds.

She’d been 128 pounds when the FAYZ came.

She still looked fat. There were still pockets of chubbiness here and there. No matter what anyone else said. Mary could see the flab. So no breakfast for her. Which was fine, given that breakfast at the day care would be oatmeal made with powdered milk and sweetened with pink packets of Sweet’n Low. Healthy enough—and much, much better than what most people were getting—but not exactly worth gaining weight over.

Mary popped her Prozac, plus two tiny red Sudafed and a multivitamin. The Prozac kept depression at bay—mostly—and the Sudafed helped keep her from getting hungry. The vitamin would keep her healthy, she hoped.

She dressed quickly, T-shirt, sweatpants, sneakers. Each was roomy. She was determined not to wear anything more body-conscious until she had really lost some weight.

She went to the laundry room and spilled a dryer full of cloth diapers into a plastic bag. There were still a few disposable diapers in storage, but they were saving those for emergencies. They had made the switch to cloth a month earlier. It was gross and everyone hated it, but as Mary had pointed out to her grumbling workers, the Pampers factory wasn’t exactly delivering anymore.

Down the stairs with the bag bump-bumping along.

Sam was with Astrid and Little Pete in the kitchen. Mary didn’t want to interrupt—or be nagged about having breakfast—so she let herself quietly out the front door.

Five minutes later she was at the day care.

The day care had fared badly in the battle. The wall it shared with the hardware store had been blown out. So now the gaping hole was covered by plastic sheeting that had to be retaped just about every day. It was a reminder of how close they had come to disaster. The coyote pack had been in this very room, holding these same children hostage, while Drake Merwin preened and gloated.

Mary’s brother, John, was already at the day care waiting for her.

“Hey, Mary,” John said. “You shouldn’t be here. You should be sleeping.”

John was working the morning shift, 5:00 A.M. to noon, breakfast to just before lunch. Mary was supposed to take over at lunch and work straight through until 10:00

P.M. Lunch through dinner through sleep time, with an hour at the end to work out schedules and clean up. Then she'd have time to go home, watch some DVDs while she worked out on the treadmill in the basement. That was the schedule. Eight hours of sleep and a few hours free in the morning.

But in reality she often spent two or three hours exercising at night. Going after those last few pounds. On the treadmill, down in the basement, where Astrid wouldn't hear her and ask her why.

Most days she consumed fewer than seven hundred calories. On a really good day it would be half that.

She hugged John. "What's up, little brother? What's today's crisis?"

John had a list. He read it off his *Warriors* notebook. "Pedro has a loose tooth. He also had an accident last night. Zosia claims Julia punched her, so they're fighting and refusing to play together. I think maybe Collin has a fever . . . anyway, he's kind of, you know, cranky. I caught Brady trying to run away this morning. She was going to look for her mommy."

The list went on and as it did, some of the kids ran over to hug Mary, to get a kiss, to get an appreciation of their hairdo, to earn an approving "good job" for the way they had brushed their teeth.

Mary nodded. The list was about like this every day.

A guy named Francis came in, pushed rudely past Mary. Then he realized whom he had just shouldered aside, turned back to her with a scowl, and said, "Okay, I'm here."

"First time?" Mary asked.

"What, am I supposed to be sorry? I'm not a babysitter."

This scene, too, had been repeated every day since peace had come to Perdido Beach. "Okay, here's the thing, kid," Mary said. "I know you don't want to be here, and I don't care. No one wants to be here, but the littles have to be taken care of. So lose the attitude."

"Why don't you just take care of these kids? At least you're a girl."

"I'm not," John pointed out.

Mary said, "See that easel? There are three lists on there, one list for each of the daily helpers. Pick a list. That's what you do. Whatever is on the list. And you smile while you're doing it."

Francis marched over and checked the list.

John said, "I'll bet you a cookie he doesn't pick diaper duty."

"No bet," Mary said. "Besides, there are no cookies."

"I miss cookies," John said wistfully.

"Hey," Francis yelled. "All these lists suck."

"Yes," Mary agreed. "Yes, they do."

"This all sucks."

"Please stop saying 'sucks.' I don't want to have three-year-olds repeating it all day."

"Man, when my birthday comes, I'm stepping out," Francis sulked.

"Fine. I'll be sure not to schedule you after that. Now, pick a work list and do it. I don't want to have to waste Sam's time calling him over here to motivate you."

Francis stomped back to the easel.

"Stepping out," Mary said to John, and made a face. "How many people have hit

the magic fifteen so far? Only two have poofed. People talk about it. But they don't actually do it."

The FAYZ had eliminated everyone over the age of fourteen. No one knew why. At least, Mary didn't, although she had overheard Sam and Astrid whispering in a way that made her think they might know more than they admitted.

A fourteen-year-old who reached his fifteenth birthday would also disappear. Poof. If he let himself. If he decided to "step out."

What happened during what kids called Stepping Out was now known to just about everyone. The way subjective time would slow to a crawl. The appearance of the person you loved and trusted most to beckon you across, to urge you to leave the FAYZ. And the way this person transformed into a monster if you resisted.

You had a choice: stay in the FAYZ, or . . . But no one knew just what the "or" was. Maybe it was escape back into the old world. Maybe it was a trip to some whole new place.

Maybe it was death.

Mary noticed John looking intensely at her. "What?" she said.

"You wouldn't ever . . ."

Mary smiled and ruffled his curly red hair. "Never. I would never leave you. Missing Mom and Dad?"

John nodded. "I keep thinking about how many times I made them mad."

"John . . ."

"I know. I know that doesn't matter. But it's like . . ." He couldn't find the words, so he made the motion of a knife stabbing his heart.

Someone was tugging at Mary's shirt from behind. She looked around and with a sinking heart saw a little boy named . . . named . . . she couldn't remember his name. But the second little boy behind him she remembered was Sean. She knew why they were there. They had both recently had their fifth birthdays. The age limit for the day care was four. At age five you had to move out—hopefully to a house with some responsible older kids.

"Hi, kids. What's up?" Mary asked as she brought her face down to their level.

"Um . . .," the first one said. And then he burst into tears.

She shouldn't do it, she knew she shouldn't, but she couldn't stop herself from putting her arms around the little boy. And then Sean started crying as well, so the embrace was extended, and John was in there, too, and Mary heard herself saying of course, of course they could come back, just for today, just for a little while.

FOUR

106 HOURS, 8 MINUTES

COATES ACADEMY WAS quite a bit the worse for wear. Battles had damaged the façade of the main building. There was a hole in the whitewashed brick so big, you could see an entire second-story classroom, a cross-section of the floor beneath it, and a jagged gap that didn't quite reach to the top of the first-story window below. Most of the glass in the windows was gone. The kids had made an effort to keep the elements out by duct-taping sheets of plastic over the holes, but the tape had loosened and now the plastic and the tape hung limp, stirring with the occasional breeze. The building looked as if it had been through a war. It had been.

The grounds were a mess. Grass that had always been trimmed to obsessive perfection in the old days now grew wild in some areas and had gone yellow as hay in others. And weeds pushed up through the circular gravel driveway where once parents' minivans and SUVs and luxury sedans had lined up.

The plumbing was out in half the building, toilets overflowing and reeking. The smaller buildings, the art classroom, and the dormitories were in better shape, but Drake insisted on staying in the main building. He had occupied the office of the school shrink, a place where in the old days Drake had standing appointments for counseling and testing.

Do you still dream of hurting animals, Drake?

No, Doc, I dream of hurting you.

The office was an armory now. Drake's guns, nine of them, ranging from hunting rifles with scopes to handguns, were laid out on a table. He kept them unloaded, all but two, the guns he carried on him. He'd hidden the ammunition for the other guns: there was no one Drake trusted. The ammunition, never enough of it, to Drake's thinking, rested behind the ceiling tiles and in air-conditioning vents.

Drake sat watching a DVD on the plasma screen he'd stolen. The movie was *Saw II*. The sound effects were so great. Drake had the volume up high enough to rattle one of the few surviving panes of glass. So he didn't at first hear Diana's voice when she said, "He wants you."

Drake turned, sensing her presence. He flicked his tentacle arm, the arm that gave him his nickname, Whip Hand, and turned off the set. "What do you want?" he demanded with a scowl.

"He wants you," Diana repeated.

Drake loved the fear in her eyes. Tough-chick Diana: snarky, sarcastic, superior Diana. Scared Diana. Scared of him and what he could do to her.

"Who wants me?"

"Caine. He's up."

"He's been up before," Drake said.

"He's back. Mostly. He's back and he wants you and Bug."

"Yeah? Well, I'll get there when I get there." He flicked his whip and turned the set back on. "Great, now I missed the best part. Where's the remote? I can't rewind without the remote."

“You want me to tell Caine to wait?” Diana asked innocently. “No problem. I’ll just go tell him you’re too busy to see him.”

Drake took a deep breath and glared at her. Slowly the whip moved toward her, the end twitching with anticipation, wanting to wrap around her neck.

“Go ahead, do it,” she challenged him. “Go on, Drake. Go ahead and defy Caine.”

His cold eyes flinched, just a little, but he knew she’d seen it and it made him mad. Not today. Not yet. Not until Caine took care of Sam.

Drake coiled the whip. He had a way of wrapping it sinuously around his waist. But the arm was never entirely still, so it always looked like a pink and gray anaconda squeezing him, always looked like Drake was its prey.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you, Diana? Me fighting Caine. Sorry to disappoint you. I am one hundred percent loyal to Caine. We’re like brothers, the two of us. Not like him and Sam, more like blood brothers.” He winked at her. “The brotherhood of the Darkness, Diana. Me and him, we’ve both been there. We’ve both faced it.”

Drake knew Diana was eaten up with curiosity about the thing in the mine shaft, the thing that had given Drake his arm after Sam had burned his old arm off. But Drake wasn’t going to give her anything. Let her wonder. Let her worry. “Let’s go see the boss.”

Caine looked better already. Whatever sickness had been consuming him these last three months, imprisoning him in a world of fevers and nightmares, must have finally run its course.

Too late for Chunk.

The memory made Drake smile. Fat-ass Chunk flying through the air, smacking into a solid wall, hitting it so hard, he actually went through it. Man, that had been something to see.

After that, no one—including Drake—had been crazy enough to be around Caine. Even now Drake was wary. Only Diana was desperate enough to stay and change Caine’s soiled sheets and spoon-feed him soup.

“You look good, Caine,” Drake said.

“I look like hell,” Caine said. “But my head is clear.”

Drake thought that probably wasn’t true. He’d spent just a few hours with the Darkness himself, and his head still wasn’t clear of it, not by a long shot. He heard the voice in his head, sometimes. He heard it. And he was pretty sure Caine did, too.

Once you heard that voice, you never stopped hearing it, Drake thought. He found the idea comforting.

“Bug, are you in here?” Caine asked.

“Right here.”

Drake almost jumped. Bug was just three feet away, not quite invisible but not quite visible, either. He had the mutant power of camouflage, like a chameleon. Looking at Bug when he was using his power, the most you might notice was a sort of ripple in the scenery, a bending of light.

“Knock it off,” Caine growled.

Bug became visible as the snot-nosed little creep he was. “Sorry,” he said. “I just . . . I didn’t . . .”

“Don’t worry, I’m not in the mood to throw anyone into a wall,” Caine said dryly. “I have a job for you, Bug.”

“Go into Perdido Beach again?”

“No. No, that’s what Sam is expecting,” Caine said. “We stay out of Perdido Beach. We don’t need the town. They can have the town. For now, anyway.”

“Yeah, let them keep what we can’t take away. That’s very generous,” Diana said, mocking them.

“It’s not about territory,” Caine said. “It’s about power. Not *powers*, Drake, power.” He put his hand on Bug’s shoulder. “Bug, you’re the key person on this. I need your skills.”

“I don’t know what else I can see in Perdido Beach,” Bug said.

“Forget Perdido Beach. Like I said, it’s about power. *Nuclear* power.” Caine winked at Diana and slapped Drake’s shoulder, working his old charm, getting them to believe in him again. But Drake wasn’t fooled: Caine was weak in his body and disturbed in his mind. The old confidence was subdued: Caine was a shadow. Although he *was* a shadow who could throw a person through a wall. Drake’s whip hand twitched against the small of his back.

“That power plant is the town’s lifeline,” Caine said. “Control the electricity and Sam will give us whatever we want.”

“Don’t you think Sam knows this? And probably has guards at the power plant?” Diana said.

“I’m sure there are guards. But I’m sure they won’t see Bug. So, fly now, little Bug. Fly away and see what you can see.”

Bug and Diana both turned to leave. The one excited, the other seething. Drake stayed behind.

Caine seemed surprised, maybe even a little worried. “What is it, Drake?”

“Diana,” Drake said. “I don’t trust her.”

Caine sighed. “Yeah, I think I get that you don’t like Diana.”

“It’s not about me not liking the . . .” He’d been about to use the “b” word, but Caine’s eyes flared and Drake reworded it. “It’s not about me not liking her. It’s about her and Computer Jack.”

That got Caine’s full attention. “What are you talking about?”

“Jack. He’s got powers now. And I’m not just talking about his tech skills. Bug saw him down in Perdido Beach. That backhoe they have? The wetback was digging a grave, and the backhoe toppled into it. Bug says Jack picked it up. Just pulled it up out of the hole like it was no heavier than a bike.”

Caine sat down on the edge of his bed. Drake had the impression Caine had needed to sit down for a while, that standing for more than a few minutes was still heavy work.

“Sounds like he’s at least a two bar. Maybe even a three,” Caine said. Diana had invented the system of bars, copying the idea from cell phones. Diana’s own power was the ability to gauge power levels.

Drake knew that there were only two known four bars: Sam and Caine. There was speculation about Little Pete, who had demonstrated some major stuff, but how dangerous could a half-brain-dead little five-year-old really be?

“Yeah, so Jack could be a three bar. Only not according to Diana, right? Diana says she read him at zero bars. So maybe the power develops late, okay. But from zero to three?” Drake shrugged, not needing to push the issue, knowing that Caine—even a

sick, weakened Caine—was connecting the dots in his head.

“We never did get an explanation for why Jack switched sides and ran to Sam,” Caine said softly.

“Maybe someone put him up to it,” Drake said.

“Maybe,” Caine said, not wanting to admit the possibility. “Get someone to watch her. Not you, she knows you watch her. But get someone to keep an eye on her.”

The worst thing about the FAYZ from Duck Zhang’s point of view was the food. It had been great at first: candy bars, chips, soda, ice cream. That had all lasted a few weeks. It would probably have lasted longer but people had wasted it—leaving ice cream to melt; gorging on cookies, then leaving the bag out where dogs could get at it; letting bread mold.

By the time they’d burned through all the sweets and snack food it was too late to do anything about the fact that all of the meat and chicken, with the exception of bacon, sausage, and ham, and all the fresh produce except potatoes and onions was expired or rotten. Duck had been forced to help clean all that out of Ralph’s. A crew of resentful kids had shoveled rotting lettuce and stinking meat for days. But what could you do when Sam Temple looked right at you, pointed his finger, and said, “You.” The boy could fry you. Plus, he was the mayor, after all.

Then had come the canned soup, dry cereal, crackers and cheese period.

Right now Duck would give anything for a can of soup. His breakfast had been canned asparagus. Which tasted like vomit and everyone knew it made your pee stink.

But there were good things about the FAYZ, too. The best thing about the FAYZ, from Duck Zhang’s point of view, was the pool. It wasn’t exactly his pool, but it might as well be because here he was, floating in it. On a Monday morning in early March when he normally would have been in school.

No school. Nothing but pool. It took some of the sting out of hunger.

He was a sixth grader, small for his age, Asian, although his family had been American since the 1930s. Back in the day his folks had worried he was getting fat. Well, no one was very fat in the FAYZ. Not anymore.

Duck loved the water. But not the ocean. The ocean scared him. He couldn’t get past the idea that a whole world was down there below the waves, invisible to him while he was visible to them. Them being squids, octopi, fish, eels, jellyfish and, above all, sharks.

Pools on the other hand were great. You could see all the way to the bottom.

But he’d never had a pool of his own. There was no public pool in Perdido Beach, so he could only swim when he happened to have a friend with a pool, or when he was on vacation with his parents and they stayed at a hotel with a pool.

Now, however, with kids in Perdido Beach able to live pretty much wherever they liked, and go pretty much wherever they liked, Duck had found a perfect, secluded, private pool. Whom it belonged to, he couldn’t say. But whoever they were, they had a great setup. The pool was big, kidney-shaped, with a ten-foot depth at one end so you could dive in headfirst. The whole thing was the prettiest shade of aqua tile with a gold sunburst pattern in the bottom. The water—once he’d figured out how to add chlorine and clean the filters—was as clear as glass.

There was a nice wrought-iron table with an umbrella in the middle and some very

comfortable chaise lounges for him to lie out on if he chose. But he didn't choose to lie out. He chose to lie back on a float. A bottle of water bobbed alongside him on its own separate float. He had a cool pair of Ray-Bans on and a light coating of sunblock and he was—in a word—happy. Hungry, but happy.

Sometimes, when Duck felt particularly good, it almost seemed as if he didn't even need the raft to hold him up. Sometimes if he was happy enough he could actually feel the pressure of his back on the plastic lessen. Like he weighed less or something. In fact he'd once awakened suddenly from a happy dream and had fallen a couple of feet into the water. At least, that's what it seemed like, although it was obviously just part of the dream.

Other times, if he became angry for some reason, maybe just remembering some slight, it seemed to him that he grew heavier and the float would actually start to sink into the water.

But Duck was seldom either very happy or very angry. Mostly he was just peaceful.

"Yeee-ahhh!"

The shout was completely unexpected. As was the huge splash that followed it.

Duck sat up on his raft.

Water sloshed over him. Someone was in the water. *His* water.

Two more blurs raced toward the pool's edge and there were two more shouts, followed by two more cannonball splashes.

"Hey!" Duck yelled.

One of the kids was a jerk named Zil. The other two Duck didn't recognize right away.

"Hey!" he yelled again.

"Who are you yelling at?" Zil demanded.

"This is my pool," Duck said. "I found it and I cleaned it. Go get your own pool."

Duck was aware that he was smaller than any of the three. But he was angry enough to feel bold. The float sank beneath him and he wondered if one of the boys had poked a hole in it.

"I'm serious," Duck yelled. "You guys take off."

"He's serious," one of the boys mocked.

Before he knew it Zil was leaping up from beneath the water and had grabbed Duck by the neck. Duck was plunged underwater, gasping, choking, sucking water into his nose.

He surfaced with difficulty, fighting with suddenly leaden arms to stay afloat.

They hit him again, just roughhousing, not really trying to hurt him, but forcing him under once more. This time he touched down on the bottom of the pool and had to kick his way back to the surface to gasp for air. He clutched at the float, but one of the boys yanked it away, giggling loudly.

Duck was filled with sudden rage. He had one good thing in his life, this pool, one good thing, and now it was being ruined.

"Get out!" he shrieked, but the last word glub-glub-glubbed as he sank like a rock.

What was going on? Suddenly he couldn't swim. He was on the bottom of the pool, in the deep end, under ten feet of water. He kicked at the tile bottom, trying to shoot back up, but his foot shattered the tile and sent pieces of it spinning through the

water.

Now panic took hold. What were they doing to him?

He kicked again, both feet as hard as he could. But he did not rise to the surface. Instead, both feet punched through the tile. He rose not at all. In fact, he was still sinking. His feet were sinking through the tile, scraping through jagged mortar and crumbled concrete, down into mud beneath.

It was impossible.

Impossible.

Duck Zhang was falling through the bottom of the pool. Through the ground beneath the bottom of the pool. It was as if he were standing in quicksand.

Up to his knees.

Up to his thighs.

Up to his waist.

He thrashed madly but he only fell faster.

Broken tile scraped his flanks. Mud slithered into his bathing suit.

His lungs burned. His vision was blurring now, head pounding, and still he fell through solid earth, as if the ground itself were nothing but water.

As the tile reached his chest he slammed his arms down to block himself falling farther, but his arms plowed through the tile and the concrete beneath and the dirt beneath that, and all of it swirled around his head in a cloud of murk and mud.

The pool water was now rushing down around him, pushing into his mouth and nose. He was a loose plug caught in a drain.

Duck Zhang's world swirled, crazy flashes of feet kicking above him, sparkling sunlight, then his vision tunneled, narrowed, and darkness crowded out the light.

It had been funny for the first minute or so. Zil Sperry had enjoyed sneaking up on Dork Zhang: he and Hank and Antoine creeping around the side of the house, shoving one another playfully, suppressing giggles.

It was Hank who'd found out about Duck's secret swimming pool. Hank was a born spy. But it was Zil's idea to wait until Duck had it all cleaned up, until he adjusted the chlorine and got the filter working.

"Let him do the work first," Zil had argued. "Then we take it from him."

Antoine and Hank were cool, Zil realized, but if there was serious thinking or planning to be done, it was up to him.

They had achieved total surprise. Duck had probably wet himself. Stupid dork. Big, whiny baby.

But then things had gone wrong. Duck had sunk like a rock. And kept sinking. And suddenly the sun-dappled water had turned into a whirlpool of shocking power. Hank had been standing on the steps and managed to leap up and out of the pool. But Antoine was with Zil in the deep end when Duck pulled the plug.

Zil had managed, just barely, to grab on to the end of the diving board. The water sucked at him, practically pulled his bathing suit off. He barely held on, fingertips scrabbling at the sandpapery surface of the board.

Antoine had been swept away, drawn into the circular motion. The force of the water had rammed him into the chrome ladder, and Antoine had managed to wedge one fat leg between the ladder, and the side of the pool. He was lucky he hadn't broken

his ankle.

Hank hauled Zil to safety. The two of them together helped Antoine clamber awkwardly up where he collapsed like a beached whale on the deck.

“Dude, we almost drowned,” Antoine gasped weakly.

“What happened?” Hank asked. “I couldn’t see.”

“Duck, man,” Zil said, his voice shaky. “He, like, sank through the water and just kept going.”

“I almost got sucked down,” Antoine said, practically in tears.

“More like you almost got flushed,” Hank said. “You looked like a big pink turd going down the bowl.”

Zil didn’t feel like laughing at the joke. He had been humiliated. He’d been made a fool of. He’d been hanging on for dear life, scared to death. He turned his hands palm-up and looked at his scraped, ragged fingertips. They burned.

He could imagine what he must have looked like, dangling from the end of the board, his swimsuit halfway down his butt as the water tugged at him.

There was nothing funny about it.

Zil would not allow there to be anything funny about it.

“What are you two laughing at?” Zil demanded.

“It was kind of—” Antoine began.

Zil cut him off. “He’s a freak. Duck Zhang is a mutant freak. Who tried to kill us.”

Hank looked sharply at him, hesitating, but only for a moment before he picked up Zil’s line. “Yeah. Freak tried to kill us.”

“This stuff isn’t right, man,” Antoine agreed. He sat up and wrapped his hands around his bruised ankle. “How were we supposed to know he was a mutant freak? We were just playing around. It’s like anything we do now we have to be worried about whether someone is normal or some kind of freak.”

Zil stood and looked down into the empty pool. The hole was ragged with broken tile teeth. A mouth that had opened and swallowed Duck and almost gotten Zil as well. Alive or dead, Duck had made a fool of Zil. And someone was going to have to pay for that.

FIVE

104 HOURS, 5 MINUTES

“BULLETS ARE FAST. That’s why they work,” Computer Jack said condescendingly. “If they moved slowly, they wouldn’t be worth much.”

“I’m fast,” Brianna said. “That’s why I’m the Breeze.” She shaded her eyes from the sun and squinted at the target she had in mind, a real estate sign in front of an empty lot pushed up against the slope of the ridge.

Jack pulled out his handheld. He punched in the numbers. “The slowest bullet goes 330 meters per second. Say 1,100 feet per second in round numbers. I found a book full of useless statistics like that. Man, I miss Google.” He seemed to actually choke up with emotion. The word “Google” caught in his throat.

Brianna laughed to herself. Computer Jack was just so *Computer Jack*. Still, he was cute in his own awkward, maladjusted, twelve-year-old and barely into puberty, voicebreaking kind of way.

“Anyway, 3,600 seconds in an hour, right? So about four million feet per hour, divided by 5,280 feet in a mile. So call it 750 miles an hour. Just one side or the other of the speed of sound. Other bullets are faster.”

“I bet I can do that,” Brianna said. “Sure, I can.”

“I do not want to shoot that gun,” Jack said, looking dubiously at the gun in her hand.

“Oh, come on, Jack. We’re across the highway, we’re aiming toward the ridge. What’s the worst that happens? You shoot a horned toad?”

“I’ve never shot a gun,” Jack said.

“Any idiot can do it,” Brianna assured him, although she had never fired a weapon, either. “But I guess it kicks a little, so you have to grip it firmly.”

“Don’t worry about that. I have a strong grip.”

It took Brianna a few seconds to figure out his ironic tone. She remembered hearing someone say that Jack had powers. That he was extremely strong.

He didn’t look strong. He looked like a dweeb. He had messy blond hair and crooked glasses. And it always seemed like he wasn’t really looking through those glasses but was seeing his own reflection in the lenses.

“Okay. Get ready,” Brianna instructed. “Hold the gun firmly. Aim it at the sign. Let’s do a—”

The gun exploded before she could finish. An impossibly loud bang, a cloud of bluish smoke, and a strangely satisfying smell.

“I was going to say let’s do a test shot,” Brianna said.

“Sorry. I kind of squeezed the trigger.”

“Yeah. Kind of. This time just aim it. At the sign over there, not at me.”

Jack leveled the gun. “Should I count down?”

“Yes.”

“On zero?”

“On zero.”

“Ready?”

Brianna dug her sneakers into the dirt, bent down, cocked one arm forward, the other back, like she was frozen in midrun.

“Ready.”

“Three. Two. One.”

Brianna leaped, just a split second ahead of Jack pulling the trigger. Instantly she realized her mistake: the bullet was behind her, coming after her.

Much better to be chasing the bullet rather than have it chasing you.

Brianna flew. Almost literally flew. If she spread her arms and caught some wind she’d go airborne for fifty feet because she was moving faster, quite a bit faster, than a jet racing down the runway toward take-off.

She ran in an odd way, pumping her arms like any runner, but turning her palms back with each stroke. For almost all the mutants of the FAYZ, the hands were the focus of their powers.

The air screamed past her ears. Her short hair blew straight back. Her cheeks vibrated, her eyes stung. Breathing was a struggle as she gasped at hurricane winds.

The world around her became a smear of color, objects flying past at speeds her brain could not process. Streaks of light without definite form.

She knew from experience that her feet would need to be iced down afterward to stop the swelling. She’d already popped two Advil in anticipation.

She was fast. Impossibly fast.

But she was not faster than a speeding bullet.

She risked a glance back.

The bullet was gaining. She could see it, a blur, a small gray blur spiraling after her.

Brianna dodged right, just half a step.

The bullet zoomed languidly by.

Brianna chased it, but it hit the dirt—not really anywhere near the target—while Brianna was still a dozen feet back.

She dropped speed quickly, used the upward slope to slow herself gently, and came to a stop.

Jack was three hundred yards away. The whole race had lasted just over a second, though it had felt longer in Brianna’s subjective experience.

“Did you do it?” Jack shouted.

She trotted back to him at a pace she now thought of as pokey—probably no more than eighty or ninety miles an hour—and laughed.

“Totally,” she said.

“I couldn’t even see you. You were here. And then you were there.”

“That’s why they call me the Breeze,” Brianna said, giving him a jaunty wink. But then her stomach reminded her that she had just burned up the day’s calories. It rumbled so loudly, she was sure Jack must hear it.

“You know, of course, that a breeze is actually a slow, meandering sort of wind,” Jack said pedantically.

“And you know, of course, that I can slap you eight times before you can blink, right?”

Jack blinked.

Brianna smiled.

“Here,” Jack said cautiously. He handed the gun to her, butt first. “Take this.”

She stuffed it into the backpack at her feet. She drew out a can opener and the can of pizza sauce she’d saved up. She cut the lid from the can and drank the spicy slop inside.

“Here,” she handed the can to Jack. “There’s a little left.”

He didn’t argue but tilted the can up and patiently waited as no more than an ounce of red paste slid into his mouth. Then he licked the inside of the can and used his forefinger to spoon out whatever he hadn’t been able to reach with his tongue.

“So, Jack. Whatever happened to you getting the phones working again?”

Jack hesitated, like he wasn’t sure he should tell her anything. “They’re up and running. Or will be as soon as I get the word from Sam.”

Brianna stared at him. “What?”

“It was a pretty simple problem, really. We have three towers, one here in Perdido Beach, one more up the highway, and one on top of the ridge. There’s a program that checks numbers to make sure the bill has been paid and so on, so that the number is authorized. The program isn’t in the tower, obviously, it’s outside the FAYZ. So I fixed it so that all phones are authorized.”

“Can I call my mom?” Brianna asked. She knew the answer, but she couldn’t quash the bounce of hope in time to stop herself from asking.

Jack stared in confusion. “Of course not. That would mean penetrating the FAYZ barrier.”

“Oh.” The disappointment was like a sharp pain. Brianna, like most of the kids in the FAYZ, had learned to deal with the loss of parents, grandparents, older siblings. But the hope of actually speaking with them . . .

It was her mother Brianna missed most. There was a big age gap between Brianna and her little sisters. Brianna’s father had been out of her life since the divorce. Her mother had remarried—a jerk—and then had had twins with him. Brianna liked the twins okay, but they were eight years younger than she was, so it wasn’t like they hung out together.

It was Brianna’s stepfather who had insisted on sending her to Coates. His reason was that her grades were falling. Which was a lame excuse. Lots of kids had trouble with math and didn’t end up getting shipped off to a place like Coates.

Brianna had talked her mother into standing up to her stepfather. This was going to be her last year at Coates. Next year she was going to be back at Nicolet Middle School, in Banning. Back where she belonged. Not that there weren’t some tough kids at Nicolet, but there were no Caines, no Bennos, no Dianas, and definitely no Drakes.

No one at Nicolet had ever encased her hands in a block of cement and then left her to starve.

Besides, it would be so cool to blow all her old friends away with her new power. Their heads would explode. Their brains would melt. She could be a whole track team all by herself.

“There are no satellites to link to,” Jack was going on in his pedantic way. He was definitely kind of cute. And she thought he was kind of interesting. Kind of cute mostly because he was so clueless while at the same time being scary smart. She had noticed him even before, back when Coates was just a miserable hellhole and Jack was only on the periphery of the Caine clique.

“Why hasn’t Sam told anyone?” Brianna asked. “Why hasn’t he turned the system back on?”

“There’s no way to stop the Coates kids from using it, too, unless we disable the tower up on the ridge. Or unless I figure out a way to replace the entire authorization protocol and then authorize only certain numbers. Which would be a big programming job since I would be starting from scratch.”

“Oh.” Brianna peered closely at him. “Well, we don’t want to do anything that will help Caine and Drake and that witch, Diana. Do we?”

Jack shrugged. “Well, I was scared of Drake. I mean, everyone is scared of Drake. But Caine and Diana, they were okay to me.”

Brianna didn’t like that answer. The “interested” smile she’d worn for him evaporated. She held up her hands. The scars from Drake’s cruel “plastering” were gone. But the memory of that abuse, and the horror of starvation, especially now that it was back, were still fresh. “They weren’t so nice to me.”

“No,” Jack admitted. He looked down at the ground. “But still. I mean, they all—Sam and Astrid and all—they asked me to figure it out, the phones I mean, and I did. I want . . . I mean . . . I mean, I did it. I *did it*. It works. So we should turn it back on.”

Brianna’s expression hardened. “No. If it helps the Coates people in any way, then no. I don’t want their lives to be any easier. I want them to suffer. I want them to suffer in every way they can suffer. And then I want them to die.”

She saw shock register behind those askew glasses. Jack was no different from most people, Brianna admitted to herself with some bitterness: he didn’t take her seriously. Of course she maintained an aura of cool and everything—after all, she was the Breeze. She was a superhero, so she had some obligation to carry off a certain style. But she was also Brianna. Regular girl.

“Oh, did that sound too harsh?” she asked, letting annoyance resonate in her tone of voice.

“A little bit,” Jack said.

“Yeah? Well, thanks for helping. Later,” Brianna said. And she was gone before he could say something else stupid.

Duck woke up.

He was completely disoriented. He was flat on his back. Wet. Wearing nothing but a bathing suit. In the dark.

He was cold. His fingertips were numb. He was shivering.

He felt something hard and sharp beneath his shoulder blades and he shifted to lessen the pain. He looked around, bewildered. There was a faint light from above. Sunlight bouncing weakly down a long dirt shaft.

Duck tried to make sense of it. He remembered everything: sinking to the bottom of the pool, then sinking through the bottom of the pool. He remembered choking on water and his lungs burning. There were scrapes down his sides, and along the underside of his arms.

And now, here he was, in a hole. A deep hole. At the bottom of a mud-sided shaft that he had somehow caused by falling into the earth.

Falling into the earth?

It was impossible to be sure how far down underground he was. But from the

faraway look of the light, he had to be at least twenty feet down. Twenty feet. Underground.

Fear stabbed at his heart. He was buried alive. There was no way he'd be able to clamber back up through that narrow muddy shaft to the surface.

No way.

"Help!" he yelled. The sound echoed faintly.

Duck realized that he was not in a confined space. There was air. And the surface beneath him was too hard and too rough to be dirt. He got to his knees. Then, slowly, stood up. There was a ceiling just inches above his head. He stretched his arms to either side and touched a wall to his left, nothing to his right.

"It's a pipe," Duck said to the darkness. "Or a tunnel."

It was also pitch black in both directions.

"Or a cave."

"How did this happen?" Duck demanded of the cave. His teeth chattered from cold. From fear as well. There was a faint echo, but no answer.

He looked up toward the light and yelled, "Help! Help!" a couple more times. But there was zero chance of anyone hearing. Unless of course Zil and the boys who'd been harassing him had gone for help. That was possible, wasn't it? They might be jerks, but surely they would go for help. They wouldn't just leave him down here.

And yet, there were no anxious faces peering down at him from above.

"Come on, Duck: Think."

He was in a tunnel, or whatever, far underground. The tunnel floor was muddy and wet. Despite this, the tunnel did not feel particularly damp, not like it was a sewer. And he himself was far less muddy than he should have been.

"I fell down through the ground. Then I practically drowned and passed out and stopped. The water kept flowing past me and mostly cleaned me off."

He was pleased to have even figured that out.

Gingerly he took steps down the tunnel, holding his hands out ahead of him. He was scared. More scared than he had been in his life. More scared even than the day the FAYZ had happened, or the day of the big battle, when he had hidden in a closet with a flashlight and some comic books.

He was down here now, alone. No Iron Man. No Sandman. No Dark Knight.

And it was cold.

Duck noticed the sound of his own sobbing, and was dismayed to realize he was crying. He tried to stop. It wasn't easy. He wanted to cry. He wanted to cry for his mother and father and grandmother and aunts and uncles and even his obnoxious big brother and the whole, whole, whole world that was gone and had abandoned him to this grave.

"Help! Help!" he cried, and again there was no answer.

Before him were two equally dark choices: The dark tunnel extending to his left. The dark tunnel extending to his right. He felt a slight, almost imperceptible whisper of breeze on his face. It seemed to come from his left.

Toward air. Not away.

Carefully, Duck made his way down the tunnel, hands outstretched like a blind person, down the tunnel.

It was so dark, he could not see his hand in front of his face. No light. None.

He soon found that it was easier if he kept one hand on the wall. It was rock, pitted and rough, but with bumps and protrusions that felt worn down. The ground below him was uneven but not wildly so.

“Cave has to lead somewhere,” Duck told himself. He found the sound of his own voice reassuring. It was real. It was familiar.

“I wish it was a tunnel. People don’t build a tunnel for no reason.” Then, after a while, “At least a tunnel has to go somewhere.”

He tried to make sense of the direction. Was he going north, south, east, west? Well, hopefully not too far west, because that would lead him to the ocean.

He walked and occasionally started crying and walked some more. It was impossible to guess how long he’d been down there. He had no idea what time of day it might be. But he soon realized that the place where he’d fallen in was seeming more and more homey by comparison. There wasn’t much light back there, but at least there had been some. And here there was none.

“I don’t want to die down here,” he said. He was instantly sorry that he had voiced that thought. Saying it made it real.

At that moment he banged his head on something that shouldn’t have been there, banged it hard.

Duck cursed angrily and put his hand to his forehead, feeling for blood, and realized his feet were sinking into the ground. “No!” he yelled.

The sinking stopped. He’d gone up to his knees. But then he had stopped. He had stopped sinking. Carefully, cautiously, he pulled his legs up out of the hard-packed dirt.

“What is happening to me?” he demanded. “Why . . .” But then he knew the answer. He knew it and couldn’t believe it hadn’t occurred to him earlier.

“Oh, my God: I’m a freak.”

“I’m a moof!”

“I’m a moof with a really sucky power.”

What exactly the mutant ability was, he wasn’t sure. It seemed to be the power to sink right down through the earth. Which was crazy. And, besides, he hadn’t intended to do any such thing. He sure hadn’t said, “Sink!”

He started walking again, careful of his head, trying to work through what had happened. Both times he had sunk he’d been angry, that was the first thing. He’d heard the stories of how Sam had discovered his abilities only when he was really scared or really mad.

But Duck had been scared now for quite a while. He’d been scared since the FAYZ. It was only when he got angry that the thing happened.

The thing. Whatever it was.

“If I got mad enough maybe I’d sink clear through the earth. Come out in China. See my great-great grandparents.”

He crept along a bit farther, toward a dim glow.

“Light?” he said. “Is that really light?”

It wasn’t bright, that was for sure. It wasn’t a lightbulb. It wasn’t a flashlight. It wasn’t even a star. It was more like a less dark darkness. Hazy. At a distance that was impossible to guess.

Duck was sure it was a hallucination. He wanted it to be real, but he feared it

wasn't. He feared it was imagination.

But he kept moving and the closer he got the less likely it seemed that it was a mirage. There was definitely a glow. Like a glow-in-the-dark clock face, a sickly, cold, unhealthy-looking light.

Even close up it didn't glow enough to make out many features, just a few faint outlines of rock. He had to stand and stare hard, straining his eyes for quite some time before he could figure out that the glow was mostly along the ground. And that it came from a side tunnel of the main cave. This second shaft was narrow, far smaller than the main cave, which, it seemed to Duck, had gradually broadened out.

He could follow this new shaft and at least see something. Not much, but something. Some proof that he wasn't actually blind.

But some little voice in his brain was screaming, "No!" His instincts were telling him to run.

"There's light down there. It must lead to somewhere," Duck argued with himself.

But although Duck had never been the most attentive student, and had very little information of a scientific nature in his brain, he was an avid fan of *The Simpsons*. He'd seen this glow, in cartoon form. And it featured in any number of comics.

"It's radiation," he said.

This was wrong, he realized, filled with righteous indignation. Everyone said there was no radiation left from the big accident at the power plant thirteen years ago, when the meteorite hit. But where else would this glow have come from? It must have seeped along underground seams and crevices.

They had lied. Or maybe they just hadn't realized.

"Not a good idea to go that way," he told himself.

"But it's the only light," he cried, and began to weep with frustration because it seemed he had no choice but to plunge back into absolute darkness.

And then, Duck heard something.

He froze. He strained his senses to listen.

A soft, swishing sound. Very faint.

A long silence. And then, there it was again. Swish. Swish.

He'd missed the sound because he'd been focusing on the glow. It was a sound he knew. Water. And it did not, thank God, come from the radioactive shaft.

Duck hated the ocean. But all things considered, he hated it a bit less than he hated this cave.

Leaving the glow behind, and feeling carefully ahead, cautious about his bruised forehead, he crept on through pitch blackness.

SIX

96 HOURS, 22 MINUTES

“LOOK, ALBERT, DON’T tell me we have a problem and I can’t do anything about it,” Sam said, practically snarling. He marched along at a quick walk from the town hall to the church next door. Albert and Astrid were with him, struggling to keep up.

The sun was setting out over the ocean. The dying light laid down a long red exclamation point on the water. A boat was out there, one of the small motorboats. Sam sighed. Some kid who’d probably end up falling in.

Sam stopped suddenly, causing Albert and Astrid to bump into each other. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to sound mad. Although I am mad, but not at you, Albert. It’s just I have to go in there and lay down the law, and I’m sorry, but killer worms aren’t making it any easier.”

“Then hold off for a few days,” Albert said calmly.

“Hold off? Albert, you were the one who was saying weeks ago, months ago, we had to make everyone get to work.”

“I never said we should *make* them work,” Albert countered. “I said we should figure out a way to pay them to work.”

Sam was not in the mood. Not in the mood at all. Losing a kid was a tragedy to everyone, but to him it was a personal failure. He’d been handed the job of being in charge, which meant everything that went wrong was on him. E.Z. had been under his care and protection. And now E.Z. was a pile of ash.

Sam sucked in a gulp of air. He shot a baleful look at the cemetery in the square. Three more graves in just the last three months since Sam had been officially elected mayor. E.Z. wouldn’t get a grave, just a marker. At the rate things were going, they’d run out of room in the square.

The front door of the church stood open. Always open. That was because it, and much of the church roof, had been damaged in the big Thanksgiving Battle. The wide wooden doors had been blown off. The sides of the opening were shaky, held up by a slab of stone across the top that made the wreckage look like a lopsided Stonehenge monolith.

Caine had come close to collapsing the entire church, but it was built strong, so three quarters of it still stood. Some of the rubble had been cleared, but not much, and even that had only been pushed into the side street. Like so many ambitious undertakings that had fallen apart as kids quit working and could not be convinced to come back.

Sam walked straight to the front of the church and mounted the three low steps to what he thought of as the stage, although Astrid had patiently explained that it was called a chancel. The great cross had not been replaced in its rightful spot, but stood leaning in a corner. A close examination would reveal bloodstains where it had once crushed Cookie’s shoulder.

Not until he turned around did Sam notice how little of the church was filled. There should have been close to 250 kids, leaving aside the day care and the people on guard in various locations. There were closer to eighty present, half of those so young,

Sam knew they'd been dumped there by big brothers or sisters looking for a bit of free babysitting.

Astrid and Albert took seats in the first pew. Little Pete was at the day care. Now that Mother Mary had more help at the day care, Astrid could occasionally leave Pete there, although never for very long. As long as Pete stayed lost in his video game, anyone could care for him. But if Pete got upset . . .

Mother Mary Terrafino herself was two rows back, too humble to insert herself in the leadership area of the church. Sam was struck by how good Mary looked. Weight loss. Probably from overwork. Or maybe she didn't enjoy living on the kinds of canned food that, in the old pre-FAYZ days, people had donated to food drives. But she was quite thin, which was not an adjective normally applied to Mary. Model thin.

Lana Arwen Lazar slumped in a back row. She looked tired and a little resentful. Lana often looked resentful. But at least she had come, which was more than could be said for most kids.

Sam gritted his teeth, angry that so many had skipped this town meeting. Just what exactly did they have to do that was more important?

"First off," he said, "I want to say I'm sorry about E.Z. He was a good kid. He didn't deserve . . ." For a moment he almost lost it as a surge of emotion welled up from nowhere. "I'm sorry he died."

Someone sobbed loudly.

"Look, I'm going to get right to it: we have three hundred and thirty-two . . . I'm sorry, three hundred and thirty-one mouths to feed," Sam said. He placed his hands on his hips and planted his feet wide apart. "We were already pretty bad off for food supplies. But after the attack by the Coates kids . . . well, it's not pretty bad off, anymore, it's desperate."

He let that sink in. But how much were six- and eight-year-olds really grasping? Even the older kids looked more glazed than alarmed.

"Three hundred and thirty-one kids," Sam reiterated, "And food for maybe a week. That's not a long time. It's not a lot of food. And as you all know, the food we have is awful."

That got a response from the audience. The younger kids produced a chorus of gagging and retching sounds.

"All right," Sam snapped. "Knock it off. The point is, things are really desperate."

"How about the food in everyone's house?" someone yelled.

The light of the setting sun streamed through the damaged façade of the church and stabbed Sam in the eyes. He had to take two steps to the left to escape it. "Hunter? Is that you?"

Hunter Lefkowitz was a year younger than Sam, long-haired like just about everyone except the few who had taken the initiative of cutting his or her own hair. He was not someone who had ever been popular in school before the FAYZ. But then, Sam reflected, the things that had made kids popular in the old days didn't mean much anymore.

Hunter had begun developing powers. Sam was trying to keep that fact secret—he suspected that Caine was sending spies into Perdido Beach. He wanted to be able to use Hunter as a secret weapon if it came to another fight with Caine's people. But secrets were tough to keep in a place where everyone knew everyone else.

“Hunter, we’ve searched all of the homes and carried the food to Ralph’s,” Sam continued. “The problem is that all the fruit and veggies spoiled while we were all filling up on chips and cookies. The meat all rotted. People were stupid and careless, and there’s nothing we can do about that now.” Sam swallowed the bitterness he felt, the anger he felt at his own foolishness. “But we have food sitting out in the fields. Maybe not the food we’d like, but enough to carry us for months—many months—if we bring it in before it rots and the birds eat it.”

“Maybe we’ll get rescued, and we won’t have to worry,” another voice said.

“Maybe we’ll learn to live on air,” Astrid muttered under her breath but loudly enough to be heard by at least a few.

“Why don’t you go get our food back from Drake and the chuds up there?”

It was Zil. He accepted a congratulatory slap on the back from a creepy kid named Antoine, part of Zil’s little posse.

“Because it would mean getting some kids killed,” Sam said bluntly. “We’d be lucky to rescue any of the food, and we’d end up digging more graves in the plaza. And it wouldn’t solve our problem, anyway.”

“Get your moofs to go fight their moofs,” Zil said.

Sam had heard the term “moof” more and more lately. “Chud” was a newer term. Each new term seemed just a little more derogatory than the one it replaced.

“Sit down, Zil,” Sam went on. “We have twenty-six kids who are in the . . . have we decided? Are we calling it the army?” he asked Edilio.

Edilio was in the first pew. He leaned forward, hung his head, and looked uncomfortable. “Some kids are calling it that, but man, I don’t know what to call it. Like a militia or something? I guess it doesn’t matter.”

“Mother Mary has fourteen kids working for her, including one-day draftees,” Sam said, ticking off the list. “Fire Chief Ellen has six kids at the firehouse, dealing with emergencies. Dahra handles the pharmacy herself, Astrid is my adviser. Jack is in charge of technology. Albert has twenty-four kids working with him now, guarding Ralph’s and distributing food supplies. Counting me, that’s seventy-eight kids who do various jobs.”

“When they bother to show up,” Mary Terrafino said loudly. That earned a nervous laugh, but Mary wasn’t smiling.

“Right,” Sam agreed. “When they bother to show up. The thing is, we need more people working. We need people bringing in that food.”

“We’re just kids,” a fifth grader said, and giggled at his own joke.

“You’re going to be hungry kids,” Sam snapped. “You’re going to be starving kids. Listen to me: people are going to starve. To death.

“To. Death.” He repeated it with all the emphasis he could bring to bear on the word.

He caught a warning look from Astrid and took a deep breath. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to yell. It’s just that the situation is really bad.”

A second-grade girl held up her hand. Sam sighed, knowing what to expect, but called on her, anyway.

“I just want my mom.”

“We all do,” Sam said impatiently. “We all want the old world back. But we don’t seem to be able to make that happen. So we have to try to make this world work out.

Which means we need food. Which means we need kids to harvest the food, and load it into trucks, and preserve it, and cook it, and . . .” He threw up his hands as he realized he was staring at rows and rows of blank expressions.

“You crazy with that stuff about picking vegetables?” It was Howard Bassem, leaning against the back wall. Sam hadn’t seen him come in. Sam glanced around for Orc, but didn’t see him. And Orc wasn’t something . . . no, someone, still some *one* despite everything . . . you overlooked.

“You have another way to get food?” Sam asked.

“Man, you think people don’t know about what happened to E.Z.?”

Sam stiffened. “Of course we all know what happened to E.Z. No one is trying to hide what happened to E.Z. But as far as we know, the worms are just in that one cabbage field.”

“What worms?” Hunter demanded.

Obviously not everyone had heard. Sam would have liked to smack Howard right at that moment. The last thing they needed was a retelling of E.Z.’s gruesome fate.

“I’ve taken a look at one of the worms,” Astrid said, sensing that Sam was reaching the limit of his patience. She didn’t come up onto the chancel but stood by her pew and faced the audience, which was now paying very close attention. Except for two little kids who were having a shoving match.

“The worms that killed E.Z. are mutations,” Astrid said. “They have hundreds of teeth. Their bodies are designed for boring through flesh rather than tunneling through the dirt.”

“But as far as we know, they’re just in that one cabbage field,” Sam reiterated.

“I dissected the worm Sam brought me,” Astrid said. “I found something very strange. The worms have very large brains. I mean, a normal earthworm’s brain is so primitive that if you cut it out, the worm still keeps doing what it normally does.”

“Kind of like my sister,” a kid piped up, and was poked by his sister in retaliation.

Howard drifted closer to the front of the room. “So these E.Z. killer worms are smart.”

“I’m not implying that they can read or do quadratic equations,” Astrid said. “But they’ve gone from brains that were a bundle of cells that did nothing more than manage the organism’s negative phototropism to a brain with differentiated hemispheres and distinct, presumably specialized, regions.”

Sam hid a smile by looking down. Astrid was perfectly capable of simplifying the way she explained things. But when someone was irritating her—as Howard was doing now—she would crank up the polysyllables and make them feel stupid.

Howard came to a stop, perhaps paralyzed by the word “phototropism.” But he recovered quickly. “Look, bottom line, you step into a field full of these E.Z. killers, these zekes, and you’re dead. Right?”

“The large brains confirm the possibility that these creatures are capable of territoriality. My point is, judging by what Sam, Edilio, and Albert observed, the worms may stay perfectly within their territory. In this case, the cabbage field.”

“Yeah?” Howard said. “Well, I know someone who could walk right through that field and not be bothered.”

So that was it, Sam thought. Inevitably with Howard, it all came back to Orc.

“You may be right that Orc would be invulnerable,” Sam said. “So?”

“So?” Howard echoed. He smirked. “So, Sam, Orc can pick those cabbages for you. Of course he’s going to need something in exchange.”

“Beer?”

Howard nodded, maybe a little embarrassed, but not much. “He has a taste for the stuff. Me, I can’t stand it. But as Orc’s manager I’ll need to be taken care of, too.”

Sam gritted his teeth. But the truth was it might be a solution to the problem. They had quite a bit of beer still at Ralph’s grocery.

“If Orc wants to try it, fine with me,” Sam said. “Work something out with Albert.”

It was not fine with Astrid. “Sam, Orc has become an alcoholic. You want to give him beer?”

“A can of beer for a day’s work,” Sam said. “Orc can’t get very drunk on—”

“No way,” Howard said. “Orc needs a case a day. Four six-packs. After all, it’s hot work out there in the field picking cabbage.”

Sam shot a glance at Astrid. Her face was set. But Sam had the responsibility for feeding 331 kids. Orc was probably invulnerable to the zekes. And he was so strong, he could yank up thirty thousand pounds of cabbage in a week’s work. “Talk to Albert after the meeting,” Sam said to Howard.

Astrid fumed but sat down. Howard did a jaunty little finger-pointing thing at Sam, signifying agreement.

Sam sighed. The meeting wasn’t going the way he’d planned. They never did. He understood that kids were kids, so he was used to the inevitable disruptions and general silliness of the younger ones. But that even so many of the older kids, kids in seventh, eighth grade, hadn’t bothered to show up was depressing.

To make things worse, all this talk of food was making him hungry. Lunch had been grim. The hunger was almost always present now. It made him feel hollow. It occupied his brain, when he needed to be thinking of other things.

“Look, people, I’m announcing a new rule. It’s going to seem harsh. But it’s necessary.”

The word “harsh” got almost everyone’s attention.

“We can’t have people sitting around all day playing Wii and watching DVDs. We need people to start working in the fields. So, here’s the thing: everyone age seven or older has to put in three days per week picking fruit or veggies. Then Albert’s going to work with the whole question of freezing stuff that can be frozen, or otherwise preserving stuff.”

There was dead silence. And blank stares.

“What I’m saying is, tomorrow we’ll have two school buses ready to go. They hold about fifty kids each and we need to have them mostly full because we’re going to pick some melons and it’s a lot of work.”

More blank stares.

“Okay, let me make this simple: get your brothers and sisters and friends and anyone over age seven and be in the square tomorrow morning at eight o’clock.”

“But how about—?”

“Just be there,” Sam said with less firmness than he’d intended. His frustration was draining away now, replaced by weariness and depression.

“Just be there,” someone mimicked in a singsong voice.

Sam closed his eyes, and for a moment he almost seemed to be asleep. Then he opened them again and managed a bleak smile. "Please. Be there," he said quietly.

He walked down the three steps and out of the church, knowing in his heart that few would answer his call.

SEVEN

88 HOURS, 54 MINUTES

“PULL OVER HERE, Panda,” Drake said.

“Why?” Panda was behind the wheel of the SUV. He was getting more and more confident as a driver, but being Panda, he still wouldn’t go more than thirty miles an hour.

“Because that’s what I said to do, that’s why,” Drake said irritably.

Bug knew why they were stopping. And Bug knew why it bothered Drake. They couldn’t risk driving down the highway to the power plant. In the three months Caine had spent hallucinating and yelling crazy stuff, the Coates side had grown steadily weaker while the Perdido Beach side cruised right along. Drake had pulled off his raid at Ralph’s, but he didn’t dare do anything more.

Bug knew. He’d been in and out of Perdido Beach many times. They might be running low on food in town but they still had more than Coates. It was frustrating for Bug because he should have been able to steal more of that food, but his chameleon powers didn’t work that well on things he was carrying. The best he could do was slip a package of dried soup or a rare PowerBar inside his shirt. Not that there were PowerBars to be found nowadays. Or dried soup.

“Okay, Bug, we hike from here,” Drake said. He swung his door open and stepped out onto the road. Bug slid across the seat and stood beside Drake.

Bug’s real name was Tyler. His fellow Coates kids assumed he had earned his nickname from his willingness to accept crazy dares—specifically, eating insects. Kids would dare him and he’d say, “What do I get if I do it?” Mostly, in the old days, he’d gotten kids to give him money or candy.

He didn’t mind most bugs. He kind of liked the way they would squirm before he would bite down on them, ending their little insect lives.

But Bug had been called that before ever coming to Coates, before he’d gotten a reputation as the kid who would try anything. The nickname Bug had stuck to him after he was caught recording parent-teacher conferences at his old school. He’d posted the conversations on Facebook, embarrassing any kid with a psychological issue, a learning disability, a bedwetting problem—about half his class.

Bug hadn’t just been sent to Coates as punishment; he’d been sent for his own safety.

Bug edged nervously away as Drake unlimbered his tentacle, stretched it out, and rewrapped it around himself. Bug didn’t like Drake. No one did. But if he was going to get caught out in the open sneaking toward the power plant, he figured Drake would do all the fighting while he himself just disappeared. At night he was completely invisible.

They left Panda behind with firm instructions to stay where he was until they got back. Which was on a back road that went from tarmac to gravel, back and forth, as though the guys who’d built it couldn’t make up their minds.

“We have a good two miles to cover to get to the main road,” Drake said. “So keep up.”

“I’m hungry,” Bug complained.

“Everybody’s hungry,” Drake snapped. “Shut up about it.”

They plunged off the road into some kind of farmland. It was tough walking because the field was plowed into furrows, so it was hard not to trip. Something was growing there, but Bug had no idea what, just that it was some kind of plant. He wondered if he could eat it: he was that hungry.

Maybe there would be some food at the plant. Maybe he could find something while he was scoping the place out.

They walked in silence. Drake was not one for small talk, and neither was Bug.

The highway’s lights were visible from far off. It was impossible, even now, to see those bright lights and not think of busy gas stations, bright Wendy’s and Burger Kings, bustling stores, cars, and trucks. Just south of Perdido Beach had been a long strip of such restaurants, plus a Super Target where they sold groceries, and a See’s candy store where . . .

Bug couldn’t stand it that it was all there, just outside the FAYZ wall. If there was an outside anymore.

See’s candy. Bug would have just about cut off his ear to have five minutes inside that store. He liked the ones with nuts in them, especially. Oh, and the ones with raspberry cream. And the kind of brown sugar ones. The ones with caramel, those were good, too.

All out of reach now. His mouth watered. His stomach ached.

It was so quiet in the FAYZ, Bug thought. Quiet and empty. And, if Caine succeeded in his plan, it would soon be dark as well.

Only some portions of the highway were lit up. The part that went through town, and here, at the turn-off to the power plant. Bug and Drake stayed well away from the pool of light.

Bug looked left, toward town. No sign of movement coming down the road. Nothing to the right, either. Across the highway and a little distance down the access road Bug knew there was a guardhouse. But that shouldn’t be any problem.

“You have to stay off the road and go cross-country,” Drake told him.

“What? Why? No one can see me.”

“There might be infrared security cameras at the plant, moron, that’s why. We don’t know if you’re invisible to infrared cameras.”

Bug acknowledged that could be a problem. But the prospect of covering another couple of miles going uphill and down, through tall grass and across unseen ditches, wasn’t very exciting. He would probably get lost. Then he would never get back in time for breakfast.

“Okay,” he said, having no intention of obeying.

Suddenly Drake’s creepy tentacle wrapped around him. Drake squeezed hard enough that Bug had to struggle to breathe.

“This is important, Bug. Don’t screw it up.” Drake’s eyes were cold. “If you do? I’ll whip the skin off you.”

Bug nodded. Drake released him.

Bug shuddered as the tentacle slithered away. It was like a snake. Just like a snake. And Bug hated snakes.

It was easy for Bug to turn the camouflage on. He just thought about disappearing

and passed his hands down his front like he was smoothing his shirt. He saw Drake's confused stare, his mean eyes not quite able to focus on Bug's true location. He knew he was all but invisible. He raised a middle finger to Drake.

"Later," Bug said, and crossed the highway.

Bug hiked cross-country until he was well away from Drake. The moon was up but it was only a sliver and touched only the occasional rock, the odd stalk of weed. He walked straight into a low-hanging tree branch and fell on his butt, mouth bleeding and bruised.

After that he cut back to the road. The road curved high above the glittering ocean, affording a pretty, if disquieting view. Something about the ocean always felt ominous to Bug.

Bug figured if he was visible on infrared, well, too bad. He could always switch sides like Computer Jack had done. Of course then he'd be in trouble if Drake ever got hold of him.

He took Drake's threats seriously. Very seriously.

Bug had been beaten many times. His father had been quick with a slap or, when he was good and drunk, a punch. But his father had some limits on his behavior: he was always worried that Bug's mother would be able to take custody away from him. Not that his father loved him so much—it was that he hated Bug's mother and wouldn't do anything that would allow her to win.

At the worst of times, when his father had been out drinking with his girlfriend and they'd had a fight, Bug had learned to hide. His favorite place was in the attic because it was stuffed with boxes, and behind the boxes there was a spot where Bug could crawl under the eaves and lie flat on the insulation between cross-beams. His father had never found him there.

It seemed like forever before Bug began to catch sight of the brightly lit power plant. A glimpse through a crease in the hill, a glow coming from beyond a bend in the road. It felt like another forever before he came upon the second guardhouse, the one that squatted across the road with a chain-link and barbed-wire fence extending out in both directions.

Caine had speculated that the fence, which only one Coates kid had ever seen, might be electrified. Bug wasn't going to take any chances. He walked along the fence, uphill, into the rough, away from the guardhouse for a hundred yards. He found a stick and began to scoop out the dirt below the fence. It wouldn't take much, he wasn't very big.

Bug felt very exposed. As long as he was digging with the stick, he was visible: sticks did not have the power of camouflage. The moon that before had seemed to cast no light at all now felt like a searchlight focused right on him. And the power plant itself was like some vast, terrifying beast crouched beside the water, blazingly bright in the blackness.

Bug crawled under the fence on his back. Dirt found its way inside his shirt, but he did not get electrocuted. Not that he really thought the fence was electrified. Still, better to be careful.

Bug stood up, brushed himself off, and began marching down the hill toward the power plant.

He was hungry. He would spy and do all the things Drake had told him to do. But

first, he would look for food.

Sam tried to sleep. Wanted desperately to sleep.

He was in the spare bedroom at Astrid and Mary and John's house. In the dark. On his back. Staring up at the ceiling.

Downstairs, in the kitchen, there were a half dozen cans of food. He was hungry. But he had had his ration for the day. He had to set the example.

Still, he was hungry, and the hunger didn't care about setting an example.

Food downstairs. And Astrid down the hall.

A different kind of hunger, that. And there, too, he had to set a good example.

I am nothing but good examples, he told himself gloomily.

Not that Astrid would . . . although, how could he know for sure?

His head buzzed with a crazy list of things he had to do. Had to get people working on picking crops. Had to get people to start carrying their trash to one central location: rats were taking over the nighttime streets, scurrying from trash pile to trash pile.

Had to get a whole list of younger kids set up in houses with older kids. There were five- and six-year-olds living alone. That was crazy. And dangerous. One of them had thrown a hair dryer into a bathtub last week and blown out power in their home. It was just sheer luck no one had been electrocuted. Two weeks before that a second-grade boy, living by himself, had set his house on fire. Deliberately, it seemed. As a way to get someone, anyone, to pay attention. The blaze had consumed three homes, half a block, before anyone got around to telling the fire department. By the time Ellen had driven the huge old fire truck to the scene, the fire had almost burned itself out.

The kid had survived with painful burns that Lana had healed. But only after the little boy had writhed and cried in unbearable agony for hours.

Was Astrid still awake? Was she lying there in the dark? Same as him? Thinking the same thoughts?

No. She was thinking he was a jerk for authorizing Albert to bribe Orc with beer. Thinking he had no morals. Thinking he was losing it.

Maybe she was right.

Not helpful. Not helpful when what you needed was sleep. Not helpful to go over the list of things you needed to do, and the list of things you couldn't do.

How crazy was it that he was reduced to fantasizing about a can of chili, the last slightly tasty thing he'd eaten? How long ago? A week? Fantasizing about canned chili. Hamburgers. Ice cream. Pizza. And Astrid, in her own bed.

He wondered what it would be like to be drunk. Did it make you forget all of that? There was still plenty of alcohol in the FAYZ, even though some kids had started drinking it.

Could he stop them? Should he bother? If they were going to starve to death, why not let them drink?

Little kids, drinking rum. He'd seen it. Drinking vodka. They'd make faces at the horrible taste and the burn of it, then they'd take another sip.

Food poisoning last week, two kids sharing something they had dug out of the garbage. They'd staggered into Dahra's so-called hospital with fevers. A hundred and four degrees. Vomiting. Vomiting the water and the Tylenol she'd tried to get down them. Thank God for Lana, she'd saved them, but it was a close call. Lana's power

worked better on wounds, things that were broken.

There would be more electrocutions. More fires. More poisonings. More accidents. Like the boy who had fallen off the roof. He'd fallen two stories, and no one had seen him fall. His sister had found the body.

He was buried in the town square now, next to the victims of the battle.

Caine was still out there. Drake. Pack Leader. All of them still out there, somewhere. Sam had fooled himself into believing he was done with them, until Drake and his crew hit Ralph's.

In the old days if you had just a little money you could make a phone call and, thirty minutes later, there would be Papa John's bringing you a giant pizza.

Melted, bubbly, brown cheese. Greasy pepperoni. Just like that. Just like it was no big deal. He would sell his soul for a pizza.

Astrid was religious, so probably no, she was not lying in her bed thinking of him. Almost certainly not. Although when they kissed she didn't seem like she was pulling away. She loved him, he knew that for sure. And he loved her. With all his heart.

But there were other feelings, in addition to love. Kind of attached to the love feeling, but different, too.

And Chinese. Oh, man, the little white cardboard boxes full of sweet-and-sour chicken and lemon chicken and Szechuan prawns. He'd never cared much for Chinese food. But it beat cans of butter beans and half-cooked pinto beans and what passed for tortillas made out of flour and oil and water and burned on a stove.

Someone would probably come and wake him up, soon, only he wouldn't be asleep. They came almost every night. *Sam, something's burning. Sam, someone's hurt. Sam, a kid crashed a car. Sam, we caught Orc all drunk and breaking windows for no reason.*

It wouldn't be *Sam, the pizza's here.*

It wouldn't be Astrid saying *Sam, I'm here.*

Sam drifted off to sleep. Astrid came in. She stood in the doorway, beautiful in her gauzy nightgown, and said, *Sam, it's okay, E.Z.'s alive.*

Even asleep, Sam knew that was a dream.

An hour later Taylor simply appeared, teleported into his room—she called it “bouncing”—and said, “Sam, wake up.”

No dream, this time. It was often Taylor who brought the bad news. She or Brianna, if either was available. They were the fastest means of communication.

“What is it, Taylor?”

“You know Tom? Tom O'Dell?”

Sam didn't think he did. His brain was not focusing. He couldn't seem to quite wake up.

“Anyway, there was a fight between Tom and the girls who live next door—Sandy and . . . and I forget the other girl. Tom got hurt pretty bad from Sandy hitting him with a bowling ball.”

Sam swung his legs over the side of the bed, but could not keep his eyes open. “What? Why did she hit him with a bowling ball?”

“She says Tom killed her cat,” Taylor said. “And then he was cooking it on the barbecue in his backyard.”

That at last penetrated Sam's bleary brain. “Okay. Okay.” He stood up and fumbled

around for his jeans. He had gotten over the embarrassment of being seen in his underwear.

Taylor handed him his pants. "Here."

"Bounce back. Tell them I'm coming."

Taylor disappeared, and for a moment Sam tried to tell himself that this was just another dream. There was nothing, after all, that he could do about a dead cat.

But it was his duty to show up. If he started blowing off his duties, it would look bad.

"Set a good example," he muttered under his breath as he crept silently past Astrid's door.

EIGHT

88 HOURS, 52 MINUTES

ORSAY PETTIJOHN STOOD transfixed. Two kids, the first human beings she had seen in three months, and both were bizarre, creepy. In the one boy's case, monstrous.

One was some sort of a demon with a thick tentacle where his right arm should have been.

The other . . . she wasn't even sure the other was there for a moment. He appeared, then he disappeared.

The boy with the frightening tentacle stared after the invisible one. Not quite invisible, Orsay realized when the boy stepped into a pool of light, but close enough. Then the boy with the python arm sighed, cursed under his breath, and opened the creaking door of a Toyota that had unaccountably run fifty feet off the road.

The boy evidently wanted the window open, but the battery was dead. So he drew a gun, aimed it at the driver's side window, and fired. The bang was so loud that Orsay gasped. She would have given away her position, but the sound of the explosion also camouflaged the sound of her cry.

Orsay squatted in the dark, in the dirt, and waited. The boy with the python arm would almost certainly go to sleep.

And then it would begin again.

Orsay had been living at the ranger station in the Stefano Rey National Park on the day everyone disappeared.

She had been mystified. She had been frightened.

She had also been relieved.

Just about three months earlier, she had been begging her father for help.

"What do you mean?" he had asked. He'd been busy poring over paperwork. There was a lot of paperwork involved in being a ranger. It wasn't just about helping find lost hikers and making sure campers didn't set the woods on fire while they were toasting marshmallows.

She had wanted to make him pay attention to her. Just to her. Not phony attention where he was really focused on his work. "Dad, I'm going nuts or something."

That declaration had earned her a dubious glance. "Is this about going to see your mom? Because I told you, she's still not ready. She loves you very much, but she's not ready for the responsibility."

That was a lie, but a well-intentioned one. Orsay knew about her mother's drug addiction. She knew about her mother's trips to rehab, each of which was followed by a period of normalcy where she would take Orsay, and put her in school, and arrange tidy little family dinners. Always just enough normal time for Orsay to think, maybe this time, before she would once again find her mother's "works" stashed in the back of a cupboard, or find her mother barely conscious and sprawled across the couch.

Her mother was a heroin addict. She'd been a secret heroin addict for a long time, faking it well during the early years when she'd still been married to Orsay's father and they'd lived in Oakland. Orsay's father had worked out of the park service regional headquarters.

But Orsay's mother's addiction grew ever worse, and soon there was no hiding it. There was a divorce. Orsay's mother did not fight for custody. Her father took a job at Stefano Rey, wanting to get far away from the city and far away from his ex-wife.

Orsay had lived a lonely life since then. School was a once-a-day video link with a classroom all the way off in Sunnyvale.

Occasionally she'd make a short-term friend with one of the kids who came with their parents to camp. Maybe a nice couple of days of swimming and fishing and hiking. But never more than a day here and a day there.

"Dad. I'm trying to tell you something important here. It's not about Mom. It's about me. There's something wrong with me. There's something very, very weird in my head."

"Sweetheart, you're a teenager. Of course there's something wrong in your head. If there wasn't, you wouldn't be a teenager. It's normal for you to start thinking about . . . well, diff—"

And that's when her father had simply disappeared.

There.

Not there.

She'd thought she was hallucinating. She had thought the craziness had suddenly overtaken her.

But her father was really gone. So were Ranger Assante and Ranger Cruz and Ranger Swallow.

So was everyone in the Main West campground.

The satellite uplink was dead. The cell phones were dead.

All that first day she had searched, but there was no one. Not in any of the campgrounds she could reach easily, anyway.

She had been terrified.

But that night she had felt silence descend on her battered mind. For the first time in weeks.

The creepy, lurid, crazy-quilt visions of people and places she didn't know were gone. In its place . . . not peace, exactly. But quiet. Her mind and dreams were her own again.

Despite her fear, Orsay slept. Reality had become a nightmare, but at least now it was her own nightmare.

On the second day, Orsay had hiked until she'd encountered the barrier. And then she knew that whatever was happening to her, it was real.

The barrier was impassable. It hurt to touch it.

There was no going north. The only way open was to the south, toward the distant town of Perdido Beach, almost twenty miles away.

Orsay had resisted. She was desperately lonely, but then she had been for a long time. And the compensation for feeling sane again was almost enough to make up for the utter isolation.

She found enough food in the storehouse and, when that was used up, in the campgrounds.

For a while she thought she might be the only person left alive. But then she had chanced upon a group of kids hiking through the forest. There were five of them. Four boys and a girl, all about Orsay's age, except for one younger boy, maybe four or five

years old.

She followed them a while, keeping out of sight. They were noisy enough to hear from a distance. They lacked Orsay's well-developed woodsman's skills.

That night, as they began to sleep, Orsay crept closer, wondering, hoping . . .

And then it started.

The first dream was from a boy named Edilio. Flashes of a day filled with insane action: a huge boat that flew through the air and crashed down on his head; a hotel atop a cliff; a race around a marina.

Crowding behind Edilio's dream came visions from a boy named Quinn. These were sad dreams, dark and gloomy and full of emotion, with only a few dark shapes to give them life.

But then the little boy, the four-year-old, fell into an REM state, and his dreams had blown away the others. It was as if the others' dreams were on small TVs while the little boy's dream was on an IMAX movie screen with surround sound.

Images of terrible menace.

Images of staggering beauty.

Things that were somehow both beautiful and terrifying.

None of it was logical. None of it made sense. But there was no looking away, no chance of hiding from the cascade of pictures, sounds, feelings. It was as if Orsay had tried to stand in front of a tornado.

The boy, Little Pete, had seen her. Dreamers often did, although they usually weren't sure who she was or why she was there. They usually ignored her as just another nonsensical element of a random dream.

But Little Pete had stepped into his own dream and he had come to her. He had stared right at her.

"Be careful," Little Pete said. "There's a monster."

And that was when Orsay had sensed a dark presence, looming up behind her. A presence that was like a black hole, eating the light of Little Pete's dream.

There was a name for the dark thing. A word Orsay couldn't make sense of. A word she had never heard. In the dream she had turned away from Little Pete to face the darkness, to ask it its name. To ask it what "gaiaphage" meant.

But Little Pete had smiled, just a little. He shook his head no, as if chiding a foolish child who'd been about to touch a hot stove.

And she had awakened, expelled from the dream like an unwelcomed guest at a party.

Now, months later, she still winced at the memory. But she also craved it. She had spent every night since wishing that she could touch Little Pete's sleeping mind once more. She savored the fragments she could recall, tried to get that same rush but always failed.

She was almost out of food, down to MREs—meals ready to eat, the overly salted meals in a pouch that soldiers and some campers ate. She told herself that she was coming down from the forest at long last for food. Just for food.

Now Orsay watched from a safe distance, concealed by darkness, as a real-life monster, a boy with a thick, powerful tentacle in place of one arm, said good-bye to a boy who simply disappeared.

She waited as he lost the fight with sleep.

And then, ah yes, such strange visions.

Drake. That was his name. She could hear the echo of that sound in her head.

Drake Merwin.

Whip Hand.

For what felt like a very long time she wandered through dreams of pain and rage. She had to shield herself from the physical agony, memories of which kept flooding the boy's dreams.

In Drake's dream Orsay saw a different boy, a boy with piercing eyes, a boy who made things fly through the air.

And she saw a boy with fire coming from his hands.

Then she saw the girl, the dark-haired, dark-eyed beauty. And the angry, resentful visions took a turn to something worse still.

Far worse.

For weeks before the great disappearance Orsay had been tortured by dreams she couldn't shut out, many of them the dreams of adults filled with disturbingly adult imagery.

But she had never entered a dream like this.

She was shaking. Feeling as if she couldn't breathe.

She wanted to look away, spare herself from witnessing the sick boy's vile nightmares. But it was the curse of her condition: She had no power to block the dreams out. It was like she was strapped into a chair, eyes pried open, forced to look at images that made her sick.

Only distance would protect her. Sobbing, Orsay crawled away, crawled toward the desert, indifferent to the stones that cut her knees and palms.

The dreams faded. Gradually, Orsay steadied her breathing. This had been a mistake, coming down from the forest, a terrible mistake.

She had told herself she was going in search of food. But in her heart she knew there was a deeper reason for leaving the forest. She missed the sound of a human voice.

No, that wasn't the whole truth, either.

She missed the dreams. The good ones, the bad ones. She found herself longing for them. Needing them. Addicted.

But not this. Not this.

She sat with eyes closed tight, rocking slowly back and forth in the sand, trying to

—
The tentacle was around her, squeezing her tight, squeezing the air out of her lungs before she could even scream.

He was behind her. Her movement had awakened him, and he'd found her and now, now . . . Oh, God . . .

He lifted her up and turned her around to face him. His face would have been handsome if she had not known what lurked behind those icy eyes.

"You," he whispered, his breath in her face. "You were in my head."

Duck had found the cause of the ocean sounds. It was, in fact, the ocean.

At least that's what it seemed like. He couldn't see it. It was as black as everything else. But it smelled of salt. And it moved like a heaving body of water should, rolling

up to his toes and receding. But he could see nothing.

He told himself it was dark outside, out beyond the mouth of the cave. That's why he couldn't see anything. It was obvious now that this had to be a sea cave, a cave cut into the land by the constant motion of water over a long, long period of time. Which meant there had to be a way out.

In his mind he pictured it opening onto the beach below Clifftop. Or somewhere near there. Anyway, the important word was: opening.

Had to be.

"You keep saying 'had to be' like that makes it so," he said.

"No, I don't," he argued. "I was thinking it, I didn't say it out loud."

"Great. Now I'm arguing with myself."

"Not really, I'm just thinking out loud."

"Well, try thinking more and arguing less."

"Hey, I've been down here for, like, a hundred hours! I don't even know what time it is. It could be three days from now!"

He bent down and touched wet sand. Water surged over his fingers. It was cold. But then, everything was cold. Duck had been cold for a long time now. It was slow work walking when you couldn't see where you were going.

He raised wet fingers to his tongue. Definitely salt. So yes, it was the ocean. Which meant that yes, this cave opened onto the ocean. Which meant there was a pretty good mystery as to why he couldn't see any light at all.

He shivered. He was so cold. He was so hungry. He was so thirsty. He was so scared.

And suddenly, he realized, he was not alone.

The rustling sound was different from the water-sloshing sound. Very different. It was a distinctly dry sound. Like someone rubbing crinkly leaves together.

"Hello?" he called.

"No answer," he whispered.

"I know: I heard. I mean, I didn't hear," he said. "Is someone there?"

The rustling sound again. It was coming from overhead. Then a chitter-chitter-chitter noise, soft but definite. He didn't miss many sounds now, not with his eyes useless. Hearing was all he had. If something made a sound, he heard it. And something had made a sound.

"Are you bats?" he asked.

"Because if they were bats, they would totally answer."

"Bats. Bats are not a problem." He chattered.

"Bats have to have a way out, right? They can't live in a cave all the time. They have to be able to fly out and . . . and drink blood."

Duck stood frozen, awaiting the bat attack. He would never see it coming. If they came after him, he would jump into the water. Yes. Or . . . or he could get mad and maybe sink through the ground and be safe in the dirt.

"Yeah, that's a great plan: bury yourself alive."

The bats—if that's what they were—demonstrated no interest in attacking him and drinking his blood. So Duck returned to the question of what exactly he should do next. In theory he could jump into the water and swim out into the ocean.

In theory. In reality he could not see his own hand in front of his face.

He squatted in a dry corner of the cave, well away from the water. And in an area that seemed somewhat less populated by weird rustling sounds.

He hugged himself and shivered.

How had he ended up here? He'd never hurt anyone. He wasn't some evil guy, he was just a kid. Like any other kid. He just wanted to go online and play games and watch TV and listen to music. He wanted to read his comics. He didn't want to be able to sink through the ground.

What kind of a stupid power was that, anyway?

"The Sinker," he muttered.

"Weightman," he countered.

"The Human Drill."

There was no chance he would ever be able to sleep. But he did. Through the worst night of his life, Duck Zhang drifted into and out of a weird nightmare, asleep, awake, and something in between that made him wonder if he was going slowly crazy. He dreamed of food. At one point he dreamed of a pizza chasing him, trying to eat him. And him wishing the pizza just would.

Then at last he woke up and saw . . .

Saw!

The light was dim, but it was bright enough.

"Hey! I can see!" he cried.

The first thing he could see was that the cave did not open onto the outside. The mouth of the cave was underwater. That was the source of the light, it filtered up through the blue-green water itself. The open air couldn't be too terribly far away, no more than a hundred feet maybe, but he would have to swim underwater to get there.

The second thing he saw was that the cave was bigger than he'd imagined. It had widened out and was large enough that you could park five or six school buses and have space left over.

The third thing he saw were the bats.

They hung from the cave ceiling. They had leathery wings and big blinking yellow eyes. There were thousands packed close together.

They stared at him.

That's when it occurred to him: bats didn't stay in caves at night, they went out at night and hid during the day.

Plus, normally, bats weren't blue.

And suddenly they began dropping, opening their wings. He was enveloped in a leathery tornado.

He dove for the water. Freezing cold. He powered down and forward, aiming for the light. Much safer underwater, even with sharks or jellyfish or—

The water around him churned and boiled.

He screamed into bubbles.

Thousands of bats swam around and past him, spun him around in a waterspout, slapped wetly at him with wings that suddenly seemed far more like flippers.

He gagged on salt water, kicked and motored his arms in a panic crawl.

He ran out of air after fifteen seconds. But he still did not see a way out. Should he turn back?

He stopped. Froze in place. Enough air to make it back? And then what? Learn to

live in a cave?

Duck kicked his feet and plowed ahead, no longer sure which way he was going. Forward or back?

Or just swimming in circles?

At last he came up. His head broke the surface as ten thousand bats erupted from the water all around him, wheeled overhead, then dove straight back into the sea a hundred yards off.

It wasn't far to the beach. He just had to swim there. Before the water bats came back.

"Just don't get mad," Duck chattered. "This would be a bad time to sink."

NINE

82 HOURS, 38 MINUTES

IT WAS MORNING. The buses were in the square. Edilio behind the wheel of one, yawning hugely. And Ellen, the fire marshal, behind the wheel of the other. Ellen was a small, dark, very serious girl. Sam had never seen her smile. She seemed to be a very capable girl, but she hadn't really been put to the test much yet. But she was a good driver.

Unfortunately, neither Ellen nor Edilio had many kids to drive.

Astrid was standing there with Little Pete, offering moral support, Sam supposed.

"I guess we don't really need two buses," Sam said.

"You could just about go with a minivan," Astrid agreed.

"What is the matter with people?" Sam fumed. "I said we needed a hundred kids and we get thirteen? Fifteen, maybe?"

"They're just kids," Astrid said.

"We're all just kids. We're all going to be very hungry kids."

"They're used to being told what to do by their parents or teachers. You need to be more direct. As in, *Hey, kid, get to work. Now.*" She thought for a moment then added, "*Or else.*"

"Or else what?" Sam asked.

"Or else . . . I don't know. We're not going to let anyone starve. If we can help it. I don't know the 'or else.' All I know is you can't expect kids to just automatically behave the right way. I mean, when I was little my mom would give me a gold star when I was good and take away a privilege when I wasn't."

"What am I supposed to do? Tell three hundred kids spread out in seventy or eighty different homes that they can't watch DVDs? Confiscate iPods?"

"It's not easy playing daddy to three hundred kids," Astrid admitted.

"I'm not anyone's daddy," Sam practically snarled. Another sleepless night, in a long string of them, had left him in a foul mood. "I'm supposed to be the mayor, not the father."

"These kids don't know the difference," Astrid pointed out. "They need parents. So they look to you. And Mother Mary. Me, even, to some extent."

Little Pete chose that moment to begin floating in the air. Just lifted off a foot, eighteen inches, hovered there, his arms floating, toes pointed downward.

Sam noticed immediately. Astrid didn't.

"What the—"

Sam stared, forgetting all about the empty school buses.

Little Pete floated. His omnipresent Game Boy had fallen to the ground. In front of him, just a few feet away, something began to materialize.

It was no bigger than Little Pete himself. Shiny red, laced with gold, a doll's dead-eyed face atop a bowling pin body.

"Nestor," Little Pete said, almost happy.

Sam recognized it. It was the nesting doll that sat on Little Pete's dresser. Identical Russian dolls, shells, really, that nested one inside the other. Sam didn't know how

many there were. He had asked Astrid about it once. She'd said it was a souvenir from Moscow sent by some traveling uncle.

It was supposed to be for Astrid, but Little Pete had taken to it immediately. He'd even given it the name: Nestor. And because Little Pete never identified much with toys, Astrid had let him keep it.

"Nestor," Little Pete repeated, but troubled now, uncertain.

As Sam stared, transfixed, the nesting doll began to change. Its smooth, lacquered surface rippled. The colors ran together and formed new patterns. The eerie painted face grew sinister.

Arms grew from its side, like twigs. The twigs thickened, grew flesh, grew talons.

And the doll's painted smile split open, revealing dagger-sharp teeth.

Little Pete reached for the image, but the floating creature seemed to be made of Teflon: Little Pete's hands slid over it, pushed it aside like someone trying to poke a globule of mercury, but never quite touched it.

"No arms," Little Pete said.

The doll's arms withered, shriveled, and turned to smoke.

"Petey. Stop it," Astrid hissed.

"What is it?" Sam asked urgently. "What is that thing?"

Astrid didn't answer. "Petey. Window seat. Window seat." It was a trigger phrase Astrid used to calm Little Pete down. Sometimes it worked. Other times not. But in this case, Sam didn't think Little Pete seemed upset, he seemed fascinated. It was a weird thing to see that kind of alert, even intelligent, involvement on Little Pete's usually blank face.

The doll's mouth opened. As if it would speak. Its eyes focused on Little Pete. Malevolent, hate-filled eyes.

"No," Little Pete said.

The mouth snapped shut. It was a painted line once again. And the furious eyes dimmed. Painted dots once more.

Astrid made a sound like a sob, quickly stifled. She stepped in, whispered, "Sorry," and slapped Pete's shoulder, hard.

The effect was immediate. The creature disappeared. Pete fell in a heap, sprawled out on the brown grass.

"Are you sure you should—" Sam began.

Little Pete was capable of . . . well, no one was quite sure what he was capable of. All that Sam and Astrid knew was that Little Pete was far and away the most powerful mutant in the FAYZ.

"I had to stop him," Astrid said grimly. "It gets worse. It starts with Nestor. Then the arms. Then the mouth and the eyes. Like it's trying to come alive. Like . . ." She knelt beside Little Pete and hugged him to her.

Sam looked sharply toward the buses. The question in his mind—had Pete been observed?—was answered by the slack-jawed stares of the kids with their noses pressed against the dusty windows.

Edilio was definitely wide awake now, and coming their way fast.

Sam cursed under his breath. "This has happened before, Astrid?"

She stuck out her chin defiantly. "A couple of times."

"You might have warned me."

“What the—I mean, what was that, man?” Edilio demanded.

“Ask Astrid,” Sam snapped.

Astrid handed Little Pete his Game Boy and pulled him gently to his feet. She kept her eyes down, unwilling to meet Sam’s accusing glare. “I don’t know what it is. It’s some kind of waking nightmare, maybe.” There was a distinct note of desperation to her voice.

“The doll, the thing, whatever it was,” Sam said. “It was fighting Pete, and Pete was fighting back. Like it was trying to come to life.”

“Yes,” Astrid whispered.

Edilio was the only other person who knew Little Pete’s history. It had been Edilio who had retrieved the videotape from the power plant that showed the moment of the nuclear meltdown when a panicked, uncomprehending Little Pete, there with his father, had reacted by creating the FAYZ.

Edilio asked the question that was on Sam’s mind. “Something was fighting Little Pete?” Edilio asked, “Man, who or what has the power to take on Little Pete?”

“We don’t talk about this with anyone else,” Sam said firmly. “Someone asks you about it, you just say it must have been some kind of . . .”

“Some kind of what?” Edilio asked.

“Optical illusion,” Astrid supplied.

“Yeah, that’ll work,” Edilio said sarcastically. Then he shrugged. “Kids got other things to worry about. Hungry people don’t waste much time on questions.”

If others learned of Little Pete’s guilt . . . and his power . . . he would never be safe. Caine would do anything it took to capture if not kill the strange little boy.

“Edilio, put everyone on one bus. Take a couple of your guys and start driving down residential streets. Go door to door. Round up as many kids as you can. Pack the bus, then take them to pick some melons or whatever.”

Edilio looked dubious but said, “Okay, Mr. Mayor.”

“Astrid. You come with me.” Sam stalked off with Astrid and Little Pete trailing.

“Hey, don’t start getting all high and mighty with me,” Astrid yelled at his back.

“I’d just appreciate it if you’d let me know when some new weirdness breaks out. That’s all.” Sam kept moving, but Astrid grabbed his arm. He stopped, glancing around guiltily to make sure no one was in eavesdropping distance.

“What was I supposed to tell you?” Astrid demanded in a terse whisper. “Little Pete’s hallucinating? He’s floating off the ground? What were you going to do about it?”

He held up his hands in a placating gesture. But his voice was no less angry. “I’m just trying to keep up, you know? It’s like I’m playing a game where the rules keep changing. So today’s rules are, hey, killer worms and hallucinating five-year-olds. I can’t do anything about it, but it’s nice to get a heads up.”

Astrid started to say something, but stopped herself. She took a couple of calming breaths. Then, in a more measured tone, she said, “Sam, I figured you had enough on your shoulders. I’m worried about you.”

He dropped his hands to his sides. His voice dropped as well. “I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not,” Astrid said. “You don’t sleep. You never have a minute to yourself. You act like everything that goes wrong is your fault. You’re worried.”

“Yeah, I’m worried,” he said. “Last night we had a kid who killed and ate a cat.

The whole time he's telling me about it he's weeping. He's sobbing. He used to have a cat himself. He likes cats. But he was so hungry, he grabbed it and . . ."

Sam had to stop. He bit his lip and tried to shake off the despair that swept over him. "Astrid, we're losing. We're losing. Everyone is . . ." He looked at her and felt tears threaten. "How long before we have kids doing worse than killing cats?"

When Astrid didn't answer, Sam said, "Yeah, so I'm worried. You look around the plaza here. Two weeks from now? Two weeks from now it's Darfur, or whatever, if we don't figure something out. Three weeks from now? I don't want to think about it."

He started toward his office but plowed into two kids absorbed in yelling at each other. They were brothers, Alton and Dalton. It was clear they'd been fighting for a while.

Under normal circumstances it might not have been a big deal—fights were breaking out all the time—but both boys had submachine guns hanging from their shoulders. Sam lived in fear of one of Edilio's soldiers doing something stupid with the guns they carried. Ten-, eleven-, twelve-year-old kids with guns weren't exactly the U.S. Army.

"What now?" Sam snapped at them.

Dalton stabbed an accusing finger at his brother. "He stole my Junior Mints."

The mere mention of Junior Mints made Sam's stomach rumble.

"You had . . ." He had to stop himself from focusing on the candy. Candy! How had Dalton managed to hoard actual candy? "Deal with it," Sam said and kept moving. Then he stopped. "Wait a minute. Aren't you two supposed to be out at the power plant?"

Alton answered. "No, our shift was last night. We came back this morning in the van. And I did not steal his stupid Junior Mints. I didn't even know he had Junior Mints."

"Then who stole them?" his brother demanded hotly. "I ate two each shift. One at the beginning, one at the end. I ate one when I got there last night and I counted them all. I had seven left. And then this morning when I went to have another one, the box was empty."

Sam said, "Did it ever occur to you it might be one of the other kids standing guard?"

"No," Dalton said. "Heather B and Mike J were at the guardhouse. And Josh was asleep the whole time."

"What do you mean Josh was asleep?" Sam said.

The brothers exchanged nearly identical guilty looks. Dalton shrugged. "Sometimes Josh sleeps. It's no big deal—he'll wake up if anything happens."

"Doesn't Josh watch the security cameras?"

"He says he can't see anything. Nothing ever happens. It's just like pictures of the road and the hills and the parking lot and all."

"We stayed up. Mostly," Alton said.

"Mostly. How much is 'mostly'?" Sam got no answer. "Get going. Go ahead. And stop fighting. You weren't supposed to be hoarding food, anyway, Dalton. Serves you right." He wanted badly to ask where the kid had found candy, and ask if there was more, but that would have been the wrong message. Bad example.

Still, Sam thought, what if there was still candy? Somewhere? Somewhere in the

FAYZ?

Edilio's bus began to pull away. Ellen was onboard and Sam figured Edilio would stop off and grab a couple of his soldiers to help with the drafting of workers for the fields.

Sam could imagine the scenes that would be played out house by house. The whining. The complaining. The running away. Followed by a lazy, mostly wasted effort to pick fruit by kids who didn't want to work in the hot sun for hours.

He thought briefly of E.Z. Of the worms. Albert was taking Orc to the cabbage field this morning, to test Howard's suggestion that he would be invulnerable. Hopefully, that would work.

For a brief moment he worried that the worms might have spread. But even if they had, surely not to the melon field. It was a mile from the cabbages.

A mile was a long distance to cover if you were a worm.

"Beer me," Orc bellowed.

Albert handed Howard a red and blue can of beer. A Budweiser. That's what Albert had the most of, and Orc didn't seem to have any particular brand loyalty.

Howard popped the tab and extended it out of the driver's side window, reaching back. Orc snatched it as they drove down the pitted dirt road.

Orc sat in the bed of the pickup truck. He was too big to fit in anything smaller, too big to fit inside the truck's cab. Howard was driving. Albert was in the front seat, squeezed in beside a large polystyrene cooler. The cooler had the logo of the University of California, Santa Barbara. It was full of beer.

"You know, we should have hung out more, back in the old days," Howard said to Albert.

"You didn't know I existed, back in the old days," Albert said.

"What? Come on, man. There's, like, a dozen brothers in the whole school and I didn't notice one?"

"We're the same shade, Howard. That doesn't make us friends," Albert said coolly.

Howard laughed. "Yeah, you were always a grind. Reading too much. Thinking too much. Not having much fun. Good little family boy, make your momma proud. Now look at you: you're a big man in the FAYZ."

Albert ignored that. He wasn't interested in reminiscing. Not with Howard, for sure, not really with anyone. The old world was dead and gone. Albert was all about the future.

As if reading his mind, Howard said, "You're always planning, aren't you? You know it's true. You are all business."

"I'm just like everyone else: trying to figure out how to make it," Albert said.

Howard didn't respond directly. "The way I see it? It's Sam, top dog. No question. Astrid and Edilio? They're only something because they're in Sam's crew. But you, man, you are your own thing."

"What thing is that?" Albert asked, keeping his tone neutral.

"You got two dozen kids working under you, man. You're in charge of the food. Between you and me? I know you have a food stash somewhere."

Albert did not so much as blink. "If I have a secret food stash, why am I so hungry?"

Howard laughed. "Because you are a smart little uptight dude, that's why. I'm smart, too. In my own way."

Albert said nothing. He knew where the conversation was going. He wasn't going to help Howard lay it out.

"Both of us are smart. Both of us are brothers in a very white town. You with the food. Me with Orc." He jerked a thumb back toward the monster. "Time may come you need some muscle to go along with all that planning and ambition of yours."

Albert turned to face Howard, wanting to send the signal clearly, unambiguously. "Howard?"

"Yeah?"

"I am loyal to Sam."

Howard threw back his head and laughed. "Oh, man, I'm just messing with you. We are all of us loyal to Sam. Sam, Sam the laser-shooting surfer man."

They had reached the deadly cabbage field. Howard pulled over and turned off the engine.

"Beer me," Orc yelled.

Albert dug in the cooler, hand plunged into ice water. He handed the can to Howard. "Last one till he does some work."

Howard handed it back to Orc.

Orc yelled, "Open it, moron, you know I can't pop the tab."

Howard took the beer back and popped the tab. It made a sound just like a soda, but the smell was sour. "Sorry, Orc," Howard said.

Orc took the beer in a fist the size of a bowling ball and drained it down his throat.

Orc's fingers were too big to handle anything delicate. Each finger was the size of a kosher salami. Each joint was made of what looked, and felt, a lot like wet gravel. Gray stones that fitted loosely together

His entire body, except for a last few square inches of his sullen mouth and the left side of his face, and a little bit of his cheek and neck, were covered—or made of—the same slimy gray gravel. He had always been a big kid, but now he was a foot taller and several feet wider.

The tiny human portion of him seemed like the creepier part. Like someone had cut the flesh off a living person and glued it onto a stone statue.

"Another," Orc growled.

"No," Albert answered firmly. "First we see if you can really do this."

Orc rolled himself over the side of the truck and stood up. Albert felt the entire truck rock back and forth. Orc came around to the door and stuck his hideous face in the window, forcing Albert to shrink back and to clutch the cooler.

"I can take the beer," Orc said. "You can't stop me."

"Yes, you can take it," Albert agreed. "But you made a promise to Sam."

Orc digested that. He was slow and stupid, but not so stupid he didn't understand the implied threat. Orc did not want to tangle with Sam.

"All right. I'll see about them worms." Orc belched and lurched toward the field. He was wearing what he usually wore, a pair of very rough-sewn canvas shorts. Albert assumed Howard had made them for his friend. There was no such thing as pants or shirts in Orc's size.

Howard held his breath as Orc stomped into the field. So, for that matter, did

Albert. Every hideous detail of the memory of E.Z.'s death was permanently imprinted on Albert's brain.

The attack was immediate.

The worms seethed from the dirt, slithered with impossible speed toward Orc's stone feet and threw themselves against his unnatural flesh.

Orc stopped. He gaped down at the creatures.

He turned with creaky slowness back toward Albert and Howard and said, "Kinda tickles."

"Pick a cabbage," Howard called out encouragingly.

Orc bent down and dug his stone fingers into the dirt and scooped up a cabbage. He looked at it for a minute, then tossed it toward the truck.

Albert opened the door of the truck and bent cautiously down toward the cabbage. He refused to step down. Not yet. Not until they were sure.

"Howard, I need a stick or something," Albert said.

"What for?"

"I want to poke that cabbage, make sure there's no worm in it."

In the field the worms continued their assault on the creature whose rock flesh broke their teeth. Orc scooped up three more cabbages. Then he came stomping back.

The worms did not follow. At the edge of the field they slithered off Orc and retreated into the ground.

"Beer me," Orc demanded.

Albert did.

He wondered how Sam was doing with lining up kids to work in the field. "Not very well, I'd guess," he muttered to himself.

The answer to the problem of food was so simple, really: farms needed farmers. Then the farmers needed motivation. They needed to get paid. Like anyone. People didn't do things just because it was right: people did things for money, for profit. But Sam and Astrid were too foolish to see it.

No, not foolish, Albert told himself. Sam was the main reason they weren't all under Caine's control. Sam was great. And Astrid was probably the smartest person in the FAYZ.

But Albert was smart, too, about some things. And he had gone to the trouble of educating himself, sitting in the dusty, dark town library reading books that made his eyelids droop.

"My boy's going to need another beer pretty soon," Howard said, yawning behind his hand.

"Your boy gets a beer for every one hundred cabbages he picks," Albert said.

Howard gave him a dirty look. "Man, you act like you paid for those cans with your own money."

"Nope," Albert said. "They are community property. For now. But the rate is still one per hundred."

For the next two hours Orc picked cabbages. And drank beer. Howard played some game on a handheld. Albert thought.

Howard was right about that: Albert had thought a lot since the day he walked into the abandoned McDonald's and began grilling hamburgers. He had a lot of standing in the community because of that. And the Thanksgiving feast he'd organized, and pulled

off without a hitch, had made him a minor hero. He wasn't Sam, of course; there was only one Sam. He wasn't even Edilio or Brianna or anything like the big heroes of that terrible battle between Caine's people and the Perdido Beach kids.

But at that moment Albert wasn't thinking about any of that. He was thinking about toilet paper and batteries.

Then Orc screamed.

Howard sat up. He jumped from the car.

Albert froze.

Orc was shrieking, slapping at his face, at the still-human part of his face.

Howard ran toward him.

"Howard, no!" Albert yelled.

"They got him, they got him," Howard cried, anguished.

Orc was struggling, staggering, then running toward the truck, his great stone feet pounding six-inch-deep impressions into the dirt.

One of the worms was on his face.

In his face.

He tripped at the edge of the field and fell hard onto neutral territory.

"Help me. Howard, man, help me!" Orc cried.

Albert broke his trance and ran. Up close he could see the worm, just one, but its black snake's head was buried in pink flesh, boring through Orc's cheek.

Up close Albert could see the blur of the tiny paddle feet driving the worm into strained flesh.

Orc had the tail of the thing in his fist and was pulling hard. But the worm wasn't letting go. Orc was pulling so hard, it seemed he might pull the last of his living flesh away from the rock skin surrounding it.

Howard grabbed on, too, and he was pulling. Weeping and cursing and pulling, despite the danger to himself if the worm should release its grip on Orc and turn against Howard.

"Bite it!" Albert shouted.

"My tongue!" Orc wailed, his speech garbled as the worm slid another inch through his cheek.

"Bite it, Orc," Albert yelled. Then he knelt, and with all his might delivered an uppercut under Orc's chin.

It was like punching a brick wall.

Albert yelled and fell back on his behind in the dirt. He was sure his hand was broken.

Orc had stopped screaming. He opened his mouth and spit out the worm's head, along with a gob of blood and saliva.

The rest of the worm came free. Orc smashed it onto the ground.

There was a one-inch hole in Orc's face.

Blood spread down his neck and disappeared like rain on parched soil as it hit the rock flesh.

"You hit me," Orc said dully, staring at Albert.

"Brother saved your life, Orc," Howard said. "The brother just saved your life."

"I think I broke my hand," Albert said.

"Beer me," Orc said.

Howard raced to comply.

Orc tilted his head back and squeezed the can until the tab burst. Yellow liquid shot from the can and gushed into his mouth.

At least half of it ran, foaming pink, from the bloody hole in his cheek.

TEN

81 HOURS, 17 MINUTES

“SHE WAS IN my dreams, in my head. I saw her,” Drake said.

“You’ve lost what little mind you had left,” Diana said.

They were in the dining hall. No one was dining. Meals at Coates amounted to a few cans put out for kids to fight over. There were kids who had eaten boiled grass to ease the hunger pangs.

In the echoing, abandoned, damaged dining hall it was Caine, Drake, Bug, Diana, and the girl who said her name was Orsay.

The girl was maybe twelve, Diana figured.

Diana had noticed a look in the girl’s eyes. Fear, of course, she’d been hauled in by Drake once Bug got back from the power plant. But that wasn’t all of it: the girl, Orsay, looked at Diana like she recognized her.

It was not a good look. Her expression made the hairs on the back of Diana’s neck tingle.

“I never saw her before in my life, but I saw her in this dream I was having.” Drake glared hatred at the girl. “Then I woke up and found her skulking around, hiding.”

It was an unusual feeling for Diana, being in a room with Drake where she was not the main object of his hatred.

Caine said, “Okay, Drake, we get it. Back before all this started I’d have said you were nuts. Now?” He waved a languid hand at Diana. “Diana, read her. Let’s see.”

Diana went and stood beside the girl, who looked up at her with frightened, protruding eyes.

“Don’t be scared. Of me,” Diana said. “I just need to hold your hand.”

“What’s happened? Why won’t anybody tell me anything? Where are all the adults? Where are your teachers?” Orsay had a voice with a built-in tremble to it, like she’d always been nervous and always would be.

“We call it the FAYZ. Fallout Alley Youth Zone,” Diana said. “You know about the accident at the power plant back in the day, right? Fallout Alley?”

“Hey, Caine told you to read her, not give her a history lesson,” Drake snapped.

Diana wanted to argue, but Orsay’s expression, her look of terror mixed with pity for Diana, was weirding her out. It was as if Orsay knew something about Diana, like she was a doctor with a fatal diagnosis she hadn’t quite nerved herself up to deliver yet. Diana took Orsay’s hand.

As soon as she took Orsay’s hand she knew her power level. The question was whether she should tell Caine the truth. In Caine’s universe there were only two possible categories of mutants: those who were unquestioningly loyal to Caine, and those who needed to be disposed of.

At least Orsay wasn’t a four bar. If she had been, there was little doubt in Diana’s mind that Caine would have turned her over to Drake.

“Quit stalling,” Drake growled.

Diana released the girl’s hand. She ignored Drake and spoke to Caine. “She’s a

three bar.”

Caine sucked air and sat back in his chair. He considered the terrified girl. “Tell me about your power. Tell me the truth, all of it, and you’ll be fine. If you lie to me, I’ll know I can never trust you.”

Orsay looked up at Diana as though she might be a friend. “Do what he says,” Diana said.

Orsay twined her fingers together. She sat with her knees knocked, her shoulders pressed in as though she were trying to get them to meet.

“It started happening, like, maybe five months ago. Mostly at night. I thought I was crazy. I didn’t know where it was coming from. My head would be filled up with these pictures and sometimes sounds, people talking, flashes of faces or places. Sometimes they were really short, just a few seconds. But sometimes they went on for a half hour, one thing after another, craziness, people being chased, people falling, people having . . . you know, like, sex and all.”

She looked down at her twisting fingers, embarrassed.

“Yeah, we get it, you’re all sweet and innocent,” Drake sneered.

Diana asked, “How did you figure out you were seeing people’s dreams?”

“It usually only happened at night,” Orsay said. “And then, one night I had this really vivid dream of this woman’s face, this kind of nice, red-haired woman, right? But she wasn’t even around, yet. She arrived the next morning. I hadn’t seen her before, not in reality, just in her husband’s dream. That’s when I figured it out.”

“So you’ve been up in the forest this whole time? You must have been lonely.” Caine was applying a bit of his smile, a fraction of his charm, putting her at ease.

Orsay nodded. “I’m used to being lonely.”

“How are you at keeping secrets?” Diana asked. She made her voice casual, but she stared hard into Orsay’s eyes, hoping she would get the message, hoping she knew how great a danger she was in.

Orsay blinked. She was about to say something, then blinked again. “I never told anyone anything I saw,” Orsay said.

Caine said, “Interesting question, Diana.”

Diana shrugged. “A good spy needs to be discreet.”

When Caine looked blank, Diana added quickly, “I mean, I assume that’s what you’re thinking. We have Bug, who can sneak into a place, maybe overhear some conversation. But Orsay could actually get into people’s dreams.” When Caine’s expression remained skeptical, Diana added, “I wonder what Sam dreams about.”

“No way,” Drake said. “No way. You heard her, she gets anyone’s dreams who happens to be nearby. That means she’s in our heads, too. No way.”

“I doubt she wants any part of your dreams, Drake,” Diana said.

Drake uncoiled his arm and lightning quick wrapped it around Orsay, who yelped and froze stiff. “I brought her in. She’s mine. I say what happens to her.”

“Just what is it you want to do with her?” Diana asked.

Drake grinned. “I don’t know. Maybe I’ll cook her and eat her. Meat is meat, right?”

Diana glanced at Caine, hoping to see some sign of revulsion, some acknowledgment that Drake was going too far. But Caine just nodded as if he was considering Drake’s claim. “Let’s find out what her range is first, huh? Orsay: How far

away can you be and still get someone's dream?"

Orsay chattered her answer, shaking with fear. "Only like . . . like . . . like from the ranger station and the nearest part of the campground."

"How much distance is that?"

She tried to shrug, but Drake was squeezing her, like a python, taking advantage of every exhalation to tighten his coils. "Maybe two hundred feet," Orsay said.

"Mose's cabin," Diana said. "It's twice that far from the campus."

"I said no," Drake threatened. "She was in my head."

"We already know it's a cesspool in there," Diana said.

"This is uncool, Caine," Drake said. "You owe me. You need me. Don't mess with me on this."

"Don't mess with me?" Caine echoed. That was the step too far.

Caine jumped up, knocking his chair over backward. He raised both hands, palms out. "You really want to challenge me, Drake? I can blow you through the wall into the next room before you can unwrap yourself from that girl."

Drake flinched. Started to answer, but he never had a chance. Caine had gone from calm and contained to crazy in a heartbeat.

"You stupid thug," Caine raged. "You think you can replace me? You think if I was out of the way you'd be able to go down the hill and take out Sam and the rest? You couldn't even beat Orc! You nobody!" Caine screamed, spit flying from a mouth moving as fast as it could but still not fast enough for the fury within.

The blood had drained from Drake's hard face. His eyes burned furiously, his arm twitched, almost out of control. He looked like he might choke on his own bottled rage.

"I'm the brains!" Caine shrieked. "I'm the brains! I'm the brains and the power, the true power, the four bar, the one. I am the one. Me! Why do you think the Darkness kept me for three days? Why do you think . . . Why do you think it's still in my . . . in my . . ."

There was an abrupt change in Caine's voice. For a second it was as if he was sobbing, not raging. He caught himself and righted his voice, swallowed hard. He looked unsteady and reached for a chairback to hold himself up.

Then he saw the not-quite-pitying look in Diana's eyes, and no doubt the shark's cold gleam of triumph on Drake's face as well.

Caine roared, an incoherent, lunatic howl. He extended his hands, aiming down and to either side of Drake.

There was an earsplitting sound, stones ripped apart, as the floor exploded upward in a geyser of shattered floor tile and dirt.

The pillar of rock and debris shot up, slammed into the already-scarred and damaged cathedral ceiling and tumbled back down again, a rain of gravel, as Caine's howl fell silent.

The only sound was the off-key, musical patter of falling debris.

Caine stared, blank. Blank.

It went on for too long. But no one dared speak. Then, as if someone had thrown a switch, Caine's expression became human once more. He smiled a shaky smile.

"We can use this girl, Drake," Caine said calmly. Then, to Orsay directly, "We can, can't we? We can use you? You'll do whatever I tell you to do? And you will obey

only me?”

Orsay tried to find her voice but couldn't even manage a whisper. She nodded vigorously.

“Good. Because if I ever doubt you, Orsay, I'll give you to Drake. You don't want that.”

Caine slumped, used up. Without another word he weaved his way to the door.

Lana patted her dog, Patrick, on his thick ruff. “Ready?”

Patrick made his little whimpering sound, the one that meant, “Come on, let's get going.”

Lana stood up and checked the Velcro strap that held her iPod in place on her arm. She made sure the bright yellow headphones were in place—her ears were too small for the standard earbuds.

She dialed up her “running” play list. But, of course, she didn't really run now. Running made hunger unbearable. Now she just walked. And not as far as she had run.

Back in the old days, before the FAYZ, she'd done neither. But that, like so much, had changed. There was nothing like dragging through the desert without water or a clue, and then being made a captive of a swift-moving coyote pack, to make you think you should get in shape.

She liked to begin in silence. She liked to hear the sound of her sneaker treads, almost silent on the carpeted hotel floor. Then satisfyingly loud on the blacktop.

Her route began at the front door of Clifftop. It was an automatic door, and it still worked. It was weird, still weird after all this time, that the door's sensor should be patiently awaiting the signal to open wide the doors to the outside world.

From Clifftop she would walk down toward Town Beach. Then she would cut through town, but away from the plaza, join the highway, and complete the circle back to Clifftop. Unless she was too weak from hunger. Then she would cut that short.

She knew she should probably not burn unnecessary calories. But she couldn't bring herself to stop. To stop, to spend a day lying on the bed, was to surrender. Lana didn't like the idea of surrender. She hadn't surrendered to pain, or to Pack Leader, or to the Darkness.

I don't surrender, she told herself.

Come to me. I have need of you.

As she got beyond the Clifftop approach road and headed down the slope, Lana punched the iPod's touchscreen and her ears were filled with a Death Cab for Cutie song.

But it was the other lyrics she heard, like a whisper, like a second track beneath this song.

She'd gone no more than a hundred yards along when two little kids intercepted her, waving their hands to get her attention.

They looked healthy enough to her. She gave them a short wave and hoped that would be enough.

But the two littles moved to block her way. She stopped, panting a little, even though she shouldn't be, and ripped off her headphones.

“What?” she snapped.

There was some hemming and hawing before the kids could blurt it out.

“Joey’s got a loose tooth.”

“So what? He’s supposed to be getting new teeth.”

“But it hurts. You’re supposed to fix things that hurt.”

“Supposed to?” Lana echoed. “Look, kids, if you’re bleeding from some big gaping wound you can bug me. I’m not here for every little headache or skinned knee or loose tooth.”

“You’re mean,” the kid said.

“Yeah. I’m mean.” Lana settled her headphones back in place and started off, feeling angry at the kids and angrier at herself for yelling at them. But kids came after her wherever she was. They interrupted her while she was eating. They harassed her when she was sitting on her balcony reading a book. They banged on her door while she was pooping.

It was almost never something that needed a miracle. And increasingly that’s what Lana was starting to think about her powers, that they were something miraculous. No one had any better explanation.

And miracles shouldn’t be wasted.

Anyway, she had a right to have a life of her own. She wasn’t everyone’s servant. She belonged to herself.

Come to me.

Lana bit her lip. She was ignoring it, the voice, the hallucination, whatever it was.

Just going to ignore it.

She cranked up the volume on the music.

She veered away from the beach as she approached town. Maybe if she went along the back streets more. Maybe she could vary her route more and make it harder for people to track her down.

So long as she ended the same way: back up the hill to Clifftop. Up to the FAYZ wall. Not to touch it, but to get very close to it as she panted and sweated and nursed the inevitable stitch in her side.

She felt she needed to see that barrier up close every day. It was a devotion, somehow. A touchstone. A reminder that she was here, and this was now. Whatever she had been before, she wasn’t that person anymore. She was trapped in this place and in this life. Not her choice: the wall’s choice.

Come to me. I have need of you.

“It’s not real,” Lana shouted.

But it *was* real. She knew it was real. She knew the voice. Where it came from.

She knew she could not shut the voice out of her mind. The only way to silence the voice was to silence it forever. She could be its victim, or she could make it her victim.

Madness. Suicidal madness. She skipped a slow song and went to something manic. Something loud enough to banish crazy thoughts.

She walked harder, faster, almost running, pumping her arms and forcing Patrick into a long lope to keep up. But she wasn’t fast enough to outrun a truck that zoomed crazily up to her honking its horn.

Again she tore off her headphones and yelled, “What?”

But this was no loose tooth or skinned knee.

Albert and Howard piled out. Howard helped pull Orc from the back. The boy . . . the creature . . . staggered as if drunk. He probably was, Lana thought. Then again,

maybe he had a pretty good excuse.

There was a hole in one of the last human parts of him, his cheek. Dried blood crusted his cheek and neck. Fresher, redder blood still oozed down his cheek and neck.

“What happened?” Lana asked.

“Zekes got him,” Howard answered. He was torn between a kind of low-level panic and relief that he had finally reached the Healer. He held Orc’s elbow as if Orc needed Howard’s frail strength to support him.

“Has he got a worm in him?” Lana asked, cautious.

“No, we got the worm,” Albert reassured her. “We were just hoping you could help him.”

“I don’t want no more rock on me,” Orc said.

Lana understood. Orc had been a garden variety thug, unaware of any special power, until the coyotes had gotten to him in the desert. They had chewed him up badly. Very badly. Worse than anything that had happened to Lana, even. Everywhere they had chewed him had filled in with the gravel covering that made Orc nearly indestructible.

He didn’t want to lose the last of his human body, the patch of pink skin that included his mouth and part of his neck.

Lana nodded.

“You need to stop weaving back and forth, Orc. I don’t want you falling on me,” she said. “Sit down on the ground.”

He sat down too suddenly and giggled a little at it.

Lana lay her hand against the gruesome hole.

“Don’t want no more rock,” Orc repeated.

The bleeding stopped almost immediately.

“Does it hurt?” Lana asked. “I mean the rock. I know the hole hurts.”

“No. It don’t hurt.” Orc slammed his fist against his opposite arm, hard enough that any human arm would have been shattered. “I barely feel it. Even Drake’s whip, when we was fighting, I barely felt it.”

Suddenly he was weeping. Tears rolled from human eyes onto cheeks of flesh and pebbles.

“I don’t feel nothing except . . .” He pointed a thick stone finger at the flesh of his face.

“Yeah,” Lana said. Her irritation was gone. Her burden was smaller, maybe, than Orc’s.

Lana pulled her hand away to see the progress. The hole was smaller. Still crusted with blood, but no longer actively bleeding.

She put her hand back in place. “Just a couple minutes more, Orc.”

“My name’s Charles,” Orc said.

“Is it?”

“It is,” Howard confirmed.

“What were you guys doing going into the worm field?” Lana asked.

Howard shot a resentful look at Albert, who answered, “Orc was picking cabbage.”

“My name’s Charles Merriman,” Orc repeated. “People should call me by my real name sometimes.”

Lana’s gaze met Howard’s.

Now, Lana thought, now he wants his old name back. The bully who reveled in a monster's name was now a monster in fact, and wanted to be called Charles.

"You're all better," Lana announced.

"Is it still skin?" Orc asked.

"It is," Lana reassured him. "It's still human."

Lana took Albert's arm and drew him away. "What are you doing sending him into the worm field like that?"

Albert's face went blank. He was surprised at being reproached. For a moment Lana thought he would tell her to take a jump. But that moment passed, and Albert slumped a little, as if the air had gone out of him.

"I'm trying to help," Albert said.

"By paying him with beer?"

"I paid him what he wanted, and Sam was okay with it. You were at the meeting," Albert said. "Look, how else do you think you get someone like Orc to spend hours in the hot sun working? Astrid seems to think people will work just because we ask them to. Maybe some will. But Orc?"

Lana could see his point. "Okay. I shouldn't have jumped all over you."

"It's okay. I'm getting used to it," Albert said. "Suddenly I'm the bad guy. But you know what? I didn't make people the way they are. If kids are going to work, they're going to want something back."

"If they don't work, we all starve."

"Yeah. I get that," Albert said with more than a tinge of sarcasm. "Only, here's the thing: Kids know we won't let them starve as long as there's any food left, right? So they figure, hey, let someone else do the work. Let someone else pick cabbages and artichokes."

Lana wanted to get back to her run. She needed to finish, to run to the FAYZ wall. But there was something fascinating about Albert. "Okay. So how do you get people to work?"

He shrugged. "Pay them."

"You mean, money?"

"Yeah. Except guess who had most of the money in their wallets and purses when they disappeared? Then a few kids stole what was left in cash registers and all. So if we start back using the old money we just make a few thieves powerful. It's kind of a problem."

"Why is a kid going to work for money if they know we'll share the food, anyway?" Lana asked.

"Because some will do different stuff for money. I mean, look, some kids have no skills, right? So they pick the food for money. Then they take the money and spend it with some kid who can maybe cook the food for them, right? And that kid maybe needs a pair of sneakers and some other kid has rounded up all the sneakers and he has a store."

Lana realized her mouth was open. She laughed. The first time in a while.

"Fine. Laugh," Albert said, and turned away.

"No, no, no," Lana hastened to say. "No, I wasn't making fun of you. It's just that, I mean, you're the only kid that has any kind of a plan for anything."

Albert actually looked embarrassed. "Well, you know, Sam and Astrid are working

their butts off.”

“Yeah. But you’re looking ahead. You’re actually thinking about how we put it all together.”

Albert nodded. “I guess.”

“Good for you, man,” Lana said. “I gotta go. Orc will be okay. As okay as he can be, anyway.”

“Thanks,” Albert said, and seemed genuinely grateful.

“Hey, let me see that hand,” Lana said.

Albert seemed puzzled. He looked at his own hand, swollen and discolored from punching Orc’s stone face.

“Oh, yeah,” Albert said as Lana briefly took his hand in hers. “Thanks again.”

Lana put her headphones back on and trotted a few steps. Then she stopped. She turned and took them off. “Hey. Albert. The money thing.”

“Yes?”

She hesitated, knowing that in this moment she was perhaps starting a chain reaction. Knowing that it was dangerous to the point of madness. It was eerie, as if fate had intervened in the person of Albert, showing her the way to her half-formed goal. “Wouldn’t gold work? I mean, as money?”

Albert’s sharp eyes found hers. “Should we get together and talk?”

“Yeah,” Lana said.

“Stop by the club tonight.”

“The what?”

Albert grinned. He fished a half sheet of paper from his pocket and handed it to her.

Lana glanced at it. Then at him. She laughed and handed it back. “I’ll be there.”

She started running again. But her thoughts were taking a different tack than before. Albert was planning for the future, not just letting it happen to him. That was the thing to do. To plan. To act. Not just to let things happen.

She was right to plan.

Come to me.

Maybe I will, Lana thought. And maybe you won’t like it much when I do.

ELEVEN

70 HOURS, 11 MINUTES

“**MOTHER MARY WANTS** to draft two more kids,” Astrid told Sam.

“Okay. Approved.”

“Dahra says we’re running low on kids’ Tylenol and kids’ Advil, she wants to make sure it’s okay to start giving them split adult pills.”

Sam spread his hands in a helpless gesture. “What?”

“We’re running low on kid pills, Dahra wants to split adult pills.”

Sam rocked back in the leather chair designed for a grown man. “Okay. Whatever. Approved.” He took a sip of water from a bottle. The wrapper on the bottle said “Dasani” but it was tap water. The dishes from dinner—horrible homemade split-pea soup that smelled burned, and a quarter cabbage each—had been pushed aside onto the sideboard where in the old days the mayor of Perdido Beach had kept framed pictures of his family. It was one of the better meals Sam had had lately. The fresh cabbage tasted surprisingly good.

There was little more than smears on the plates: the era of kids not eating everything was over.

Astrid puffed out her cheeks and sighed. “Kids are asking why Lana isn’t around when they need her.”

“I can only ask Lana to heal big things. I can’t demand she be around 24/7 to handle every boo-boo.”

Astrid looked at the list she had compiled on her laptop. “Actually, I think this involved a stubbed toe that ‘hurted.’”

“How much more is on the list?” Sam asked.

“Three hundred and five items,” Astrid said. When Sam’s face went pale, she relented. “Okay, it’s actually just thirty-two. Now, don’t you feel relieved it’s not really three hundred?”

“This is crazy,” Sam said.

“Next up: the Judsons and the McHanrahans are fighting because they share a dog, so both families are feeding her—they still have a big bag of dry dog food—but the Judsons are calling her Sweetie and the McHanrahans are calling her BooBoo.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I’m not kidding,” Astrid said.

“What is that noise?” Sam demanded.

Astrid shrugged. “I guess someone has their stereo cranked up.”

“This is not going to work, Astrid.”

“The music?”

“This. This thing where every day I have a hundred stupid questions I have to decide. Like I’m everyone’s parent now. I’m sitting here listening to how little kids are complaining because their older sisters make them take a bath, and stepping into fights over who owns which Build-A-Bear outfit, and now over dog names. Dog names?”

“They’re all still just little kids,” Astrid said.

“Some of these kids are developing powers that scare me,” Sam grumbled. “But

they can't decide who gets to have which special towel? Or whether to watch *The Little Mermaid* or *Shrek Three*?"

"No," Astrid said. "They can't. They need a parent. That's you."

Sam usually handled the daily dose of nonsense with equanimity, or at least with nothing worse than grouchy humor. But today he was feeling it was finally too much. Yesterday he'd lost E.Z. This morning he'd seen almost no one show up for work. And Edilio had been forced to track kids down for two hours. Even then they had come back with a pitiful amount of cantaloupes, barely enough to feed the day care. All of that followed by Duck Zhang and some crazy story about falling through the ground into a radioactive tunnel full of water bats.

The only person who'd been productive was Orc. He had picked several hundred cabbages before the worms had nearly killed him.

"What is that music?" he demanded, angry and needing to yell at someone or something. Sam stomped to the window and threw it open. Immediately the volume of the music, most of it vibrating bass, increased dramatically.

Down in the square things were dark but for the streetlights and a strobe light blinking through the front window of McDonald's.

"What in the . . ."

Astrid came and stood beside him. "What is that? Is Albert throwing a party?"

Sam didn't answer. He left without a word, annoyed, angry, and secretly glad of any excuse to get out of answering kids' stupid questions and handling their stupid problems.

He took the steps two at a time. Down to the ground floor, out through the big front door, ignoring a "Hello" from the kid Edilio had guarding the town hall, and down the big marble steps to the street.

Quinn was passing by, clearly heading toward McDonald's.

"Hey, brah," Quinn said.

"What is going on, do you know?" Sam asked.

"It's a club." Quinn grinned. "Man, you must be working too hard. Everyone knows about it."

Sam stared at him. "It's a what?"

"McClub, brah. All you need is some batteries or some toilet paper."

This announcement left Sam baffled. He considered asking Quinn for clarification, but then Albert appeared, formally dressed, like he thought it was graduation or something. He actually had on a dark sports coat and slacks in a lighter shade. His shirt was pale blue, collared, and ironed. Spotting Sam, he extended his hand.

Sam ignored the hand. "Albert, what is going on here?"

"Dancing, mostly," Albert said.

"Excuse me?"

"Kids are dancing."

Quinn caught up then and stepped in front of Sam to shake Albert's still-extended hand. "Hey, dude. I have batteries."

"Good to see you, Quinn. The price is four D cells, or eight double As, or ten triple As, or a dozen Cs. If you have a mix, I can work it out."

Quinn dug in his pocket and produced four triple A batteries and three D cells. He handed them to Albert, who agreed to the price and dropped the batteries into a plastic

bag at his feet.

“Okay, the rules are no food, no alcohol, no attitude, no fights, and when I call ‘time,’ there’s no arguing about it. Do you agree to these rules?”

“Dude, if I had any food, would I be here? I’d be home eating it.” Quinn put his hand over his heart like he was pledging allegiance to the flag and said, “I do.” He jerked a thumb back at Sam. “Don’t bother with him: Sam doesn’t dance.”

“Have a good time, Quinn,” Albert said, and swung open the door to admit him.

Sam stared in absolute amazement. He was torn between outrage and an urge to laugh in admiration.

“Who told you you could do this?” Sam asked.

Albert shrugged. “Same person who told me I could run the McDonald’s until we ran out of food: no one. I just did it.”

“Fine, but you gave away the food. Now you’re charging people. That’s not cool, Albert.”

“You’re trying to profit?” This from Astrid, who had followed Sam, Little Pete in tow.

Inside, the music had shifted from hip-hop to a song Sam happened to love: the ridiculously hooky Tim Armstrong tune “Into Action.” If he ever were to dance, this might be the tune that did it.

Albert considered Astrid and Sam. “Yes. I’m trying to make a profit. I’m using batteries, toilet paper, and paper towels as currency. Each is something that will eventually be in short supply.”

“You’re trying to get all the toilet paper in town?” Astrid shrieked. “Are you kidding?”

“No, Astrid, I’m not kidding,” Albert said. “Look, right now, kids are playing with the stuff. I saw little kids throwing rolls of it around on their lawns like it was a toy. So —”

“So your solution is to try and take it all away from people?”

“You’d rather see it wasted?”

“Yeah, actually,” Astrid huffed. “Rather than you getting it all for yourself. You’re acting like a jerk.”

Albert’s eyes flared. “Look, Astrid, now kids know they can buy their way into the club with it. So they’re not going to waste it anymore.”

“No, they’re going to give it all to you,” she shot back. “And what happens when they need some?”

“Then there will still be some left because I made it valuable.”

“Valuable to you.”

“Valuable to everyone, Astrid.”

“It’s you taking advantage of kids dumb enough not to know any better. Sam, you have to put a stop to this.”

Sam had drifted away from the conversation, his head full of the music. He snapped back. “She’s right, Albert, this isn’t okay. You didn’t get permission—”

“I didn’t think I needed permission to give kids what they want. I mean, I’m not threatening anyone, saying, ‘Give me your toilet paper, give me your batteries.’ I’m just playing some music and saying, ‘If you want to come in and dance, then it’ll cost you.’”

“Dude, I respect you being ambitious and all,” Sam said. “But I have to shut this down. You never got permission, even, let alone asked us if it was okay to charge people.”

Albert said, “Sam, I respect you more than I can even say. And Astrid, you are way smarter than me. But I don’t see how you have the right to shut me down.”

That was it for Sam. “Okay, I tried to be nice. But I am the mayor. I was elected, as you probably remember, since I think you voted for me.”

“I did. I’d do it again, man. But Sam, Astrid, you guys are wrong here. This club is about all these kids have that can get them together for a good time. They’re sitting in their homes starving and feeling sad and scared. When they’re dancing, they forget how hungry and sad they are. This is a good thing I’m doing.”

Sam stared hard at Albert, a stare that kids in Perdido Beach took seriously. But Albert did not back down.

“Sam, how many cantaloupes did Edilio manage to bring back with kids who were rounded up and forced to work?” Albert asked.

“Not many,” Sam admitted.

“Orc picked a whole truckload of cabbage. Before the zekes figured out how to get at him. Because we paid Orc to work.”

“He did it because he’s the world’s youngest alcoholic and you paid him with beer,” Astrid snapped. “I know what you want, Albert. You want to get everything for yourself and be this big, important guy. But you know what? This is a whole new world. We have a chance to make it a better world. It doesn’t have to be about some people getting over on everyone else. It can be fair to everyone.”

Albert laughed. “Everyone can be equally hungry. In a week or so, everyone can starve.”

A group of kids were leaving, pushing open the door. Sam recognized them, of course. He knew everyone in town now, at least by sight if not by name.

They came out laughing, giggling, happy.

“Hey, Big Sam,” one of them said.

Another said, “You should go in, dude, it’s great.”

Sam just nodded in acknowledgment.

The decision could no longer be put off. Close down the club or let it go. If he didn’t close it down he was giving ground to Albert and would probably have another stupid fight with Astrid, who would feel as if he’d ignored her.

Not for the first time, or even the hundredth time, Sam wished he had never, ever agreed to become anyone’s leader.

Sam stole a glance at the watch on Albert’s wrist. It was almost nine P.M.

“Close it down,” Sam said firmly. “Close it. At ten thirty. Kids need sleep.”

Inside the club Quinn relaxed into the beat. Some ska-punk, sure. Maybe later some hip-hop. Some classic old tunes, maybe.

Give it up for Albert: the guy had turned the Mac’s into a decent dance club. The main lights were all off, just the menu boards were illuminated. But they didn’t show Happy Meals and combos. Albert had covered them with pink tissue paper so they gave off a mellow glow, just enough to light the whites of people’s eyes and their teeth when they smiled.

Hunter, what was he, seventh grade? He was the one spinning the CDs and scratching the turntable. He wasn't exactly a professional, but he was good enough. Cool enough kid, Quinn thought, even though the rumor was he was developing some killer powers. Time would tell if he would stay cool, or turn as arrogant as some of the freaks. Like Brianna, who was suddenly calling herself "the Breeze" and demanding everyone else play along. Like she was a comic book superhero. The Breeze. And he'd kind of liked her, once.

Speaking of which, there she was, dancing like a crazy person, speeding herself up, feet flying, bouncing up and down so fast, she looked like she might start flying around the room.

She'd been telling everyone who would listen how she beat a bullet. "I'm now officially faster than a speeding bullet. Me and Superman."

In another corner the weird little kid named Duck was peddling some crazy story involving fish-bats and an underground city or whatever.

And then there was Dekka, sitting by herself, nodding almost imperceptibly to the beat, eyes on Brianna. No one really knew much about Dekka. She was one of the Coates kids, one of the ones who had been rescued from Caine and Drake's cruel cinderblock torture.

She had a vibe to her, Dekka, a feeling she gave off that she was strong and a little dangerous. There was some history there, Quinn thought, something in her past, like with almost all the Coates kids. Coates was known as a school for troubled rich kids. They weren't all rich, they weren't all troubled, but the majority had some serious issues.

Quinn slid between two fourth graders, a guy and a girl, dancing. Together. When Quinn was that age he would never have danced with a girl like they were on a date. In fact, he still didn't. But things were different now, he supposed. Fourth grade was like . . . like middle-aged or something. He himself was old. Old, old, old at almost fifteen.

Birthday coming up. The question was, what would he do? Stay or step outside?

Mostly, ever since Sam had survived, kids who had hit the Fatal Fifteen had survived. Sam had told them how to do it.

Computer Jack, who back in those days was with Caine, had used high-speed photography to record a captive kid up at Coates hitting the moment, the AoD, the Age of Destruction. Jack had come to Perdido Beach with the tale of the tape, the great revelation that in that fateful moment your world would slow down, slow down to a crawl as you approached infinity. And there, in that moment, would come a tempter to beckon to you, call to you, ask you to cross over.

But the tempter was a fraud. A liar. Like a devil, Quinn thought, like a devil. He backed into someone and turned to apologize.

"Hey, Quinn." It was Lana, shouting over the music so that it was halfway to lip-reading for Quinn. The Healer actually speaking to him.

"Oh. Hi, Lana. This is cool, huh?" He indicated the room with an awkward motion.

Lana nodded. She looked a little bleak, a little forlorn. Which seemed impossible to Quinn. Lana was second only to Sam in hero status. And the difference was that some people really kind of hated Sam, while no one hated Lana. Sam might make you do something—pick up garbage, take care of the prees at the day care, shoot someone with a machine gun—but all Lana ever did was heal people.

“Yeah. It’s kind of cool,” Lana said. “But I don’t really know anyone.”

“No way. You know everyone.”

Lana shook her head ruefully. “No. Everyone knows me. Or at least they think they do.”

“Well, you know me,” Quinn said, and made a kind of slanted grin so she’d know he wasn’t trying to get above himself and act like her equal.

But that wasn’t how she took it. She nodded, so serious that she looked like she might cry. “I miss my parents.”

Quinn felt the sudden, sharp pang he’d felt about every hour back when all this started, and now felt only a couple of times a day. “Yeah. Me too.”

Lana held out her hand, and Quinn, after a moment’s amazed hesitation, took it.

Lana smiled. “Is it okay if I just hold your hand and don’t, you know, heal you of anything?”

Quinn laughed. “Whatever’s wrong with me, it isn’t something even you can heal.” Then, “You want to dance?”

“I’ve been waiting to talk to Albert, standing around here for like, an hour, and you are the first person to ask me,” she said. “Yeah. I would kind of like to dance.”

The song had just changed to a hip-hop tune, a raucous, flatly obscene rap. It was a few years old, but still catchy, and had the added attraction of being a song no one in the room had been allowed to listen to three months earlier.

Quinn and Lana danced, even bumped hips a couple of times. Then Hunter changed the mood to a moderately slow, dreamy song by Lucinda Williams. “I love this song,” Lana said.

“I . . . I don’t know how to dance slow,” Quinn said.

“Me neither. Let’s try it, though.”

So they held each other awkwardly and just swayed back and forth. After a while Lana laid her face against Quinn’s shoulder. He could feel her tears on his neck.

“This is kind of a sad song,” Quinn said.

“Do you dream, Quinn?” Lana asked.

The question took him aback. She must have felt him flinch because she looked at his face, looking for the explanation in his eyes.

“I have nightmares,” he said. “The battle. You know. The big battle.”

“You were really brave. You saved those kids in the day care.”

“Not all of them,” Quinn said shortly. He fell silent for a moment, back in the dream. “There was this coyote. And this kid, right? And . . . and . . . Okay, so I could have shot him, maybe, a little sooner, right? But I was scared of hitting the kid. I was so scared I’d hit that little kid, so I didn’t shoot. And then it was, like, too late. You know?”

Lana nodded. She didn’t show any sympathy, and strangely Quinn thought that was a good thing because if it wasn’t you, and *you* hadn’t been there, and *you* hadn’t been holding a machine gun with your finger frozen on the trigger, and *you* hadn’t heard your voice coming out of your throat in a scream like an open artery, and *you* hadn’t seen what he had seen, then you didn’t have a right to be sympathetic because you didn’t understand anything. You didn’t understand anything.

Anything.

Lana just nodded and put her palm against his heart and said, “I can’t heal that.”

He nodded, fighting back the tears that had come . . . how many times since that horrible night? Let's see, three months, thirty days in a month, that would make it about a thousand times. Maybe more. Not less, not if you counted the times he had wanted to cry but had plastered on his happy-go-lucky Quinn smile because the alternative was falling down on the ground and sobbing.

"That's my sad stuff," he said after a while. "What's yours?"

She cocked her head sideways as if sizing him up, asking herself if she wanted to share with him. Him of all people. Unsteady Quinn. Unreliable Quinn. Quinn, who had sold Sam out to end up being tortured by Caine and Drake. Quinn, who had almost gotten Astrid killed. Quinn, who was only tolerated now because when it had all hit the fan in the big battle he had finally stepped up and pulled that trigger and . . .

"You ever meet someone you can't quite forget?" Lana asked him. "Someone who you meet them and forever after it's like they own a piece of you?"

"No," Quinn said. He felt a little disappointed. "I guess he's a lucky dude."

Lana was so startled, she laughed. "No. Not that kind of guy. Maybe not a guy at all. Maybe not . . . well, not a dude the way you mean. More like someone took a fishing hook, right? Like they took that hook and stuck it in me like I was a worm. You know how on the end of a fishhook there's this barb? So you can't pull it out without ripping a big hole in yourself?"

Quinn nodded without really understanding.

"And then, maybe, here's what's weird, right: You almost want the fisherman to reel you in. It's like, okay, you have that hook in me, and it hurts, but I can't get it out, I'm stuck. So just reel me in. Just get it over with and stay out of my dreams because they're all nightmares."

Quinn still didn't understand what she meant, but the image of a fish, reeled in, helpless, stuck with him. Quinn knew hopelessness when he heard it. He'd just never expected to hear it from the most beloved person in the FAYZ.

The musical tempo changed again. Enough with the slow music, kids wanted to rock out, so Hunter dialed up some techno that Quinn didn't recognize. He started to move to the rhythm, but Lana wasn't into it.

She put her hand on his shoulder and said, "I see Albert's free, and I have to talk to him."

She turned away without a further word. Quinn was left with the feeling that however bad his nightmares were, the Healer's were worse.

TWELVE

61 HOURS, 3 MINUTES

THE ARGUMENT WITH Astrid about Albert's club had not been pretty.

Most nights Sam slept at the house Astrid shared with Mary. Not this night.

It wasn't their first argument. It probably wouldn't be their last.

Sam hated arguing. When he added up the total number of people he could really talk to, the number came to two: Edilio and Astrid. His conversations with Edilio were mostly about official business. His conversations with Astrid used to be about deeper stuff, and lighter stuff, too. Now they seemed to be always talking about work. And arguing about it.

He was in love with Astrid. He wanted to talk to her about all the stuff she knew, the history, the math even, the big cosmic issues that she would explain and he would kind of almost understand.

And he wanted to make out with her, to tell the truth. Kissing Astrid, stroking her hair, having her nuzzle close to him, that was all that kept him from going crazy sometimes.

But instead of making out and talking about the stars or whatever, they argued. It reminded him of his mother and stepfather. Not happy memories.

He spent the night on the lumpy cot in his office and woke early, before the sun was even up. He dressed and crept out before kids could start arriving to bug him with more problems.

The streets were quiet. They usually were nowadays. Some kids had been given permission to drive, but only on official business. So there was no traffic. On the rare occasions there was a car or a truck, you'd hear it long before you saw it.

Now Sam heard a motor. Far off. But it didn't sound like a car.

He reached the low concrete wall that defined the edge of the beach. He jumped atop it and immediately spotted the source of the sound. A low-slung motorboat, a bass boat they were often called, was putt-putting along at no more than walking speed. With dawn just graying the night sky Sam could make out a silhouette. He was pretty sure he recognized the person.

Sam walked down to the water's edge, cupped his hands around his mouth to form a megaphone, and yelled, "Quinn."

Quinn seemed to be fiddling with something Sam couldn't see. He yelled back, "Is that you, brah?"

"Yeah, man. What are you doing out there?"

"Wait a second." Quinn stooped down, dealing with something. Then he turned the boat toward shore. He beached the shallow craft and killed the engine. He hopped out onto the sand.

"What are you doing, man?" Sam asked again.

"Fishing, brother. Fishing."

"Fishing?"

"People are looking for food, right?" Quinn said.

"Dude, you can't just decide to take a boat and go off fishing," Sam said.

Quinn seemed surprised. “Why not?”

“Why not?”

“Why not? No one’s using the boat. I found the fishing gear. And I’m still putting in my guard-duty hours with Edilio.”

Sam was at a loss for words. “Did you catch anything?”

Quinn’s teeth showed white in the darkness. “I found a book on fishing. Just did what they said in there.” He reached down into the boat and lifted something heavy. “Here. You can’t see it in the dark. But I’ll bet it weighs twenty pounds. It’s huge.”

“No way.” Despite his foul mood, Sam grinned. “What is it?”

“I think it’s a halibut. I’m not sure. It doesn’t look exactly like the fish in the book I got.”

“What do you plan to do with it?”

“Well,” Quinn said thoughtfully. “I guess I’m going to try and catch some more, and then I’m going to eat a bunch of it, and then maybe see if Albert will trade me something for whatever I don’t eat. You know Albert: he’ll figure out some way to fry them up at Mickey D’s and do fish sticks or whatever. I wonder if he still has any ketchup.”

“I’m not sure that’s the best idea,” Sam said.

“Why?”

“Because Albert doesn’t just give stuff away. Not any more.”

Quinn laughed nervously. “Look, brah, don’t tell me I can’t do this, okay? I’m not hurting anyone.”

“I never said you were hurting anyone,” Sam said. “But look, Albert’s going to sell this fish to whoever will give him whatever he wants: batteries and toilet paper, whatever else he figures out he can control.”

“Sam. I got, like, twenty pounds of good protein here.”

“Yeah. And it ought to go to the people who aren’t getting enough, right? Mother Mary could serve some to the prees. They’re not eating much better than the rest of us, and they need it more.”

Quinn dug his toe in the wet sand. “Look, if you don’t want me to sell or trade the fish to Albert, okay. But look, I have this fish, right? What am I supposed to do with it? Someone needs to put it on ice before long. I can’t just walk around town handing out pieces of fish, right?”

Once again Sam felt the wave of unanswerable questions rising around him like a tide. Now he had to decide what Quinn did with a fish?

Quinn continued. “Look, I’m just saying I can haul this fish and any others I get up to Albert and he has a refrigerator big enough to keep it in good shape. Plus, you know how he is: he’ll figure out how to clean it and cook it and—”

“All right,” Sam interrupted. “Fine. Whatever. Give it to Albert this time. Till I figure out some kind of, I don’t know, some kind of rule.”

“Thanks, man,” Quinn said.

Sam turned and headed back toward town.

“You should have come in and danced last night, brah,” Quinn yelled after him.

“You know I don’t dance.”

“Sam, if anyone ever needed to cut loose, it’s you.”

Sam tried to ignore his words, but their pitying, concerned tone bothered him. It

meant that he wasn't keeping his mind secret. It meant he was broadcasting his foul, self-pitying mood, and that wasn't good. Bad example.

"Hey, brah?" Quinn called.

"Yeah, man."

"You know that crazy story Duck Zhang's talking about? Not the cave thing, but the part about, like, flying fish-bats or whatever?"

"What about them?"

"I think I saw some. Came shooting up out of the water. Of course, it was dark."

"Okay," Sam said. "Later, dude."

As he walked across the beach he muttered, "My life is fish stories and Junior Mints."

Something was nagging at him. And not just Astrid. Something. Something about Junior Mints.

But weariness swept over him and dissolved the half-formed thought. He was due at town hall before long. More stupidity to deal with.

He heard Quinn singing Bob Marley's "Three Little Birds" to himself. Or maybe to Sam.

Then the sound of the putt-putt outboard motor starting again.

Sam felt an intense stab of jealousy.

"You don't worry," Quinn said, echoing the song.

"I do."

"Caine?"

No answer. Diana tapped at the door again.

"Hungry in the dark," Caine cried in an eerie, warbling voice. "Hungry in the dark, hungry in the dark, hungry, hungry."

"Oh, God, are we back to this?" Diana asked herself.

During his three-month-long funk Caine had screamed or cried or raged in various different ways. But this phrase had been the one most often repeated. *Hungry in the dark*.

She pushed open the door. Caine was thrashing in his bed, sheet twisted around his body, arms batting at something invisible.

Caine had moved out of Mose's cabin into the bungalow once occupied by the headmistress of Coates Academy and her husband. It was one of the few still-undamaged, untrashed spaces at Coates. The room had a big, comfortable bed with satin-soft sheets. There were prints of the kind baby boomers bought at Z Gallerie on the walls.

Diana moved quickly to the window as Caine cut loose again, wailing like a lost soul about hunger in the darkness. She raised the room-darkening blinds, and pale early sunlight lit the room.

Caine sat up suddenly. "What?" he said. He blinked hard several times and shivered. "Why are you here?"

"You were doing it again," Diana said.

"Doing what?"

"'Hungry in the dark.' It's one of your greatest hits. Sometimes you change it to 'hungry in the darkness.' You muttered it, moaned it, shouted it for weeks on end,

Caine. Darkness, hunger, and that word: ‘gaiaphage.’” She sat down on the edge of his bed. “What’s it all mean?”

Caine shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“The Darkness. Drake talks about it, too. The thing out in the desert. The thing that gave him his arm. The thing that messed up your head.”

Caine didn’t say anything.

“It’s a monster of some kind, isn’t it?” Diana asked.

“Of some kind,” Caine muttered.

“Is it some mutant kid or whatever? Or like the coyotes, some kind of mutant animal?”

“It is what it is,” Caine said shortly.

“What does it want?”

Caine looked suspiciously at her. “What do you care?”

“I live here, remember? I have to live in the FAYZ along with everyone else. So I kind of have an interest in whether some evil creature is using all of us for some—”

“No one uses me,” Caine snapped.

Diana fell silent, letting his anger ebb. Then, “It messed you up, Caine. You’re not you anymore.”

“Did you send Jack to warn Sam? Did you send him to tell Sam how to survive the poof?”

The question caught Diana unprepared. It took all her self-control to keep fear from her face. “That’s what you think?” Diana managed a wry smile. “So that’s why I’m being followed everywhere I go.”

Caine didn’t deny it. “I’m in love with you, Diana. You took care of me these last three months. I don’t want you to be hurt.”

“Why are you threatening me?”

“Because I have plans. I have things I have to do. I need to know whose side you’re on.”

“I’m on my side,” Diana said. It was the honest answer. She didn’t trust herself to convince him of a lie. If he thought she was lying . . .

Caine nodded. “Yeah. Fine. Be on your own side, I respect that. But if I find out you’re helping Sam . . .”

Diana decided it was time for a show of anger. “Listen, you sad excuse for a human being, I had a choice. Sam offered me that choice after he kicked your butt. I could have gone with him. It would have been the smart move. I would have been safe from Drake. And I wouldn’t have had to put up with you trying to paw me every time you felt lonely. And I would definitely be eating better. I chose to go with you.”

Caine sat up straighter. He leaned toward her. His eyes made his intentions clear.

“Oh, here we go.” Diana rolled her eyes.

But when he kissed her, she let him. And after a few seconds of stony indifference she kissed him back.

Then she put her palm on his bare chest and shoved him back onto his pillow. “That’s enough.”

“Not nearly enough, but I guess it will have to do,” Caine said.

“I’m out of here,” Diana said. She started for the door.

“Diana?”

“What?”

“I need Computer Jack.”

She froze with her hand on the doorknob. “I don’t have him hidden in my room.”

“Listen to me, Diana, and don’t say anything. Okay? I’m telling you: don’t say anything. This is a one-time offer. Amnesty. Whatever happened with you and Jack and Sam, it’s forgotten, if . . . if you get me Jack. Bygones will be bygones. But I need Jack. I need him soon.”

“Caine—”

“Shut up,” he hissed. “Do yourself a favor, Diana. Don’t. Say. Anything.”

She bit back the angry retort. There was no mistaking the menace in his voice. He meant it. This time, he meant it.

“Get me Jack. Use any resource you want. Use Bug. Use Drake, even. Use Pack Leader, if that’ll help. I don’t care how it gets done, but I want Jack in two days. Starting now.”

Diana struggled for her next breath.

“Two days, Diana. You know the ‘or else.’”

Albert was supervising the sweeping of his club by one of his crew, and reading about the melting points of various metals—lead and gold, especially gold—when Quinn pushed a wheelbarrow into the McDonald’s.

In the wheelbarrow were three fish. One was very big for a fish. The other two looked more average.

Albert’s *second* thought was that this was an opportunity.

His *first* thought was that he was hungry and would definitely enjoy a nice piece of fried fish. Even raw fish. The strength of the hunger pangs caught him off-guard. He tried to ignore the hunger, eating very little himself and making sure that his crew were as well fed as possible, but when a guy walked in with actual, honest-to-God fish . . .

“Whoa,” Albert said.

“Yeah. Cool, huh?” Quinn said, smiling down at his fish like a proud parent.

“Are they for sale?” Albert asked.

“Yeah. Except for whatever I can eat. Plus, we got to send some to Mary for the prees.”

“Of course,” Albert agreed. He considered. “I don’t have anything I can use to make a batter. But I could probably dip them in a little flour to give them a little crunchiness.”

“Man, I’ll eat ’em raw,” Quinn said. “I barely got them here without chomping on them.”

“What do you want for all three?” Albert asked.

Quinn was obviously baffled. “Dude, I don’t know.”

“Okay,” Albert said. “How about this: You get a free pass to the club. Plus, you get all the fish you can eat. And, I owe you a major favor in the future.”

“A major favor?”

“Major,” Albert confirmed. “Look, I’m doing some things. I have some plans. As a matter of fact, they’re plans I would like you to help me with.”

“Uh-huh,” Quinn said skeptically.

“I’m asking you to trust me, Quinn. You trust me, and I’ll trust you.”

Albert knew that would hit home with Quinn. Trust was the last thing anyone offered Quinn.

Albert changed the subject, just a little. “How did you catch these fish, Quinn?”

“Um, well, it’s not that hard to figure out. I used a net to scoop up some little fish, you know, not like fish you could eat. Then I used them as bait. You get the little fish in tide pools and shallow water. There’s plenty of gear and boats. Then you just need to be really, really patient.”

“This could be major,” Albert said thoughtfully. Then, “Okay, I have a proposition for you.”

Quinn grinned. “I’m listening.”

“I have twenty-four guys on my crew. Mostly they guard Ralph’s and move food around. But the truth is, there isn’t much left to guard or to move around. So.”

“So?”

“So, I give you six of my best people. The most reliable six guys I can come up with. You take them and train them to fish.”

“Yeah?” Quinn frowned, still not getting it.

“And you and me, we’re partners in the fish business. Seventy-thirty. I give you workers, I haul the fish, preserve it, prepare it, distribute it. And whatever we bring in, I take seventy percent and you take thirty.”

Quinn arched a brow. “Excuse me? How come you get seventy percent?”

“I pay everyone under me,” Albert explained. “Your thirty percent is just for you.”

“It’s thirty percent of nothing,” Quinn said.

“Maybe. But not for long.” Albert grinned and slapped Quinn on the shoulder. “You have to stay hopeful, man. Things are looking up. We have fish.”

Mother Mary smelled it before she saw it.

Fish. Fried fish.

The kids smelled it, too. “What is that smell?” Julia cried, and ran forward, black ponytail flying behind her.

There followed a near riot. Preschoolers surged around Quinn, who was carrying the fried fish piled on a napkin-covered McDonald’s tray.

“Okay, okay, okay, everyone gets some,” Quinn yelled.

Mary could not move. She knew she should, she knew she had to step in and impose order, but the smell had paralyzed her.

Fortunately, Francis—who had made such a scene over hating to work at the preschool—had decided after the first day that he wouldn’t mind working a second day. Then a third. He was on his way to becoming a regular. Once he’d gotten over his attitude, he had proved to be really good with the children.

“Okay, little creatures,” Francis yelled, “back away. Back slowly away from the food.”

“Sorry, I probably should have warned you I was coming,” Quinn said sheepishly as he waded through a sea of kids and held the fish high above dozens of grabbing hands.

Mary twisted her fingers together as she watched Francis and the other helpers get the kids into line. The smell of the fish was unbelievable. It made her stomach grumble. It made her mouth water.

It made her sick.

“Okay, guys, we have thirty-two pieces,” Quinn said. “How do you want to do this?”

Francis glanced at Mary, but she could not respond. It was as if she were frozen in place.

“Everyone starts with half a piece,” Francis decided. Then he warned, “And anyone who gets grabby gets nothing.”

“Mary, there’s enough for you and your workers to have some, too,” Quinn said.

Mary nodded. She couldn’t. Not for herself. For the others, yes. Of course.

“You okay?” Quinn asked her.

Mary gritted her teeth and forced a shaky smile. “Of course. Thanks for bringing this. The children haven’t had . . . they need the protein . . . they . . .”

“Okay,” Quinn said, obviously nonplussed.

“Save some for the babies,” Mary urged Francis. “We’ll purée it in the blender.”

The sounds of gobbling filled the room. Many of these kids probably hated fish. Back in the old days. Even two weeks ago they would have turned up their noses. But now? No one would turn away protein. They felt the need way down inside. Their bodies were ordering them to eat.

But Mary’s body was ordering her not to.

It would be a sin, she told herself. A sin to consume the fish only to vomit it back up later. She couldn’t do that to the littles.

Mary knew there was something wrong with the way she was behaving. She was surrounded by hunger that kids couldn’t avoid, and she alone was the cause of her own hunger. A warning sounded, but distant, barely audible. Like someone shouting to her from two blocks away.

“Come on, Mary, you have to try this,” Francis urged. “It’s amazing.”

Unable to manage a reply, Mary turned away, silent, and headed for the bathroom pursued by the slavering sounds of hungry children.

THIRTEEN

45 HOURS, 36 MINUTES

SAM KNOCKED AT the front door. He didn't usually do that. Astrid had told him many times he could just walk in.

But he knocked, anyway.

It took her a while to answer.

She must have just come from the shower. Astrid worked out after dinner, when Little Pete usually liked to watch DVDs. Her blond hair was plastered down her neck, strands of it swooping down across one eye to give her a vaguely piratical look. She was wearing a bathrobe and carrying a towel.

"So. You came crawling back, eh?" Astrid said.

"Would it help if I were on hands and knees?" Sam asked.

Astrid considered that for a moment. "No, the abject look is enough."

"I didn't see you all day."

"It would have been surprising if you had. I wasn't interested in being seen."

"Can I come in?"

"Are you asking if you *may* come in? 'Can' is meant to suggest ability. 'May' is proper when the question is one of permission."

Sam smiled. "You know you just get me hot when you do that."

"Oh? Then maybe I should go on to point out that both 'can' and 'may' are considered 'modal verbs.' There are nine modal verbs. Would you like me to tell you what they are?"

"You'd better not," he said. "I can't take too much excitement."

Sam put his arm around her, drew her close, and kissed her on her lips.

"Wimp," she teased when he drew back. "Well, come on in. I have some delicious canned okra, a burned homemade graham-flour tortilla, and half a head of Orc's cabbage left over from dinner if you're hungry. If you wrap the tortilla around some shredded cabbage and a bit of okra and microwave it for thirty seconds you have something really disgusting but kind of healthy."

Sam stepped inside and closed the door behind him. Little Pete was camped out in front of the TV watching a DVD of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. Jim Carrey, completely obscured by makeup, was rubbing his hands gleefully.

"It was one of his Christmas presents," Astrid explained.

"I remember," Sam said.

Christmas had not been a great time for anyone. Christmas without parents. Without older siblings. Or grandparents. Without all the weird relatives you saw only at holiday time.

Astrid's parents had an artificial tree that Sam had found in the attic and hauled downstairs to set up. It was still set up, although they'd taken the ornaments off and put them back in boxes.

Everyone had done what they could. Albert had put on a feast, though nothing to rival his great Thanksgiving production. By Christmas there were no pies to be had, no cookies, and fresh fruit or vegetables were all in the half-forgotten past.

“We can’t fight over . . . you know . . . politics,” Sam said.

“You mean you want me to just agree with you on everything?” Astrid asked, her voice signaling readiness to start it all over again.

“No. I want you to tell me what you think. I need you,” Sam admitted. “But that’s kind of the point: I need you. So when we disagree, we can’t get mad at each other. As people, you know?”

Astrid seemed ready to argue. Instead she exhaled a long, weary breath. “No, you’re right. We have enough to deal with.”

“Cool,” he said.

“Did you get any sleep last night? You look tired.”

“I guess I am,” he said. “Long day. Hey, did you know Quinn is fishing? He caught something big this morning.”

“I didn’t know. That’s good.” She looked troubled. “We should have thought of that. Fishing, I mean.”

“We’re not going to think of everything, I guess,” Sam said wearily. That was the problem with having one person in charge. People expected you to come up with all the answers. They stopped coming up with answers for themselves. Quinn had opened up a new possibility all by himself. And now he was turning to Albert for help, not to Sam.

“What’s he doing with the fish?”

“We sent a lot of it over to the day care this morning. We got some protein to the littles, at least.”

“A lot of it?” She raised an eyebrow. “What’s Quinn doing with the rest? He’s not hoarding it, I hope.”

“He’s . . .” Sam stopped himself. The last thing he wanted was to argue about Quinn and Albert and fish. “Actually, can we talk about that tomorrow? The important thing is that the littles got some protein today. Can we just be happy about that?”

Astrid laid her hand against his cheek. “Go to bed.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

He trudged upstairs, feeling better than he had all day. He passed Mary coming down. “Hey, Mary. Back to work?”

“What else would I be doing?” she said. “Sorry, that sounded cranky.”

“If you can’t be cranky, who can?” Sam said. “But hey, are you getting enough to eat?”

Mary seemed startled. “What?”

“I was wondering if you were getting enough food. You’ve lost some weight. I mean, don’t get me wrong, you look good.”

“Thanks,” Mary managed to say. “I’m um . . . Yes, I’m getting plenty to eat.”

“Did you get some of the fish this morning?”

Mary nodded. “Yes. It was really great.”

“Okay. Later.”

Sam had the use of what had once been a guest room. It was nicely made up, had its own bathroom, with very soft matching towels. He kept the room very neat and clean because it was still somehow not his room. He couldn’t imagine it ever being his room. This house belonged to . . . well, that was a good question. But it sure wasn’t his.

Which did not stop him from sliding between the sheets and passing almost instantly from hectic consciousness to sleep.

But there was no peace in his dreams. He had a dream of his mother. Only she wasn't really his mother in the dream, not the real person. She was the creature who had called for him in the midst of what would have been the poof.

Happy fifteenth birthday, Sam, now step out of the FAYZ into . . . into no one knew what.

Some kind of illusion. Seeing what you wanted to see. And yet, it had seemed so real at the time. In his dream, Sam relived that moment.

He saw Caine, his fraternal twin, within a circle of blistering light. He saw their mother. And he saw a girl, maybe twelve, thin, with a lot of thick ponytail. He wondered in a vague sort of way about the girl. There had been no girl there during the poof. Not inside the distortion. No girl.

But now that dream was dissolving into another. Sam was standing at the bottom of the town hall front steps and there were cans as big as trash barrels rolling down the steps. It started with a can of beans. And then another. And then a can of ravioli. The cans started coming faster and now Sam was trying to climb the steps but he couldn't because every time he lifted a foot to set it down on a step, he found another can hurtling toward him.

Now a cascade of little cans, almost like insects scurrying around under his feet. He was tripping, slipping and sliding in a cascade of cans, unable to rise.

In his dream he looked up and saw a girl, the same girl again. Lots of brown hair drawn back in a long ponytail. The girl. She was at the top of the stairs. But she wasn't throwing the cans.

The cans became Junior Mints. In cans, oddly, but with the familiar green Junior Mints label. Cans of them rolling and tumbling and tripping Sam, who now was buried under them.

Sam was aware of someone standing beside him. Not a person, an insect, a bug of indistinct shape.

The giant bug picked up a Junior Mint, which now was not a can but a big, novelty-sized box.

Sam woke suddenly.

Astrid was shaking him, yelling right in his face, scared. "Wake up!"

He was up in a flash, almost knocking Astrid over.

"What?"

"Petey," Astrid cried. Her eyes were wild with fear.

Sam ran for Pete's room. He stopped dead in the hallway outside it. The door was open.

Pete was in his bed. He wasn't moving. His eyes were shut. His face was peaceful. He was asleep. But how he could sleep was beyond Sam, because the room around Pete was filled with monsters.

Literally filled. Wall to wall. Up to the ceiling.

Monsters. A hundred nightmares' worth of monsters. They slithered from under his bed. They crawled from his closet. They floated like they were helium balloons. Like an entire Macy's Thanksgiving parade in miniature had floated into Little Pete's room. But instead of cartoon Shrek and the Cat in the Hat there were things much more

sinister in their place.

One of the smaller ones had purple wings in three pairs, grasping tendrils hanging from its belly, a head like the end of a syringe with bloodred eyeballs perched on top.

The largest was a shaggy monstrosity like a grizzly bear with eighteen-inch spikes at the ends of its paws.

There were creatures that were all sharp edges, as if they'd been assembled out of razor blades and kitchen knives. There were creatures of glowing magma. There were creatures who flew and others who slithered.

"Like the other day? In the plaza?" Sam asked in a shaky whisper.

"No. Look: they cast shadows," Astrid said urgently. "They're making sounds. They smell."

The big shaggy monster shifted shape as they watched. The brown fur lightened toward white, then veered suddenly to green.

Its mouth moved.

Opened.

A sound came from it, like a strangling cat. An eerie mewling.

Then the mouth snapped shut with an audible click. The mouth melted and disappeared beneath new-grown fur.

"It was trying to speak," Astrid whispered.

A mustard-colored creature with a vaguely canine shape, pickax head, antennae, and twin tubes mounted on its eyeless head was changing shape as it floated. Its feet were shifting, from mere pads to sharp-ended, fishhook-barbed spears. The barbs clicked in and out. Like the creature was practicing with them, discovering their use.

And then, with its shape determined at last, it too attempted to speak. This time the sound was even less coherent, a chittering, insect sound that died out suddenly when a fleshy membrane grew over its mouth.

"Do they see us?" Sam wondered aloud.

"I don't know. See how they're staring at Petey?"

It was absurd to think about reading the faces of the monsters—some had five eyes; some had a single eye; some had gnashing, razor teeth and no eyes at all. But to Sam they seemed to be gazing with something like awe at Little Pete, who snored softly, oblivious.

A snake as long as a python slithered by, twisting in midair. Tiny centipede legs grew from it, reminiscent almost of the zekes, though these legs looked like they were made for sticking like Velcro.

The snake's mouth hissed. The hissing grew in volume, then stopped abruptly: the snake's entire head had simply disappeared.

"They're trying to communicate," Astrid said. "Something is stopping them. Something won't let them speak."

"Or someone," Sam said. "If they attack us . . ." He raised his hands, palms out.

Instantly Astrid pressed his hands down. "No, Sam. You might hit Petey."

"What happens if he wakes up?"

"The other times the visions just disappeared. But this is different. Look. Look at the curtains, they're singed where that . . . that lava thing got near them."

Sam made up his mind. "Wake him up."

"What if—" she began.

“Look, maybe they’re not a threat. But maybe they are. If they are, I’m not just going to let them hurt you, I’m going to burn them.”

Then he added, “If I can.”

“Pete,” Astrid called in a quavering voice.

Until that moment none of the creatures had taken any notice of the two frail-looking humans standing there gawking. But now every eye, every set of eyes, every quivering antenna, turned toward them. It was so sudden, Sam imagined he heard their eyeballs click.

Red eyes, black eyes, yellow-slitted eyes, globular blue eyes, maybe fifty eyes in all, stared straight at Sam and Astrid.

“Try again,” Sam whispered. He stretched out his arms again, opened his palms toward the monsters, ready.

“Petey,” Astrid said more urgently.

Now monstrous bodies shifted. They moved almost as one, some clumsy, some like lightning, but all moving as if they were Disney animatronics operating off the same signal. They turned to face Sam and Astrid.

One after another their mouths opened. Sounds came from those mouths. Grunts and hisses, hoots and growls; sounds like steel dragged on porcelain, sounds like the chirping of crickets, sounds like mad dogs barking. Not words, but sounds that wanted to be words, were struggling to be words.

It was a chorus of fury and frustration. And it stopped as suddenly as if someone had yanked the plug from a stereo.

The monsters glared at Sam and Astrid, as though they were to blame for the silencing.

Sam cursed softly.

“Walk backward. Down the hall,” Sam ordered. “They’ll have to come at us one by one and Pete won’t be in the line of fire.”

“Sam . . .”

“Not really a good time for a debate, Astrid,” Sam said through gritted teeth. “Back slowly away.”

She did. He followed, one foot directly behind the other, arms up, his mutant’s weapons at the ready.

But no way he’d get them all if they came. No way. He could get a few, maybe, if they could even be burned. How did you burn a creature made of magma?

Step by step till they were halfway down the hall. Ten feet. Fifteen. The monsters would have to come at him down that hallway. That gave him all the advantage he was going to get. Pete was out of the direct line of fire.

“Call him again. Louder this time.”

“He doesn’t always respond.”

“Try.”

“Pete,” Astrid shouted, fear giving volume to her voice. “Petey, wake up! Wake up, wake up!”

Through the doorway Sam saw the floating creatures, all those that didn’t have wings anyway, suddenly land with convincing weight on the floor. The floorboards jumped from the impact.

The six-winged creature was first. Fast as a dragonfly it zoomed straight for Astrid.

A scorching green-white light shot from Sam's hands. The winged thing burst into flame. But it already had too much momentum.

Sam dropped, reached back to yank Astrid down, found that she had already ducked. The flaming corpse, wings shriveled like burning leaves, blew over their heads.

Mary Terrafino blundered into the hallway. "What is happening!"

"Mary! Back! Backbackback!" Sam yelled.

Mary jumped back into her room as the mustard-colored, eyeless dog with antennae attacked, feet clicking and scrabbling on the hardwood.

It had two tubes on its head. Sam was sure it hadn't had them just moments earlier.

Something pale blue shot from the tubes. Slime covered one of Sam's hands, thick as oatmeal, sticky as rubber cement.

With the other hand, Sam fired again. The thing burned, slowed, but did not stop.

And now all the nightmares were pushing and shoving to get through the door, jostling for the chance to attack, and then—

Then they were gone.

Simply gone.

All but the still-sizzling remains of the six-winged bug and the goo-spraying canine. Astrid rushed into Little Pete's room. Sam was only a step behind. Little Pete was sitting up in bed, eyes open, unfocused.

Astrid threw herself onto the bed and put her arms around him.

"Oh, Petey, Petey," she cried.

Sam crossed quickly to the window. The curtain that had been singed was now burning. He yanked at it, pulled it down to stomp on it, and in the process knocked a shelf full of nesting dolls to the floor. Sam stamped the fire out. One foot crushed one of the gaily painted red nesting dolls. The outer doll splintered. The doll nestled within rolled free into the flame.

Sam stamped it all out.

"You have a fire extinguisher?" he asked. He was trying to wipe the mucousy substance from his hand and not having much luck. "Just to be safe, we should—"

But then, through the window he saw something almost as frightening as the monsters. There was a girl standing across the street. She was gazing up at him.

She had huge dark eyes, and an abundance of brown hair pulled back into a ponytail.

The girl from his dream.

Sam ran from the room, tumbled down the steps, and burst out onto the street.

The girl was nowhere to be seen.

Sam ran back inside to face a terrified Mary and Astrid, who, to his amazement, was taking notes on a pad of paper even as she hugged her brother.

"What in the—" Sam began.

"They were adapting, Sam," Astrid interrupted urgently. "Did you see? They were changing as we watched them. Altering their physical shapes. Evolving."

She scribbled, wiped tears from her face, and scribbled some more.

"What is going on?" Mary Terrafino asked in an abashed, diffident whisper, like she was intruding.

Sam turned to her. "Mary. You don't talk about this."

“It’s him, isn’t it?” Mary asked, looking at Little Pete, who was yawning now and beginning to drift back to sleep. “There’s something about him.”

“There are a lot of things about him, Mary,” Sam confessed wearily. “But it stays between us. I need to be able to trust you on this.”

Mary nodded. She seemed torn between staying and arguing and returning to the relative sanity of her room. Sanity won out.

“This isn’t right,” Astrid whispered as she laid her brother back on his pillow.

“You think?” Sam asked shrilly.

Astrid stroked Little Pete’s forehead. “Petey, you can’t do that again. You might hurt someone. You might hurt me. And then who would take care of you?”

“Yeah, no more monsters, Petey,” Sam said.

“No more monsters,” Astrid echoed.

Little Pete closed his eyes. “No more monsters,” he said through a huge yawn.

“I made him be quiet,” Little Pete added.

“Made who be quiet?” Sam asked.

“Petey. Who?” Astrid pleaded. “Who? Who was it? What did he want to say?”

“Hungry,” Little Pete said. “Hungry in the dark.”

“What does that mean?” Astrid pleaded.

But Little Pete had fallen asleep.

FOURTEEN

36 HOURS, 47 MINUTES

“SHE’S BEEN LIKE this ever since.” Bug—the visible Bug—waved his hand at Orsay, who sat knock-kneed and slump-shouldered on the front steps of Coates Academy.

Caine stared down at her with more than casual interest. He touched the top of Orsay’s head and noted the way she flinched. “Been there. I think,” he said.

Diana yawned. She was still dressed in her silk pajamas with a robe pulled around her as if it was cold. It was never really cold in the FAYZ.

Bug swayed back and forth, barely able to stay awake.

“What was happening when she started zoning out?” Caine asked Bug.

“What?” Bug snapped his head forward, jerking himself awake. “She was in one of Sam’s dreams. Something about cans of food. Then all of a sudden there’s this, like, creepy light show going on in one of the other rooms in the house and then it was like Orsay was on drugs or something.”

“What do you know about drugs?” Diana asked.

Bug shrugged. “Joe junior, my big brother, he got high a lot.”

Caine knelt down in front of Orsay. Gently he lifted her face. “Snap out of it,” he said.

There was no response. So he slapped her once, hard but with no malice. His palm left a pink stain on her cheek.

Orsay’s eyes flickered. She looked like a person waking up many hours too early.

“Sorry,” Caine said. He was very close to her. Close enough to inhale her breath. Close enough to hear her heart pounding like a cornered rabbit’s. “I need to know what you saw.”

The corner of her mouth turned down, like a crudely drawn cartoon of fear and sadness and something else.

“Come on,” Caine cajoled. “Whatever dreams you had, I’ve had worse. Terrible stuff you don’t even want to know about.”

“They weren’t terrible,” Orsay said in a small voice. “They were . . . overpowering. They made me want more.”

Caine shifted his weight away from her. “Then why are you all freaked out?”

“In his dreams . . . in his dreams the world . . . Everything is so . . .” She formed her hands as if trying to make a shape out of something that defied definition.

“Sam’s dreams?” Caine demanded, half skeptical, half angry.

Orsay looked sharply at him. “No. No, not Sam. Sam’s dreams are easy. There’s no magic in them.”

“Then tell me about them. That’s what I sent you to find out.”

Orsay shrugged. “He’s . . . I don’t know. Like, worried. He’s distracted,” she said dismissively. “He thinks he’s screwing up and, anyway, he just wants to get away from it all. And of course, he thinks about food a lot.”

“Poor baby,” Diana said. “All that power. All that responsibility. Boo-hoo.”

Caine laughed. “I guess being the boss isn’t what Sam thought it would be.”

“I think it’s exactly what he thought it would be,” Diana argued. “I don’t think he

ever wanted any of this. I think he just wanted to be left alone.” That last sentence she spoke pointedly.

“I don’t leave people alone when they screw with me,” Caine said. “Useful information, Diana.”

He stood up. “So. Sam is running scared. But not scared of me. Good. He’s worried about his silly job as mayor of loserville. Good.” He tapped the top of Orsay’s head. “Hey. Anything about the power plant in Sam’s dreams?”

Orsay shook her head. She was off again, off in some zombie trance reliving some strange hallucination of her own or maybe someone else’s.

Caine clapped his hands together. “Good. Sam isn’t obsessing over the power plant. The enemy,” he said with a grand flourish, “is looking inward, not outward. In fact, we could strike at any time. Except.”

He stared hard at Diana.

“I’ll get him,” she said.

“I can’t do it without Jack, Diana.”

“I’ll get him,” she said.

“You want Jack? I’ll get him,” Drake said.

Caine said, “You’re thinking of the old Jack, Drake. You have to remember that Jack has powers now.”

“I don’t care about his powers,” Drake snarled.

“Diana will give me Jack,” Caine said. “And then we will turn off the lights and feed the—” He stopped very abruptly. He blinked in confusion.

“Feed?” Drake echoed, puzzled.

Caine almost didn’t hear him. His brain seemed to trip, to skip a step, like a scratch in a DVD when the picture pixilates for a moment before starting up again. The familiar grounds of Coates Academy swam before his eyes.

Feed?

What had he meant?

Who had he meant?

“You can all go,” he said, distracted.

No one moved, so he made it clear: “Go away. Go away and leave me alone!”

Then he added, “Leave her.”

With Diana and Drake gone, Caine knelt before Orsay again. “You saw him, didn’t you? You felt him there. He touched your mind. I can tell.”

Orsay didn’t deny. She met his gaze, unflinching. “He was in the little boy’s dreams.”

“The little boy?” Caine frowned. “Little Pete? Is that who you mean?”

“He needed the little boy. The dark thing, the gaiaphage, he was . . .” She searched for a word, and when she found it, it surprised her. “He was learning.”

“Learning?” Caine gripped her arm tightly, squeezing meaning from her. She flinched. “Learning what?”

“Creation,” Orsay said.

Caine stared at her. He should ask. He should ask what she meant. What would the Darkness create? What would he learn from the mind of a five-year-old autistic?

“Go inside,” Caine whispered. He let go of her arm. “Go!”

Alone, he searched his mind, his memory. He stared into the trees at the edge of

the campus as though the explanation might be hiding there in the early morning shadows.

“And then we will turn off the lights and feed the—”

He had not just misspoken. It wasn't just . . . nothing. There had been a definite idea there, something tangible. Something that needed doing.

Hungry in the dark.

It felt like someone had a rope wrapped around his brain. Someone he couldn't see, someone standing far off in the dark, invisible. The rope disappeared into gloom and mystery, but at this end it was attached to him.

And out there, the Darkness held the other end. Yanked it whenever it liked.

Like Caine was a fish on a hook.

He crawled up onto the step. The granite was cold. He felt exposed and ridiculous sitting there, almost doubled over, beads of sweat forming on his brow.

It still had its hook in him. It was playing him, letting the line go slack, letting him think he was free, then yanking back hard, making sure the hook was still set, wearing him out.

Playing him.

Caine flashed on a memory almost forgotten. He saw his “father,” seated in a deck chair with salt spray darkening his tan jacket, holding the long, supple pole, sawing it back and forth.

Caine had gone fishing that one time, with his “father.” It hadn't been a Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn kind of experience. Caine's father—the man he'd grown up calling his father—was not a man for small, intimate moments, for worms in a bucket and bamboo poles.

They were on a trip down to Mexico. Caine's “mother” had been left to shop in Cancún, and Caine had been granted the high privilege of accompanying his father on what amounted to a business trip disguised as a father-son fishing trip.

Caine and his father; a kid named Paolo and his father; a girl named . . . well, he couldn't recall her name. The three fathers were doing business and fishing for swordfish aboard a seventy-foot power boat.

The girl, what was her name?

Oh, my God, her name had been Diana. Not the same Diana, of course, a very different girl, not very attractive, red hair, bulging eyes, not at all the same.

Diana had led them, Caine and Paolo, down into the tight forward space where the anchor and ropes and so on were stored. There she had produced a joint, a small, tightly rolled marijuana cigarette.

Paolo, an Italian kid a couple of years older than Caine, had shrugged and said, “No problem,” using his American slang. Caine had felt trapped. Trapped on the boat. Trapped in the company of the two kids. Trapped into getting high.

Trapped.

It wasn't Caine's favorite feeling.

He'd sat there in that dark, damp, cramped space taking hits of the joint and wishing he was anywhere else.

Paolo had tried to hook up with the girl, the pre-Diana Diana. She'd discouraged him and eventually Paolo had gone off in search of food. The girl had sidled up beside Caine and made it clear that she'd like to make the most of their privacy and the drug's

effects.

Caine had rebuffed her, but she'd said, "Oh, you think you're too cool, right? You think you're out of my league, don't you?"

"You said it, not me."

"Yeah? Guess what? Your dad needs my dad. What if I go up on deck and tell my dad you forced me to smoke pot? I do that and guess what? Your dad loses this deal and he blames you."

Her eyes shone with triumph. She had him. She had her hook in him, no different from the loudly laughing men up on deck and their stupid fish.

She was sure of it, that Diana.

But Caine had laughed. "Go ahead."

"I will," she said.

"Fine. Go."

He had come to realize a basic truth that day: You can't be trapped by other people, you can only be trapped by your own fear. Defy and win.

On that day, that day on the boat, Caine had been less afraid than the girl. And he'd known intuitively that he held the winning hand.

Defy and win.

The problem now was that Caine was truly, deeply afraid of the creature in that mine. Afraid all the way down to his bones. Afraid down to the smallest, farthest, most secret recesses of his mind.

He couldn't bluff the Darkness. The Darkness knew he was afraid.

There was a rope wrapped tightly around his mind and soul. The other end of that rope was held by the dark thing at the bottom of that mine shaft. Caine imagined himself cutting that rope, picking up an ax, raising it high above his head, bringing it down with all his might. . . .

Ruthless and unafraid. Like he had been with Diana.

With both Dianas.

"Have to," he whispered to himself.

"Have to cut it," he said.

"Maybe I will," he muttered.

But he doubted very much that he could.

"He's hungry," Little Pete said.

"You mean you're hungry," Astrid corrected automatically. Like Little Pete's major problem was bad grammar.

She was in Sam's office at town hall. People were coming and going. Kids with requests or complaints. Some Astrid dealt with herself. Some she wrote down for Sam.

One thing Sam was right about: This couldn't go on. Kids coming in to ask for someone to arbitrate sibling rivalries, or asking whether it was okay for them to watch a PG-13 DVD, or asking Sam to decide whether they could stop wearing their retainer. It was ridiculous.

"He's hungry," Little Pete said. He was hunched over his Game Boy, intent on the game.

"Do you want something to eat?" Astrid asked absentmindedly. "I could maybe find something."

“He can’t talk.”

“Sure you can talk, Petey, when you try.”

“I won’t let him. His words are bad.”

Astrid looked over at him. There was a slight smile on Little Pete’s face.

“And he’s hungry,” Little Pete said, whispering now. “Hungry in the dark.”

“Because Sam said so, that’s why,” Edilio said for maybe the millionth time. “Because if we don’t pick the food, we’re all going to get very, very hungry, that’s why.”

“Can I do it another time?” the kid asked.

“Little dude, that’s when everyone wants to do it: some other time. But we got melons need picking. So just get on the bus. Bring a hat, if you have one. Let’s go.”

Edilio stood holding the front door of the house, waiting for the kid to find his *Fairly OddParents* cap. His mood, already gloomy, was not improving as the morning wore on. He had twenty-eight kids on the bus, all complaining, all wanting to go to the bathroom, all hungry or thirsty, squabbling, whining, crying.

It was almost eleven already. By the time he got them to the fields it would be noon and they’d be asking for lunch. He was determined to tell them to pick their lunch. Pick your lunch, it’s right there in front of you. Yes, I mean melons. I don’t care if you don’t like melons, that’s your lunch.

Thirty kids, counting himself. If they worked hard for four hours they could harvest maybe seventy, eighty melons each. Which sounded like a lot until you divided it by three hundred-plus hungry mouths and you started to realize that it took a whole lot of cantaloupe before you felt full.

What worried Edilio was the way so many of the melons were already rotting in the field. The way the birds were getting at them. And the fact that no one was thinking far enough ahead to wonder what they should be planting for the next season.

Food rotting. No planting. No irrigating.

Even if they harvested the available crops, it was just a matter of time before everyone was starving. Then, good luck keeping it all together.

It turned out he’d been optimistic. It was almost one in the afternoon before they made it to the field after a hellishly unpleasant bus trip during which a full-on fistfight broke out between two sixth graders.

Sure enough, the first words out of the kids’ mouths were, “I’m hungry.”

“Well, there’s your lunch,” Edilio said, sweeping his hand toward the field and feeling great personal satisfaction at being able to rub their noses in it.

“Those round things?”

“They’re called cantaloupes,” Edilio said. “And they’re very tasty, actually.”

“What about zekes?” one of the girls asked.

Edilio sighed. “That’s the cabbage field, not here. That’s, like, a mile from here.”

But no one moved. They all lined up obediently but kept close to the bus and far from the edge of the field.

Edilio sighed. “Okay. Let the wetback show you how.”

He sauntered out into the field, bent over, gave a twist to one of the melons, and held it up high so they could see.

It was luck that saved him. The fact that he dropped the melon.

He looked down at the cantaloupe and saw the dirt move.

Edilio leaped, a wild reaction that almost tripped him, but he caught his footing and ran.

He ran faster than he had ever run before, boots slamming down on the seething worms and faster, faster, faster until he sprawled, facedown, in the dust.

The dust beyond the field.

He yanked his feet toward him and frantically examined his boots. There were chew marks on the sides, on the heels. But no holes.

The worms had not penetrated.

Edilio looked at the shocked faces of the kids around him. He had been seconds away from impatiently ordering them into the field. Most wearing sneakers. None with experience seeing what the zekes looked like.

He'd been one hesitation away from ordering forty-nine kids to their deaths.

"Get back on the bus," Edilio said shakily. "Get back on the bus."

"What about lunch?" someone asked.

FIFTEEN

30 HOURS, 41 MINUTES

SAM TOOK THE list from Astrid. He scanned the first couple of matters and nearly crumpled it up.

“The usual?” he asked her.

Astrid nodded. “The usual. I think you’ll especially enjoy the—”

Computer Jack burst in like he was in a hurry.

People weren’t supposed to just come busting in, but Jack wasn’t just people.

“What is it, Jack?” Sam asked him as he slid into the oversized leather chair behind what had once been the real mayor’s desk and briefly was Caine’s.

Jack was agitated. “You should let me turn on the phones.”

Sam blinked. “What? I thought you had an emergency the way you came in here.”

“Everybody keeps asking me when I’m going to fix the phones,” Jack said in apparent agony. “Everybody asks me, and I keep having to come up with stupid lies. They think I failed.”

“Jack, we’ve been over this. I’m really grateful for the work you have done, man, no one else could ever have pulled it off. But, dude, we have other issues, okay?”

Jack flushed. “You asked me to do it. I told everyone I was going to do it. Then you won’t let me do it. It’s not fair.” His glasses almost seemed to steam up from the heat of his indignation.

“Listen, Jack. You really want Caine and Drake to be able to dial up anyone they want down here? You want Caine to be able to reach out to kids? Threaten them? Sweet-talk them? Maybe offer to give them food in exchange for guns or whatever? Look how well he fooled everyone the first time around.”

“You just want to be in control of everything,” Jack accused.

The accusation stung. Sam started to yell but choked it off. For a few seconds he just struggled with his temper, unable to speak.

Of course I want to control things, he wanted to say. Of course he didn’t want Caine filling kid’s heads with lies. Kids were desperate enough to listen to anyone who offered an easier life, even Caine. Did Jack not understand how close they all were to disaster? Did Jack not get how tenuous Sam’s control of the situation had become?

Maybe not.

“Jack, kids are scared. They’re desperate,” Sam said. “Maybe you don’t see that because you’re busy with other things. But we are about this far”—he held up thumb and forefinger about an inch apart—“from total disaster. You want Caine to know that? You want kids talking to him or Drake at three in the morning, spilling their guts, telling him all of our business? You really want Caine knowing how bad things are?”

Astrid stepped in to cut off Sam’s increasingly angry rant. “Jack, what happened to get you all worked up?”

“Nothing,” Jack said. Then, “Zil. He’s busting on me in front of everyone, talking about how now that I’m a mutant and all, my brain must not work as well.”

“Say what?” Sam asked.

“He says people who get powers, their IQ drops, they get stupid. He said, ‘Exhibit

A: poor old Jack, formerly Computer Jack, who can pick up a house but can't get the phones to work.”

“You know, Jack, I'm sorry if he hurt your feelings, but I kind of have stuff to deal with here,” Sam said, beginning to get really exasperated. “You're the tech genius. You know it, I know it, Astrid knows it, so who cares what Zil thinks?”

“Look, why don't you just work on the internet thing you're trying to do?” Astrid suggested.

Jack shot her a poisonous look. “Why, so you can not use that, either? Make me look like an even bigger fool?”

Sam was ready to snap at Jack, tell him to shut up, go away, stop bothering him, but that would be a bad idea, so he took a deep breath, summoned all his patience, and said, “Jack, I cannot make promises. I'm dealing with a lot of stuff. First priority, before we worry about techie stuff, is—”

“Techie stuff?” Jack interrupted. His voice was shocked and indignant.

“That's not a diss. I'm just saying—” But whatever he was about to say was forgotten when Edilio appeared in the doorway. He didn't rush in as Jack had done. He just stood there looking pale and solemn.

“What?” Sam asked.

“The zekes. They're in the melon field now.”

“They're spreading,” Astrid said.

“I could have got all those kids killed,” Edilio said. He looked like he'd seen a ghost. He was trembling.

“Okay. Enough,” Sam said, standing up, pushing his chair back sharply.

Finally.

Finally something he could actually do.

He should have been worried. And he was. But the emotion that filled his mind as he strode purposefully from the room was relief. “The list is going to have to wait, Astrid. I'm going to kill some worms.”

Two hours later Sam stood at the edge of the melon field. Dekka was beside him. Edilio had driven them there in the open Jeep, but he was not stepping foot on the ground.

“How you see this playing out?” Dekka asked.

“You lift them, I burn them,” Sam answered.

“I can only reach a little area at a time. A circle, maybe twenty feet across,” Dekka said.

The word had spread that Sam was going to throw down with the zekes. So other kids had piled into cars and vans and now a couple of dozen watched from a safe distance. Some, looking like tourists or sports fans, had brought cameras.

Howard and Orc arrived as well. Sam was relieved. He'd sent word to Howard that he might need Orc's help.

“T'sup, Sammie?” Howard asked.

“More worms. We're going to see if we can do some pest control.”

Howard nodded. “All right. And what do you want with my boy?” He jerked his thumb toward Orc, who stood leaning back against a car hood, his weight almost flattening the tires and denting the sheet metal.

“We can’t kill all the zekes,” Sam said. “But Astrid thinks they may be smarter than your average murderous mutated worm. So we’re sending a message: don’t mess with us.”

“Still not seeing what Orc is here for.”

“He’s our canary,” Sam said.

“Our what?”

“Coal miners in the old days would carry a canary down with them,” Sam said. “If there was poison gas, the canary would die first. If the canary was okay, the miners knew it was safe.”

Howard took a moment to digest that idea. He laughed sardonically. “I used to think you were soft, Sam. Now here you are all cold and hard, wanting to send Orc in there to get chewed up.”

“It took them a while to get to his face last time,” Sam said. “If we see any worm activity, he comes right out.”

“Cold and hard,” Howard said with a smirk. “I’ll talk to my boy. But he doesn’t work for free. You know that. Four cases of beer.”

“Two.”

“Three.”

“Two, and if you argue anymore, I’ll show you just how cold and hard I can be.”

With the deal done, Sam looked over at Dekka. “You ready?”

“I am,” she said.

“Let’s do it.”

Dekka raised her hands high over her head. She aimed her palms at the nearest edge of the melon field.

Suddenly, in a rush, melons, vines, and a cloud of dirt rose into the air, a dark pillar. Worms could be clearly seen, writhing within the ascending cloud.

Sam raised his own hands to shoulder height. He spread his fingers.

“This is going to feel good,” he muttered.

Blazing fire shot in two green-white bolts from his palms.

Melons exploded like soggy popcorn. Vines crisped. Clods of dirt smoked and melted in midair.

The worms died. They died popping open from the superheated steam of their own blood. Or they died shriveling up like ash curlicues, like Fourth of July snakes. Some did a little of each.

Sam raked his flamethrower up and down the pillar, aiming anywhere he saw movement. In places where he lingered, the dirt grew so hot, it glowed red and formed flying droplets of magma.

“Okay, Dekka, let go!” Sam yelled.

Dekka released her hold. Gravity worked again. And the whole molten, smoking pillar fell back to earth. It sent up a shower of sparks as it crashed. Some of the kids who were standing too close yelped as they were hit by droplets of what was almost lava.

Sam and Dekka both backed away hastily, but too late to save Sam a burn that went through his jeans and sizzled a teardrop-shaped spot onto his thigh.

“Water bottle,” he yelled. He grabbed the proffered bottle and doused the spot. “Okay, that hurt. Man. Ow.”

“I saw some very crispy zekes,” Howard commented.

“Let’s go again, Dekka. If you’re up for it.”

“I like melon,” Dekka said. “I’m not giving it up for these worms.”

They moved a distance to the left and repeated the whole sequence. Then to a third location and did it again.

“Okay, message sent,” Sam said when they were done. “Let’s see if they got it. Howard?”

Howard waved Orc over. The boy-monster lumbered wearily toward the field.

“First go into an area we blasted,” Sam instructed him.

Orc did. If his stone feet were bothered by the scorching heat of the singed soil, he showed no sign of it.

“Okay,” Sam said. “Now farther. Past the burned part. Try to pick a melon.”

“Someone ought to beer me,” Orc grumbled.

“I don’t have any with me,” Sam said.

“Figures,” Orc said. He plodded into fresh, unburned dirt. He leaned down to grab a melon and came back up with two worms writhing around his hand.

Orc flung the worms away and moved with some speed back onto safer ground.

Sam felt deflated. He had failed. Even at this.

In the process he’d used the promise of beer to turn an alcoholic kid into human bait.

“Not maybe my proudest day,” he said to himself.

The crowd, disappointed, shot sidelong looks of worry at Sam. He ignored them all and climbed into the Jeep beside Edilio.

“You want my job, Edilio? he asked.

“Not a chance, man. Not a chance.”

Nothing stuck to the FAYZ wall. Lana had discovered that fact. She had put on gloves and tried to tape a target to the barrier. The tape didn’t stick. Neither did rubber cement.

No one was going to be mounting posters of their favorite bands on the barrier.

She tried spray paint. It was fun to try. Fun to imagine that the barrier could be covered in graffiti. But spray paint sizzled a bit as if it had been sprayed onto a hot frying pan. Then it evaporated and disappeared, leaving no trace.

It was frustrating. Lana needed a target. And the notion of shooting at the wall appealed to her.

In the end she had dragged a chaise lounge from the pool area over to the tennis courts, where the barrier was most easily accessible. She leaned the chair up against the barrier—you could at least lean things against it—and taped a target to the chair.

It was not a bull’s-eye. It was a copy of a photo she’d found. A picture of a coyote.

Then she took the pistol out of her backpack. It was heavy. She had no idea what caliber it was. She’d found it in one of the houses she’d previously occupied. Along with two boxes of ammunition.

She had figured out how to load it. She’d gotten pretty fast at that. The clip held twelve bullets. There was one extra clip. It was easy to slide the old clip out and pop the new one in. She’d managed to pinch her finger pretty badly the first time she tried, but she was the Healer, and that had certain advantages.

But she needed to be able to do more than hold it and load it.

She raised the gun in one hand. But it was too heavy to hold very steady with just her hand. So she gripped it with both hands. Better.

She took aim at the coyote picture.

She squeezed the trigger.

The gun kicked in her hand.

The explosion was so much louder than it was on TV or in movies. It sounded like the whole world had blown up.

She walked forward, feeling a little shaky, to check the target. Nothing. She had missed. The FAYZ wall behind the target was unscathed, of course.

Lana took aim more carefully. She'd watched Edilio training his people. She knew the basics. She centered the front target in the middle of the rear target, made sure the top edge of front and back targets were level. Then she lowered the gun until the sights rested just beneath the coyote's head.

She fired.

When she walked forward this time she found a hole in the target. Not precisely where she had aimed. But not too far off, either.

The hole in that paper filled her with pleasure.

"Looks like you have a boo-boo, Pack Leader."

Lana fired two clips' worth of ammunition at the target. She hit only half the time, but that was better than hitting not at all.

When she was done she could barely hear for the ringing in her ears. Her hands were sore and bruised. She could easily heal the bruising. But she kind of liked the feeling and what it represented.

Lana carefully reloaded both clips, slid one back into the gun, and put the gun in her backpack.

Come to me. I have need of you.

She slung the pack over her shoulder. The sun was going down, casting pale orange shadows against the gray of the FAYZ wall.

Tomorrow. She would be there soon.

SIXTEEN

22 HOURS, 41 MINUTES

SHE DIDN'T WANT to cut off her hair. She liked her hair long. But Diana took Caine's threat seriously. She had to deliver Jack.

So she stood before the mirror and lifted the electric clippers she'd found in the bedroom closet of the former headmaster. There was no point in subtlety, no need to fool with scissors and mirror for hours.

The clippers made a strangely pleasing buzz. They changed pitch each time she pushed the blade into a tuft of hair.

In less than fifteen minutes her dark hair was in the sink and spilling out onto the floor. Her head was covered in a half-inch-long black burr that made her look like Natalie Portman in *V for Vendetta*.

She scooped the hair into a trash can and rinsed the sink.

Next she began removing the last traces of makeup from her eyes. There was nothing much she could do about the sculpted eyebrows. However, there was plenty she could do about clothing. Laid out on her bed was a black World of Warcraft T-shirt two sizes too big, a gray hoodie, a pair of baggy boy's jeans, and a pair of boy's sneakers. She kept her own underthings. There was such a thing as getting too deep into the part, after all.

She dressed quickly and stood back to check the results in the full-length mirror that hung behind the closet door.

She was still obviously a girl. From a distance she might pass, but up close, no way.

She analyzed the problem. It wasn't her body; that was covered effectively. The problem was that she simply had a girl's face. The nose, the eyes, the lips, even the teeth.

"Not much I can do about my mouth," she whispered to her reflection. "Except not smile."

Then, as if arguing with her own reflection, she said, "You never smile, anyway."

She rummaged in the bathroom until she found some medical supplies. Moments later she had a white bandage on the bridge of her nose. That helped. She could pass. Maybe.

She stepped out into the hall. No one there, which wasn't surprising. Dinner, such as it was, had come and gone. Kids were hungry and weak, and no one had energy for much except lying in their rooms.

Diana knew better than to take a car. A guard was being kept at the entrance to Coates again. They'd be sure to stop her and summon Drake.

Drake might let her go. She was, after all, following Caine's orders.

But then again, he might not. What better time to arrange an "accident" for Diana?

So she took a side door out of the dormitory, the door nearest the woods. She was acutely conscious of the crunch of her oversized boy sneakers on gravel and then grateful for the softer sound of pine needles and moldering leaves.

It was a long walk to skirt the gate. The woods were dark. Straight overheard,

when she looked at the sky, she could see the rich blue of evening. But night fell early under the trees.

It took her an hour to work her way through brambles and over gullies. She was afraid she wouldn't be able to find her way back to the road—woods were woods, to Diana, one tree like the next. But at last, as night crept up on twilight, she climbed a slippery embankment and stepped onto blacktop.

She had no brilliant plan for getting to Jack. She couldn't exactly knock him on the head and carry him to Caine. She would have to rely on other means. Jack had always had a crush on her, not that he would ever act on it.

A pity she looked like a boy now.

It was all downhill until she hit the highway. There at last were widely separated pools of light cast by the ever fewer functioning streetlights, and a faint glow from the empty storefronts that hadn't yet burned out their last lightbulbs.

She was footsore and weary when she reached Perdido Beach and she badly needed a rest. It was going to be a long night, of that she was sure.

Diana walked down Sherman Avenue and onto Golding Street, looking for an empty house. They weren't hard to find. Few homes showed any glimmer of light, and this one house was so shabby, so run-down, that she was convinced no one would be staying here.

The lights were off inside and repeated efforts yielded only one functioning light bulb, a Tiffany-style lamp in the cramped and overstuffed living room. There was a roll-armed easy chair decorated with lace doilies and she sagged into it gratefully.

"Some old lady lived here," she said to the echoing emptiness.

She put her feet up on the coffee table—something the previous resident would no doubt have frowned on—and considered how long she should wait before risking the streets again. Jack's place was only a few blocks away, but it would mean passing through the more densely populated center of town.

"I would sell my soul for some TV," she muttered. What was that show she used to watch? Something with doctors and all kinds of soap opera plots. How could she have forgotten the name? She'd watched it every . . . every what? What night was it on?

Three months and she'd forgotten TV.

"I suppose my MySpace and Facebook pages are still up, somewhere, back in the world," she mused aloud. Messages and invitations piling up unanswered. Where are you, Diana? Can I be your friend? Did you read my bulletin?

What ever happened to Diana?

Diana is _____. Fill in the blanks.

Diana is . . .

She wondered what everyone in the FAYZ wondered: Where were all the adults? What had happened to the world? Was everyone "out there" dead and the only life here in this bubble? Did people in the outside world know what had happened? Was the FAYZ like some giant, impenetrable egg plopped on the Southern California coastline? Was it a tourist attraction? Were busloads of the curious lining up to have their pictures taken in front of the mysterious sphere?

Diana is . . . lost.

She got up to search the kitchen. As far as she could see in the deep gloom the shelves were empty. They had been cleaned out, of course, Sam would have seen to

that, marshalling his resources.

The refrigerator was empty, too.

Diana is . . . hungry.

But she found a working flashlight in the kitchen junk drawer. With this she explored the only other room, the old lady's bedroom. Old lady clothing. Old lady slippers. Old lady knitting needles stuck through a ball of yarn.

Would Diana still be here, trapped in the FAYZ when she was old? "You're already old," she told herself. "We're all old now." But that wasn't quite true. They'd been forced to act older, to behave in ways that were very adult. But they were all still kids. Even Diana.

There was a book beside the old lady's bed. Diana was sure it was a Bible, but when she shone the light on it, she saw a reflection from glossy raised lettering. It was a romance novel. Some half-undressed woman and a kind of creepy guy in what looked like a pirate outfit.

The old woman had been reading romances. The day she poofed out of the FAYZ she was probably thinking, I wonder if spunky Caitlin will find true love with handsome Pirate guy?

That's how I should reach out to Jack, Diana thought. Play the beautiful damsel in need. Save me, Jack.

Would Computer Jack respond to her now? Would he buy the act? Would he be her pirate?

"Just call me Caitlin," Diana said, and smirked.

She tossed the book aside. But that felt wrong, somehow. So she picked it up and placed it carefully back where the old woman had left it.

She went out into the night looking for a kid who was very strong—and, she hoped, very weak.

Astrid plugged the cable into her computer and the other end into the camera Edilio had brought at her request. He'd told her a number of kids had taken pictures. The best of the photographers was an eleven-year-old named Matteo. This was his camera.

iPhoto opened and she clicked import. The pictures began to open, flashing through the viewer as they loaded.

The first half dozen or so were of kids standing around. Shots of the field. A greedy close-up on some melons. Sam with the look of cold anger he sometimes wore. Orc slouched against a car hood. Dekka self-contained, unreadable. Howard, Edilio, various people.

Then the moment when the ground rose up.

The moment when Sam fired.

Once the photos had loaded, Astrid began to go back over them, starting with Dekka's suspension of gravity. The boy had used a good camera and he'd gotten some very good shots. Astrid zoomed in and could clearly see individual worms suspended in midair. Or mid-dirt.

Then came a spectacular shot that captured the first blast of Sam's power.

Several more, taken in just a few seconds, snapped quickly, some shaky, but some perfectly focused. Matteo knew how to use a camera.

Astrid clicked ahead, but then she froze. She backed up. She zoomed in tight.

A worm was turned toward the camera, twisted around so that its toothy mouth was aimed at the camera. Nothing unusual except that the next worm she panned over to was doing the same thing. The same direction, the same expression.

And the next worm.

She found nineteen separate images of worms. All were turned toward the camera. Pointing in the direction of the attack.

Aiming their devil grins at Sam.

With shaking hand she moved the mouse to an earlier album. She opened the photos she had taken of the dead zeke Sam had brought her. She zoomed in on the ugly thing, scanning carefully over the head.

Sam came into the room. He stood behind her and put his hands on her shoulders.

“How are you, babe?” He had started calling her that. She was still deciding whether or not she liked it.

“Rough evening,” she said. “I just got past a two-hour Petey meltdown. He noticed Nestor.”

“Nestor?”

“His nesting doll, remember? The little red things in his room, one doll fits exactly inside the other? The other night you stomped on it.”

“Oh. Yeah. Sorry.”

“Not your fault, Sam.” She wasn’t sure she liked him calling her “babe,” but she did like the feel of his lips on her bare neck. But after a few seconds she pushed him away. “I’m working.”

“What is it you’re seeing?” Sam asked.

“The worms. They were looking right at you.”

“I was the guy cooking them,” Sam said. “For all the good it did.”

Astrid twisted around to look up at him.

“Oh, I know that look,” Sam said. “Go ahead, genius, tell me what it is I missed.”

“With *what* are they looking at you?” Astrid asked.

Sam took a beat. Then, “They don’t have eyes.”

“No. I just checked again. They don’t have eyes. But somehow, in the middle of being levitated in midair and getting hit with blasts of light energy, they all twist around in midair to stare—at least it looks like they’re staring—in the same direction. At you.”

“Great. So somehow they can see. I think what matters is that I killed a bunch of them and they didn’t get the message.”

Astrid shook her head. “I don’t think you did anything to them. I’m not sure it’s ‘them.’ What if they’re like ants? I mean, what if there really aren’t individual worms? What if they’re all part of one superorganism? Like a hive.”

“So there’s a queen worm somewhere?”

“Maybe. Or maybe it’s not so hierarchical, less differentiated.”

He kissed the nape of her neck, sending pleasant shivers down her spine. “This is all great, Astrid. How do I kill them?”

“I have two ideas on that. One is a practical suggestion. You’ll like it. The other is crazier. You won’t like the crazy idea.”

It was time to get Little Pete ready for bed. She stood up and called to him, using the trigger phrase he understood. “Beddy boody, beddy boody.”

Little Pete gave her a hazy look, as if he had heard her but had not understood. Then he got up from his chair and headed obediently up the stairs. Obedient not to Astrid's authority, really, but to what was, in effect, programming.

"I have to go do a walk-through in town, and you have to get Petey to bed," Sam said. "So give me the short version."

"Okay," Astrid said. "SUVs running just on their rims, no tires. The zekes can't eat through steel. That's the practical suggestion."

"That could work, Astrid," he said excitedly. "Four-by-fours, on their steel rims, use hooks on poles to snag melons or cabbages or whatever. It would take practice, but unless the zekes can fly, the pickers would be pretty safe riding in the truck." He grinned at her. "This is why I keep you around, despite your annoying superior attitude."

"It's not a superior *attitude*," Astrid teased back. "It's actual superiority."

"So, what's the crazy suggestion?"

"Negotiate."

"What?"

"They're too smart to be worms. They're predatory and they shouldn't be. They're territorial and they couldn't possibly be. They move and act as one, at least some of the time, and there's no way. They were looking at you, but they don't have eyes. I have no proof, obviously, but I have a feeling."

"A feeling?"

"I don't think they're zekes. I think they're Zeke."

"Talk to the superworm?" Sam said. He shook his head and looked down at the ground. "No offense, but the SUV tractor thing is why you're the smartest person in the FAYZ. The other part? That's why even though you're smart, you're not the one in charge."

Astrid resisted the urge to say something cutting in response to his condescension. "You need to keep your mind open, Sam."

"Negotiate with a killer worm brain? I don't think so, babe. I think maybe your brain is overheating. I have to go."

He tried to kiss her, but she dodged it. "Good night. Let's hope Petey doesn't have any interesting nightmares tonight, huh? Oh wait, nothing to worry about there, it's probably just my overheated brain."

...

Computer Jack clicked through a dizzying number of windows at an amazing speed. The mouse cursor flew across the virtual page, opening, closing, pushing aside.

It wouldn't work.

It could work. Maybe. But not without more gear. A serious server. A serious router.

He'd found one server with nowhere near the capacity he wanted. It was old, not exactly state-of-the art, but it was functional. And there were certainly enough PCs and Macs in town that could be strung together, and enough for everyone to have his own 'puter, with plenty of spares that could be cannibalized for parts.

But he did not have a serious router. A router was the difference between a true

internet and just being able to share a computer between several people.

A large-capacity router. That was the Holy Grail.

Jack could see a day when all of Perdido Beach had WiFi. Then kids would start blogs, and they'd start databases, and post pictures, and maybe he would set up some version of MySpace or Facebook, a social networking site. And maybe a YouTube, and maybe even a Wiki. WikiFAYZ.

It could be done. But not without more and better gear.

He pushed back from his desk. Which turned out to be a mistake. The chair, and him in it, went flying, slid, caught on a dropped sweater, tipped over, and luckily twisted sideways just before his head would have slammed into a closed door.

He was still getting used to his strength. So far it had been of no practical use to him. In fact, it was more dangerous than helpful.

Jack picked himself up and righted the chair.

There was a knock at the door. At least, maybe it was a knock. It sounded more like a woodpecker.

"Who is it?"

"The Breeze."

"What?"

"Brianna."

Jack opened the door and there she was. She was wearing a dress. It was blue and short and had thin straps. He blurted the first thing that popped into his head. "How can you run in that?"

"What?"

"Um—"

"I can run—"

"I didn't—"

"No biggie—"

"I need a router," he said.

That put an end to the confusing cross-talk.

"A what? A router?"

"Yes," Jack said. "I can't, uh, you know, make it all work without a serious router."

Brianna considered that for a moment, then, "Do I look stupid in this dress?"

"No. You don't look stupid."

"Thanks," she said with heavy sarcasm. "I'm so glad to know I don't look stupid."

"Okay," he said, and felt stupid himself.

"Well, I was just going to the club. I have some batteries. That's all."

"Oh. Good."

"And?"

Jack shrugged, mystified. "And . . . so . . . have fun?"

Brianna stared at him for a very long five seconds without looking away. And then she was a blur. Gone.

He closed the door and went back to the computer he was using to run an analysis of the antique server.

About five minutes later he began to wonder if he had missed something in his brief conversation with Brianna.

Why had she come by?

Even six months ago Jack never thought about girls. Now they tended to show up more and more often in his thoughts. Not to mention some very embarrassing dreams.

In the good old days he might have Googled up an explanation. Not now. His parents had never really talked to him about puberty, about the fact that as his body changed, so did his thoughts. He knew enough to know things were changing for him, but he didn't know whether or not it was something he could stop.

He needed a router.

Or he needed to find Brianna and . . . and talk to her. Maybe about the router.

An idea hit him with such force, he felt as if it had stopped his heart for a second: Had Brianna been asking him to go with her to the club? Where people danced?

No. That was crazy. She wouldn't have come to ask him to go to a dance. Would she?

No.

Maybe.

The computer screen called to him. It had always been better than candy to Jack. Better than anything. He longed desperately to be able to get back online, back to Google. Back to Gizmodo. Back to . . . to more sites than he could list.

Jack did have a free pass to Albert's club. He had spent part of a day helping Albert set up the sound system—easy work—and had earned a sort of VIP pass. So if Brianna was there, and she actually did want him to be there, too, well, he could go.

He made the decision very suddenly and acted on it very suddenly, in a hurry lest he change his mind. He leaped for the door and crushed the door handle in overeager fingers. Now it wouldn't turn, but it was easy enough to rip the door open. There was some damage, but nothing major.

The club was loud—the sound system seemed to be working just fine—and crowded with too many kids. Albert was holding a line of them at the door.

"Sorry, folks, but the maximum occupancy is seventy-five," Albert said. Then he spotted Jack. "Jack, how's it going?"

"What? Oh, fine." Jack was confused as to how to proceed. He didn't want to wait in line if Brianna wasn't even inside.

"You look like a man with a question," Albert prompted.

"Well, I'm kind of looking for Brianna. We had this . . . it's a . . . tech thing. You wouldn't understand."

"Breeze is already inside."

One of the kids in the line said, "Of course she is, she's a freak. They always get in."

A second kid nodded. "Yeah, the freaks don't wait in lines. Bet she didn't have to pay, either."

Albert said, "Hey, she got here a little before you guys did and she waited. And she paid." Then to Jack. "Go ahead in."

"See?" the first kid crowed. "He's one, too."

"Dude, he set up my sound system," Albert said. "What have you done for me other than stand here and bust on me?"

Jack, embarrassed, slid past Albert and into the room. About half the kids were dancing. The rest were camped out in chairs and sitting on tables talking. It took Jack a while to adjust to the lighting and the noise.

He searched for Brianna while trying to look casual. He spotted Quinn, dancing all alone, and Dekka, sitting silent, brooding in a corner.

Standing near Dekka but not with her was a kid Jack thought at first seemed familiar. A boy, maybe twelve, no older, with a shaved head, and a bandage on his nose. Jack noticed the boy because the boy was staring at him. The instant Jack made eye contact the boy looked away.

Jack heard a rising chorus of happy, encouraging shouts and clapping hands. He followed the sound and there was Brianna. She was dancing alone—no one could possibly have danced with her—keeping her own accelerated beat ten times faster than the music.

Her dress sort of floated around her, not quite attached, a blue cloud. Jack found the effect utterly fascinating. Brianna wasn't what people would call beautiful, she was more in the "cute" category. But there was something about her that made her hard to ignore. And not just the fact that she was the Breeze.

"Go, Breeze," someone yelled.

But another voice yelled, "Quit showing off, stupid mutant."

Brianna stopped dead. Her dress settled back into place. "Who said that?"

Zil. The same jerk who had picked on Jack over the phones.

"Me," Zil said, stepping forward. "And don't bother trying to look tough. I'm not scared of you, freak."

"You should be," Brianna hissed.

Suddenly there was Dekka, up off her chair, hand extended between Brianna and Zil. "No," she said in her deep voice. "None of that."

Quinn joined her. "Dekka's right, we can't be having fights and stuff here. Sam will shut this place down."

"Maybe we should have two different clubs," a seventh grader named Antoine said. "You know, one for freaks and one for normals."

"Man, what is the matter with you?" Quinn demanded.

"I don't like her acting like she's so cool, is all," Zil said, stepping beside Antoine.

"You should be on our side, Quinn. Everyone knows you're a normal," another kid, Lance, said. "Well . . . kind of normal. You're still Quinn."

"Knock it off," Dekka growled.

"I can take care of myself," Brianna snapped at Dekka. "I can handle both these little twerps, slap them both down so fast, they wouldn't even see it happening."

"Be cool," Dekka said to her. "Why don't you just have a good time and not put on a show?"

For a second Brianna looked as if she might challenge Dekka. But Dekka never flinched, just waited.

Brianna sighed theatrically. "Okay. The Breeze is not into making trouble. The Breeze is all about a good time." She made a sort of curtsy to Dekka, which Dekka accepted with a nod.

The music rose again and kids went back to dancing or hanging around.

"Hey, Jack," Brianna said. "You came."

"Yeah."

"So. You think you could beat Dekka?" she asked.

The question startled him. His mouth dropped open.

“Kidding. Just kidding,” Brianna said. “Dekka’s actually very cool. Not as cool as me, of course.”

“No one is as cool as you,” Jack blurted.

Brianna accepted this as though it were only her natural due. “You want to dance?”

“I don’t know how,” Jack said.

“Really?”

“Really.”

“I could teach you.”

“I’d be too embarrassed.”

Brianna shrugged. “It’s not like anyone is going to laugh at you.”

“Yes, they would.”

Brianna shook her head. At normal speed. “No way. Everyone is hoping you’ll fix the phones and the internet and all. Everyone likes you. Well, not exactly likes, but everyone hopes you’ll do it.”

“I told you I fixed the phones already,” Jack said.

Brianna’s eyes narrowed. “Jack-O, watch what you say about that. It’s supposed to be a secret, right?” Then she shifted focus to someone just behind Jack’s shoulder. “What did you hear?”

Jack twisted to see the shaved-head kid shrugging. “What? I didn’t hear anything.”

That voice. Jack knew that voice.

“That’s right you didn’t hear anything,” Brianna said pointedly. “And you better not repeat what you didn’t hear.”

He knew that voice.

He stared at the kid with the voice.

And suddenly, he *saw*.

“So come dance with me,” Brianna said, tugging at Jack’s arm.

He pulled away. “I uh . . . I have to go,” he said, unable to tear his gaze away from the shaved-head “boy.”

“No one will laugh at you,” Brianna pleaded.

But Jack just shook off her hand and fled toward the door.

“Okay, fine, forget you,” Brianna yelled. “Jerk. Computer Jerk.” Then, loud enough for everyone to hear, she said, “I guess he’s scared of girls.”

SEVENTEEN

22 HOURS

DIANA FOLLOWED JACK from the McClub. It was a relief to get away from Brianna and Dekka. Both girls knew Diana well. Neither had any reason to like her.

Fortunately, Dekka had eyes only for Brianna, and Brianna was focused on Jack. There had been a terrifying moment when Brianna had spoken directly to Diana, but she'd quickly looked down at the ground and Brianna had not recognized her.

Jack was moving, ignoring Albert's polite "Good night," walking quickly away from the club. Not quite running but looking as if he wanted to.

She caught up with him. "Jack."

He stopped. He looked around, fearful that someone might overhear. "Diana?" he whispered.

"Mmmm. Yep. Like the new hairdo?" She rubbed her hand over her brush cut.

For a boy with the strength of ten grown men, he looked awfully nervous.

"What are you doing here?"

"I need you, Jack."

"You? You need me?"

She tilted her head to the side and sized him up. "So, you like Brianna, huh? And here I thought I was the girl of your dreams."

Flesh tones were all blue in the harsh streetlight, but Diana was sure he was blushing.

"Come on," she said. "Let's walk on the beach. We'll have some privacy there."

He followed her obediently, as she knew he would. He might have a crush on cute little Brianna, but Diana had missed none of the covert looks Jack had sent her way over the months she'd known him. She still had some power over him. They climbed the low sea wall and labored across the sand under the night sky. Diana wished she could live down here, close to the beach. As shabby and damaged as Perdido Beach was, it was still so much more alive than the Fear Factory, as some kids called Coates Academy.

"What is it you want?" Jack asked. His voice sounded desperate.

"So. You got the cell phones working. I was wondering what was taking you so long," Diana said. "You always used to tell me it would be fairly easy."

"I can't talk about it," he said miserably.

"Sam won't let you do it, will he? Why?" When he didn't answer, she provided her own explanation. "Because we'd be able to use it, too. Interesting. Poor Caine: always underestimating his brother."

Jack plodded along beside her. The strength in his limbs drove his feet too deep into the sand.

"Caine knows about you now, of course, about you being a mutant. With a serious power, no less."

"He knows?" Jack's voice rose an octave.

Diana smiled to herself. Still scared. Good. "Yep. He knows everything. He knows it's not your fault you ended up over here. He knows that was me."

“Did he make you cut off your hair?”

The question caught Diana off-guard. She laughed. “Oh, Jack. No. Caine forgave me. You know how he is. He gets mad, but really he’s very forgiving.”

“That’s not how he seemed to me,” Jack said.

Diana chose not to argue that point. “How’s the internet project going?”

“I need a decent server. I need a serious router.”

“Are those pieces of equipment?”

The question allowed Jack a moment of superiority. She heard the familiar pedantic tone in his voice. “Yes, those are pieces of equipment.”

“Have you looked everywhere?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you look at Coates when you were still with us?”

“Of course. I know every piece of technology at Coates, and probably every one here in Perdido Beach.”

So, Diana thought, that was the bait she had to lay out for Jack. Of course. What else? He might lust for Diana, and long for Brianna, but Jack’s true love was made of silicon.

“Even if you got a router, what makes you think Sam would let you set up your own internet?”

The long, long hesitation was all the confirmation Diana needed.

At last he said, “I don’t know.”

“I know Sam is a nice guy,” Diana conceded. “Nicer than Caine. But Caine has always had respect for what you can do, Jack. Even back before the FAYZ. You know he always let you do your thing.”

“Maybe,” Jack muttered.

“I mean, put it this way: do you imagine, even for a second, that Caine would give you a job as hard as setting up the cell phone system and then just blow you off?”

His silence was eloquent.

“We need you, Jack,” Diana said. “We need you back.”

“I have stuff to do here.”

She put her hand on his arm and he stopped walking. She came around to stand face-to-face with him. She stood too close. Close enough that she could be sure that the hard drive he had in place of a heart was whirring away.

She stroked his face with her fingers. Not too overt, not really a promise, just enough to disorient him, poor boy.

“Come back, Jack,” Diana breathed. “Caine has a job for you. The biggest job you can imagine. The ultimate technological challenge.” She spoke the last three words slowly, pausing dramatically.

Jack’s eyes widened. “What is it?”

“Something only you can do,” she said. “Only you.”

“Can’t you tell me?” he pleaded.

“It’s huge, Jack. Beyond anything you’ve tried so far. Bigger computers. Far more complex programs. Maybe too much—even for you.”

He shook his head, but barely. “It’s a trick. You’re just trying to get me to go back so Caine and Drake can teach me a lesson.”

“Don’t flatter yourself, kid,” Diana said. Time to close the deal. Time to make him

believe. “You’re only good for one thing. You’re not Courageous Jack or Fighting Jack or even Lover Jack, although I know you have your sad little fantasies. You’re Computer Jack. Sam won’t let you do what you can do. Caine will. And Jack?”

“Yes.”

“So very much technology. Such a huge challenge. And only you can do it.”

“I . . . I have to think about . . .”

“No, Jack. It’s right now. Right now, or never.”

She turned and began to walk away. Jack stood there, hesitating. But she knew. She had seen it in his eyes.

“Hey. Someone’s been in my room,” Zil Sperry said, coming down the stairs at a run.

Hunter Lefkowitz was splayed out on the couch, one leg up on the back, one leg touching the floor, both arms behind his head. He was watching a DVD of *Superbad*. He’d watched it at least ten times before. He knew every joke.

“How can you tell, man? The mess your room is in?” Hunter said, barely paying attention.

Zil came around and hit the power button on the side of the TV. “Not finding that real funny, freak. Someone was in my room. Someone took something that belonged to me.”

Hunter shared the house with three other boys, Zil, Charlie, and Harry. They’d been friends back before the FAYZ. They were all seventh graders, and the thing that had united them was their love of the San Francisco Giants. Perdido Beach was definitely Dodgers territory, with maybe a scattering of Angels fans. But Zil and Charlie had moved here at various times from the Bay Area, Harry had come from Lake Tahoe, and Hunter just plain liked the Giants.

So they had banded together to irritate other kids at school by ostentatiously dressing up in the orange and black. They’d gotten together on summer afternoons to watch games.

But there were no pro sports in the FAYZ. No TV, either. The four of them no longer had the one shared interest that had bound them together.

And lately distance had grown between Hunter and the other three for a reason unique to the FAYZ: Hunter was a freak. The other three were normals. At first they’d all talked about it together, like, no big deal, they’d probably all get powers eventually, it was just that Hunter was first.

But as the weeks had worn on, none of the other three had changed at all, whereas Hunter was rapidly becoming a potentially powerful mutant. That had bothered Zil.

It had bothered him more with each passing day.

“Hey man, turn the set back on,” Hunter demanded, pointing angrily at the set.

“Give it back, Hunter,” Zil demanded.

“Give what back, jerkwad?”

Zil hesitated. Then, “You know what.”

Hunter sighed heavily and sat up. “Okay, so you’re accusing me of stealing something and you won’t even tell me what it is? Man, you must be awfully bored to be starting some beef with me over nothing.”

“Beef!” Zil cried accusingly.

Harry came wandering in from the dining room, where he was building a

complicated LEGO design, attracted by the sound of raised voices.

“What’s going on?” Harry asked.

“Moof boy here stole something from my room,” Zil said.

“You’re lying,” Hunter shot back. “And don’t be calling me names.”

“Moof? You’re a mutant freak. Why shouldn’t I call you that?”

“What’s going on?” Harry asked again, bewildered.

“Give it back,” Zil said. “Give it back.”

“You stupid moron, I don’t even know what you’re talking about!” Hunter was on his feet now, red in the face.

“The jerky,” Zil said. “You called me jerkwad. Then you said ‘beef.’ So stop trying to be clever. You know exactly what it was, because you stole it. I had a piece of beef jerky.”

“That’s what this is about?” Hunter was incredulous. “First off, why were you holding out on us, man? I thought we shared—”

“Shut up, you mutant freak of nature,” Zil shouted. “I don’t share anything with you. I might share stuff with humans, but not with chuds.”

They’d had disagreements before. Even arguments. And this was not the first time Zil had harped on Hunter’s powers. But this was more intense, and now it was starting to seem like a fight they’d managed to sidestep in the past was now unavoidable. The question in Hunter’s mind was, could he win? Zil was bigger and stronger. But if there had to be a fight, then, okay, Hunter would have that fight. He couldn’t back down.

“Step back, Zil,” Hunter warned.

“Shut your fat mutant face, you subhuman chud freak,” Zil shot back. He balled his fists, tense, ready.

“Last chance,” Hunter warned.

Zil hesitated, but only for a second. He spun and grabbed a long, bronze poker from in front of the fireplace.

Hunter recoiled in shock. Zil could kill him with the poker. This wasn’t just a fistfight.

He raised his hands, palms out.

Harry moved with surprising speed, trying to get between the two of them, trying to calm them down, maybe, or maybe just get out of the way

Then Harry screamed.

He clawed at his neck.

He turned, slowly, and stared in horror at Hunter. Harry’s glasses slid off the end of his nose. His eyes rolled up in his head, and he crumpled to the floor.

Hunter and Zil both froze. They looked down at Harry.

“What happened?” Zil asked. “What did you do to him?”

Hunter shook his head. “Nothing. Nothing, man, I didn’t do anything.”

Zil dropped to his knees and touched Harry’s neck. “It’s hot. His skin is hot.”

Hunter backed away. “I didn’t do anything, man.”

“You freak! You murdering freak! You killed him.”

“He’s not dead, he’s breathing,” Hunter protested. “I didn’t mean to . . . He jumped between us—”

“It was me you were trying to kill,” Zil yelled.

“You were going to hit me with that poker!”

“What did you do, man? Did you turn on your magic microwave hands and fry his brains?”

Hunter was looking at his own palms, appalled, not wanting it to be true, needing for it not to be true. He hadn't meant . . . Harry had been his friend . . .

“Oh, my God, you murdering mutant freak!”

“I'll get Lana. She'll save him,” Hunter said. “He'll be okay. He'll be fine.”

But as he watched, a massive blister was forming on the back of Harry's neck, right at the base of his skull. The blister was six inches across, as big as an orange, a hairy sac full of liquid.

Hunter ran from the room. His former friend's shouted accusations followed him: “Murdering freak! Murdering freak!”

Sam was asleep in the extra bedroom at Astrid's house. He heard the sound of someone vomiting in the adjoining bathroom.

He was beyond weary, but nevertheless he dragged himself up out of bed, grabbed a T-shirt, and tapped at the bathroom door. “Hey,” he said.

“What?” Mary's voice, shaky.

“You okay?”

“Oh, I'm sorry. Did I wake you up?”

“Sounded like you were ralphing. Are you sick?”

“No. No, I'm fine.”

He could have sworn he heard a sob in her voice, a catch. “You sure?”

Her voice steadied. “Yeah, I'm fine, Sam. Go back to sleep. Sorry I woke you.”

Sam thought that was a good suggestion. He climbed back into bed and arranged the pillows the way he liked them. He stared at the clock. Midnight. He closed his eyes. But he knew that sleep wasn't coming back anytime soon. Instead there came a rushing freight train loaded with worries and fragments of worries. And his old friend, hunger. It was hard to fall asleep when your stomach was twisting into knots.

He heard the toilet flush and the bathroom light went off.

What if Mary was sick? Who could he get to take over running the day care? Astrid had to deal with Little Pete, so it couldn't be her. He started running down the list of people he could trust to behave in a mature fashion and cope.

The only kids he could think of to take over for Mary would probably just do the job so they could get into the day care's oatmeal supplies.

He'd been dreaming, he realized. Junior Mints. He'd been dreaming about . . .

. . . Junior Mints.

That was it, the thing nagging at the edge of his consciousness. Junior Mints.

“I'm going nuts from hunger, that's what it is, I'm slowly but surely going nuts.”

He forced his eyes closed, but the nagging in the back of his head was yammering louder now, not letting go, demanding attention.

Alton and Dalton fighting over whom they belonged to. Who had taken them.

Did it ever occur to you it might be one of the other kids standing guard?

No. Heather B and Mike J were at the guardhouse. And Josh was asleep the whole time.

What do you mean Josh was asleep?

Junior Mints. The map with the power plant at its center. The memory of the day

of the battle.

Bug, the chameleon.

Bug.

The power plant.

Sam jumped out of bed like he'd been shot from a cannon.

He pulled on jeans and searched frantically for his shoes under the bed. He slipped them on and ran to Astrid's room. He didn't knock, just threw open the door.

She was asleep, a tangle of blond hair on a pillow.

"Astrid. Wake up."

She didn't move, so he took her bare shoulder, feeling an illicit thrill despite his frenzy. "Wake up."

Blue eyes snapped open. "What? Is it Petey again?"

He was suddenly extremely aware of the fact that he had never been in her bedroom before. But this was not the time.

"Bug. He took the Junior Mints."

She stared at him. "You woke me up for that?"

"At the power plant. Alton and Dalton. They were both telling the truth. Neither of them took the candy, or Josh, either. Someone else was there. Someone they didn't see."

"Why would Bug be at the power plant?" Astrid wondered. Then her eyes widened as she understood.

"Because I'm an idiot, that's why," Sam said angrily. "I have to get Edilio. You're in charge till I get back."

"You may be wrong," Astrid said.

He was already on his way out. He pounded down the stairs and out into the frosty night air. He found Edilio at the firehouse, where he stayed most nights.

"Who's on guard at the plant?" Sam asked Edilio after he'd shaken him out of a sound sleep.

"Josh, Brittney D, um, Mickey, and Mike Farmer."

"Mike's solid," Sam said. "The other three?"

Edilio shrugged. "Man, I work with what I got. Mickey's the one who was playing around with a gun and shot a hole in the floor of his house, killed the washing machine in the basement. Brittney may be cool. She's motivated. Josh? I don't know, man."

They piled into the Jeep. It took them an hour of crisscrossing the town before they had rounded up Dekka, Brianna, Taylor, Orc, and a handful of Edilio's soldiers. They added a sedan and a giant Escalade to the convoy. Orc snoozed in the back of the Escalade.

They had ten kids in the three vehicles. They paused in front of the town hall. Sam stood on the sidewalk, where he could be heard by everyone.

"I'm sorry to drag you all out of your warm beds, but I think Caine is going to make a move on the power plant," he said.

"Let me run out there and warn them," Brianna begged.

"If you run ten miles at high speed you'll be dead on your feet. Hungry as you are?"

"Man, the Breeze can do ten miles in, like, a minute." She snapped her fingers.

Sam hesitated. It was true. Brianna could get there long before any of them. It was

also true she'd be exhausted by it. He'd seen her when she had done those kind of distances. She wasn't just worn out by it, she'd looked close to death.

"Go. But stay out of trouble." The last four words were said to a whoosh of air.

He was probably overreacting, Sam told himself. Missing Junior Mints was not a very good reason to panic. He was going to look like an idiot.

But his instincts told him he was right. He was right because if he were Caine, that's what he would have done.

He should have seen it. He should have seen it and been prepared. Just like he should have been prepared for the raid on Ralph's.

They drove away from the plaza. Past the graveyard Edilio had built, the one with far too many gravestones. Past the burned apartment building, the damaged preschool, the half-destroyed church.

Sam told himself he'd been running as fast as he could, just keeping up with trivia, and trying to deal with the threat of starvation. It didn't help. If Caine was after the power plant. . . .

They drove two blocks more, and suddenly, right in the middle of the dark street, caught in the headlights, was Zil, running and waving his arms like a crazy person.

"What do I do?" Edilio asked.

Sam cursed under his breath. "Pull over. Let's see what it is."

Edilio hit the brakes. Zil rushed over, breathless, panting, flushed. He leaned on the window as Sam rolled it down. "It's Hunter, man. The freak killed Harry."

Dekka made a sort of growling noise in her throat that made Zil take a step back. But he wasn't apologizing. "That's right, he's a freak. One of you people. And he used his freak powers to kill Harry. For nothing."

"Have you found Lana?" Edilio asked.

"I don't know where she is."

"Funny how you don't call the Healer a freak," Dekka pointed out.

"Lana's at Clifftop," Sam said. "Great. Now I really could use Brianna. Okay, we're going to have to hope I'm just being paranoid about the power plant. Edilio, drop me at Hunter and Zil's place. Tell your crew to head back to the plaza, hang around there, wait for us. Then you'll have to head up to Clifftop and see if you can find Lana. All right?"

"Yep."

"Dekka, why don't you stay with me to see what this is about."

"I'm going to go get some other normals," Zil said. "Normals gotta know what's happening."

Sam pointed his finger out of the window at him. "You're going to run around waking people up out of a sound sleep? No. You come with us."

"No way, man. You and Dekka? You're both freaks. Freaks always back each other up."

"You're being an idiot, Zil," Sam said. "I'm not going to have you running around and stirring up trouble."

"What are you going to do? Fry me?" Zil spread his hands in a gesture that was simultaneously defiant and innocent.

"This is bull," Sam said. "Get in, Zil. We're wasting time arguing."

"No way, man. No way." Zil turned and began to walk quickly away.

“You want me to stop him?” Dekka asked.

“No,” Sam said.

“He’s going to make trouble.”

“Sounds like Hunter already made trouble. Let’s get going, Edilio. Hopefully Breeze gets to the plant and at least wakes them up. The more I think about it, the more I think I overreacted. I don’t think Caine will start a war tonight.”

“We may have our own war, right here in town,” Edilio said.

EIGHTEEN

18 HOURS, 47 MINUTES

PATRICK FIGURED IT was all a party. His master was up in the middle of the night, and that was fun. Plus, now she was climbing into a pickup truck.

Quinn was behind the wheel. Albert sat beside him. The backseat would normally have been a little cramped for Lana and Cookie, who was a very big kid, but Quinn had his seat pulled all the way forward so he could reach the pedals. Patrick climbed in and lay across Cookie's lap.

"You want to put the dog in the back?" Albert suggested.

"And have him bark at everything we pass? Wake everyone up?"

"Okay," Albert said. He gave the dog a dirty look. Lana didn't like that about Albert, that he didn't like dogs, but this wasn't the time to have that argument.

At least Albert wasn't joking about eating Patrick. She'd heard that from more than one person.

The four of them—five, if you counted Patrick—had met up at a muffler shop on the highway. There was a heavy-duty four-by-four, extended-cab pickup parked there that Albert figured would be just right for the cross-country travel and the gold.

"Guess I better see if I know how to drive this thing," Quinn said.

"You said you know how to drive," Albert accused.

"I do. I've driven Edilio's Jeep, anyway. But this is bigger."

"Great," Albert muttered.

Quinn turned the key and the engine roared. It seemed way too loud, like it would wake up the whole town.

"Yikes," Quinn said. He put it into drive, and the beast lurched forward, bumped across a curb, and fishtailed out onto the highway.

"Hey, let's not get killed, huh?" Albert yelled.

Quinn steadied the truck and it went off at a sedate thirty miles an hour straight down the center of what had once been a busy highway.

"You seem a little cranky, Albert," Quinn said playfully. "Are you going to tell me what this trip is all about? I mean, it's, what, three A.M.? We're not going to kill a guy, right?"

"You're getting paid, aren't you?" Albert snapped.

"You haven't told him?" Lana said from the backseat. "Albert, he has to know what's going on."

When Albert didn't answer, Lana said, "We're going after gold, Quinn."

She saw Quinn's eyes framed in the rearview mirror.

"Um. What?"

"Hermit Jim's shack. The gold," Lana explained.

Lana saw Quinn's eyes again, more worried. "Excuse me, but last time we were out there, we were getting chewed on by coyotes."

"You know how to handle a gun now. And you have a gun with you," Albert said calmly. "And Cookie has a gun. You're both trained."

"That's right," Cookie agreed. "But I don't want to shoot no one. Unless they mess

with the Healer.”

“And we need gold *why*?” Quinn asked a bit shrilly.

“We need money,” Albert said. “You can only get so far with barter. We need a system, and the system works better if you have a basis for the currency.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Okay, look, take the fish business, right?” Albert began.

“It hasn’t been much of a business,” Quinn grumbled. “I barely caught enough yesterday to make bait.”

“You’ll have good days and bad days,” Albert said impatiently. “Some days you’ll have a lot of fish. So let’s say you want to trade some fish for oranges.”

“Sounds good, actually. You know someone with oranges?”

“You have enough fish that you want to trade some for oranges, and some for bread, and some for a kid to clean your room for you. That’s three different places you have to go with your fish in your hand to pay someone.”

“Is anyone else really starving right now?” Quinn joked. “I mean, dude: oranges? Bread? Stop.”

Albert ignored him. “What you do if you have money, instead of just trading things, is you can have a market where everyone brings what they have to sell, right? All in one place. And everyone is walking around with pieces of gold, not their fish, or a wheelbarrow full of corn or whatever, trying to make deals.”

Quinn said, “Either way, I’m standing around with my fish. Either I’m walking around selling them at this market of yours, or I’m standing still and people are coming to me to trade, but either way—”

“No, man,” Albert interrupted impatiently. “Because you’re selling your fish to someone who sells it to other people. You need to be out fishing, because that’s what you’re good at. Not selling fish. Catching fish.”

Quinn frowned. “You mean, I’m selling them to you.”

“Could be,” Albert agreed. “Then I sell them to Lana. That way, Quinn, you’re doing what you do and I’m doing what I do, and to make all that work out easy peasy we need money of some kind.”

“Yeah, well, since I’m doing this all night there may not be any fish tomorrow, either,” Quinn grumbled. Then he asked the question Lana expected. “Why are you coming along, Healer?”

The use of her “title” bothered Lana; she wasn’t quite sure why. And the question on top of the title bothered her. She didn’t like the question. She shifted in her seat and stared out of the window.

“She’s coming because I need a guide,” Albert said. “And I’m going to pay her. When I get the gold. Which brings us to a little something called credit.”

Poor Albert, Lana thought as Albert launched into a lecture on the usefulness of credit. Smart kid. He’d probably end up owning the FAYZ some day. But he knew nothing of her reasons for going on this trip.

All the gold in the world wouldn’t be enough to pay her for what she was planning to do. Gold couldn’t touch the cold dread that filled her heart. And gold wouldn’t be any use to her if she failed.

“There’s more than money in the world,” Lana said, thinking she was speaking only to herself.

“Like what?” Albert asked.

“Like freedom,” Lana said.

At which point Albert went on, talking about how money could buy freedom. Lana supposed he was right, in most cases. But not in this one.

Not in this case.

She couldn’t bribe the Darkness. But maybe, maybe . . . maybe she could kill it.

Caine sat silent, biting his thumb, chewing at the ragged nail.

Panda was driving. Computer Jack was squeezed in the backseat between Diana and Bug. They were the lead car. The second car, an SUV, was behind them, Drake and four of his soldiers. All were armed.

They drove cautiously. Caine insisted on it. Panda had gotten better at driving, more confident, but he was still just thirteen. He still drove scared.

The SUV behind, urged on no doubt by Drake, practically hung on their bumper, impatient.

Down Highway 1, past abandoned businesses, weaving around crashed cars and overturned trucks. All the debris of the FAYZ, the litter left behind by all the disappeared.

They turned onto the power plant road.

“Don’t drive us off the road,” Caine cautioned. “It’s a long drop.”

“Don’t worry,” Panda said.

“Uh-huh,” Caine said. There was a cliff to the left, a hundred-foot drop to the ocean rocks below. Caine wondered if he could use his powers to stop the car falling in the event that it did topple over. That kind of thing might be worth practicing, to see if he could use his telekinetic power to suspend a falling object with him inside. It would take just the right balance.

“What was that?” Panda cried.

“What was what?”

“I saw it, too,” Diana said.

“Saw what?” Caine demanded.

“Like a blur. Like something shooting past us.”

There was silence. Then, Caine cursed. “Brianna. Faster, Panda!”

“I don’t want to run off—”

“Faster,” Caine hissed.

The walkie-talkie crackled. Drake’s voice. “You guys see that?”

Caine keyed his own set. “Yeah. Brianna. Either that or a tornado.”

“She’ll get there before us,” Diana said.

“She’s already there,” Caine agreed.

“Don’t you think maybe we should do this some other time?” Diana asked.

Caine laughed. “Just because Brianna is zipping around? I’m not worried about that girl.” It was phony bravado. Brianna “zipping around” could mean that an ambush was waiting. Or it could mean that Sam had been alerted and was already on his way.

He keyed the walkie-talkie. “Drake. They may be ready when we get there.”

“Good. I’m in the mood for a fight,” Drake answered.

Caine twisted halfway in his seat to see Diana. Her nearly bald head was distracting. It had the strange effect of focusing his attention on her eyes and lips. He

winked at her. “Drake’s not worried.”

Diana said nothing.

“You worried, Panda?” Caine asked. Panda was too terrified to answer. His fingers were white from gripping the wheel.

“Nobody’s worried but you, Diana,” Caine said.

Caine hadn’t asked Jack. He was going to be careful with Jack for a while. At least until the computer genius had given him what he needed.

“Coming up on the gate,” Bug said.

There was a brick guardhouse beside a tall chain-link fence. Lights were blazing everywhere. Spotlights atop the guardhouse, trained down along the fence line in both directions. And beyond the gate the vast bulk of the power plant itself, humming, vibrating, a sinister presence in the night. It was bigger than Caine had imagined, and was comprised of several buildings, the largest of which looked like a prison. It could almost be a small city of its own. The parking lot was half full of cars, glittering in the glow.

“There’s Brianna!” Caine cried, and pointed at the girl, doubled over, clutching the fence, tugging ineffectually at it. She glanced back fearfully at them, face blue-white in the headlights. She shouted something that Caine did not hear.

In obvious frustration she rattled the chain link, unable to open it, unable, it seemed, to get the attention of anyone in the guardhouse. If anyone even was in the guardhouse.

Panda slammed on the brakes and the car skidded.

Caine leaped out and raised his hands toward Brianna. But in a blur she was gone only to reappear halfway up the hill to the right.

“Hello, Brianna, long time no see,” Caine called to her.

“Hello, Caine. How’s that leg where Sam burned your skin off?”

Caine smiled at her. “Everyone out of the car,” he said in a whisper. “Now!”

Panda, Jack, and Diana piled out. Bug may have piled out or not, Caine didn’t see him, but with Bug, that didn’t mean much.

“Whatcha up to?” Brianna asked. She was chewing gum, trying to act nonchalant. But Caine could see that she had not yet recovered from the exertion. She would be tired. Hungry, too, no doubt. He wished he had some food to offer her. Like a bone for a dog. Test her loyalty.

But they had not brought any food.

“Oh, not much, Brianna,” Caine answered. He dropped his hands to his waist, arms crossed over his chest, and turned his palms toward the car behind him. Then, in a swift motion he rotated his arms up over his head and brought them down.

The car jumped up off the ground. It was yanked into the sky like it was a giant’s yo-yo that had run out its string.

The car inscribed a tight arc, twenty, thirty feet in the air, and hurtled down toward Brianna.

The car smashed the dirt with shocking violence. The windshield and all the other windows shattered into a million glittering pieces. Like someone had set off a hand grenade inside. Two of the tires blew out. The hood popped clear off, twirled in the air, and crashed.

Brianna was standing twenty feet away from the impact.

“Wow. That was cool, Caine,” Brianna mocked. “I’ll bet that seemed really fast to you, huh? Car flying through the air all lightning quick? Why don’t you try again?”

“She’s baiting you, Caine,” Diana said, stepping up beside him. “She’s stalling. Not to mention that whoever is on guard inside may have heard that.”

Drake’s car had come to a stop just behind theirs. He leaped from the car and went racing toward Brianna, unspooling his whip hand as he went.

Brianna laughed and gave Drake the finger. “Come on, Drake, you can catch me.” Drake lunged at her, but suddenly she was behind him.

“Knock it off, Drake,” Caine yelled. “You can’t catch her. And all we’re doing is making noise and wasting time.”

“The gate’s locked,” Brianna taunted, suddenly just out of arm’s reach in front of Caine. When she came to a stop she quivered like an arrow hitting a target.

“Gate?” Caine said. He aimed his hands at the shattered car. It came up off the ground and flew, tumbling, through the air, spraying bits of glass like a comet’s tail.

The car smashed into the gate, ripped the gate from its mooring, wrapping chain link around itself, and carried the twisted mess for forty feet before hitting the parking lot and skidding into a parked minivan.

It made enough noise to wake a deaf person.

“And now,” Caine said, “it’s open. Good-bye, Brianna.”

The girl glared at him and was gone.

“Drake, leave two guys in the guardhouse,” Caine ordered. “Let’s go get this over with.”

Edilio pulled the Jeep into Zil, Hunter, Lance, and Harry’s driveway. Sam and Dekka jumped out. The front door of the house was ajar.

“Edilio? Go. Find Lana. Maybe pick up Taylor on the way, huh, if she’s in the plaza still? She could help you search.”

“You sure you don’t want me to—”

“Get Lana.” He slapped his hand on the hood, a signal to hurry. Edilio gunned it into reverse and then took off down the street.

“How do we play this?” Dekka asked.

“We see what’s what. If Hunter’s gone nuts, lift him off the ground, keep him from running away. Bounce him off the ceiling, if you need to. I’m not looking to hurt him, just talk to him,” Sam said. He knocked on the open door, which swung away from him. “Hunter. You in there?”

No answer.

“Okay, it’s Sam, and I’m coming in.” He purposely did not mention Dekka. Dekka was a weapon he’d as soon keep in reserve. “I’m hoping there won’t be any kind of problem.”

Sam took a deep breath and stepped inside.

A painting of an attractive but serious-looking woman with luxuriant red hair hung in the entryway. Someone, presumably one of the current residents, had defaced the painting with a mustache carefully drawn on with a black Sharpie.

The hallway was a mess—a Frisbee on the side table, a dirty gym sock hanging from a chandelier, a mirror badly out of alignment and cracked. Not much different from most of the residences in a FAYZ without parents.

The first room, on the left, was a formal dining room, dark. The kitchen was ahead, down the hall, past the stairs. The family room was ahead and to the right. Dekka poked her head into the dining room, peered under the table, and whispered, "Clear."

Sam advanced to the family room.

The family room was an even bigger mess than the hallway: DVDs strewn here and there, long-emptied soda cans, some sort of bright yellow Nerf projectiles, family photos—the red-haired woman again, and what was probably her husband—knocked over on the mantel, dust thick on bookshelves.

At first Sam didn't see Harry. He had fallen between the couch and a heavy coffee table. But one step closer, and he came into view.

Harry was lying facedown. There was a deflating blister on the back of his neck. It reminded Sam of a balloon three days after a party.

Sam pushed the table aside, but it was wedged. "Dekka?"

Dekka raised one hand, and the table lifted off the floor. Sam gave it a shove. It floated aside till it was out of Dekka's field, then it crashed to the floor.

Sam knelt beside Harry. Carefully avoiding the blister, he pressed two fingers against Harry's neck. "I'm not feeling anything," Sam said. "You try."

Dekka glanced around, searching for what she needed, and came up with a small, mirrored box. She twisted Harry's head to the side and held the mirrored surface close to the boy's nostrils.

"What are you doing?" Sam asked.

"If he's breathing, you'd see it. Condensation."

"I think he's dead," Sam said.

They both stood up then and took a couple of steps back. Dekka set the box aside, careful, like Harry was asleep and she didn't want to wake him.

"What do we do about this?" Dekka wondered.

"That's a very good question," Sam said. "I wish I had a very good answer."

"If Hunter killed him . . ."

"Yeah."

"The freak-versus-normal thing . . ."

"We can't let it get like that," Sam said forcefully. "If Hunter did this . . . I mean, I guess we have to hear what he says about it."

"Maybe talk to Astrid, huh?" Dekka suggested.

Sam laughed mirthlessly. "She'll say we should have a trial."

"We could, you know, just make this go away," Dekka said.

Sam didn't answer.

"You know what I'm saying," Dekka said.

Sam nodded. "Yes. I do. We're trying to keep from starving. Trying to stay ready in case Caine starts something. The last thing we need is some big argument between freaks and normals."

"Of course Zil won't shut up about it, no matter what we do," Dekka pointed out. "We could say we got here, Harry wasn't here, we found nothing. But Zil would never believe it, and a lot of kids would go along with him."

"Yep," Sam said. "We are stuck with this."

They stood side-by-side, staring down at Harry. The blister still slowly, slowly deflating.

Then Sam led the way back out to the driveway. Edilio roared up ten minutes later with Dahra Baidoo in the passenger seat.

“Hey, Dahra,” Sam said. “Thanks for coming.”

“I couldn’t find Lana,” Edilio said. “She’s not in her room at Clifftop. Her dog was gone, too. I got Taylor bouncing around, looking for her everywhere. The rest are still hanging out in the plaza in case we need them.”

Sam nodded. He was used to Lana’s strange and sudden relocations. The Healer was a restless girl. “Dahra, take a look, huh? Inside. On the floor.”

Edilio looked quizzically at Sam. Sam shook his head and avoided making eye contact.

Dahra was back in less than a minute. “I’m not Lana, but even she couldn’t do anything here. She’s not Jesus,” she snapped. “She doesn’t raise the dead.”

“We were hoping he wasn’t dead,” Dekka said.

“He’s dead, all right,” Dahra said. “Did either of you notice that the skin on his neck wasn’t burned? The hair around it wasn’t singed? The blister must have welled up from inside. Which means something cooked him from the inside out. That leaves you out as a suspect, Sam: I’ve seen your handiwork. You leave people looking like marshmallows that got dropped in the coals.”

“Hey,” Edilio blurted angrily. “You got no reason to be harshing on Sam.”

“It’s okay, Edilio,” Sam said mildly.

“No. He’s right,” Dahra said. She touched Sam’s shoulder. “Sorry, Sam. I’m tired and I don’t like seeing dead bodies, okay?”

“Yeah,” Sam acknowledged. “Head on home. Sorry to drag you out.”

She peered quizzically at Sam. “What are you guys going to do about this?”

Sam shook his head. “I don’t know, but whatever I do, it’ll probably make everyone mad. Edilio can drive you home.”

“No reason, it’s a five-minute walk.” Dahra patted his shoulder again and took off.

When she was gone, Sam said, “I guess we’re going to talk to Hunter.”

“You guess? Man, this ain’t something can be let slide,” Edilio said. “This is killing.”

“Orc killed Betty,” Sam pointed out. “And Orc’s still free.”

“You weren’t in charge then,” Edilio said. “We didn’t have a system.”

“We still don’t have a system, Edilio. We have me being pestered by everyone with a problem,” Sam said. “That’s not a system. You see a Supreme Court around here, somewhere? I see me and you and about a dozen others even giving a damn.”

“You saying we’re going to have it where kids can kill someone and that’s okay?”

Sam slumped. “No. No. Of course not. I’m just . . . Nothing.”

“I’ll get my guys, go look for Hunter,” Edilio said. “But I gotta know: What if he won’t come? Or what if he tries to hurt one of my guys?”

“Come get me if that happens,” Sam said.

Edilio did not look happy about that instruction. But he nodded and left.

Dekka watched him go. “Edilio’s a good guy,” she said.

“But?”

“But, he’s a normal.”

“There aren’t going to be lines like that, between freak and normal,” Sam said firmly.

Dekka almost, but didn't quite, laugh. "Sam, that's a great concept. And maybe you believe it. But I'm black and I'm a lesbian, so let me tell you: From what I know? Personal experience? There are always lines."

NINETEEN

18 HOURS, 35 MINUTES

THEY DROVE THE SUV through the hole in the fence, veered around the twisted mess of chain link, and raced to a skidding halt in the parking lot of the power plant.

The sheer size of the power plant was intimidating. The containment towers were as tall as skyscrapers. The big turbine building was blank and hostile, like a giant windowless prison.

A door, almost insignificantly small, stood open. No light shone from inside, but Caine could make out a shape crouching within.

“Hey! What are you doing here?” a young voice challenged.

Caine didn’t recognize the kid, couldn’t really see him. The plant was very loud, so Caine pretended he couldn’t hear. He cupped a hand to his ear and yelled, “What?”

“Stop! Don’t come any closer.”

“Come closer? Okay.” Caine kept walking. Diana and Jack hung back, but Drake was striding quickly to catch up. Drake had an automatic pistol in his real hand. His whip slithered and squirmed at his side, a snake anxious for a chance to strike.

“Stop! I said stop!”

The doorway was just a hundred feet away now. Caine never faltered.

“Stop, or I’ll shoot,” the voice cried, scared, almost begging.

Caine stopped. Drake stood beside him.

“Shoot?” Caine demanded, sounding puzzled. “Why on earth would you shoot me?”

“That’s we’re opposed to do.”

Caine laughed. “You can’t even say it right. Who are you, anyway? If you’re going to shoot me, I should know your name.”

“Josh,” the answer came. “It’s me, Josh.”

“It’s ‘me Josh,’” Caine mimicked.

Drake snarled, “You better step off, me Josh, or me Whip Hand is going to hurt you.”

The sudden explosion of bullets was deafening. Josh’s firing was wild, bullets shattering the glass of parked cars far off to their right.

Caine dropped to the pavement.

Drake never flinched. He raised his pistol, took careful aim, and fired.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

With each shot he advanced a step.

Josh whinnied in terror.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Each time the noise was stunning. Each time fire flashed from the barrel of the pistol, lighting Drake’s blank, cold eyes.

Then Drake broke into a run. Straight for the door, pistol held level, firing carefully, precisely even as he ran.

Josh fired back, but again the bullets went wild into the night, missing even the parked cars, doing nothing to stop Drake.

Bang. Bang.

Click.

Caine stayed on the ground, staring, rapt, at Drake as he calmly ejected his ammunition clip. The clip clattered on the concrete.

Drake held the pistol with the delicate end of his tentacle and fished a second clip out of the hunting vest he was wearing. Using his hand he slammed the clip into place.

Josh fired again. More careful, this time.

Bullets sparked the pavement near Drake's feet.

Drake raised the gun carefully, fired and moved, fired and moved, fired and now Josh was gone, running back inside the building, screaming for help, screaming that someone better help him.

Caine stood up, feeling shamed by Drake's cold-blooded performance. He hurried now to catch up to Drake, who was through the doorway and inside the building.

Another loud bang, the sound different this time, muffled. The doorway was a bright rectangle from the muzzle flash.

A cry of pain.

"I give up! I give up!"

Caine reached the doorway and entered the turbine room. There, on the floor between massive, howling machines, pitilessly lit by eerie fluorescent light, lay Josh. He sat, stunned, in a black pool of his own blood. One leg was twisted at an impossible angle.

Caine felt a flash of anger. Josh was a kid, no more than ten. What was Sam thinking, putting kids in this position?

"Don't shoot me, don't shoot me!" Josh begged.

Drake raised high his whip hand and brought it down with sound-barrier-shattering speed on Josh's upraised hands.

Josh screamed and writhed in agony. The screaming didn't stop.

"Leave him," Caine snapped. "Get to the control room."

Drake turned a feral snarl on Caine, teeth bared, eyes wild. Contempt and fury were in those eyes. Caine raised his hands, ready, waiting for his lieutenant to turn his whip against him.

Instead Drake kicked the prostrate boy in his damaged leg and plowed ahead. Josh crawled sobbing toward the door to the outside.

It all seemed unnatural, nightmarish. Drake stalking ahead, his gun smoking, his whip twitching. Caine heard Drake's soldiers coming up behind, and Diana and Jack bringing up the rear.

"Door's locked," Drake called back.

Caine caught up to him and tried the doorknob himself. It was heavy steel set into a heavy steel frame, obviously a door meant to withstand explosion or attack. If he hit it with a direct shock-wave of telekinetic power, it might bust open. But in the confined area of the hallway it might also reverb and knock him on his butt. "It won't be locked for long."

Caine glanced around, searching for something heavy enough for his purposes. Back in the turbine room he found a rolling steel tool chest, four feet tall, strongly built.

Caine raised the chest off the floor and hurled it through the air, down the hall. It

slammed into the locked door.

He was immensely gratified by the spectacle of Drake flattened to the wall to avoid getting hit by the wrenches and sockets and screwdrivers that flew like shrapnel from the chest.

The tool chest was crumpled, the door barely scratched.

Caine drew the chest back and hurled it forward again. This time more tools spilled out and the chest was crushed to half its size. But the door was undamaged.

Caine felt Diana's hand on his arm. "Hey. Why don't you see what Jack can do."

Caine was torn between the fear of failing if he continued to batter away ineffectually, and the fear of being shown up by the computer geek. This had become as much a contest between him and Drake as it was an attack on the power plant.

"Show us what you got, Jack," Caine said.

Computer Jack advanced uncertainly, urged on by Diana.

He placed his hands against the door and tried to get a good grip on the floor with his sneakers. He pushed against the door, and his feet slid away beneath him. He fell to one knee.

"It's too slippery," Jack said.

"We have to be through that door before Sam shows up," Caine said. "We need hostages, and we need that control room."

His gaze rested on a heavy wrench. "Look out."

Caine levitated the wrench, lifted it to the ceiling, turned it vertical, and with a sudden sweep of his hands plunged the wrench into the floor. It crunched through tile and concrete and stood like a climbing piton that had been hammered into a cliff face.

Caine repeated the move three more times, driving heavy-gauge stainless steel into the floor.

"Okay, use those."

Jack braced his feet against the tools, placed his hands against the door, and heaved with all his might.

Edilio did not find Hunter. Instead he found Zil and a crowd of a dozen kids. They in turn had found Hunter. They had Hunter cornered on the porch of the house Astrid and Mother Mary shared.

Why Hunter had gone there, Edilio could guess: Astrid would be calm and reasonable. She would shelter him, for a while at least.

The scene, however, was anything but calm or reasonable. Astrid was wearing a nightgown. Her blond hair was untethered and wild. She stood at the top of the porch stairs and stabbed an angry finger at Zil.

Hunter was behind Astrid. Not exactly cowering, but not getting out in front of her, either.

Zil and his friends, who—Edilio noted with a sinking heart—were all normals, were angry. Or most were angry, some were just goofing around, glad of an excuse to get out and run around town in the middle of the night.

Most had some kind of weapon or other, baseball bats, tire irons. One, Edilio noted grimly, carried a shotgun. The kid with the shotgun, Hank, had been a quiet kid back in the old days. He didn't look quiet now.

Edilio pulled his Jeep up to the curb. He hadn't had time to round up any of his

own people, he was alone. All eyes registered Edilio's arrival, but no one stopped yelling.

"He's a murdering chud," Zil was yelling.

"What do you want to do? Lynch him?" Astrid demanded.

That stopped the flow for a second as kids tried to figure out what "lynch" meant. But Zil quickly recovered.

"I saw him do it. He used his powers to kill Harry."

"I was trying to stop you from smashing my head in!" Hunter shouted.

"You're a lying mutant freak!"

"They think they can do anything they want," another voice shouted.

Astrid said, as calmly as she could while still pitching her voice to be heard, "We are not going down that path, people, dividing up between freaks and normals."

"They already did it!" Zil cried. "It's the freaks acting all special and like their farts don't stink."

That earned a laugh.

"And now they're starting to kill us," Zil cried.

Angry cheers.

Edilio squared his shoulders and stepped into the crowd. He went first to Hank, the kid with the shotgun. He tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Give me that thing."

"No way," Hank said. But he didn't seem too certain.

"You want to have that thing fire by accident and blow someone's face off?" Edilio held his hand out. "Give it to me, man."

Zil rounded on Edilio. "You going to make Hunter give up his weapon? Huh? He's got powers, man, and that's okay, but the normals can't have any weapon? How are we supposed to defend ourselves from the freaks?"

"Man, give it a rest, huh?" Edilio said. He was doing his best to sound more weary than angry or scared. Things were already bad enough. "Zil, you want to be responsible if that gauge goes off and kills Astrid? You want to maybe give that some thought?"

Zil blinked. But he said, "Dude, I'm not scared of Sam."

"Sam won't be your problem, I will be," Edilio snapped, losing patience. "Anything happens to her, I'll take you down before Sam ever gets the chance."

Zil snorted derisively. "Ah, good little boy, Edilio, kissing up to the chuds. I got news for you, dilly dilly, you're a lowly normal, just like me and the rest of us."

"I'm going to let that go," Edilio said evenly, striving to regain his cool, trying to sound calm and in control, even though he could hardly take his eyes off the twin barrels of the shotgun. "But now I'm taking that shotgun."

"No way!" Hank cried, and the next thing was an explosion so loud, Edilio thought a bomb had gone off. The muzzle flash blinded him, like camera flash going off in his face.

Someone yelled in pain.

Edilio staggered back, squeezed his eyes shut, trying to adjust. When he opened them again the shotgun was on the ground and the boy who'd accidentally fired it was holding his bruised hand, obviously shocked.

Zil bent to grab the gun. Edilio took two steps forward and kicked Zil in the face. As Zil fell back Edilio made a grab for the shotgun. He never saw the blow that turned

his knees to water and filled his head with stars.

He fell like a sack of bricks, but even as he fell he lurched forward to cover the shotgun.

Astrid screamed and launched herself down the stairs to protect Edilio.

Antoine, the one who had hit Edilio, was raising his bat to hit Edilio again, but on the back swing he caught Astrid in the face.

Antoine cursed, suddenly fearful. Zil yelled, "No, no, no!"

There was a sudden rush of running feet. Down the walkway, into the street, echoing down the block.

Edilio struggled to stand. It wasn't easy. His legs did not want to stay where he put them.

Astrid had a hand over one eye but was steadying Edilio with the other.

"You okay?" Astrid asked. "Did he shoot you?"

"I don't think so." Edilio patted himself down, searching for but not finding any wounds except for a growing knot on the crown of his head.

His vision cleared enough to notice the red welt where the bat had caught Astrid in the eye. "You're going to have a shiner."

"I'm okay," Astrid said, shaky but strong.

Zil's mob was gone. Disappeared. It was just the three of them left, Edilio, Astrid, and Hunter.

Edilio picked up the shotgun and cradled it carefully. "I guess that could have been worse. No one got shot."

Astrid said, "Hunter, go inside and get some ice for Edilio's head."

"Yeah. No problem," Hunter said. He hurried away.

With Hunter out of hearing Astrid said, "What are you going to do?"

"Sam said bring Hunter in."

"Arrest him?" Astrid asked.

"Yeah, because all of a sudden I'm like the sheriff, too," Edilio said bitterly, touching the lump on his head. "I must have forgot the day where I signed up for that."

"Did Hunter really kill Harry?"

Edilio nodded, a movement which sent bright shards of pain stabbing into his brain.

"Yeah. Killed him. Maybe it was an accident like Hunter says, but either way I better take him and keep him in Town Hall."

Astrid nodded. "Yeah. I'll talk to him. Make him see it's the only way."

The two of them went inside. Hunter was not in the kitchen making ice packs. The sliding glass door to the backyard was open.

Brittney Donegal recoiled from the door when the banging started. Mickey Finch and Mike Farmer were already across the room, back by the plant manager's office. They were waiting for Brittney to give them some guidance because neither of them had a clue.

Brittney was twelve years old, overweight, with a pimply face adorned by overbearing black horn-rim glasses. She wore sweat pants pulled up too high, and a pink frilly blouse that was at least one size too small. Her indifferent brown hair was yanked to either side in pigtails.

She had braces on her teeth—braces that had not been adjusted in three months. Braces that were accomplishing nothing now, but that she could not figure out how to remove.

Brittney had kind of had a crush on Mike Farmer, but he wasn't exactly impressing her.

"We gotta get out of here, Britt," Mike whined.

"Edilio said anything ever happens, we're supposed to lock this door and sit tight," Brittney said.

"They got guns," Mike cried.

Another crashing impact. They all jumped. The door did not budge.

"So do we," Brittney said.

"Josh is probably already heading back to town, safe, I bet," Mickey said. "Mike's right, we have to get away."

Brittney wanted nothing more than to run away. But she figured she was a soldier. That's what Edilio had said. Their job was to protect the power plant.

"I know we're all just kids," Edilio used to say. "But we may need kids to step up, someday, be more than just kids."

Brittney had been in the square the day of the big battle. It was Edilio who had killed the coyote that was all over her, snapping at her throat, then seizing her leg in a jaw like a bear trap.

She had no scars from the coyote bite on her leg. The Healer had cured all that. And she had no scar from the bullet that had burned a crease across her upper arm. The Healer had taken all the wounds away. But Brittney's little brother, Tanner, was one of the kids buried in the plaza.

Edilio had dug his grave with the backhoe.

Brittney had no romantic feelings for Edilio, but what she had went a lot deeper. She would rather burn for eternity in the hottest fires of Hell than let Edilio down.

Brittney had no scars, but she did still have nightmares, and sometimes not when she was asleep. Mike had been there that day, too, hurt worse than her. But it had left Mike scared and timid, while it had left Brittney mad and determined.

"Anyone comes through that door, I'm shooting them," Brittney said in a loud voice, loud enough that she hoped to be heard by whoever was on the other side.

"Not me, I'm getting out of here," Mickey said. He turned and ran.

"You want to run, too?" Brittney challenged Mike.

"Lana's not exactly here right now," Mike said. "What if they shoot me? I'm just a kid, you know."

Brittney tightened her grip on her machine gun. It hung from a strap over her shoulder. She'd long since gotten used to the weight of it. She had test-fired it four times, following Edilio's training program. The first time she'd dropped it and burst into tears and Edilio had asked her if she wanted to quit.

But then Tanner had made his presence known, a soft voice that spoke to her when she was scared and told her not to worry, that he was in Heaven with Jesus and the angels. And he was so happy, not hurt or afraid or lonely anymore.

The next time she'd held on as the gun kicked in her hands. After that she'd more or less hit what she aimed at.

"If that's Caine out there, I'm going to get him," Brittney said.

“I hate him,” she said. “I mean, I hate what he did. Hate the sin, not the sinner. And I’m going to shoot him so he won’t hurt anyone else.”

The banging had stopped. Now something different was happening. The door seemed to be bulging inward. It creaked and groaned. There was a loud snap.

It was going to give way.

“Run away, Mike,” Brittney said. He was weak. Well, kids were, sometimes. She had to forgive that. “But leave your pistol.”

“Where do you want me to put it?”

Brittney stared at the door. It was bulging, straining. Something or someone very, very strong was pushing against it.

“On the floor. Underneath the last console. Back where no one can see it.”

“You should come,” Mike pleaded.

Brittney’s finger curled around the trigger. “No. I don’t think I’m going to do that.”

She heard his footsteps retreating down the hallway. She expected the door to give way in a few seconds. And then she figured she would be in Heaven with her little brother.

“Lord? Please help me to be brave,” Brittney said. “In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

“It’s okay if I die, Tanner,” she said, in a different sort of prayer, one she knew her dead brother could hear. “As long as Caine dies first.”

TWENTY

18 HOURS, 29 MINUTES

BRIANNA HAD NOT found Sam on the road to the power plant as she raced back to town. He was not on any of the roads. The only vehicle she had seen had Quinn, Albert, Cookie, and Lana out for a ride in a giant pickup truck. She'd thought about stopping them, telling them to go to the power plant, but none of the four was much of a fighter. Quinn and Cookie were both supposed to be soldiers, but the person she needed to find was Sam, not his useless old surfing buddy.

Sam wasn't at the gas station. He wasn't at town hall or in the plaza. He wasn't anywhere she looked.

And Brianna was burning out fast. The speed was exhausting. Not as tiring as it should have been, probably, given that she had just run something like fifteen miles or so, dodging back and forth, up and down streets and alleyways. But exhausting. And the hunger was like a lion inside her, tearing at her insides.

Her sneakers were in tatters. Again. They didn't build Nikes for going as fast as a race car.

Then she heard a loud bang. It was hard to guess where it had come from. But then suddenly there were kids running. Slow. Very slow. But as fast as they could run, poor things.

"What's going on?" she demanded, screeching to a stop.

No one answered. If anything, they seemed scared of her.

It was clear, though, that they were running away from, and not toward something. So she zipped back up the street and in less time than it would have taken a normal heart to beat twice she was standing in Astrid's open doorway.

"Hey. Anybody home?"

Astrid came out, followed by Edilio. It was obvious that neither was having a good night. Astrid had a red welt on the side of her face next to her eye. Edilio was rubbing his head gingerly and holding a massive shotgun.

"Where is Sam?" Brianna demanded. "What happened to you guys?"

"You missed the fun," Edilio said sourly.

"No. No, I didn't. You did!" Brianna yelled. "Caine is attacking the power plant."

"What?"

"He's there. He and Drake and some other guys."

"What about our kids up there?" Edilio demanded.

"I didn't see any of them. Look, Caine threw a car through the front gate. He's real serious about this."

"You know where Hunter lives?" Edilio asked.

Brianna nodded. But too fast to be seen. So she said, "Yeah."

"Go there. Sam was there last I saw him. Tell him I'm getting my guys. It'll take me half an hour to get everyone assembled again. Tell Sam I'll meet him at the highway."

"Your shoes," Astrid said, pointing down at Brianna's feet. "What size do you wear?"

“Six.”

“I’ll get you a pair from my closet.” But before Astrid could move, Brianna was up the stairs and back, sitting on the porch and tying on a pair of New Balance.

“Thanks,” she said to a startled Astrid.

“Don’t forget to—,” Astrid said, but between “don’t” and “forget” Brianna had arrived at Hunter’s house.

Dekka was just coming down the steps looking like a thundercloud. The girl barely flinched when Brianna appeared suddenly before her.

“Hi, Breeze,” Dekka said. She almost smiled.

“Sam in there?”

“Yep.”

Brianna appeared suddenly before Sam, who took it less calmly than Dekka had.

“Sam. Caine. He’s at the plant. I already found Edilio, he’s getting his guys together. Give me a gun, I’ll go keep Caine busy.”

Sam cursed loudly. It took a while before he was ready to stop. Then, “I knew it! I knew it, and I let myself get distracted.”

“Sam. Give me a gun.”

“What? No, Breeze, I need you. And not dead.”

“I can get back there in, like, two minutes,” Brianna pleaded.

Sam put a hand on her shoulder. “Breeze? You have a job. You’re the messenger. Right? We have other people for fighting. Go help Edilio get the troops together. Then go see if you can find Lana. I don’t know where she is and we’re going to need her.”

“She’s driving around in a truck with Quinn and Albert,” Brianna reported.

“What?”

“They’re in a truck, heading out on the highway.”

Sam threw up his hands. “Maybe they heard about Caine, somehow. Maybe they’re on the way there.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so. Albert wouldn’t be with them. Also, someone smacked Astrid.”

Sam’s face froze. “What?”

“She’s fine, but there was some kind of problem over at her house.”

“Zil,” Sam said through gritted teeth. He kicked savagely at a chair. Then, “Go, Breeze. Do what I told you to do.”

“But—”

“I don’t have time to argue, Breeze.”

“Guys? Guys?” Quinn reached across to shake Albert’s shoulder. He had fallen asleep.

“What? I’m awake. What?”

“Dude, we are lost.”

“We’re not lost,” Lana said from the backseat.

Quinn glanced in the rearview mirror. “I thought you were asleep, too.”

“We’re not lost,” Lana said.

“Well, all due respect, we’re not exactly *not* lost, either. This isn’t even a dirt road anymore, it’s just, like, you know, flat. And not even all that flat.” They had left the highway and turned onto a side road. From there onto a dirt road. And that had gone on and on forever, without so much as a twinkle of light anywhere. Then the dirt road

had become more and more dirt and less and less road.

“If the Healer says we’re not lost, we’re not lost,” Cookie grumbled.

“It’s not far,” Lana said.

“How do you know? I couldn’t find my way back here in the middle of the day. Let alone at night.”

She didn’t answer.

Quinn glanced down at the road, then back into the rearview mirror. The only light came from the dashboard, so he could see only the faintest outline of her face. She was looking out of the window, not the direction they were traveling but northeast.

He couldn’t read her expression. But he got a feeling off her. It was in the occasional sigh. In the absent way she stroked Patrick’s ruff. The distant tone of her voice when she spoke.

“You okay?” Quinn asked.

She didn’t answer. Not for a while. Too long. Then, “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

Lana said nothing.

Albert, by contrast, was easy to read. Albert—when he managed to stay awake—was all about the goal. He focused his gaze straight ahead. Sometimes Quinn noticed him nodding to himself, as if he was commenting on some internal dialogue.

Quinn was envious of Albert. He seemed to be so sure of himself. He seemed to know just where he wanted to go, who he wanted to be.

For his part, Cookie had his own goal: to serve Lana. The big ex-bully would do anything Lana told him to do.

There were two kinds of kids in the FAYZ, Quinn reflected, and the types were not “freak” and “normal.” They were kids who had been changed for the worse, and the kids who had been changed for the better. The FAYZ had changed them all. But some kids had become more than they were. Albert was one of those. Cookie, in a very different way, was another.

Quinn knew himself to be the first type. He was one of the kids who had never recovered from the FAYZ. The loss of his parents was like a wound that had never healed. Never stopped hurting. How could it?

It went beyond the loss of his mom and dad, too, a loss that encompassed everything he had known, everything he had been. He’d been cool, once. The memory brought a sad smile to his lips. Quinn was cool. One of a kind. Everyone knew him. They didn’t all like him, they didn’t all get his act, but Quinn had carried an aura of specialness with him.

And now . . . now he was an afterthought in the FAYZ. Kids knew he had betrayed Sam to Caine. They knew that Sam had taken him back. They knew that he had gone a little crazy on the day of the big battle. Maybe more than a little crazy.

The memories of his mom and dad, his old life, they were far away. Like photos in an old album. Not quite real. Someone else’s memories, his pain; someone else’s life, his loss.

The memories of the battle—those couldn’t even be called memories because weren’t memories something from the past? That day might have happened three months ago, but it wasn’t the past to Quinn, it was right here, right now, always. Like a parallel life happening simultaneously with this life. He was driving through the night

and feeling the gun buck buck buck in his hands and seeing the coyotes and the kids, all mixed up together, all crisscrossing, weaving through the arcs of the bullets.

Finger off the trigger. Too close to shoot. He'd hit the kid. He couldn't do it, couldn't take that chance, and so the coyote had leaped, jaws open, and—

And that wasn't long ago and far away to Quinn. It was right now. Right here.

"Okay," Lana said, bringing him back to reality. "Slow down, we're almost there."

The headlights lit scruffy bushes and dirt and scatterings of rock. Then a wooden beam, badly charred. Quinn swerved to avoid it.

He stamped on the brakes. Then, much more slowly crept forward again.

The headlights illuminated a section of wall, just a few feet. Charred wood was everywhere. Two blackened cans of fruit or beans or whatever lay on their sides in the dirt.

Despite himself Quinn wondered if there was anything edible left. He remembered that terrifying night spent cowering in the cabin, waiting for the coyotes to drag them out and kill them.

That was when Sam had finally revealed the extent of his powers. For the first time he had been able to control the devastating light that shot from his hands.

Quinn stopped the vehicle. He put it into park.

"It was here," Quinn said softly.

"What happened here?" Albert asked.

Quinn killed the lights, and the four of them climbed from the SUV. It was silent. So much quieter than the last time Quinn had been there.

Quinn slung his machine pistol over his shoulder and fished a flashlight from under the seat. Albert had a flashlight of his own. The two beams stabbed here and there, highlighting this jagged beam, that singed bit of rug, a kitchen utensil, a twisted metal chair.

"This is where we met Lana for the first time," Quinn said. "We'd escaped from Caine. Run away into the woods up north. Decided to go back to town and make a fight of it. Anyway, Sam decided."

He bent down to pick up a hefty number-ten can. The label was charred. It might be pudding, though. Roasted pudding, maybe, but the can looked intact. He walked it back to the SUV and tossed it into the back.

"How was it destroyed?" Albert pressed.

"Partly it was Sam. First time he ever used his power deliberately. Not out of panic, or whatever, just cold-blooded, knowing what he was doing. You should have seen that, man." Quinn recalled the moment perfectly. It was the moment when his old friend was clearly revealed as something far, far beyond Quinn. "Partly the coyotes had set the place on fire."

"Where's the gold?" Albert asked, not really caring about the story.

Quinn waited for Lana to show the way, but she seemed rooted to where she stood. Looking down at the brown, dead remains of Hermit Jim's quirky attempt to keep a lawn in the midst of this dry, empty land. Cookie stood just behind her, big pistol stuck in his belt, ready, scowling at the threatening night, ready to lay down his life for the girl who had saved him from agony beyond enduring.

Patrick was busily running around to anything remotely vertical, smelling carefully. He didn't mark anything himself, just smelled. He seemed subdued, tail

down almost between his legs. The scent of Pack Leader must still be strong.

“This way,” Quinn said when it was clear that Lana wasn’t going to respond.

He threaded his way through the wreckage. There wasn’t much, really; most of it had burned down to ash. But the surviving bits of shattered lumber were stuck with nails, so Quinn moved cautiously.

He bent down when he reached what seemed like the right place and began pushing two-by-fours and shingles aside. He was surprised to find the plank floor mostly intact. It had been singed but not consumed by the fire. He found the hatch.

“Let me see if I can get it open.” He tried, but the fire had warped the hinges. It took both of them, him and Albert, to raise the hatch. One hinge broke, and the hatch flopped awkwardly to one side.

Albert aimed his flashlight down into the hole.

“Gold,” Albert said.

Quinn was a little surprised by Albert’s matter-of-fact tone. He’d half expected a Gollum-like “My precioussss,” or something.

“Yeah. Gold,” Quinn agreed.

“It didn’t melt,” Albert said. “Heat rises and all that. Like they taught us in school.”

“Let’s start loading, huh? This place gives me the creeps,” Quinn said. “Bad memories.”

Albert reached down and lifted out a brick. He set it down with a thud. “Heavy, huh?”

“Yeah,” Quinn said. “What are you going to do with it all?”

“Well,” Albert said. “I’m going to see if I can melt it down and make coins or something out of it. Except I don’t have any kind of coin mold. I had thought about using muffin tins. I have a cast-iron muffin tin that makes the small-sized muffins.”

Quinn grinned and then laughed. “We’re going to use gold muffins for money?”

“Maybe. But, actually, I found something better. One of the kids searching houses found where the guy had made his own ammunition. He found some bullet molds.”

They kept busy lifting the gold out and onto the ground. They stacked it crisscross, like kids playing with blocks.

“Gold bullets?” Quinn stopped laughing. “We’re going to make gold bullets?”

“It doesn’t matter what shape they are, so long as they’re consistent. All the same, you know?”

“Dude. Bullets? You don’t think that’s maybe, you know . . . weird?”

Albert sighed, exasperated. “Gold slugs, not the gunpowder part, just the slug part.”

“Jeez, man, I don’t know.” Quinn shook his head.

“Thirty-two caliber,” Albert said. “That was the smallest size the guy had.”

“Why isn’t Cookie helping us?” Quinn wondered.

In answer, Lana, from somewhere outside, said, “Guys, I’m going to look around for food. Cookie will help me.”

“Cool,” Quinn said.

In a few minutes they had all the gold up out of the hole.

They began walking the gold to the truck, a few bars at a time. The gold bars were not big, but they were heavy. By the time Albert and Quinn had finished hauling the

gold they were sweating despite the chill of the night.

Albert climbed in and pulled a canvas tarp over the gold.

“Listen, man,” Albert said as he worked to tie down the corners, “this isn’t something we want anyone talking about. Right? This is just between the four of us here tonight.”

“Hold up, dude. You’re not telling Sam?”

Albert climbed down to stand face-to-face with Quinn. “Look, I’m not trying to get over on Sam. I have the most total respect for Sam. But this plan works better if it all comes out at once.”

“Albert, I’m not going to lie to Sam,” Quinn said flatly.

“I’m not asking you to lie to Sam. If he asks you, tell him. If he doesn’t ask . . .”

When Quinn still hesitated, Albert said, “Look, man, Sam is a great leader. Maybe he’s our George Washington. But even Washington was wrong about some things. And Sam doesn’t get what I’m talking about. How people all have to work.”

“He knows people have to work,” Quinn argued. “He just doesn’t want you getting over on everyone, making yourself the rich guy.”

Albert wiped sweat from his forehead. “Quinn, why do you think people work hard? Just to get by? You think your folks worked just to get by? Did they buy just enough food? Or did they get just barely enough house? Or a car that barely runs?” Albert’s voice was urgent. “No, man, people like a good life. They want more. What’s wrong with that?”

Quinn laughed. “Dude, okay, you’ve thought about all this and you’re probably right. I mean, what do I know? Anyway, look, am I going to go running straight to Sam and tell him what we did? No. As far as I know, I don’t have to do that.”

“That’s all I’m asking, Quinn,” Albert said. “I wouldn’t ever ask you to lie.”

“Uh-huh,” Quinn said cynically. “What about the Healer? She . . .” He looked around, suddenly aware that he hadn’t heard her or Cookie in quite a while.

“Lana!” he yelled.

Then, “Healer!”

The night was silent.

Quinn aimed the flashlight into the truck cab. Maybe she was in there. Asleep, maybe. But the cab was empty.

He swiveled the light around the area, picking out the poles that had once held Hermit Jim’s water tower.

“Lana? Lana? We’re ready to go,” Quinn yelled.

“Where is she?” Albert wondered. “I don’t see her or Cookie. Or her dog.”

“Lana! Healer!” Quinn shouted. No answer came.

He and Albert exchanged looks of horror.

Quinn leaned into the truck, intending to sound the horn. She’d have to hear that. He froze when he saw the Post-it note. He tore it from the steering wheel and read it aloud by flashlight.

“‘Don’t try to follow us,’” Quinn read. “‘I know what I’m doing. Lana.’”

“Okay,” Albert said, “Okay, now we have to tell Sam.”

TWENTY-ONE

18 HOURS, 23 MINUTES

JACK STRAINED AGAINST the door.

It was built strong. Very strong. Steel in steel.

But it creaked and groaned, and Jack could see the seam between door and jamb growing.

His strength was shocking to him. He'd done very little to learn to control it. He hadn't really tested it much. In fact, he kept forgetting he had it because it was not, it never would be, part of who he really was.

Jack had grown up being a brain. He liked being a brain. He wore the geek label proudly. He had no interest in being some superstrong mutant. In fact, even as he pushed against the door, he was wondering if there wasn't an electronic control of some sort on the door. Wondering where the control panel might be. Wondering whether he could cut a wire, or solder another wire, and open the door. Wondering whether it might be computer-controlled, in which case it would be a question of hacking.

Those thoughts engaged Jack's mind. And that gave Jack pleasure.

Pushing on a steel door like some kind of ox? That was stupid. It was what stupid people did. And Jack was not stupid.

"Keep at it, Jack," Caine encouraged him. "It's starting to give."

Jack heard Diana saying to Drake, "I told you he was strong. And you thought you'd just go and pick him up and bring him to Coates? Hah."

The door would give way in another few seconds, Jack could feel it.

"When it goes, Jack, you need to drop to the floor," Caine said.

Jack would have asked why, but the exertion was popping the veins in his neck, squeezing his lungs, bulging his eyes, and generally making it hard to imagine engaging in conversation.

"Soon as it goes, Jack, drop to the floor," Caine reiterated. "Someone in there might start shooting."

What? Shooting?

Jack lessened his effort.

"Don't slack off," Drake warned. "We'll take care of whoever is on the other side."

Jack heard the sound of a gun being cocked. And a low, mean laugh from Drake.

He wedged his feet tight. One more big push. And drop.

Suddenly he was scared. Getting shot at was not part of the deal.

He shoved hard. All his might.

The door collapsed suddenly, but not the way Jack had expected. It snapped at the top hinge and the deadbolt broke. The door was still in the doorway, bent at an angle but held in place by one hinge. Another push and it would swing in.

The sound of the gun was shocking.

Jack dropped to the floor. He covered his head, covered his ears.

He yelled, "Don't kill me, don't kill me!" but no one could possibly have heard because now the firing was coming from both sides. Whoever was in the control room

was firing short bursts through the gaps. BlamBlamBlam!

Drake was firing back in rapid-fire single rounds.

Bullets pinged off the steel and ricocheted in the hallway.

Drake yelled, Caine yelled, Jack yelled, and from beyond the doorway a girl's voice was screaming in rage and fear.

Then Caine struck. He hit the weakened door with a blast of his own.

The steel door exploded inward.

It skidded across the floor beyond and knocked the legs out from under a girl who kept firing as she fell, spraying automatic weapons fire wildly in the air.

Jack hugged the ground, sobbing, "Don't kill me!" Drake leaped over him, gun in one hand, whip hand unfurled.

Lying on his side, Jack saw a crazy tableau, the girl, unable to move, her legs twisted at impossible angles but bringing the still-firing gun around toward Drake.

Drake's whip hand snapping.

The girl pointed her gun straight at Drake's chest.

Click.

Empty.

Drake's whip connected.

A scream of pain.

Another.

"Stop it!" Diana cried.

Caine, accidentally kicking Jack's head as he rushed into the room.

Again, the lash of Drake's whip, and now he was yelling in wild glee, crowing and cursing.

Jack crawled forward, blinded by tears. He knew the girl. He knew her. Brittney. She'd been in history with him. Three rows back.

Again Drake struck.

The empty gun fell from Brittney's hand.

She was cut, bleeding, legs shattered from the impact of the door, her face a mess of tears and blood and Diana screaming abuse at Drake and Caine saying nothing to stop the psychopath and Jack wanting to cry, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," but unable to find the words.

Diana reached Drake and grabbed his whip hand at the shoulder. "Enough, you sick piece of—"

Drake spun around, face-to-face with Diana. He bared his teeth and roared at her, roared like an animal, spit flying.

"She's right: enough," Caine said at last.

"Keep your girlfriend out of my face!" Drake bellowed at Caine.

Caine looked coldly at Drake. "I let you have your fun. We're not here for your entertainment."

Jack was stunned. He was unable to tear his eyes away from Brittney. She moaned, tried to move, then slumped to the floor. Unconscious or dead. Jack didn't know which.

She'd been in his class.

He *knew* her.

"Get to work, Jack," Caine said.

Diana turned bloodshot eyes on Jack, eyes full of hatred and sorrow. She brushed tears away. “Jack’s hurt.”

“What?” Caine demanded. “Jack?”

Jack wasn’t hurt. He started to get up, ashamed of cowering on the floor. But his left foot gave way. He looked down, mystified, and saw that his pants, from the knee down, were soaking red.

“He’s losing a lot of blood,” Diana said.

It was the last thing Jack heard before the floor rushed up and smashed him in the face.

Lana heard Quinn’s shouts. She heard the truck’s horn. She was no more than two or three hundred feet away, just beyond the reach of the stabbing flashlight beams.

Cookie walked stolidly beside her, quiet, though he must have had his doubts.

Lana hoped Quinn and Albert wouldn’t come after her. She didn’t want to have to explain what she was up to.

Patrick, too, heard the honking horn, so she whispered, “Quiet boy. Shhh.”

Lana had made sure to wear sturdy boots—a big improvement over the last time she had walked this route. She had her heavy pistol in her shoulder bag, which was another major improvement. And she had Cookie.

If Pack Leader found them out here, Lana intended one of them—she hoped it was she, not Cookie—to shoot him in the face.

Also in her bag was a bottle of water, a can of button mushrooms, and an entire cabbage. Not much food, especially for a guy Cookie’s size, but then she expected to find at least a few cans of something in the shed at the mine. Hermit Jim would have stashed at least some food there.

She hoped.

The last time she had walked this path she’d gone in search of Jim’s truck, hoping to use it to get to Perdido Beach. By that point she had found the gold and figured out that the eccentric hermit was a prospector. She had followed tire tracks to the tumble-down, abandoned mining town hidden in a crease of the hills. She’d found Jim’s truck but not the keys. Then she had found Jim himself, dead in the mine shaft.

She knew now where the keys were.

Back then, back before so much had happened, she would have been terrified of digging through the pockets of a corpse. But that was the old Lana. The new Lana had seen things that were so much worse.

She knew where to find the keys. And where to find the truck. And she remembered the big LPG—liquid petroleum gas—tank Jim used to fire the smelter.

Her plan was simple: Retrieve the keys. With Cookie’s help, load the gas tank into Jim’s truck. Drive the truck and the tank to the mine entrance. Open the valve on the gas and let it seep into the mine shaft.

Then light a fuse and run.

She didn’t know if the explosion would kill the thing in the mine. But she hoped to bury it under many tons of rock.

The Darkness had called to her in her dreams and in her waking dreams as well. It had its hook in her and she knew it was drawing her in.

Come to me. I have need of you.

It wanted her.

“Hello darkness, my old friend,” Lana half sang, half whispered. “I’m coming to talk with you again.”

TWENTY-TWO

18 HOURS, 18 MINUTES

JACK WOKE TO pain.

He'd been moved. Someone had turned him over. He sat up too suddenly. His head swam, and for a moment he thought he would pass out again.

One leg of his trousers had been crudely ripped to expose the wound. There was a blue, blood-soaked bandage tied around his lower thigh. It hurt. It burned like someone was sticking a red-hot poker into his flesh.

Diana was beside him. It took him a moment to make sense of her shaved head. "I found these in one of the offices. Take them." She transferred four Advil from her hand to his. "It's twice the regular dose, but I doubt it will kill you."

"What happened?" he rasped.

"Bullet. But it just grazed you and kept going. It cut a kind of neat little furrow. It'll hurt, but the bleeding's already stopped."

"Okay, Jack, snap out of it," Caine said. He sounded harried and worried. Things weren't going quite as he had planned. "You know what you're here for."

Two of Drake's soldiers returned, loudly abusing Mickey Finch and Mike Farmer, who had their hands tied behind them. They'd been found hiding in offices. Cowering under desks. "Oh good," Caine said breezily, "the hostages are here."

"We told them to throw down any guns they had, and this retard just did," one of the goons crowed. "All we had was a shotgun and a pistol and this kid had a machine gun and he still gave up. Little wussy. The other one didn't have a gun."

Mickey and Mike looked miserable and very afraid. Their expressions grew bleaker still when they saw Brittney on the floor in a puddle of blood.

Drake strode toward them, pushed Mike aside, and grabbed the machine gun. He ran his tentacle over the stock, over the cocking mechanism, holding it almost reverently. There was an expression not far from love in his cold, blue eyes. "I like this. The girl's gun was a piece of crap, but this is cool. Very cool."

"Maybe you two should get a room," Diana said.

"None of the freaks has power enough to mess with me if I'm carrying one of these," Drake said.

"Yeah, not even Caine," Diana agreed brightly. "Now you can be the boss, right?"

Jack stood rooted in place watching all this, still unable to focus on his so-called job.

How had he let himself be dragged into this? There was a girl not ten feet away from him who might die, if she wasn't dead already. He could take three steps and be standing in her blood, as he was sitting in his own.

"Jack," Caine said. "Snap out of it. Get to work. Now!"

Jack moved like he was in a dream, shaking his head, his ears still ringing from the gunfire. His leg burned. And the material of his trousers, wet, clung to him. He stepped gingerly to the nearest computer console and sat down heavily in a swivel chair. The monitor was old. The look of the software was old. The computer didn't even have a mouse, it was all keyboard-controlled.

His heart sank further still. Old software meant all kinds of keystrokes, nothing he was used to. He slid open a drawer hoping to find a manual, or at least a cheat sheet.

“How’s it look?” Caine asked. He laid his hand on Jack’s shoulder, a friendly gesture meant to reassure Jack. For the first time in his life it occurred to Jack that he wanted to spin around and punch Caine. Punch him hard.

“It’s totally unfamiliar software,” Jack said.

“Nothing you can’t handle, though. Right?”

“I can’t do it very fast,” Jack said. “I have to work through it.”

The hand on his shoulder tightened its grip. “How long, Jack?”

“Hey, I’m hurt, all right? I got shot!” When Caine just stared at him, he lowered his voice. “I don’t know. It depends.”

He could sense Caine’s tension, the bottled-up rage that fed on fear. “Then don’t waste time.”

Caine released him and turned back to Drake. “Put the hostages in the corner.”

“Uh-huh,” Drake said absently. He was still fondling the submachine gun.

Caine strode quickly up to him and smacked the barrel of the gun. “Hey. Take care of business. Brianna could be back here at any second. If it’s not her, it’ll be Taylor. You’d better not be screwing around.”

Brittney lay on the floor, not moving, not making a sound. Was she alive? Jack wondered. Given how badly she was hurt, and knowing now how much pain even a grazing wound could cause, he wondered if she might not be better off dead.

Jack found an ancient loose-leaf binder, smallish, with torn page ends sticking out here and there, festooned with age-curling Post-it notes marking pages.

He started to work his way through it. He was looking for a guide to the function keys. Without that he had nothing. The lack of a mouse was crippling: he’d never seen, let alone used, a computer without a mouse. It was amazing that such things still existed.

“Diana,” Caine ordered. “Read our two hostages. I don’t want to find out they’re hiding some power. Drake? How’s it going?”

“I’m going to string the wire,” Drake said.

“Good,” Caine said.

Jack stole a glance and saw that Drake was holding a spool of bare wire, quite thin but strong looking. He was surveying the doorway, looking for something.

Drake shrugged, dissatisfied with what he was seeing. He began to wrap one end of the wire around the broken middle hinge where it was still attached to the wall. It was a tall door with three hinges, one that was just above head level, one at ankle height, one splitting the difference.

Drake stretched the wire from the hinge to a heavy metal filing cabinet against the wall. He passed the spool through a drawer handle and pulled it tight. He cut the wire with a pair of needle-nose pliers and wrapped the wire back on itself, tightening it further.

Diana stepped back from the two hostages and said, “They’re both clear. The one may be a one bar, but at that level he doesn’t even know what powers he has. If he even has anything at all useful.”

“Good,” Caine said.

Diana sauntered over and flopped into the swivel chair closest to Jack. She stared

moodily at the monitor in front of her.

“What’s Drake doing?” Jack whispered.

Diana turned her languid eyes on him. “Hey. Jack wants to know what you’re doing, Drake. Why don’t you tell him?”

“Jack is supposed to be working,” Caine interrupted. “He’s busy.”

Jack turned hastily back to the notebook. There it was: a list of function keys. He frowned and began to work his way through the keys, pressing, seeing the results, moving on methodically to the next key.

Drake had finished with the wire. He ducked beneath it and disappeared down the hallway from the direction they had come, uncoiling wire as he went.

“I’m in the main directory,” Jack announced. “This is so old. This is, like, DOS or something.”

Despite himself he was becoming fascinated by the challenge at hand. It was computer archaeology. He was deciphering a language that was pre-Windows, pre-Linux, pre-everything. It took his mind off the pain. Mostly.

“I hope you weren’t too madly in love with Brianna, Jack,” Diana said.

“What? No. No way.” Jack could feel himself blushing. “No. That’s stupid.”

“Uh-huh.”

He felt his way, step by step, through the directory, looking for controls that might not even be there, commands that might not even exist.

Drake reappeared. He was whistling happily to himself. “Slice and dice,” he said. “Slice and dice.”

“Good,” Caine said. “That’s one. Now set up for Taylor. Remember, we don’t want anyone shooting Jack or hitting any of the equipment.”

“I know what I’m doing,” Drake said. He pointed his tentacle at one of his two thugs. “You. Bring the shotgun.” When the boy had complied, Drake spent a few minutes moving him around the room, checking sightlines. “Okay. You have a simple job. You see Taylor popping in here, you shoot.”

The kid looked pale. “I have to shoot her?”

“No, you have a choice,” Drake said. “You can shoot her or not. It’s up to you.”

The kid breathed a sigh.

“Of course, if you don’t shoot her?” Drake snapped his whip arm. The tentacle wrapped around the boy’s throat. “If you don’t shoot her? If you forget, or get distracted, or miss? I’ll whip you till I see bone.”

Drake laughed happily and unwrapped his arm. “I believe we are ready,” he announced. “Taylor has a load of buckshot waiting for her. And if little Brianna decides to breeze on in at a hundred miles an hour, she’ll hit the wires.”

“And set off an alarm?” Jack asked.

Drake laughed like that was the funniest thing he’d ever heard.

“Slice and dice,” Drake said. “Slice and dice.”

Jack didn’t look at Drake. He looked at Diana. Her eyes were windows on darkness.

“Get back to work, Jack,” Caine said.

The McClub was closed down. There was a sign on the door that said, “Sorry, We Are Closed. Will Reopen Tomorrow.”

Duck didn't know why he had been drawn there. Of course it was closed—it was after midnight. He had just craved company. Hoped someone was hanging around. Pretty much anyone.

In the three days—well, technically four, since it was tomorrow already—since Duck had fallen through the bottom of the swimming pool, his life had actually managed to get worse. First off, he had lost his private oasis of calm. The pool was obviously unfixable. He had spent some effort looking for another pool, but no other spot had been nearly as great as the one he had lost.

In the second place, no one believed him. He had become a joke. Kids didn't bother to go and check out the pool to see if the hole was really there. And of course Zil and his punk friends didn't exactly step up to validate Duck's story.

When he'd tell people about this weird, un-asked-for power, they'd demand he demonstrate. But Duck didn't want to demonstrate. It meant getting mad, for one thing, and he wasn't naturally an angry person.

More importantly, it meant falling into the ground. And Duck had not enjoyed that the first time around. It had been sheer luck that he had passed out before he fell right on past the cave. He could have kept falling until he reached the molten core of the earth. That was the image in his head, anyway. Falling through the ground, down through the crust and the mantle and the whatever other layers there were that he had probably learned about in school but couldn't recall now, all the way down to the big melted metal and rock core.

In his mind's eye that would look like the scene at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*. He would be like Gollum, swimming for a few seconds in all that lava, then incinerated.

But that image was almost a relief compared to the other possibility: that he would simply be buried alive. That he would fall a hundred feet into the ground and have no way of extricating himself. He would slowly suffocate as the dirt walls of the hole filled in, clods falling onto his upturned face, dirt filling his eyes, his mouth, his nose

...

He grabbed the handle of the McClub door to steady himself. The images were waking nightmares. They were in his thoughts more and more often.

It didn't help that no one else took the problem seriously. Kids laughed at his story. They thought the whole thing was funny. The part about falling through the bottom of the pool. The part about the cave. The radioactive side cave. The blue bats. The emergence from the waves, half naked and shivering. The way he'd had to climb the cliff up from the beach, forcing himself to grin happily lest anger cause him to fall and keep on falling. Climbing had been the easiest part. He'd felt light with relief.

He had told the story and kids roared with laughter. The first day or so he'd played along. He enjoyed making people laugh. But he'd gone very quickly from being a funny storyteller to being an object of ridicule.

"Your power is the power to gain so much weight, you actually sink into the ground?" That had been Hunter, who thought himself a real comedian. "So, you're basically *Fatman*?"

After that it was open season: Fatman led to Fall-through Boy, the Spelunker, the Sinker, the Miner, and the one he heard most often, the Human Drill.

Kids didn't get it: It wasn't funny. Not really. Not if you thought about it. Not if

you spent the night tossing and turning, barely able to sleep because you worried that you might get angry in some dream and fall to a slow, agonizing death.

Hunter had also ridiculed his tale of the blue bats. “Dude—or should I call you the Human Drill? Dude, bats sleep during the day and fly at night. Your blue bats? According to you, they woke up when it got light. How do you figure? Plus, no one but you has ever seen them.”

“They’re blue, like the sky, so you wouldn’t see them flying overhead or through the water,” Duck had pointed out to no avail.

He let go of the club door. Probably better that it was closed. He was lonely, but maybe loneliness wasn’t as bad as the ridicule.

Duck looked around, feeling lost. It was late. No one was out. In the old days his parents would have grounded him for a year if they’d found out he was wandering the streets at night.

No one was in the plaza. It was a creepy place at night. The graves were there. The shattered outline of the church dark against the stars. The burned remains of the apartment building. There were a couple of lights on in town hall—no one bothered going around and turning out lights. The streetlights were still on, although some had burned out and others, especially the ones in the plaza, had been broken either by the battle or by vandals.

The plaza was a place of ghosts now. Ghosts and long shadows.

Duck headed wearily toward home. So-called home. It meant passing by the church. It at least was dark. It was lit nowadays only on meeting nights because the original lighting system had not survived. Lights were strung from the town hall on an extension cord. Someone usually remembered to yank the cord out of the socket when they were done.

Rubble, some of it massive chunks of masonry, blocked the sidewalk on the church side. No one had ever cleaned it up. Probably no one ever would. Duck walked down the middle of the street, mistrusting the shadows on either side.

He heard a scuffling sound in the church. A dog, probably. Or rats.

But then, an urgent whisper, “Hey! Hey, Duck!”

Duck stopped. The voice was coming from the direction of the church.

“Dude!” the whisper, louder now.

“What? Who is that?” Duck asked.

“It’s me, man. Hunter. Keep it down. They’ll kill me if they find me.”

“What? Who?”

“Duck, man, come here, I can’t be yelling back and forth.”

Reluctantly—very reluctantly because he expected some trick—Duck crossed the street.

Hunter was crouched behind a piece of rubble that still held a portion of stained-glass window. He stood up when Duck approached, which brought his face into the light. He didn’t look as if he was planning a prank. He looked scared.

“What’s up?” Duck asked.

“Come back here, man, so no one can see us.”

Duck climbed over the rubble, skinning his shin in the process.

“Okay,” Duck said, once he was in Hunter’s rubble hideaway. “What?”

“Can you hook me up, dude? I didn’t catch any dinner.”

“Uh . . . what?”

“I’m hungry,” Hunter said.

“Everybody’s hungry,” Duck pointed out. “I drank a jar of gravy for dinner.”

Hunter sighed. “I’m starving here. I didn’t get dinner. I barely got any lunch. I was trying to save up.”

“Why are you here?”

“Zil. He and the normals are after me.”

Duck had the definite feeling he was either being elaborately punked, or had wandered into someone else’s crazy dream. “Man, if you’re here to bust on me, just get it over with.”

“No, man. No way. I’m sorry about all that, you know, teasing you and all. I was just trying to get along with them, you know?”

“No. I don’t know what you’re talking about, Hunter.”

Hunter hesitated, looking like he might try to bluster. But then he collapsed. He sat down hard on the ground. Duck knelt awkwardly beside him. The awkwardness was compounded when he heard the telltale snuffle. Hunter was crying.

“What happened, man?” Duck asked.

“Zil. You know Zil, right? We were having an argument. He goes totally nuts. He tries to kill me with a fireplace poker. So what am I supposed to do?”

“What did you do?”

“I was totally in the right,” Hunter said. “I was totally in the right. Only I didn’t get Zil because Harry came rushing in. He got in between us.”

“Okay.”

Hunter sniffled again. “No, man. Not okay. Harry goes down. He hits the floor. I wasn’t even aiming at him, he didn’t do anything. You have to help me, Duck,” Hunter pleaded.

“Me? Why me? All you ever do is pick on me.”

“Okay, okay, that’s true,” Hunter admitted. He had stopped crying. But his voice was, if anything, even more urgent. “But, look, we’re on the same side, here.”

“Um . . . what?”

“We’re freaks, man. You aren’t getting this, are you?” Irritation helped Hunter’s self-control. The sniffing stopped. “Dude, Zil is running around getting normals to come out against us. All of us.”

Duck shook his head in confusion. “What are you talking about, man?”

Hunter grabbed his arm and held it tight. “It’s us against them. Don’t you get that? It’s freaks against normals.”

“No way,” Duck scoffed. “First of all, I didn’t hurt anyone. Second of all, Sam is a freak and Astrid’s a normal, and so is Edilio. So how is it that all of them are trying to get us?”

“You think they won’t come after you next?” Hunter said, not exactly answering. “You think you’re safe? Fine. Go on. Run away home. Play pretend. It’s us against them. You’ll see, when it’s you hiding out from them.”

Duck disengaged himself from Hunter’s grip. “I’ll see if I can bring you something to eat, dude. But I’m not getting involved in your troubles.”

Duck climbed back out of the rubble and headed down the street.

Hunter’s hissed words followed him. “It’s freaks against normals, Duck. And

you're a freak."

Jack was sweating like he was in a sauna. His leg hurt. Hurt bad.

But more, the wires.

The wires.

Brianna would never see them. She would come rushing on, as fast as a speeding bullet. She would hit the wires at that speed and she would be sliced into pieces. Like a wire cheese cutter going through a brick of Swiss.

The image was painfully clear in Jack's mind.

He could see Brianna hitting the wire. And being cut in half. Legs still running for another few steps before they realized they were no longer carrying a body.

"Take down the wires," Jack said. The words were out of his mouth before he knew it. He hadn't planned it. He'd just blurted it.

No one heard him except Diana.

He glanced at her and saw a flicker of a smile.

But Drake was busy and Caine was ranting and neither heard him.

Jack pulled his hands away from the keyboard.

"You have to cut down the wires," Jack said, choking on the words.

And now Caine froze. And now Drake whirled.

"What?" Drake demanded.

"Take the wires down," Jack said. "Or else I—"

The whip landed on his neck and back. Like the bullet wound, but so much worse for being on such tender skin.

Jack cried out in shock at the pain.

Drake was coiled to strike again, but Caine yelled, "No!"

Drake seemed ready to ignore the order, but contented himself with wrapping his tentacle around Jack's throat. He squeezed, and Jack felt blood pounding in his head.

Caine walked over and in a reasonable voice said, "What's the problem, Jack?"

"The wires," Jack said, barely able to form sounds. "I don't like what you're doing."

Caine blinked. He was honestly puzzled. He looked at Diana for an explanation.

Diana sighed. "Puppy love," she said. "It looks like Jack's gotten over me. There's another girl playing the leading role in Jack's shameful dreams."

Caine laughed, disbelieving. "You've got a thing for Brianna?"

"I don't . . . it's not like . . ." Jack squeezed the words out.

"Oh, come on, Jack. Don't be an idiot," Caine cajoled him. "Let him go, Drake. Jack's just losing focus. He's forgetting what's important."

Drake withdrew his tentacle, and Jack breathed in deep. His neck and back burned so badly, he forgot the lesser wound on his thigh.

"Jack, Jack, Jack," Caine said, sounding like a disappointed teacher. "Bad things happen sometimes, Jack, you have to accept that."

"Not Brianna," Jack said.

Jack saw color rising in Caine's face, a warning sign. But he knew Caine needed him. Caine wouldn't kill him, he was sure of that, no matter how mad he got. Drake might let his rage take over, but Caine wouldn't.

"You think she'd defend you?" Caine asked. "She'll come zooming in here, maybe

carrying a gun, shoot anyone she sees, Jack. Now, get back to work and let me take care of making the big decisions.”

Jack turned back to the keyboard. He started to rest his hands on the keys. But he couldn't do it. He froze there with his fingertips half an inch above the keys.

Not Brianna. Not her. Not like that.

“I could talk to her,” Jack said. “I could maybe get her to come over to your side.”

“Let me just deal with this,” Drake pleaded. “I guarantee you, he'll get back to work.”

“That's right, Drake,” Diana said. “Torture him into it. You'll never know if he gets pissed off enough to maybe flood this room with radiation. Until your hair starts falling out.”

That had not occurred to Jack. But it did now. Diana was right, they wouldn't really know what he was doing.

Caine was biting his thumb again, his habit when frustrated.

“Drake, cut the wires. Jack, figure out how to turn the lights off in Perdido Beach or I'll tell Drake to not only put the wires back up, but whip you till he gets too tired to lift his arm.”

Jack carefully concealed his feeling of triumph.

Drake started to object, but Caine snapped, “Just do it, Drake. Just do it.”

Jack felt a wave of some warm feeling flow through him. Something unlike anything he'd ever felt before. There was still the searing pain on his neck and back, and the all-but-forgotten pain on his leg. But the pain was secondary to this feeling of . . . something. He didn't know quite what to call it.

He had stepped up to protect someone else. Brianna might never know it, but he had just taken a big risk for her. In fact, he had risked his life for her.

Diana drawled, “Our little geek is growing up.”

Jack began tapping away at the keyboard.

“But still so naïve,” Diana added.

The word bothered Jack, vaguely. He kind of knew what it meant, the word “naïve.” But now he was into the directory he needed, and there were commands to be learned, sequences to be deciphered.

TWENTY-THREE

18 HOURS, 7 MINUTES

“THEY’LL HAVE SOMEONE on the gate,” Sam said. “It’s just around this bend. Stop here.”

Edilio braked, and the other two vehicles came to a stop behind them. Dekka driving Orc and Howard in a hefty SUV. A handful of Edilio’s soldiers in the third car. All the people Sam could round up. He’d tried others, but these were the ones who came when they learned they were to do battle with Caine and Drake.

Fear of Caine, and especially Drake, ran deep in Perdido Beach.

Sam turned in his seat so he could see Brianna and Taylor in the back. “Okay, girls, here’s our problem: I need to know where Caine’s goons are. I have to figure he left at least a couple of guys on the front gate. Armed, of course. They’ll have instructions to shoot anyone who comes down this road.”

“I can pop in and out before they can shoot me,” Taylor said. She wasn’t quite eager.

“Sam, I can plow past that gate and take a little tour inside the facility and be back in thirty seconds,” Brianna argued. “They most likely won’t even see me.”

“If you’re going so fast, they don’t see you, how you going to see them?” Edilio asked.

She pointed at her face. “Fast eyes, Dillio, very fast eyes.”

Sam and Edilio both grinned. But it didn’t last long.

“Okay, listen to me, Breeze,” Sam said. “Do not go anywhere but to the gate. That’s not a suggestion, that’s me telling you.”

“I can do it all in no time,” Brianna argued.

“Breeze, I need you to hear me on this: do not go into that plant.”

Brianna pouted. “You’re the boss, boss.”

“Okay,” Sam said. “Take off—” He stopped, realizing he was talking to air.

“Long gone,” Edilio commented. “Girl doesn’t hang around.”

“I can help, too,” Taylor said, a little resentful.

“You’ll get your chance,” Sam said.

Dekka was climbing out of the SUV. “Did you send Breeze?”

“Yeah. She should be back any second now,” Edilio said.

“I’m ready to do this,” Dekka said. “Driving with Orc in the back? Boy is farting something terrible.”

“Cabbage,” Taylor said.

“Any second now. You know Brianna,” Edilio said.

The four of them waited. Sam kept his eyes on the road. Not that he would see her when she got back.

“Taking a while,” Taylor said. “I mean, for her.”

No one spoke after that. Not as two minutes passed. Then three minutes. Five interminable minutes.

“Oh, my God,” Dekka whispered. “Brianna.” She closed her eyes and seemed to be praying.

“She’d be back by now,” Sam said heavily. “If she was coming.”
He felt sick to his stomach. Sick down to his bones.

Lana felt the dread growing on her. She was prepared. She knew it was coming.

“What is this place?” Cookie asked, feeling something, too, no doubt, but only the ghosts, not the living, seething evil that was now so close.

“It used to be a mining town,” Lana said. “Gold miners, back in, like, the 1800s or whatever.”

“Like cowboys?”

“I guess so.”

They walked through the ghost town, the shabby, tumbledown wreck of a place that had no doubt once been someone’s dream of a future metropolis. The mines had mostly played out back in the late 1800s.

It was still possible to make out where the main street had been. And Lana supposed if you really thought about it, you’d be able to figure out which of the piles of sticks was the hotel, the saloon, the hardware store, or whatever. Here and there a tenuous wall or rickety chimney still stood outlined in silver. But roofs had mostly collapsed long ago, storefronts had pancaked. Maybe it was an earthquake or something that had tumbled the weakened structures. Maybe it was just time.

Only one building seemed more or less intact, the rough-hewn warehouse where Hermit Jim had hidden his gas-fired gold smelter and his pickup truck.

“That’s where we’re going,” Lana said, nodding in the direction of the structure.

Lana’s gaze was drawn beyond the building to the trail that led up the side of the hill. She knew she would have to walk up that trail, up that hill to the mine shaft, and dig the keys from the mummified miner’s pocket.

Not her favorite idea. Being even this close to the thing in the mine shaft laid shadows on her soul. She could feel it up there, the Darkness, and she had the terrible feeling that it could sense her closeness as well.

Did the Darkness know she was coming?

Did it know why?

Did *she* know? For sure?

“I know why I’m here,” Lana said. “I know.”

“Of course,” Cookie said. He seemed to think she was rebuking him.

Patrick was quiet, cowed. He remembered, too.

They were in the warehouse. Lana checked the propane gas tank. There was a gauge that showed it half full. That should be enough.

She knelt and checked the support for the tank. It rested on a sort of steel frame, rusted, but not, thankfully, bolted down to the ground or anything. The cradle rested on dirt. Good.

“What we have to do, Cookie, is get this tank into that truck. In a little while I’m going to get the keys. We’ll back the truck up to the tank. But first, let’s see how it all works, huh?”

“You got it, Healer.”

She pressed her leg against the bottom edge of the tank, finding it came to the top of her thigh. She walked to the pickup truck and compared the height of the tailgate.

Good. Good. They were very close to being the same height. The tank was maybe

two inches lower, which meant it would have to be lifted. Lifted and shoved. But there would be a system, had to be, because Hermit Jim would have had to carry the tank in his truck to get refills.

“Cookie. Look around for a toolbox.”

First things first. She made sure the nozzle was off.

Then she rummaged in the toolbox Cookie had retrieved until she found a wrench that fit the pipe fitting. The coupling that attached the hose to the tank was frozen up.

“Let me give it a try,” Cookie suggested.

Cookie was at least twice Lana’s weight. The coupling gave way.

Lana pointed to the rafters. A heavy chain hung down from a series of pulleys. There was a hook on the end of the chain, and an eyebolt on the gas tank’s frame.

“Jim would have had to refill the tank from time to time. That’s how he got the tank into his truck.”

Cookie hauled the hook down. The chain clanked and came easily, rolling through the well-oiled pulley.

Cookie hoisted himself heavily up onto the framework and attached the hook to the eyebolt.

“Okay. Good,” Lana said. “Now I’m going up to get the key.”

Something in her tone must have worried Cookie. “Well, um, Healer, we should go with you. Me and Patrick. It’s not safe out there.”

“I know,” Lana said. “But if something goes wrong, I want to know I have someone I trust who can take care of Patrick.”

That was the wrong thing to say if her goal was to soothe Cookie. His eyes were wide, his chin trembling.

“What’s going to go wrong?”

“Probably nothing.”

“Okay, I have to go with you,” Cookie said.

Lana laid her hand on his big forearm. “Cookie, you have to trust me on this.”

“At least tell me what the problem is,” he pleaded.

Lana hesitated. A big part of her wanted Cookie and Patrick, too, along for the walk to the mine entrance. But she was worried about Patrick. And even more, she was worried about what might happen to Cookie.

In the old days Cookie had been a big, dumb bully, a sort of second-tier Orc. He was still not exactly a genius. But his heart had been transformed by days of suffering, and whatever meanness had once been in him was gone. There was now in Cookie a sort of purity, he seemed so innocent to Lana. An encounter with the Darkness might end all that. The creature in the mine had left its stain on her soul, and she didn’t want that same thing to happen to her trusting and loyal protector.

Lana retrieved her bag. From it she drew a letter, neatly sealed in a white business envelope. She handed it to Cookie. “Look, if something does happen, you take this to Sam or Astrid. Okay?”

“Healer . . .” He was reluctant to take it.

“Cookie. Take.” She placed it in his hand and closed his fingers around it. “Good. Now, listen, I need you to do something else while I’m gone.”

“What?”

She forced a smile. “I’m so hungry, I could eat Patrick. Look around this dump and

see if you can find something to eat. I'll be back in fifteen minutes."

She turned toward the door and plunged out into the night before he could argue any further.

Lana slipped her hand into her bag, wrapped her fingers around the cold plastic grip of the pistol. She pulled it out and let it hang by her side.

She was going to get the key from the dead miner. If Pack Leader showed up to stop her, she would shoot him.

And if . . . and if she could not bring herself to come back out of that cave, if she found herself instead walking deeper into it, deeper, toward the Darkness, unable to resist, well . . .

Taylor was not Brianna. Breeze had an image of herself as a superhero. Taylor knew she was just a girl. Like any other girl except that she had the strange ability to think of a place and appear there instantaneously.

And now Brianna was very late getting back. The Breeze was never late. Brianna didn't know how to be late. Something had happened to her.

So it was Taylor's turn. She felt it, knew it. But Sam didn't ask her. He stood there staring down the road, like he was willing Brianna to appear.

Dekka was more upset than Taylor had ever seen her. Dekka was normally a rock, but the rock had some cracks in it now.

Edilio kept a poker face. Eyes straight ahead, waiting for orders. Patient.

No one wanted to pressure Sam. But everyone knew that with each passing minute, it was becoming harder to act.

It was up to Taylor. Sam didn't want to send her. So it was up to her.

She would do anything for Sam. Anything. She supposed she was kind of in love with him, even though he was older than her and was totally into Astrid.

Sam had saved Taylor's life. He had saved her sanity.

Caine had decreed that uncooperative freaks at Coates be kept under control. He had figured out that most powers seemed to focus through a kid's hands, and with Drake's help he had moved quickly and decisively.

It was called plastering. It involved encasing a kid's hands in a block of cement. The blocks weighed forty pounds. The sheer weight rendered kids helpless. At first Caine's flunkies had fed them in dishes on the ground, like dogs. Taylor and the others, including Brianna and Dekka, had lapped up bowls of cereal and milk like animals.

Then trouble had broken out between the kids left in charge at Coates while Caine went down to grab control in Perdido Beach.

The feedings had grown less frequent. And then they had stopped altogether. Taylor had eaten weeds poking up through gravel.

Sam was the reason she wasn't dead.

She owed him. Everything.

Even, she realized with a sinking in the pit of her stomach, the life he had given back to her.

"I'll be right back," she said.

Before Sam or anyone else could speak, she was gone. Just down to the end of the road so she could see the gate, not far, not as far as she was capable of teleporting.

One second she was with Sam and Edilio and Dekka. A millisecond later she was alone in the dark, her friends just out of sight behind her.

It was like changing a TV channel. Only she was inside the TV.

Taylor took a shaky breath. The gate was just fifty yards away. The power plant beyond was bright and intimidating.

They would expect her to either bounce into the guardhouse or directly into the plant. She wouldn't do either.

A split second later she was on the hillside above the guardhouse, tripping because she had materialized on a steep slope.

She caught herself, glanced around quickly, saw no one, and bounced to a dark shadowed place behind a parked delivery truck just off to one side of the gate.

"Ah!"

A shout of surprise and Taylor knew she had made a bad choice.

Two kids, two of Drake's thugs, both armed with rifles were right there, right next to her, hiding behind the truck. Waiting in ambush.

Surprise slowed their reactions. She could see it in their eyes.

"Too slow," Taylor said.

They shouted, swiveled their guns, and she was gone.

She appeared three feet from Sam, who was still staring down the road.

"Taylor. What are you doing?" he asked.

He hadn't realized she was gone. She laughed in relief. "Two guys with guns behind a big truck, just past the gate, to the left. I don't think anyone's actually in the guardhouse. It's an ambush. If you guys went toward the guardhouse, these guys would be able to shoot you in the back. They saw me."

Now it was Sam's turn to be a little stunned.

"You . . ."

"Yeah."

"You shouldn't . . ."

"Had to. And look, I didn't see Brianna anywhere."

"Load up," Sam ordered. He leaped into the Jeep. "Dekka?"

"On it," Dekka said, breaking into a run for her own vehicle.

Edilio shouted to his guys to load up as well.

"Thanks," Sam said over his shoulder.

Taylor felt amazingly happy over that one word acknowledgment. "I could . . .," she began, not really wanting Sam to say yes.

"No," he said firmly. "And keep your head down." To Edilio he said, "Straight to the gate, but pull over before you reach it. We have to move fast before they can figure out what to do. But, remember, there'll be one more guy out there. The one that Taylor *didn't* see."

"Yep," Edilio said. "We're ready for that."

Taylor wondered what they were talking about, but it wasn't time for twenty questions.

The Jeep careened around the curve and hurtled down the hill to the gate. Edilio slammed on the brakes. Dekka's SUV barely had time to avoid piling into them. The third vehicle followed more slowly.

Sam jumped out. Dekka leaped while her own car was still moving.

Both pelted down the hill.

Taylor heard Sam yelling instructions to Dekka. Seconds later the truck, tons of steel, floated up off the ground.

Taylor saw the two thugs gaping up at it.

Sam raised his hands. "Guys?" he said to the two startled thugs. "Way I see it, you have a choice. Drop your guns, run away, and live. Or point those guns my way and burn."

The two guns clattered on the pavement. The two boys stuck their arms in the air.

"You have anything we can eat?" one asked.

Dekka dropped the truck back into place.

It made a huge noise, smashing, bouncing but remaining upright.

"Have you seen Brianna?" Dekka asked them.

"No," the boy said.

"But if she tried to go after them inside, she's not coming back," the other said, trying to sound tough, even though his hands were in the air.

"Taylor," Sam said. "Double-check the guardhouse."

Taylor bounced into the guardhouse. She was on a hair trigger, ready to bounce back out again. But she saw no one inside.

Outside, through the window, she saw Edilio's soldiers piling out of the last car, machine guns ready. Howard stepped out of the SUV, scared, cringing. And slowly, like he was an old man with arthritis, came Orc. Howard was a tiny shadow beside him.

Taylor bounced to them.

"No one's in the guardhouse," Taylor reported. "And no Brianna."

Dekka looked at Sam. "If anyone's hurt that girl, they don't get the chance to walk away."

"Dekka, we need to play this smart," Sam said.

"No, Sam," Dekka said with sudden, savage ferocity. "Anyone who hurts that girl dies."

Taylor expected Sam to put Dekka in her place. Instead, he said, "We all love her, Dekka. We'll do what's right."

Taylor bounced next to Dekka. She put her hand on Dekka's strong shoulder. The girl was trembling.

TWENTY-FOUR

18 HOURS, 1 MINUTE

SAM WISHED CAINE would come out after him. That would be best. That would be the thing. A straight-up fight, out in the open. Last time they'd had that fight, Sam had won.

But Caine wasn't going to step outside.

The fight had barely begun and already he had lost Brianna.

Poor Breeze.

"What do we do?" Edilio asked. He was at Sam's side. Edilio was always at his side, and Sam was profoundly grateful for that. But right this moment, standing here in the shadow of the hulking power plant, with images of Brianna filling the next hole in the town plaza, he wished Edilio would shut up and leave him in peace.

But Sam was the guy who made decisions. Win or lose. Right or wrong. Life or death.

"I should have brought Astrid along," Sam said. "She knows the plant better than either of us do."

"They gotta be in the control room," Edilio said. "Whatever Caine is up to, he'd want to have the control room."

"Yeah."

"Only two ways in, as far as I remember. Either in through the turbine building or back through all the offices. They'll have both covered."

"Yeah."

"Kind of narrow hallways from either direction. Come through the turbine room, maybe they won't want to get crazy and do anything that messes up the plant, right?"

Sam looked at him sharply. "You're right. That makes sense. I should have thought of it. Caine doesn't want the plant destroyed."

Edilio shrugged. "Hey, man, I'm not just your good-looking Mexican sidekick."

Sam smiled. "You're not Mexican. You're Honduran."

"Oh, yeah," Edilio said dryly. "Sometimes I forget." Then, serious again, he said, "Caine didn't come here to wreck the place. He came here to take it over, use it somehow. Boy doesn't want to sit in the dark any more than we do."

"But he'll do what he has to," Sam said.

"Yeah. If the other choice is him coming out peacefully and letting us lock him up, or . . ."

Howard sidled up. "We standing around here all night or what? Orc's, like, let's do this or let me go home and go to sleep."

"I kind of thought we'd take a couple of minutes to think it over," Sam snarled. "We've probably lost Breeze. But if you'd rather just have Orc go barreling in there alone, fine."

"No, man," Howard said, backing down quickly.

Sam laid his hand on Edilio's shoulder and gave it a little squeeze. "He may have hostages."

"Yeah," Edilio agreed. "My guys. Mike and Mickey and Brittney and Josh."

“Okay, as long as we understand,” Sam said. He made eye contact with Edilio. Edilio gave just the slightest nod in return.

“Here’s my plan. Taylor bounces in, carries a shotgun, starts to blast. One, two, three rounds, then bounces out. At that point we hit them all together, straight through the turbine room.”

“Yep,” Edilio said. “Straight through the turbine room.”

Looking perfectly casual, Edilio slung his knapsack off his shoulder and began rummaging inside. He called over to a kid named Steve, one of his soldiers. “Hey, Steve, man, where’s my Snickers bar? I had it right here in my backpack.”

Steve frowned and headed over. The pockets of his cargo pants were bulging.

Edilio drew a gun—too big, too brightly colored, and too plastic to be real from his backpack. He pumped it once, leveled it at waist level, and fired.

A thin stream of watered-down yellow paint sprayed thirty feet.

At the same time Steve drew twin cans of spray paint from his pants, aimed, and fired.

Edilio and Steve both sprayed in a circle, twirling, hitting kids and cars and foliage.

“There!” Sam yelled.

Bug was almost completely invisible at night. But a lot less invisible with a spray of yellow paint across his chest.

Bug bolted, looking like nothing more than a dancing, racing streak of fluorescence. He pelted away, yelling, “Open the door! Open the door!”

Dekka took a stance. “Make it look good, but not too good,” Sam whispered.

Suddenly Bug tripped. Gravity had ceased to exist, but he stumbled out of Dekka’s range, regained his feet, and hit the door.

“Nice,” Sam said.

The door opened, and Bug fell into the darkness beyond.

“You think he heard?” Edilio asked.

“Yeah. He’ll be blurting it to Caine right about now. So we go in hard and fast.”

“How?” Edilio asked.

“Right through the wall,” Sam said grimly. “Howard! Orc!” he yelled. He pointed at the turbine room door, which had slammed shut behind Bug. “Take out that door. Edilio, grab your best guy and go with them. Make lots of noise. Make it look good. Everyone else with me.”

“Lots of noise,” Edilio echoed in a worried voice.

Sam tightened his grip on Edilio’s shoulder. “If I were ever going to have a Mexican sidekick, you’d be the guy.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Ready?”

“Nope.”

“So let’s go,” Sam said. Then, louder, “Let’s go!”

They raced for the door that Bug had taken. Across the parking lot at a crazy run. Edilio, Steve, and one other soldier, half pushing Orc ahead of them as Howard drifted strategically slower and fell behind in relative safety.

Sam, Dekka, and the remaining soldiers kept pace, then peeled off, dodging left and racing along the building.

Taylor stayed behind with two guys guarding the rear.

Orc ran straight for the door. He plowed into it like a bull, full-speed, heedless. The sound of the impact echoed around the parking lot.

The metal door crumpled but did not give. Orc reared back and kicked it with his stone foot. He fell on his back, but the door flew open.

Gunfire erupted from inside.

Orc stayed flat. The others dodged aside.

Edilio began firing through the doorway, an earsplitting din. The muzzle flash was like a strobe light.

Sam and Dekka raced away, hugging the wall.

“About here, I think,” Sam said, panting.

The two of them stepped away from the wall, and Sam raised his hands.

Blistering green fire exploded from Sam’s upraised palms. The brick wall glowed red. Almost immediately the masonry began to crack, and then Dekka made her own move. Gravity beneath the wall ceased to exist.

The wall began to crack. Flakes of mortar and stone flew straight up in the air. Some of the smaller chunks caught fire and burned as they rose. The wall was coming apart, but too slowly.

“Orc!” Sam yelled.

The boy-monster rolled to his feet and came at a rush.

“Dekka, off!” Sam yelled.

The green fire died, gravity returned with a rain of dirt and gravel, and through it ran Orc. He hit the weakened wall with one massive shoulder. The cinder block collapsed in like a fallen pie crust.

Orc backed up, then hit it again and he was through. Sam dashed after him, but unlike Orc he was not immune to the heat he had himself created. It was like rushing into an oven. He brushed against a bit of red-hot brick and yelped in pain.

Sam froze.

Inside, beyond the cinderblock wall, was not the control room. Instead of breaking through to the control room and catching Caine off guard, he was in an outer room filled with old-style metal filing cabinets.

The whole plan had just fallen apart. The diversion was now pointless.

Dekka was right behind Sam. “So much for the element of surprise,” she said.

No time for regrets, Sam told himself, but it was a bitter moment. Surprise might have saved lives. Surprise might have allowed them to rescue the hostages.

“The next wall should be easier,” Sam said. “Take cover!”

Dekka jumped behind a row of filing cabinets as Sam attacked the inner wall. The temperature in the filing room went from stifling to dangerous in seconds.

Sam’s light burned away paint and wallboard in a few seconds, but beyond it, inside the wall, was a barrier of dull, gray metal.

“It’s a radiation shield,” Sam yelled to Dekka. “Lead.”

The lead melted quickly at the touch of Sam’s probing fire. Liquid lead dribbled down the wall and pooled, instantly igniting anything it touched.

But now the file room was too hot for anyone. The air was gone, and Sam was woozy, unfocused, forgetting what he was doing.

“Orc! Grab him!” Dekka yelled as she dove back outside, gasping for breath.

Sam felt himself lifted off his feet. It was curiously pleasant. Outside, the shock of cold air on his face snapped him back to reality.

He glanced to his right. Gunfire still kept the turbine room doorway clear. Edilio was flattened against the wall, unable to do anything but reload and keep firing blindly. His soldiers had been ordered back to safety behind parked cars.

The attack was failing.

Sam stood up, fighting nausea and dizziness. He faced the wall again. He could shoot through the outer wall, through the room beyond, and hit the lead shield. But his deadly light was diffused at that distance. And he had no room to ply the blowtorch back and forth and widen the hole.

He raised his hands and unleashed the power. The lead sheath melted quickly. But too late, Sam knew. Too late for surprise. Too late.

And in the end, too little.

A red-rimmed hole about the size of a manhole cover dripped melted lead like tears.

Then a familiar voice cried, "Sam!"

Sam ignored it.

"Sam, in three seconds I'm pushing one of my hostages into this hole you've made," Caine yelled. "One!"

Sam widened the gap as much as he could, working the edges, melting lead.

"Two!"

He couldn't stop, Sam told himself.

But if he didn't stop, he had no doubt, none, that Caine would make good on his threat. Caine could literally hurl one of the hostages into the fiery hole Sam was burning.

Sam dropped his hands. The light died.

"That's better," Caine yelled.

"Come out now, Caine, and maybe I let you walk away in one piece," Sam blustered.

"Here's the thing, brother," Caine called back. "I have two of your people. Give a shout-out, kids."

"It's me, Sam. It's Mike Farmer! Mickey's here, too. And Britt, she's . . . she's hurt."

Sam shot a look at Dekka. She stared back at him, stone faced. Caine had said two hostages. So he was counting Brittney as dead.

And no mention of Brianna. The Breeze was not a hostage. At the same time, Sam told himself, Mike hadn't listed her, either. So at least she wasn't lying defeated in that room.

The gunfire at the doorway had ceased. Edilio still stood ready, but not knowing what to do next.

"Let them go, Caine," Sam said wearily.

"I don't think I'm going to do that," Caine answered.

Sam ran his hand through his hair, beside himself with frustration.

"What is it you want?" Sam asked. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I have the power plant, that's obvious," Caine said. "Stupid of you to lose it, Sam."

Sam had no answer to that.

“What I’m going to do, Sam, is turn off the power to Perdido Beach.”

“You do that, you’ll be sitting in the dark, too,” Sam shouted back.

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you?” Caine said with a laugh. “But it turns out that’s not true. It seems we can turn off some parts of the grid from here and not affect other parts.”

“I think you’re bluffing, Caine. I’ve seen the control room. It would take you a week to make any sense out of it.”

Caine laughed easily. “Oh, man, you are right about that, brother. Hey, it would probably take me a month. And Diana’s no better at the techie stuff. And Drake, well, you know Drake. But . . .”

Sam knew what was coming next. He closed his eyes and hung his head.

“Fortunately, our mutual friend Computer Jack, here, he’s pretty much got it whipped. In fact . . . How’s it going, Jack? Got it yet?”

There was a murmur, barely audible. Then, Caine again, taunting. “Guess what, Sam?”

Sam refused to answer.

“Jack here says the lights just went off in Perdido Beach.”

Caine laughed, a wild, triumphant sound.

Sam caught Taylor’s eye. She teleported over to him. “Check it out,” he said. The girl nodded once and disappeared.

“You sending Brianna to check it out?” Caine shouted. “Or Taylor?”

Sam said nothing. He waited.

Taylor popped back into view, right beside him.

“I bounced to a bend in the road where you can see town,” she reported.

“And?”

TWENTY-FIVE

17 HOURS, 54 MINUTES

DUCK HAD ARGUED with himself all the way home. Hunter's problem was not his problem, he told himself. Okay, maybe he was a freak now, too, like Hunter, but so what? He had some stupid, useless power—why did that mean he had to buy a piece of Hunter's grief?

Hunter was a jerk. And all the people Duck liked were normals. Mostly. He liked Sam, of course, in a sort of distant way. But, man, how was he suddenly supposed to be choosing sides in a fight he didn't even know was happening?

However, he didn't like the idea of just leaving Hunter hiding out hungry in the rubble outside the church. That seemed kind of harsh.

By the time he had reached the relative safety of his home, Duck had talked himself out of doing anything one way or the other. And then he talked himself into the opposite position. And back again.

He found himself looking in the kitchen cupboards. Just to see. Just to see if it was even possible to help Hunter out.

There wasn't much to see in the kitchen. Two cans of veggies. A jar of hot dog relish, but not even the sweet kind. A half-empty bag of flour and some oil. He'd learned how to cook a sort of nasty-tasting tortilla with the flour and a little water and oil. It was the current popular favorite in the FAYZ, something even the most kitchen-impaired could kind of figure out.

He didn't want to even think about what they'd all be eating in a week. From what Duck had heard, there was food in the fields, but no one wanted to pick it if there were zekes. He shuddered at the thought.

But he supposed he could spare the hot dog relish. Not exactly something good for you, but Hunter had sounded pretty desperate. And nowadays everyone was eating things that would have made them gag before.

Duck had a sudden vision of actual hot dogs. The real thing, steaming hot, nestled in a tender white bun.

Duck's aunt was from Chicago. She had taught him about genuine Chicago hot dogs with, what was it? Seven toppings? He wondered if he could remember them all.

Mustard. Relish. Onions. Tomatoes.

His mouth was watering at the thought. But then his mouth would have watered at the idea of a real hot dog topped with Brussels sprouts.

He made up his mind. It wasn't about freaks versus normals. It was about whether he could just leave Hunter out there cowering all through the night.

No. He'd bring him the relish and then, if Hunter needed a place to hide, he'd let him stay in the basement here at the house.

Duck slipped the relish into the pocket of his jacket and headed with great reluctance back into the night.

It took only a few minutes to reach the church.

"Hunter. Yo, Hunter," he called in a hoarse whisper.

Nothing.

Great. Perfect. He was being punked after all.

He turned and started to walk away. But around the corner came a group of seven, maybe eight kids. It took him only a second to spot the baseball bats.

Zil was in the lead.

“There’s one!” Zil shouted, and before Duck could even react the seven boys were rushing him.

“What’s up?” Duck asked.

The boys surrounded him. There was no denying their menacing attitude, but Duck was determined not to give them an excuse to start swinging.

“What’s up?” Zil mocked. “The Human Drill wants to know what’s up.” He gave Duck a shove. “One of your kind killed my best friend, that’s what’s up.”

“We’re sick of it,” another boy chimed in.

Various voices muttered agreement.

“Guys, I didn’t hurt anyone,” Duck said. “I’m just . . .”

He didn’t know what he was just. The hostile eyes around him narrowed.

“Just what, freak?” Zil demanded.

“Walking, man. Anything wrong with that?”

“We’re looking for Hunter,” Hank said.

“We’re going to kick his butt.”

“Yeah. Maybe rearrange his nose,” Antoine said. “Like maybe it would look better sticking out the side of his face.”

They laughed.

“Hunter?” Duck said, working to sound innocent.

“Yeah. Mr. Microwave. Killer chud.”

Duck shrugged. “I haven’t seen him, man.”

“What’s that in your pocket there?” Zil demanded. “He’s got something in his pocket.”

“What? Oh, it’s nothing. It’s—”

The baseball bat swung with unerring accuracy. Duck felt the blow on his hip where the relish hung in his jacket pocket. The soggy sound of wet glass shattering.

“Hey!” Duck yelled.

He started to push his way through them, but his feet wouldn’t move. He looked down, uncomprehending, and saw that he had sunk up to his ankles in the sidewalk.

“Okay, stop making me mad,” he cried desperately.

“Stop making me mad,” Zil repeated in a taunting, singsong voice.

“Hey, man, he’s sinking!” one of them yelled.

Duck was up to mid-calf. Trapped. He met Zil’s contemptuous gaze and pleaded, “Come on, man, why are you picking on me?”

“Because you’re a subhuman moof,” Zil said, adding, “duh.”

“You want Hunter, right?” Duck asked. “He’s in there, man, behind all this stuff.”

“Is that so?” Zil said. He nodded to his gang, and all together they climbed into the rubble in search of their true prey. Someone, Duck didn’t see who, smashed the stained glass fragment with his bat.

Duck took a deep breath. “Happy thoughts, happy thoughts,” he whispered. He had stopped sinking, but he was still trapped. He squirmed his foot this way and that. Finally he pulled one foot free—minus the shoe. The other foot came out easier, and

he managed to keep the shoe.

Duck took off at a run.

“Hey, get back here!”

“He lied, man, Hunter’s not here!”

“Get him!”

Duck ran all-out, yelling, “Happy thoughts, happy thoughts, ah hah hah hah!” desperate to keep anger at bay, forcing his mouth into a grin.

He made it across the street. He was well out in front of the mob, but not far enough ahead that he would be able to get inside his house and lock the door before they caught him.

“Help! Someone help me!” he cried.

His next step landed hard.

The step after that broke the curb.

The third step plowed down through the sidewalk and he fell hard.

His chin hit concrete and crunched through it like a rock through glass.

He was falling into the earth again. Only this time he was facedown.

Zil and the others immediately surrounded him. A blow landed on his back. Another on his behind. Neither blow hurt. It was like they were hitting him with straws rather than bats. Then they could no longer reach him because he had fallen all the way through the cement and was sinking through the dirt.

“Scratch one chud,” Duck heard Zil crow.

Then, “What happened, man?”

“All the lights went out,” someone said, sounding scared.

There was a frightened curse, and the sound of running footsteps.

Duck Zhang, facedown in dirt, kept sinking.

Mary was lying in bed, in the dark, running her hands over her belly, feeling the fat there. Thinking, just a few more weeks of dieting, maybe. And then she’d be there. Wherever “there” was.

The water bottle beside her bed was empty. Mary climbed wearily from her bed. She opened the bathroom door and flipped on the light. For a moment she saw someone she did not recognize, someone with sunken cheeks and hollow eyes.

Then sudden, total darkness.

In the basement of town hall, in the gloomy space kids called the hospital, Dahra Baidoo held Josh’s hand.

He wouldn’t stop crying.

They’d brought him from the battle at the power plant. One of Edilio’s soldiers had dropped him off.

“I want my mom, I want my mom.” Josh was rocking back and forth, deaf to any words Dahra had, lost and ashamed.

“I want my mom,” he cried.

“I just want my mom.”

“I’ll put on a DVD,” Dahra said. She had no other solution. She’d seen kids like this before, too many to keep track of. Sometimes it was all just too much for some kids. They broke, like a stick bent too far. Snapped.

Dahra wondered how long it would be before she was one of them.
How long until she was holding herself and rocking and weeping for her mother?
Suddenly, the lights went out.
“I want my mom,” Josh wept in the dark.

At the day care John Terrafino lay zoned out, one eye half open, watching a muted TV while he fed a bottle to a cranky ten-month-old. The bottle wasn't filled with milk or formula. It was filled with water mixed with oatmeal juice and a small amount of puréed fish.

None of the baby care books had recommended this. The baby was sick. Getting weaker every day. John doubted the baby, whose name was also John, would live very long.

“It's okay,” he whispered.
The TV blinked off.

...

Astrid had gotten Little Pete to bed, finally. She was exhausted and worried. Her eye hurt where the baseball bat had caught her. She had a gruesome bruise in yellow and black. Ice had helped, but not much.

She needed to sleep; it was one in the morning, but it wasn't going to happen. Not yet. Not until she knew Sam was okay. She wished she could have gone to the power plant with him. Not that she would have been much help, but she would at least have known.

Strange how, in just three short months, Sam had come to feel like a necessary part of her life. More than that, even. A necessary part of *her*. An arm, a leg. A heart.

She heard a noise from the street. Running. She tensed, expecting to hear the pounding of feet on her porch. But no one approached.

Was it Hunter coming back? Or was Zil still running around looking for trouble? There wasn't anything she could do about it. She had no powers, or none that mattered, anyway. All she could do was threaten and cajole.

By the time she reached the window, the street was empty and quiet.

She hoped Hunter was hiding somewhere. They'd have to figure out what to do about that situation and it would be very tricky. Explosive, maybe. But it wasn't going to be solved tonight.

What was happening with Sam? Had he managed to stop Caine?

Was he hurt?

Was he dead?

God forbid, she prayed.

No. He wasn't dead. She would feel it if he was.

She wiped away a tear, and sighed. No way she could sleep. Not happening. So she sat herself down in front of the computer. Her hands were shaking as she touched the keyboard. She needed to do something useful. Something. Anything to keep from thinking about Sam.

At the bottom of the screen were the usual icons for Safari and Firefox. Web browsers that, when opened, would just remind her that she was not connected to the

internet.

Astrid opened the mutation file. There were all the bizarre pictures. The cat that had melded with a book. The snakes with tiny wings. The seagulls with raptor talons. The zeke.

She opened a Word document and began to type.

The one constant seems to be that mutations are making creatures—humans and nonhumans—more dangerous. The mutations are almost all in the form of weapons.

She paused and thought about that for a moment. That wasn't quite right. Some kids had developed powers that seemed to be essentially useless. The truth was, Sam wished more mutants had developed what he called "serious" powers. And there was Lana, whose gift was definitely not a weapon.

Weapons or defense mechanisms. Of course it may be that I simply have not observed enough mutations to know. But it would not exactly be surprising if mutations tended to be survival mechanisms. That's the whole point of evolution: survival.

But was this evolution? Evolution was a series of hits and misses over the course of millions of years, not a sudden explosion of radical changes. Evolution built on existing DNA. What was happening in the FAYZ was a radical departure from the billion years' worth of code in animal DNA. There might be genes for speed, but there was no gene for teleportation, or for suspension of gravity, or for telekinesis.

There was no DNA for firing light from the palms of your hands.

The fact is, I don't

The screen went blank. The room was dark.

Astrid stood up and went to the window. She pulled back the curtains and looked out at total darkness. Not a light on in the street.

She let herself out onto the porch.

Darkness. Everywhere. Not a single light from the surrounding houses.

Someone a few doors down yelled in outrage, "Hey!"

Caine had reached the power plant. Sam had failed.

Astrid stifled a sob. If Sam was hurt . . . If . . .

Astrid felt fear like icy fingers reaching through her nightgown. She stumbled into the kitchen. She opened the junk drawer and found, after some searching, a flashlight. The light from it was faint and failed in seconds.

But in the few seconds of light she found a candle.

She tried to light it from the stove. But the gas ran unlit because it required electricity to fire.

Matches. A lighter. Surely there were some matches somewhere.

But there was no way to find them without light. She had a candle and no way to light it.

Astrid felt her way to the stairs and climbed to Little Pete's room. The Game Boy was beside his bed, where he always left it. If he woke up and found it missing, he would go nuts. He would . . . there was no telling what he would do.

She carried the Game Boy down the stairs and used the light from the LED to search the junk drawer. No matches, but there was a yellow Bic lighter.

She struck a flame and lit the candle.

She had avoided thinking about Sam for the last few moments, intent on her search. But there was no escaping the fact that Sam had rushed off to stop Caine. And he had not succeeded. The only question now was: Had he survived?

A line from an old poem bubbled up from Astrid's near-photographic memory. "The center cannot hold," she whispered to the eerily lit kitchen. The verse played in her head.

*Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

"Things fall apart; the center cannot hold," Astrid repeated.

The center, maybe. But surely, even here in the FAYZ, God listened and watched over His children.

"Please let Sam be okay," she whispered to the candle.

She made the sign of the cross on her chest and knelt before the kitchen counter as if it were an altar.

"Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle. Be our defense against the wickedness and snares of the devil."

In the old days when she had said this prayer, the devil was a creature with horns and a tail. Now in her mind the devil had the same face as Caine. And when the prayer went on to speak of "the evil spirits who prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls," the picture in her mind's eye was of a dead-eyed boy with a snake for an arm.

TWENTY-SIX

17 HOURS, 49 MINUTES

“WHAT IS IT you want, Caine?” Sam’s voice, calling from outside. He sounded angry, frustrated. Defeated.

Caine bowed his head. He savored the moment. Victory. Just four days had passed since he had regained some measure of control over himself. And now he had beaten Sam.

“Four days,” he said, just loudly enough for those in the room to hear. “That’s how long it took me to defeat Sam Temple.” Caine locked eyes with Drake. “Four days,” Caine sneered. “What did you accomplish in the three months I was sick?”

Drake met his gaze, then wavered, and looked down at the floor. There was red in his cheeks, a dangerous glitter in his eyes, but he could not meet Caine’s triumphant scowl.

“Remember this when you finally decide it’s time to take me on, Drake,” Caine whispered.

Caine turned to the others and beamed happiness at his crew. Jack, still at the computer, a sloppy, bloody mess, but so engaged in his work that he was barely aware of what was going on. Bug, drifting in and out of view. Diana pretending to be unimpressed. He winked at her, knowing she wouldn’t respond. Drake’s two soldiers, lounging.

“What do I want?” Caine yelled back through the charred hole in the wall. Then, carefully enunciating each word for emphasis. “What. Do. I. Want?”

And then, Caine drew a blank. For a moment, just a moment before he recovered, he couldn’t think of what he wanted. No one else heard the hesitation. But Caine felt it.

What *did* he want?

He searched for an answer and found one that would do. “You, Sam,” Caine purred. “I want you to walk in here all by yourself. That’s what I want.”

The hostages, Mickey and Mike, looked at each other in disbelief. Caine could guess what they were thinking: their big hero, Sam, had failed.

Sam’s voice was muffled but audible. “I would, Caine. To tell you the truth, it would probably be a relief.” He sounded weary. He sounded beaten. Luscious, wonderful sounds to Caine’s ears. “But we all know how you act when there’s no one there to stop you. So, no.”

Caine let out a loud, theatrical sigh. He smiled ear to ear. “Yeah, I thought you’d take that attitude, Sam. So I have an alternative. I have a trade in mind.”

“Trade? What for what?”

“Food for light,” Caine said. He put his hand to his ear as if listening. To Diana, he whispered, “Hear that? That’s the sound of my brother realizing he’s beaten. Realizing he just became my . . . what’s a good word? Servant? Slave?”

Sam yelled, “Looks to me like you’re the one in trouble, Caine.”

Caine blinked. A warning light was flashing in the back of his mind. He had just made a mistake. He didn’t know what, but he had made a mistake.

“Me?” Caine yelled. “I don’t think so. I own the light switch, brother.”

“Yeah, I guess you do,” Sam shouted. “And I’ve got you surrounded. And if you’re short on food up at Coates, my guess is you don’t have a lot with you here. So I’m guessing you’ll get hungry pretty soon.”

Caine’s smile froze.

“Well, there’s an unexpected development,” Diana said dryly.

Caine bit his thumbnail and yelled, “Hey, brother of mine, do I have to remind you that I have two of your people hostage in here?”

There was a long silence and Caine braced himself, thinking that Sam might launch another attack. Finally, Sam spoke. He sounded both more grim and more confident. “Go ahead, Caine, do whatever you want with the hostages. Then you won’t have hostages anymore. And you’ll still be hungry.”

“You think I won’t turn the hostages over to Drake?” Caine threatened. “You’ll be able to listen to them scream.” He could feel the color rising in his cheeks. He knew Sam’s answer. It wasn’t long in coming.

“Two seconds after I hear anyone yelling, in we come,” Sam said. “It will be bloody, and I’d like to not have that. But you know I have enough people with enough power to do it.”

Caine chewed his thumbnail. He glanced at Diana, willing her to have some solution, some helpful idea. He carefully avoided making eye contact with Drake.

“So, I have a better idea,” Sam yelled. “How about I give you ten minutes to get out of there? And I give you my word you can go back to Coates.”

Caine squeezed out a laugh that was half snarl. “Not happening, Sam. I’m holding this place. And you can go back to a very dark town.”

There was no answer.

The silence was eloquent. Sam didn’t need to say anything else. And Caine had nothing left to say. It felt as if there was a band tightening around his chest. Like he had to fight for each breath.

Something was not right. Something was very much not right. The fears that lived in his nightmares were rising now, like an incoming tide inside his head. He was in a trap.

“Stay tight,” Drake muttered as his soldiers exchanged skeptical, worried looks.

Diana swiveled in her chair. “So what now, Fearless Leader? He’s right: we don’t have any food.”

Caine winced. He ran a hand through his hair. His head felt hot.

He turned quickly, feeling as if someone was sneaking up behind him. No one there but the girl, Brittney, on the floor.

How had he not seen this coming? How had he not realized he would be trapped here? Even if he could somehow reach his people at Coates, they were far fewer in number than the number of kids Sam could command.

And none would come. Not here. Not with Sam surrounding the place.

Sam could have fifty people sitting outside the power plant within a few hours. And what could Caine do?

What could he *do*?

They had taken the power plant. They had turned off the lights in Perdido Beach. But now they were trapped. It was impossible.

Caine frowned, trying to concentrate. Why had he done it? In the space of a minute he had gone from crowing triumph to dismal humiliation.

What he had done? It made no sense. It gained him nothing. All he had thought was: Take the plant. Take it, and hold it. Then . . .

Then . . .

Caine felt himself sinking, mind swirling down and down as if a pit had opened beneath him.

The realization was sudden and sickening. He hadn't taken the power plant in order to get food for his people, or even to show his power over Sam. He hadn't been following his own desires at all.

Caine, the color all drained from his face now, stared at Drake.

"It's for him," Caine said. "It's all for him."

Drake narrowed his eyes, uncomprehending.

"He's hungry," Caine whispered. It hurt him to see the dawning realization in Diana's eyes as he said the words, "He's hungry in the dark."

"How do you know?" Drake demanded.

Caine spread his hands, helpless to explain. Words would not come.

"It's why he let me go," Caine said, more to himself than to Diana or Drake. "It's why he released me. For this."

"Are you telling me we're living out some fever dream of yours?" Diana was poised between laughing and crying, incredulous. "Are you telling me we did all this because that monster out in the desert is in your head?"

"What does he need us to do?" Drake asked, eager, not angry. A dog anxious to please his true master.

"We have to bring it to him. We have to feed him," Caine said.

"Feed him what?"

Caine sighed and looked at Jack. "The food that brings the light to his darkness. The same thing that brings light to Perdido Beach. The uranium."

Jack shook his head slowly, understanding but not wanting to understand. "Caine, how do we do that? How do we take uranium from the core? How do we move it for miles across the desert? It's heavy. It's dangerous. It's radioactive."

"Caine, this is crazy," Diana pleaded. "Drag radioactive uranium across the desert? How does this help you? How does this help any of us? What is the point?"

Caine hesitated. He frowned. She was right. Why should he serve the Darkness? Let the creature feed itself. Caine had problems of his own, his own needs, his own—

A roar so loud, it seemed to vibrate the walls, filled the room. It knocked Caine to his knees. He clapped his hands over his ears, trying to block it out, but it went on and on, as he cringed and covered himself and fought the sudden desire to void his bowels.

It stopped. The silence rang.

Slowly Caine opened his eyes. Diana looked at him like he had gone crazy. Drake stared incredulous, on the edge of laughing. Jack merely looked worried.

They hadn't heard it. That inhuman, irresistible roar had been for Caine alone.

Punishment. The gaiaphage would be obeyed.

"What is going on with you?" Diana asked.

Drake narrowed his eyes and smirked openly. "It's the Darkness. Caine is no longer running things. There's a new boss."

Diana gave voice to Caine's own thoughts.

"Poor Caine," she said. "You poor, screwed-up boy."

For Lana each step seemed too loud, like she was walking on a giant bass drum. Her legs were stiff, knees welded solid. Her feet felt each pebble as though she were barefoot.

Her heart pounded so hard, it seemed the whole world must be able to hear it.

No, no, it was just her imagination. There was no sound but the soft cornflake crunch of sneakers on gravel. Her heart beat for her ears only. She was no louder than a mouse.

But she was convinced it could hear her. Like an owl listening and watching for prey in the night, it watched and it waited, and all her stealth was like a brass band to it, him, the thing, the Darkness.

The moon was out. Or what passed for the moon. The stars shone. Or something very like stars. Silvery light illuminated tips of brush, the seams of a boulder, and cast deep shadows everywhere else.

Lana picked her way along, holding herself tight. The gun was in her right hand, hanging by her side, brushing against her thigh. A flashlight—off for now—stuck up from her pocket.

You think you own me. You think you control me. No one owns me. No one controls me.

Two points of light winked in the shadows ahead.

Lana froze.

The twin lights stared at her. They did not move.

Lana raised the gun and took aim. She aimed at the space directly between the two points of light.

The explosion lit up the night for a split second.

In that flash she saw the coyote.

Then it was gone and her ears were ringing.

From back down the trail she heard a wooden door creaking, slamming. Cookie's voice. "Lana! Lana!"

"I'm okay, Cookie. Get back inside. Lock the door! Do it!" she yelled.

She heard the door slam.

"I know you're out there, Pack Leader," Lana said. "I'm not so helpless this time."

Lana started moving again. The explosion, the bullet—which almost certainly had missed its target—had settled her down. She knew now that the mutant coyote leader was there, watching. She was sure the Darkness also knew.

Good. Fine. Better. No more sneaking. She could march to the mine and take the key from the corpse. And then march back to the building where Cookie waited with Patrick.

The gun felt good in her hand.

"Come on, Pack Leader," she purred. "Not scared of a bullet, are you?"

But her bravado faded as she drew near the mine entrance. The moonlight painted the crossbeam above the entrance with faintest silver. Below it a black mouth waiting greedily to swallow her up.

Come to me.

Imagination. There was no voice.

I have need of you.

Lana clicked the flashlight on and aimed the beam at the mouth of the cave. She might as well have pointed it at the night sky. The beam illuminated nothing.

Flashlight in her left hand. Pistol heavy in her right. The smell of cordite from the shot she'd fired. The crunch of gravel. Limbs heavy. Mind in something like a dream-state now, all focus narrowed down to a simple task.

She reached the mine shaft entrance. There above it, perched on the narrow ledge, stood Pack Leader snarling down at her.

She aimed her flashlight and swung the pistol to follow the beam, but the coyote darted away.

He's not trying to stop me, Lana realized. He's just observing. The eyes and ears of the Darkness.

Into the mine entrance. The beam searched and stopped when it found the object.

The face was like a shrunken head, yellow skin taut against bones that waited patiently to emerge. The rough, patched denim seemed almost new by comparison with the ancient-looking mummy flesh and sere-grass hair.

Lana knelt beside him. "Hey, Jim," she said.

She now had to choose between the gun and the light. She laid the gun on Jim's collapsed chest.

She found his right front pocket. Wrangler jeans. The pocket loose. Easy enough to reach in. But the pocket was empty. She could reach the hip pocket easily enough as well, but it was also empty.

"Sorry about this." She seized the waist of his jeans and rolled him toward her, exposing the other hip pocket. The body moved oddly, too light, too easily shifted, so much weight evaporated.

Empty.

"Human dead."

She knew the voice instantly. It wasn't a voice you ever forgot. It was Pack Leader's slurred, high-pitched snarl.

"Yes, I noticed," Lana said. She was proud of the calmness of her tone. Inside, the panic was threatening to engulf her, just one pocket left, and if the keys weren't there?

"Go to the Darkness," Pack Leader said.

He was a dozen feet away, poised, ready. Could she reach the gun before Pack Leader could reach her?

"The Darkness told me to pick this guy's pockets," Lana said. "The Darkness says he wants gum. Thinks maybe Jim has a pack."

During her time as Pack Leader's captive, Lana had come to respect the coyote leader's ruthless determination, his cunning, his power. But not his intelligence. He was, despite the mutation that allowed speech, a coyote. His frame of reference was hunting rodents and dominating his pack.

Lana shoved the corpse away from her, rolling it back to reveal the remaining pocket. The gun clattered onto the rock, Hermit Jim between Lana and the weapon.

No chance now that she could reach it before Pack Leader could reach her.

Lana fumbled for and found the pocket.

Inside, something cold and hard-edged.

She drew the keys out, squeezed them tight in her fist, then thrust them into her own pocket.

Lana leaned out over poor, dead Jim and swept the flashlight until she found the gun.

Pack Leader growled deep in his throat.

“The Darkness asked for it,” she said.

Her fingers closed on it. Slowly, knees creaking, she stood up.

“I forgot. I have to get something,” she said. She walked directly toward the coyote.

But this was too much for Pack Leader.

“Go to Darkness, human.”

“Go to hell, coyote,” Lana answered. She did not move the light, did not telegraph her move, just snapped the gun up and fired.

Once. Twice. Three times. BangBangBang!

Each shot was a bolt of lightning. Like a strobe light.

There was an entirely satisfying coyote yelp of pain.

In the strobe she saw Pack Leader leap. Saw him land hard, far short of his objective.

She was past him and running now, running blind and heedless down the path and as she ran she screamed. But not in terror.

Lana screamed in defiance.

She screamed in triumph.

She had the key.

TWENTY-SEVEN

17 HOURS, 48 MINUTES

BRIANNA WOKE.

It took a while for her to make sense of where she was.

Then the pain reminded her. Pain all down her left arm, left hip, left calf, left ankle.

She had been wearing a denim jacket over a T-shirt, shorts, and sneakers. The hoodie was burned away on her left shoulder and arm, a skid burn. A three-inch oval was gone from her shorts on the same side.

The skin beneath was bloody. She had hit the roof at high speed. The concrete had been like sandpaper.

It hurt amazingly.

She was on her back. Staring up at the bogus stars. Her head hurt. Her palms were scraped raw but nowhere near the scraped-to-the-meat injuries on her side.

Brianna picked herself up, gasping from the pain. It was like she was on fire. She looked, expecting almost to see actual flames.

It was scary bright on the roof of the power plant. So she could see the wounds all too clearly. The blood looked blue in the fluorescent light. Her injuries weren't life-threatening, she reassured herself, she wasn't going to die. But oh, man, it hurt and it was going to keep on hurting.

"Happens when you slam concrete at a couple hundred miles an hour," she told herself. "I should wear a helmet and leathers. Like motorcycle guys."

That thought offered a welcome distraction. She spent a few seconds contemplating a sort of superhero outfit for herself. Helmet, black leather, some lightning-bolt decals. Definitely.

It could have been worse, she told herself. It would have been worse if she were anyone else on earth, because when she had hit the deck her body wanted to go tumbling out of control. That would have broken her arms and legs and head.

But she was the Breeze, not anyone else. She'd had the speed to slam palms and feet against concrete fast enough—barely—to turn a deadly tumble into an extremely painful skid.

She limped at regular speed over toward the edge of the roof. But the way the building was constructed the edges sloped away, round-shouldered, rather than forming a nice, neat ninety-degree angle. So she couldn't see straight down, though she could see the gate and the parking lot, all blazing bright. Beyond, the dark mountains, the darker sea.

"Well, this was a stupid idea," Brianna admitted.

She had attempted to fly. That was the fact of it. She had tried to translate her great speed into a sort of bounding, leaping version of flight.

It had made perfect sense at the time. Sam had ordered her not to enter the power plant's control room. But by the same token she had to try to get the lay of the land, to see where all of Caine's people might be positioned. She'd thought: What would be better than the view from on top of the turbine building?

She'd been toying for a long time with the idea of flying. She'd worked out the

basic concept, which amounted to running real fast, leaping onto something a little high, then jumping to something higher still. It wasn't rocket science. It was no different from leaping from rock to rock while crossing a stream. Or perhaps like taking a set of stairs two at a time.

Only in this case the "stairs" had been a parked minivan, and a low administrative building, with the final "step" being the turbine structure itself.

The first two steps had worked fine. She had accelerated to perhaps three hundred miles an hour, leaped, slammed off the roof of the minivan, landed on the admin building, kept almost all of her speed, taken six blistering steps to regain whatever speed she'd lost, and made the jump to the roof of the massive concrete hulk.

And that's when things had gone wrong.

She was just short of landing on the flat part of the roof and instead hit the shoulder. It was more like belly-flopping than it was the sort of airplane-landing-on-runway situation she was looking for.

She'd seen the concrete rushing up at her. She'd motored her feet like crazy. She'd managed to avoid sliding off and falling all the way to the ground, but her desperate lunge had ended with an out-of-control impact that had come very close to killing her.

And now, now, having reached this perch, she couldn't actually see much of anything.

"Sam is going to kill me," Brianna muttered.

Then, as she bent a knee, "Ow."

The roof was a few hundred feet long, one third as wide. She trotted—slowly—from one end to the other. She found the access door easily, a steel door set in a brick superstructure. This would lead down to the turbine room and from there to the control room.

"Well, of course there would be a door," Brianna muttered. "I guess I should pretend that was my plan right from the start."

She tried the doorknob. It was locked. It was very locked.

"Okay, that sucks," Brianna said.

She was desperately thirsty. Even more desperately hungry. Thirst and hunger were often extreme after she had turned on the speed. She doubted she'd find any food up on this roof the size of a parking lot. Maybe water, though. There were massive air conditioners, each the size of a suburban home. Didn't air conditioning always create condensation?

She zipped at a moderate speed over to the closest AC unit, ow, ow, owing as she ran. Brianna let herself in. Found a light switch. Her heart leaped when she spotted the Dunkin' Donuts box. In a flash she was there. But there was nothing inside but some tissue paper smeared with the crusty remains of pink icing and a half dozen brightly colored sprinkles.

Brianna licked the paper. It had been so long since she'd tasted anything sweet. But the result was just a sharpening of the pain in her stomach.

She found what she hoped was a water pipe, white plastic. She looked around for a tool and found a small steel box containing a few wrenches and a screwdriver. In seconds she had popped the pipe and was filling her stomach with ice cold water. Then she let the water pour over the burns on her skin and cried out at the agony of it.

She next carried the screwdriver—it was large and heavy—to the steel door. She

inserted it into the gap between the handle and the frame and pushed. There was no give. Not even a little.

In frustration she stabbed at the door. The screwdriver made a spark and a scratch. Nothing more.

“Great. I’m trapped on the roof,” she said.

Brianna knew she needed medical attention. A visit with Lana would be great. Failing that, she needed bandages and antibiotics.

But all of that was nothing compared to the hunger. Now that the adrenaline rush was wearing off, the hunger was attacking her with the ferocity of a lion. She had started the night hungry. But then she had run perhaps twenty-five miles. On a very empty stomach.

It was a ridiculous situation to be in. No one knew she was up here. She probably couldn’t yell loud enough to make herself heard over the noise of the plant. Even if she could, she probably wouldn’t want to because if Sam had failed, somehow, then the guy who heard her would be Caine.

Then she spotted the pigeon.

“Oh, my God,” Brianna whispered. “No.”

Then, “Why not?”

“Because, ewww.”

“Look, it’s no different from a chicken.”

She retrieved the donut box. She tore the paper into little strips. She found an ancient newspaper and tore it up as well. She found a wooden pallet and with a saw from the toolkit, and superhuman speed, she soon had a small pile of wood.

It was unfortunate that none of the workmen had left matches behind. But steel struck with super speed against cement made sparks fly. It was tedious work, but she soon had a fire going. A cheerful little fire in the middle of the vast roof.

And now there were two pigeons, dozing and cooing in their sleep. One was gray, the other kind of pink.

“Pink,” she decided.

The chances of a regular kid catching them was close to zero. But she was not a normal person. She was the Breeze.

The pigeon never had time to flinch. She grabbed it, hand around its golf ball head. She swung it hard, snapping its neck.

Two minutes in the fire burned off most of the feathers. Five minutes more and the bird burst open.

That was the end of her patience. She used the screwdriver to pry slivers of meat from the pigeon’s plump breast and pop them into her mouth.

It had been weeks since she had tasted anything half as good.

“The Breeze,” she said, squatting by her fire. “Scourge of pigeons.”

She lay back, savoring her meal.

In a minute she would get up and figure out how to escape this rooftop trap.

But with food in her stomach the weariness of a day spent running at insane speeds over insane distances caught up with her.

“I’m just going to rest my . . .”

Duck sank, facedown, mouth full of dirt and rock.

He was choking, gagging. No way to breathe.

His head was pounding. Blood pounding in his ears. His chest heaved, sucking desperately on nothing.

It was over.

He was going to die.

Wild with panic, he thrashed. His arms plowed through packed dirt with no more effort than if he had been swimming in water.

He was no longer acting consciously, legs and arms kicking in a sort of death spasm as his brain winked out and his lungs screamed.

“Duck! Duck! You down there?”

A voice from a million miles away.

Duck tried to sit up, very quickly. He had managed to turn himself over. But his head slammed into dirt, and he took a shower of gravel in the face for his efforts. He tried to open his eyes, but dirt filled them. He spit dirt out of his mouth and found that he could breathe. His thrashing had made a space for him.

“Duck! Dude! Are you alive?”

Duck wasn't sure he knew the answer. He cautiously moved his arms and legs and found that he could, within limits.

Sudden, overwhelming panic. He was buried alive!

He tried to scream, but the sound was choked off and now he was falling again, falling through the earth.

No. No. No.

He had to stop. Had to stop the anger.

It was the anger that had sent him plummeting toward the center of the earth.

Think of something not angry, not fearful, he ordered himself.

Something happy.

Buried alive!

Happy . . . happy . . . the swimming pool . . . the water . . . floating . . .

Duck stopped sinking.

That was good. Good! Happy. Floating. Happy, happy thoughts.

Cookies. He liked cookies. Cookies were great.

And . . . and . . . and Sarah Willetson that time she smiled

at him. That was nice. That had given him a nice, warm feeling, like maybe someday girls would like him.

Also, how about watching TV, watching basketball on TV? That was a happy thought.

He was definitely no longer sinking.

No problem. Just be happy. Be happy to be buried alive.

“Duck?” It was Hunter's voice calling down to him. It sounded like Hunter was at the bottom of a well. Of course it was the other way around: Duck was at the bottom of the well.

“Happy, happy,” Duck whispered.

He was not buried alive, he was sitting down in the movie theater. He was in the seats with the railing right in front where he could rest his feet. And he had popcorn. Buttered, of course, extra salt. And a box of Cookie Dough Bites.

Previews. He loved the previews. Previews and popcorn and oh, look, there was a

Slushee in the seat's cup holder. Blue, whatever flavor that was supposed to be. Blue Slushee.

What was the movie? *Iron Man*.

He loved *Iron Man*.

And Slushees. Popcorn. Swimming pools. Girls.

Something was scraping against his face, against his arms and legs and chest.

Don't think about that, it might make you unhappy and mad, and boy, those are not helpful emotions. They drag you down.

Way down.

Duck laughed at that.

"Duck. Dude." Hunter's voice. It sounded closer now, clearer. Was he watching *Iron Man*, too?

No, Sarah Willetson was. Sarah was sitting beside him, sharing his popcorn and oh, excellent, she had a bag of peanut M&M's. She was pouring some into his hand. Happy little football shapes in bright colors.

The scraping had stopped.

"Dude?"

The voice was close now.

Duck felt a breeze.

He opened his eyes. There was still dirt in his eyes. He brushed it away. The first thing he saw was Hunter. Hunter's head.

The *top* of Hunter's head.

Slowly Hunter's face turned up toward him with an expression of pure awe.

"Dude, you're flying," Hunter said.

Duck glanced around. He was no longer buried alive. He was out of the hole. He was across the street from the church, out of the hole, and floating about five feet in the air.

"Whoa," Duck said. "It works both ways."

"We should just get out. Take Sam's deal. Walk away," Diana was saying.

"I'm in the root directory," Jack was saying.

Brittney knew she should be in pain. Her body was a wreck. She knew that. Her legs were broken. The control room door, blown from its hinges, had done that. She knew she should be in agony. She wasn't.

She should be dead. At least one bullet had hit her.

But she wasn't dead. Not quite.

So much blood, all around her. More than enough to kill her. Had to be.

And yet . . .

"No one's leaving," Caine said.

It was like being in a dream. Things that she should feel, she didn't. It was like the way sometimes, in a dream—cause and effect went backward, or sideways, things not making sense.

"We have no food," Diana said.

"Maybe I could go for some," Bug said.

"Yeah, right. Like you'd come back here if you found any," Drake sneered. "We're not here to feed ourselves. We're here to feed him."

“Do you capitalize it when you say ‘him,’ Drake?” Diana’s sarcasm was savage. “Is he your god now?”

“He gave me this!” Drake said. Brittney heard a loud crack, the bullwhip sound of Drake’s arm.

With infinite caution, Brittney tested her body. No, she could not move her legs. She could only rotate one hip, and that only a little.

Her right arm was useless. Her left arm, though, worked.

I should be dead, Brittney thought. I should be with Tanner in Heaven.

I should be dead.

Maybe you are.

No. Not before Caine, Brittney thought.

She wondered if she had become a healer, like Lana. Everyone knew the story of how Lana had discovered her power. But Lana had been in terrible pain. And Brittney was not.

Still, she focused her thoughts, imagined her useless right arm healing. She concentrated all her mind on that.

“Trapped,” Diana said bitterly.

“Not for long. We bust out of here and bring him what he needs,” Drake said.

“Gaiaphage. That’s what Caine calls it when he’s ranting,” Diana said. “Shouldn’t you know your god’s name?”

Brittney did not feel any change in her arm.

A terrible suspicion came to her. There was an awful silence from within her own body. She listened. Strained to hear, to feel, the ever-present thump . . . thump . . .

Her heart. It was not beating.

“Gaiaphage?” Jack said, sounding interested. “A ‘phage’ is another word for a computer virus. A worm, actually.”

Her heart wasn’t beating.

She wasn’t alive.

No, that was wrong, she told herself. Dead things don’t hear. Dead things cannot move their one good hand, squeezing the fingers ever so slightly so no one would notice.

There could be only one explanation. Caine and Drake had killed her. But Jesus had not taken her up into Heaven to be reunited with her brother. Instead, He had granted her this power. To live, still, a while, though she was dead.

To live long enough to accomplish His will.

“A phage is code. Software that sort of eats other software,” Jack said in his pedantic way.

Brittney had no doubt what God had chosen her to do. Why He had kept her alive.

She could still see, barely, though one eye was obscured. She could see across the floor to where Mike had left the pistol, just the way she had told him to.

She would have to move with infinite patience. Millimeter by millimeter. Imperceptible movements of her hip and arm. The gun was underneath the table, far in a corner, seven, eight feet away.

Satan walked the earth in this evil trinity of Caine, Drake, and Diana. And Brittney had been chosen to stop them.

Watch me, Tanner, she prayed silently. I’m going to make you proud.

Quinn and Albert were silent as they drove back to Perdido Beach.

The truck was heavier by many pounds of gold.

Lighter by two kids and a dog.

Finally Quinn spoke. "We have to tell Sam."

"About the gold?" Albert asked.

"Look, man, we lost the Healer."

Albert hung his head. "Yeah."

"Sam has to know that. Lana's important."

"I know that," Albert snapped. "I said that."

"She's more important than some stupid gold."

For a long time Albert didn't respond. Then, finally, "Look, Quinn, I know what you think. Same as everyone else. You think I'm just all about me. You think I'm just into being greedy or whatever."

"Aren't you?"

"No. Well, maybe," Albert admitted. "Okay, maybe I want to be important. Maybe I want to have a lot of stuff and be in charge and all that."

Quinn snorted. "Yeah. Maybe."

"But that doesn't make me wrong, Quinn."

Quinn didn't have anything to say to that. He was sick at heart. He would be blamed for losing Lana Arwen Lazar. The Healer. The irreplaceable Healer. Sam would be disgusted with him. Astrid would give him one of her cold, disappointed looks.

He should have stuck to fishing. He liked that. Fishing. It was peaceful. He could be alone and not be bothered. Now, even that was ruined with him having Albert's guys working under him. Having to train them, supervise them.

Sam was going to blow up. Or else just borrow Astrid's cold, disappointed look.

They bounced out onto the highway.

"The streetlights are out," Albert said.

"It's almost morning," Quinn said. "Maybe they're on a timer."

"No, man. They aren't on a timer."

They reached the edge of Perdido Beach. It began to dawn on Quinn that something very big was very wrong. Maybe even something bigger and wronger than losing the Healer.

"Everything's dark," Quinn said.

"Something's happened," Albert agreed.

They drove down pitch-black streets to the plaza. It was eerie. Like the whole town had died. Quinn wondered if that's what had happened. He wondered if the FAYZ was in some new phase. Just he and Albert left, now.

Quinn pulled the truck up in front of the McDonald's.

But just as Quinn was pulling up to park, he spotted something. He turned the truck around to aim the headlights at town hall.

There, spread across one wall, in letters two feet tall, was spray-painted graffiti. Bloodred paint on the pale stone.

"Death to freaks," Quinn read aloud.

TWENTY-EIGHT

16 HOURS, 38 MINUTES

THE PICKUP TRUCK'S battery was dead. It had been sitting for more than three months.

But Hermit Jim was a prepared guy. There was a gasoline-powered generator and a charger for the battery. It took an hour for Lana and Cookie to figure out how to start the generator and hook up the battery. But finally Lana turned the key and after several attempts the engine sputtered to life.

Cookie backed the truck up to the gas tank.

It took some hard, sweaty work to shift the tank into the truck's bed.

By the time they were done, so was the night. Lana cautiously opened the warehouse's door and looked outside. In the shadow of the hills it wasn't possible to speak of true dawn, but the sky was tinged with pink, and the shadows, still deep, were gray and no longer black.

A dozen coyotes lounged in an irregular circle, a hundred feet away. They turned to stare at her.

"Cookie," Lana said.

"Yeah, Healer?"

"Here's what I want you to do. I'm taking the truck, right? You should hear an explosion. Wait ten minutes after that. I'll be back. Maybe. If not, well, you need to wait until the sun is all the way up—coyotes are more dangerous at night. Then walk back to the cabin, and from there head home."

"I'm staying with you," Cookie said firmly.

"No." She said it with all the finality she could manage. "This is my thing. You do what I say."

"I ain't leaving you to those dogs."

Lana said, "The coyotes won't be the problem. And you have to leave. I'm telling you to. Either the explosion happens or it doesn't. Either way, if I don't come back, I need you to get to Sam. Give him the letter."

"I want to take care of you, Healer. Like you took care of me."

"I know, Cookie," Lana said. "But this is how you do it. Okay? Sam needs to know what happened. Tell him everything we did. He's a smart guy, he'll understand. And tell him not to blame Quinn, okay? Not Quinn's fault. I would have figured out some other way to do it if Quinn and Albert hadn't helped."

"Healer . . ."

Lana put her hand on Cookie's beefy arm. "Do what I ask, Cookie."

Cookie hung his head. He was weeping openly, unashamed. "Okay, Healer."

"Lana," she corrected him gently. "My name is Lana. That's what my friends call me."

She knelt down and ruffled Patrick's fur the way he liked. "Love you, boy," she whispered. She hugged him close and he whimpered. "You'll be okay. Don't worry. I'll be right back."

Quickly, before she could lose her resolve, she climbed into the truck. She fired up

the engine and nodded to Cookie.

Cookie swung open the creaking door of the warehouse.

The waiting coyotes got to their feet. Pack Leader ambled forward, uncertain. He was limping. The fur of one shoulder was soggy with blood.

“So, I didn’t kill you,” Lana whispered. “Well, the day is young.”

She put the truck into the lowest gear and took her foot off the brake. The truck began to creep forward.

Slow and steady, that would be the way, Lana knew. The pathway to the mine entrance was a mess of potholes, narrow, crooked, and steep.

She turned the wheel. It wasn’t easy. The truck was old and stiff with disuse. And Lana’s driving experience was extremely limited.

The truck advanced so slowly that the coyotes could keep up at a walk. They fell into place around her, almost like an escort.

The truck lurched crazily as she pulled onto the path. “Slow, slow,” she told herself. But now she was in a hurry. She wanted it to be over.

She had an image in her mind. Red and orange erupting from the mouth of the mine. Debris flying. A thunderclap. And then the sound of collapsing rock. Tons and tons and tons of it. Then billowing dust and smoke and it would be over.

Come to me.

“Oh, I’m coming,” Lana said.

I have need of you.

She was going to silence that voice. She was going to bury it beneath a mountain.

There was a sudden jolt. Lana glanced into her mirror and saw the deformed, scarred face of Pack Leader. He had jumped into the back of the truck.

“Human not bring machine,” Pack Leader said in his unique snarl.

“Human do whatever she likes,” Lana yelled back. “Human shoot you in your ugly face, you stinking, stupid *dog*.”

Pack Leader digested that for a while.

The truck lurched and wallowed and crept up the hillside. More than halfway now.

Come to me.

“You’re going to be sorry you invited me,” Lana muttered. But now, with the mine shaft entrance in view, she found she could scarcely breathe for the pounding in her chest.

“Human get out. Human walk,” Pack Leader demanded.

Lana couldn’t shoot him. That would break the window behind her and that would allow the coyotes to come at her.

She had reached the entrance.

She put the truck into reverse. She would have to turn the truck around. Her hands were white, tendons straining, as she gripped the steering wheel.

Pack Leader’s evil face was in her way as she turned to check her backward course. He was inches away, separated by nothing but a pane of glass.

He lunged.

“Ahh!”

His snout hit the glass. The glass held.

Lana was sure the glass would hold. The coyotes had not yet grown hands or

learned to use tools. All they could do was bang their snouts into the glass.

You are mine.

“No,” Lana said. “I belong to me.”

The bed of the truck crossed the threshold into the mine. Now the coyotes were getting frantic. A second coyote leaped and landed on the hood. He got the windshield wiper in his teeth and ripped savagely at it.

“Human, stop!” Pack Leader demanded.

Lana drove the truck backward. The back wheels rolled up and over the mummified corpse of the truck’s owner.

The truck was all the way inside now, as far as it would go. The mine shaft ceiling was mere inches above the cab. The walls were close. The truck was like a loose cork in the shaft. The coyotes, feeling the walls closing in, had to decide whether to be trapped by the truck. They opted to slither out of the way, back to the front of the truck where they took turns leaping on and off the hood, snarling, snapping, scrabbling impotently at the windshield with their rough paws.

The truck stopped moving, held tight. The doors would no longer open.

That was fine. That was the plan.

Lana twisted around in her seat, aimed carefully to avoid hitting the big tank in the back, and fired a single shot.

The rear window shattered into a million pieces.

Shaking with fear and excitement Lana crawled gingerly out of the cab into the bed of the truck. This excited the coyotes even more. They tried to shove themselves through the gap between the sides of the truck and the mine shaft walls, trying to get at her. One furious head jammed sideways between roof and a crossbeam.

They yapped and snarled and Pack Leader cried, “Human, stop!”

Lana reached the valve of the LPG tank. She twisted it open. Immediately she smelled the rotten-egg odor of the gas.

It would take a while for the gas to drain out. It was heavier than air, so it would roll down the sloping floor of the mine shaft, like an invisible flood. It would sink toward the deepest part of the mine. It would pool around the Darkness.

Would he smell it? Would he know that she had sealed his fate? Did he even have a nose?

Lana paid out the fuse she’d made. It was a hundred feet of thin rope she’d soaked in gasoline. She’d kept it in a Ziploc bag.

She took a coil and tossed it into the dark of the mine. It didn’t have to reach far.

She carried the rest with her, back into the cabin of the truck. She stepped on the brake, turning on the brake lights and illuminating the shaft in hellish red. It was impossible to see the gas, of course.

Lana waited, hands gripping the steering wheel. Her thoughts were a jumble of disconnected images, wild jump-cuts of her captivity with the coyotes and her encounters with the Darkness.

The first time she had—

I am the Gaiaphage.

Lana froze.

You cannot destroy me.

Lana could barely breathe. She thought she might pass out. The Darkness had

never before spoken its name.

I brought you here.

Lana reached into her pocket and fingered the lighter. It was simple physics. The lighter would light. The gasoline-soaked rope would burn. The flame would race down the rope until it reached the gas vapor.

The gas would ignite.

The explosion would shatter the ceiling and walls of the shaft.

It might even incinerate the creature.

It might kill her, too. But if she survived, she would be able to heal any burns or injuries. That was her bet: if she could simply stay alive for a few minutes, she would be able to heal herself.

And then she would be truly healed. The voice in her head would be gone.

You do my will.

“I am Lana Arwen Lazar,” she cried with all the shrill force she could manage.

“My dad was into comic books, so he named me Lana for Superman’s girlfriend Lana Lang.”

You will serve me.

“And my mom added Arwen for the elf princess in *The Lord of the Rings*.”

I will use your power as my own.

“And I never, ever do what I’m told.”

Your power will give me shape. I will feed. Grow strong again. And with the body I will form using your power, I will escape this place.

Your power will give me freedom.

Lana was shaking. The gasoline smelled, and the fumes were making her woozy.

Now or never. Now.

Never.

“Pack Leader!” Lana shouted. “Pack Leader! I’m going to blow this mine to hell, Pack Leader. Do you hear me?”

“Pack Leader hears,” the coyote sneered.

“You get yourself and your filthy animals out of here or you’ll die with the Darkness.”

Pack Leader leaped heavily onto the hood. His fur was up, the ripped mouth slavering. “Pack Leader fears no human.”

Lana snapped the pistol up and fired. Point-blank range.

The sound was stunning.

In the glass there was a hole surrounded by a star pattern, but the glass did not blow out like the rear window had.

Blood sprayed across the glass.

Pack Leader yelped and jumped clumsily from the hood, hit. Hurt.

Lana’s heart jumped. She’d hit him. A solid, direct hit this time.

But the glass was still there. It was supposed to shatter. It was her only escape route.

Your power will give me freedom.

“I’ll give you death!” Lana raged.

Lana took the pistol and used it like a hammer, beating on the glass, breaking it out, but only a little at a time. She kicked at it, frantic. It gave, but too slowly.

The coyotes could take her if they made a concerted attack.

But the coyotes held off. The injury of their leader had left them confused and rudderless.

Lana kicked, crazy now, panicked.

You will die.

“As long as you die with me!” Lana screamed.

A big section of the safety glass gave way, folding out like a stiff-frozen blanket.

Lana began pushing through. Head. Shoulders.

A coyote lunged.

She fired.

She pushed the rest of the way out, scratched, skin ripped, oblivious to the pain. On hands and knees on the hood. She had to fumble for the rope. Rope in one hand, greasy. Gun in the other, stinking of cordite.

She fired wildly. Once, twice, three times, bullets chipping rock. The coyotes broke and ran.

She laid the pistol on the hood.

She fumbled the lighter from her pocket.

No.

She struck the lighter.

The flame was tiny and orange.

You will not.

Lana brought the flame toward the rope’s end.

Stop.

Lana hesitated.

“Yes,” Lana breathed.

You can not.

“I can,” Lana sobbed.

You are mine.

The flame burned her thumb. But the pain was nothing, nothing next to the sudden, catastrophic pain like an explosion in her head.

Lana cried out.

She clasped her hands over her ears. The lighter singed her hair.

She dropped the rope.

She dropped the lighter.

Lana had never imagined such pain. As if her brain had been scooped out and her skull filled with burning, white-hot coals.

Lana screamed in agony and rolled off the hood.

She screamed and screamed and knew that she would never stop.

TWENTY-NINE

16 HOURS, 33 MINUTES

“WE CAN WAIT him out,” Edilio said to Sam. “Just sit tight here. You could even catch a few Zs.”

“Do I look that bad?” Sam asked. Edilio didn’t answer.

“Edilio’s right, boss,” Dekka said. “Let’s just sit tight and wait. Maybe Brianna will . . .” She couldn’t finish, and turned away quickly.

Edilio put his arm around Sam’s shoulders and drew him away from Dekka, who was now sobbing.

Sam gazed up at the massive pile of cement and steel that was the power plant. He scanned the parking lot, looking past the parked cars to the sea beyond. The black water twinkled here and there, faint pinpoints of starlight, a rough-textured reflection of the night sky.

“When’s your birthday, Edilio?”

“Cut it out, man. You know I’m not stepping out,” Edilio said.

“You don’t even consider it?”

Edilio’s silence was answer enough.

“Where’s this all end, Edilio? Or does it never end? How many more of these fights? How many more graves in the plaza? You ever think about it?”

“Sam, I dig those graves,” Edilio said quietly.

“Yeah,” Sam said. “Sorry.” He sighed. “We’re not winning. You know that, right? I don’t mean this fight. I mean the big fight. Survival. We’re not winning that fight. We’re starving. Kids eating their pets. We’re breaking up into little groups that hate each other. It’s all going out of control.”

Edilio glanced at Howard, who was a discreet distance away but listening in. Two of Edilio’s guys were within earshot as well.

“You need to cut this out, Sam,” Edilio said in an urgent whisper. “These people are all looking to you, man. You can’t be talking about how we’re screwed.”

Sam barely heard him. “I need to get back to town.”

“What? Are you messing with me? We’re kind of in the middle of something here.”

“Dekka can keep an eye on Caine. Besides, if he busts out, that’s good, right?” Sam nodded as if he had convinced himself. “I need to see Astrid.”

“You know, maybe that’s not a bad idea,” Edilio said. He left Sam and went to Dekka, drew her aside, and spoke urgently to her. Dekka shot a tear-stained glance at Sam, worried.

“Come on, I’ll drive you back to town,” Edilio said.

Sam followed him to the Jeep. “What did you tell Dekka?”

“I told her with the lights out, you needed to check on what’s happening in town.”

“She buy that?” Sam asked.

Edilio didn’t answer directly. And he didn’t look Sam in the eye. “She’s tough. Dekka will handle things here.”

They drove in silence to Perdido Beach.

The plaza was full of kids milling around. That many kids hadn't been together in one place since the Thanksgiving feast.

Sam felt a hundred pairs of eyes on him as he pulled up with Edilio.

"This doesn't look like a fiesta," Edilio said.

Astrid came out of the crowd, ran to the car, and threw her arms around Sam. She kissed him on the cheek, and then on the lips.

He buried his face in her hair and whispered, "Are you okay?"

"Better now that I know you're alive," Astrid said. "We have some very scared, angry kids here, Sam."

As if she had given a cue, the crowd rushed forward to surround the three of them.

"The lights are out!"

"Where have you been?"

"We're out of food!"

"I can't even turn on the TV!"

"I'm scared of the dark!"

"There's a mutant freak murderer running loose!"

"The water isn't working!"

Those that weren't shouting accusations were asking plaintive questions.

"What are we supposed to do?"

"Why didn't you stop Caine?"

"Where's the Healer?"

"Are we all going to die?"

Sam pushed Astrid gently, reluctantly away and stood alone to face them. Each question hit home. Each was an arrow aimed at his heart. They were the same accusations he had thrown at himself. The same questions he had asked himself. He knew he should put an end to it. He knew he should call for quiet. He knew that the longer he went without answering, the more scared the kids would get.

But he had no answers.

The assault of anger and fear was deafening. A seething wall of angry faces pressed all around. It left him numb. He knew what he should do, but he couldn't. Somehow he had convinced himself that kids would understand. That they would cut him some slack. Give him some time.

But they were terrified. They were on the edge of panic.

Astrid was turned to face the crowd, back against the hood, pressed from all sides. She was yelling for quiet, ignored.

Edilio had reached into the backseat of the Jeep to slide his gun forward onto his lap. Like he thought he might have to use it to save Sam or Astrid or both.

Zil appeared, pushing his way through the crowd, five other kids acting like a star's bodyguard, shoving people out of the way. He was cheered by some, booed by others. But when he raised his hand the crowd quieted, at least a little, and leaned forward in anticipation.

Zil stuck one fist on his hip and pointed at Sam with his other hand. "You're supposed to be the big boss."

Sam said nothing. The crowd hushed, ready to watch this one-on-one confrontation.

"You're the big boss of the freaks," Zil yelled. "But you can't do anything. You

can shoot laser beams out of your hands, but you can't get enough food, and you can't keep the power on, and you won't do anything about that murderer Hunter, who killed my best friend." He paused to fill his lungs for a final, furious cry. "You shouldn't be in charge."

Suddenly, there was silence. Zil had laid the challenge out there.

Sam nodded, as if to himself. Like he was agreeing. But then, moving as slowly as an old man, he climbed up onto the passenger seat of the Jeep, and stood where everyone could see him.

Sam felt anger building inside him. Resentment. Rage.

It wouldn't be good to let it out. He knew that. He kept his voice calm, kept his expression blank. He now towered over Zil. "You want to be in charge, Zil? Last night you were running around trying to get a lynch mob together. And let's not even pretend that wasn't you responsible for graffiti I saw driving into town just now."

"So what?" Zil demanded. "So what? So I said what everyone who isn't a freak is thinking."

He spit the word "freak," making it an insult, making it an accusation.

"You really think what we need right now is to divide up between freaks and normals?" Sam asked. "You figure that will get the lights turned back on? That will put food on people's tables?"

"What about Hunter?" Zil said. "Hunter murders Harry with his mutant freak powers and you don't do anything."

"I had kind of a busy night," Sam said, his voice now poisonous with sarcasm.

"So let me and my boys go find him," Zil said. "You're so busy not getting any food, and not stopping Caine and all, not keeping the lights on, so me and my crew will get Hunter."

"And do what with him?" It was Astrid. The crowd had backed up just enough to give her some breathing room. "What's your big plan, Zil?"

Zil spread his hands in a gesture of innocence. "Hey, all we want to do is get him before he hurts someone else. You want to, like, give him a trial or whatever? Fine. But let us go and get him."

"No one is stopping you from finding him," Sam said. "You can walk around town all you like. You can admire your graffiti and count the number of windows you broke."

"We need guns," Zil said. "I'm not going up against a killer freak without guns. And your wetback friend there says we regular people can't carry guns."

Sam glanced down at Edilio to see how he had registered the insult. Edilio looked grim but calm. Calmer than Sam felt.

"Hunter is a problem," Sam acknowledged. "We have a big list of problems. But you trying to make trouble between people with powers and people without powers is not helping anything. Neither is calling people names. We have to stick together."

When Zil didn't immediately answer, Sam went on, looking past Zil to speak to the whole group. "Here's the thing, people: We have some serious problems. The lights are off. And it seems like that's affecting the water flow in part of town. So, no baths or showers, okay? But the situation is that we think Caine is short of food, which means he's not going to be able to hold out very long at the power plant."

"How long?" someone yelled.

Sam shook his head. "I don't know."

"Why can't you get him to leave?"

"Because I can't, that's why," Sam snapped, letting some of his anger show. "Because I'm not Superman, all right? Look, he's inside the plant. The walls are thick. He has guns, he has Jack, he has Drake, and he has his own powers. I can't get him out of there without getting some of our people killed. Anybody want to volunteer for that?"

Silence.

"Yeah, I thought so. I can't get you people to show up and pick melons, let alone throw down with Drake."

"That's your job," Zil said.

"Oh, I see," Sam said. The resentment he'd held in now came boiling to the surface. "It's my job to pick the fruit, and collect the trash, and ration the food, and catch Hunter, and stop Caine, and settle every stupid little fight, and make sure kids get a visit from the Tooth Fairy. What's your job, Zil? Oh, right: you spray hateful graffiti. Thanks for taking care of that, I don't know how we'd ever manage without you."

"Sam . . .," Astrid said, just loud enough for him to hear. A warning.

Too late. He was going to say what needed saying.

"And the rest of you. How many of you have done a single, lousy thing in the last two weeks aside from sitting around playing Xbox or watching movies?"

"Let me explain something to you people. I'm not your parents. I'm a fifteen-year-old kid. I'm a kid, just like all of you. I don't happen to have any magic ability to make food suddenly appear. I can't just snap my fingers and make all your problems go away. I'm just a kid."

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Sam knew he had crossed the line. He had said the fateful words so many had used as an excuse before him. How many hundreds of times had he heard, "I'm just a kid."

But now he seemed unable to stop the words from tumbling out. "Look, I have an eighth-grade education. Just because I have powers doesn't mean I'm Dumbledore or George Washington or Martin Luther King. Until all this happened I was just a B student. All I wanted to do was surf. I wanted to grow up to be Dru Adler or Kelly Slater, just, you know, a really good surfer."

The crowd was dead quiet now. Of course they were quiet, some still-functioning part of his mind thought bitterly, it's entertaining watching someone melt down in public.

"I'm doing the best I can," Sam said.

"I lost people today . . . I . . . I screwed up. I should have figured out Caine might go after the power plant."

Silence.

"I'm doing the best I can."

No one said a word.

Sam refused to meet Astrid's eyes. If he saw pity there, he would fall apart completely.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"I'm sorry."

He jumped down. The crowd parted. He walked away through shocked silence.

Not that many kids came up to congratulate Zil on exposing Sam Temple as a helpless, useless fraud. Not as many as he had a right to expect.

But Antoine was with him, and Lance, Hank, and Turk. The four of them had become his crew. His boys. These four had been with him last night as he woke up the town of Perdido Beach.

It had been a dizzy, crazy, wild night. Zil had gone from being just a guy to becoming a leader. The way the others looked at him had changed. Lightning quick. One minute they were his equals, now he was clearly in charge.

That was cool. Very cool. Zil was the “Sam” of the normals, now. And the normals were still by far the majority.

So why didn’t more kids crowd around him now? There were a few nods, some pats on the back, but there were also some very suspicious looks. And that wasn’t right. Not when he, Zil Sperry, had stood up face-to-face with Sam Temple.

As if reading his thoughts, Lance said, “Don’t worry, they’ll come around. They’re just shaken up right now.”

“They’re still scared of Sam,” Hank said. “They should be scared of us.”

Hank was a short, skinny, angry kid, with a face like a rat. Hank talked constantly about kicking butt, to the point where Zil could barely stop himself from pointing out that Hank was practically a midget and wasn’t going to kick anyone’s butt.

Lance was a different story. Lance was tall, athletic, good looking, and smart. Zil could hardly believe Lance was being so respectful to him, letting Zil take the lead and make the decisions. Back in the old days Lance had been one of the most popular kids in school—not at all like Hank, who was generally despised.

“Hi.”

Zil looked around and found himself face-to-face with a girl he knew vaguely. Lisa. That was her name. Lisa something.

“I just wanted to tell you that I totally agree with you,” Lisa something gushed.

“Really?” Zil had very little experience talking to girls. He hoped he wouldn’t start blushing. Not that this girl was beautiful or anything, but she was cute. And she was wearing a short skirt and makeup; almost none of the girls in the FAYZ seemed to bother trying to look nice and “girly” anymore.

“The freaks are totally out of control,” Lisa said, nodding her head constantly like a bobble-head doll.

“Yes, they are,” Zil agreed, almost wary, not knowing why this girl was talking to him.

“I’m really glad you’re standing up to them. You’re, like, totally brave.”

“Thanks.” Zil found his own head bobbing up and down now in response to her. Then, not knowing what else to say, he forced an awkward smile and started out of the church.

“Can I—” Lisa began.

“What?”

“I mean, are you guys going to do anything? Because maybe I could help,” Lisa said.

Zil felt a moment of panic. Do something? Like what? They’d already tagged town

hall and busted some windows. Unless Hunter showed up, what was there to do?

Then it dawned on Zil. If he did nothing now, he would lose everything. Lance and Hank and Turk and even Antoine would drift off, or just settle into being another bunch of dudes doing nothing much and slowly starving.

It wasn't over. It couldn't be over.

"Actually, I could use your help," Zil said to Lisa. "I have plans."

"What are you going to do?" Lisa asked eagerly.

"I'm going to put real humans back in charge. Get rid of the chuds. Run things for us, not for them."

"Yeah!" Turk said.

"The six of us, here? We're just the start," Zil said.

"Absolutely," Hank agreed.

"Zil's crew," Turk said.

Zil waved that off modestly. "I think maybe we should call ourselves the Human Crew."

THIRTY

13 HOURS, 38 MINUTES

CAINE HAD FALLEN asleep, exhausted, on the plant manager's couch. He woke slowly. Disoriented. Not sure where he was. He opened his eyes and everything around him, the dusty furnishings of the office, seemed to vibrate.

He rubbed his eyes and sat up.

Someone was sitting in the plant manager's chair. A green man. Green from some inner light, like chemicals were burning inside him putting off a sickly glow.

The man had no face. His shape was rough, like a clay model only half completed. When Caine looked closer he could see millions of tiny crystals, some no larger than a period, some almost as big as a sugar cube. The mass of crystals was constantly in motion, like frenzied ants crawling over each other.

Caine closed his eyes. When he opened them again the apparition was gone.

A hallucination. Caine had gotten used to hallucinations.

He got to his feet, but he was shaky. He felt sick, like he had the flu or something. His face was beaded with sweat. His shirt was sticky on his skin.

He needed to throw up, but there was nothing in his stomach.

Through the glass he could see the control room. Diana, asleep or dozing in her chair, her feet up on the table. She looked strange without her hair. Caine loved Diana's hair.

Jack had his head down on the same table, his face puffy, lips babylike as he snored.

The two hostages leaned into each other, asleep.

The dead girl, Brittney, lay on the floor in a heap. Someone had moved her. It looked like someone had tried to push her under the counter, out of the way. The pool of her blood was now a smear.

The only one awake was Drake. He leaned against a wall, unblinking, whip arm coiled around his waist, a machine gun in his other hand.

Caine staggered. He righted himself, squared his shoulders, wiped the drool from his mouth. He had to look strong. Drake looked strong, like he was the one in charge.

Caine wondered how long it would take for Drake to finally decide to come after him. He hadn't done so during Caine's long months incapacitated. But now that Caine was giving the orders again, he knew Drake was chafing.

Caine steadied himself and started toward the control room. He got as far as the office door when the memory storm swept over him, almost knocked him to his knees. He grabbed the door and held on to it, shaking.

It came to him as hunger. Hunger deeper than anything he had ever felt himself. As if he had nothing inside his skin but a roaring, starving tiger.

Hungry in the dark.

Caine whimpered. He caught himself before he did it again, but the desperate sound was out of his mouth. Had Drake heard?

Leave me alone, Caine pleaded silently with the voice in his head. I'm doing what you want, but leave me alone.

Caine, looking down at the floor, saw Drake's feet. Drake had arrived soundlessly. Or maybe Caine had been beyond hearing anything.

"You okay?" Drake asked.

"I'm fine," Caine snapped.

Drake said, "Good. I'm real glad about that."

Caine pushed past him, making sure to dig a hard shoulder into Drake.

"What are you all doing asleep?" Caine demanded in a loud voice. "Sam could be outside right now, waiting for a chance to come back after us."

"We won't have to worry about Sam for long," Drake said. "Not once *he's* fed."

Caine kicked Jack's chair. He kicked the nearest of the hostages. "Wake up. All of you. It's almost daylight outside. Sam may be planning something."

"What is your problem?" Diana demanded. "Did your monster overlord wake you up? Did he crack his crazy-brain whip and make you jump?"

"Shut up!" Caine said savagely. "I don't need this from you. Has anyone searched for food?"

"You don't think in the last three months Sam's people have searched this place for food?" Diana said, but with less overt hostility than usual.

"That's not what I asked," Caine yelled. "I asked whether any of you stupid, lazy idiots bothered to look for something to eat. It's a yes-or-no answer."

"No," Diana answered for all of them.

"Then get off your butts and go look," Caine said.

Diana sighed and got to her feet. "I wouldn't mind a little walk."

Jack got up as well. So did Drake's two gunmen. The four of them disappeared down various hallways.

"Just don't go outside the building," Caine yelled after them.

Caine pulled Drake aside. "Has Jack got it worked out yet?"

"I think so. He was looking smug right before he fell asleep."

Caine nodded. "We should move out as soon as we can."

"Shouldn't we try to take Sam out first?" Drake asked.

Caine snorted a laugh. "You say that like it's easy. If we could start by taking Sam down, we'd have an easy time of it." He shook his head. "No. That's not how we do this. If they catch us, we use the uranium to make them back off."

Despite himself, Drake grinned. "Threaten to drop it on them?"

"Threaten to smash it open," Caine said. "Threaten to launch it into the air and smash it open."

"And everyone will glow in the dark," Drake said, as if that was a happy thought.

"I'll only have one hand free," Caine said. "So you may finally get a chance to use that gun you love so much."

"Should we send Bug to Coates?" Drake asked. "Bring more of our people?"

"They wouldn't come," Caine said flatly.

There was a commotion and Caine glanced aside to see Computer Jack storming down the hallway trailed by Diana, who tried unsuccessfully to hold him back. Like a two-year-old trying to hold a bull.

"You!" Jack bellowed.

He waved his fist in the air and Caine could see naked wires, like hair-thin snakes

in his fingers.

“You said you took these down!” Jack cried accusingly.

“Oh, gee, I must have missed some,” Drake said. “Hey, did you find your girlfriend while you were looking around?”

Jack froze. “What?”

Drake had his arm uncoiled, ready to use. “She must have been doing pretty good speed when she hit the wire. Breezed right through them. Oh wait, I said that wrong. The wire breezed right through the Breeze.”

“She . . . what . . .” Jack gasped.

“Cut her right in half,” Drake said, laughing with sheer glee. “It was kind of neat to see. You’d have found it interesting, all her insides, sliced right in half. Like a meat cleaver went through her.”

“I’m going to kill you,” Jack whispered.

“You don’t have the—”

But Jack had tossed Diana aside and was running straight at Drake.

Drake managed to lash him once with his whip hand, but only once. Jack hit him like a linebacker. Drake went flying across the room, flying like he’d stepped out in front of a bus.

Drake landed hard, but rolled to his feet. He lashed again. There was a loud crack, and a tear appeared in Jack’s shirt.

Jack never slowed down but went straight for Drake. But then, suddenly, he couldn’t move. He motored his legs, but could not advance.

Caine with one raised hand held him with an irresistible force.

“Let me go, Caine,” Jack yelled.

“He’s yanking your chain, you idiot,” Caine yelled. The temptation to let Jack kill Drake was strong. It would solve a major problem—sooner or later Drake was going to challenge Caine. But for now, Drake was still necessary in a battle.

Drake slashed at Jack with his whip, but the whip stopped in midair, hitting an invisible barrier.

“Both of you knock it off,” Caine yelled.

“You touch me, I’ll kill you!” Drake shrieked at Jack.

“I said shut up, both of you!” Caine bellowed. He pushed both palms out, one aimed at Jack, the other at Drake. Both boys went flying backward. Jack landed hard on his back. Drake, lighter and without Jack’s superhuman strength, hit the wall and crumpled at its base.

Caine caught a movement out of the corner of his eye and saw the backs of the two hostages as they bolted from the room.

Caine twisted to aim for them, but they were out of his line of sight. He heard footsteps pelting away. “Get them!” he yelled.

But Drake was slow getting up and Jack would be no help. Drake’s two thugs stood stock still, paralyzed. Caine realized that they were loyal to Drake, awaiting *his* orders and not Caine’s.

He spun, raised his hands, lifted both the punks off the floor, and hurled them bodily down the hallway after the hostages.

“Bring them back!” Caine bellowed.

“Look out!” Diana cried.

Gunfire erupted. Insanely loud. Caine heard bullets fly past his ear like buzzing dragonflies.

Brittney!

Not dead. Just playing dead and slowly, slowly working her way toward a gun she must have known was stashed under the counter.

She was still in a heap on the floor, unable to stand, unable even to sit up, lying on her side firing.

Caine leaped aside as bullets flew.

He slammed heavily into the table, rebounded, and fell to his knees. He brought his palms up, but the barrel of the gun moved faster.

But faster still, was Drake's whip hand. It snapped and wrapped around Brittney's wrist. The gun fired, but the bullets hit wall and ceiling.

Caine, enraged, aimed his full power at the girl. She skidded across the floor and hit the wall, so quickly that Drake was still attached and was drawn along with her.

Caine jumped to his feet, holding his focus on Brittney, raised her from the ground, suspended in midair.

"You piece of—" Brittney said, and then she was a bullet herself, rocketing through the air.

She flew through the hole Sam had burned earlier.

That had not been Caine's intention. The girl was lucky.

Or someone was looking out for her.

Outside, standing faithful guard, Dekka heard the eruption of gunfire from the control room.

She leaped toward the wall just as something flew through the burned-out hole. It landed with the unmistakable sound of a human body hitting the ground.

Dekka stared, too stunned to react.

Then, off to her right, gunfire from inside the turbine building. Bright yellow flashes outlined the doorway.

She broke her trance and ran toward the door. Edilio's soldiers jumped up off the ground and fell in behind her.

"Orc! Orc!" Dekka shouted.

She heard rather than saw the monster stir. He'd been asleep in the back of the SUV. The springs squeaked as he clambered out.

Two of Caine's gunmen appeared as shadows in the doorway. Their guns aimed at the fleeing forms.

Gunfire and one of the shapes fell without even crying out. Collapsed onto his face and did not move. The other ran, ran, ran.

"I got him! I got him!" someone cried, more terror than pride in his voice.

"Taylor!" Dekka yelled. "Distract them!"

"Bouncing!" Taylor yelled back and disappeared.

"Oh, my God, I think I killed him," the voice moaned.

Dekka raised her hands and both gunmen floated up off the ground. One smacked the top of the doorway. The other slid back inside, out of Dekka's reach. The firing stopped. The running hostage collapsed, gasping, behind a vehicle.

One second Taylor was running beside Dekka.

A split second later she was staggering, still half running, across the control room of the power plant.

“You stupid psycho!” Caine screamed at Drake.

Drake had gone bone white, all but his cold gray eyes. “I just saved your life!”

“You were being an idiot! You pushed Jack just to watch him squirm,” Caine yelled. “And look what happened. I’m busy keeping you two apart and look what happened, you stupid thug!”

“Hey!” Diana yelled.

It took Taylor a moment to recognize her. Her head was practically shaved.

“Hey!” Diana yelled again, pointing at Taylor. “We have company!”

Caine whirled and swung his deadly hands up, but Taylor bounced across the room to appear in a far corner, behind him.

“Jack, you traitor!” Taylor yelled, and bounced out of the room.

Taylor popped back, right in Dekka’s face. “They’re freaking out in there. We should hit them now!”

Dekka came to a stop. She added quickly in her mind. She had Orc and Taylor and herself. She had three of Edilio’s guys. The hostages were no longer an issue.

But Caine and Drake were still alive. Still very, very dangerous. Plus at least two gunmen, maybe more.

“No,” she said, feeling deflated. “Not without Sam.”

“We should go now, right now!” Taylor yelled. She pointed at the bloody mess on the ground. “Look what they did. Look what they did! Look at what those animals did!”

Dekka put a calming hand on the girl’s shoulder. “We go in now, we’ll lose,” she said. And even if Sam were there . . . She’d never seen Sam acting the way he had earlier. Like the fire had gone out in him.

“You’re just scared,” Taylor said.

“Don’t be up in my face, Taylor,” Dekka warned. “We don’t have the power. Simple as that. We attack now, we’ll lose. Sam will have more bodies for Edilio to bury. I don’t know if Sam can . . .” She stopped herself. Too late.

“What about Sam?” Taylor demanded.

Dekka shrugged. “Nothing. Boy’s just tired, is all. I think maybe he doesn’t need another fight tonight.”

Taylor looked like she might argue some more. Then her shoulders sagged. “Yeah. Whatever.”

“You head back to town. Tell Sam what went down. Tell him what you saw inside there.”

“It’ll take me a few minutes. I can’t do it all in one bounce,” Taylor said.

“Then get going.”

Taylor disappeared and Dekka kicked furiously at the dirt. It had all happened too fast for her to do much more than watch.

Mike Farmer was creeping from behind the truck where he’d hidden. Mickey was facedown and terribly still. The remains of Brittney were a nightmare.

Dekka felt a flash of anger at Sam. He had run off and left her in charge. Well, she

didn't want to be in charge. Sam wasn't the only one who was hanging on by his fingernails.

Brianna . . . The thought was like a knife to the stomach, twisting, twisting.

She had never even told Brianna how she felt. And now it was too late.

Something landed on the pavement next to Dekka. She stared at what looked a great deal like chicken bones. Cooked chicken bones.

Dekka looked up. She moved back and back to get a clear view.

Ten stories up, eerie in the blazing light atop the turbine building, someone was waving her arms. Very fast.

Time seemed to stand still. Dekka couldn't breathe. She stared hard, not wanting to be wrong, not willing to believe until she was sure.

"Breeze?" Dekka whispered, amazed.

Dekka lowered her head for just a moment and thanked God. Brianna. Alive.

Alive and as impatient as ever, by the look of it.

No way Brianna could hear her over the noise of the plant. How Brianna had managed to get herself up there was a mystery, but judging from her frantic semaphore of waving arms, she wanted to get down.

Dekka waved. She even displayed a rare smile. Brianna, alive.

Brianna stuck her hands on her hips as if to say, "What's keeping you?"

Dekka considered for a moment. Then she pointed to a spot just at the base of the wall, well away from the door where Caine's boys crouched hidden with guns.

Brianna nodded.

Dekka raised her hands.

Brianna leaped into midair. And stayed in midair. No gravity dragged her down.

Dekka took a deep breath. She switched off her power for a second and Brianna fell. On again and Brianna stopped falling. Off. On. Until Brianna floated just a few feet off the pavement.

Dekka released her and Brianna landed lightly, taking the shock in her knees. Dekka steadied her.

"What is going on down here?" Brianna demanded. "I heard guns. Woke me up."

"Good to see you, too, Brianna," Dekka said dryly. "Everyone thought you were dead."

"Well, I'm not. Duh."

Dekka shook her head in tolerant amazement.

They joined Mike behind the truck, leaving Edilio's soldiers in place watching the door, guns leveled.

Mike was surprised. "Hey, Drake told Jack you were dead! Jack totally lost it believing him."

Brianna grinned. "Oh he did, did he?"

"Totally. He went all Aragorn on Drake. Tried to kill him. That's how we . . . I mean, how I, got away." He burst into tears then, weeping uncontrollably and covering his face with his hands.

"You have a thing with Computer Jack?" Dekka asked. She carefully modulated her voice, giving nothing away of her inner turmoil. This was no time to burden Brianna with feelings she wouldn't reciprocate. Feelings that might even make her mad at Dekka. The two of them hadn't exactly been friends while they were at Coates.

Dekka wasn't sure Brianna even knew Dekka was gay.

"I didn't think I did," Brianna answered, looking pleased with herself. "I guess I do."

"Okay," Dekka said, swallowing hard. The important thing was Brianna was alive. And Mickey and Brittney were not.

Dekka was in charge here, she had to make some decisions. "You going to tell me how you came to be up on the roof?"

"Um . . . no. But here's the thing: There's a door up there that leads down inside. If I had a crowbar or something, I could get it open, get in and out of there before they know it. Smack the—"

"No, no," Mike said through heaving sobs. "The wires are still up."

"What wires?" Brianna demanded.

"Drake. He stretched wires all over the place so if you came in, they'd cut you up."

Dekka noted the look of shock on Brianna's usually cocky face.

"That's why Jack was trying to kill Drake," Mike said. "Jack told him he had to take them all down, and Drake pretended like he did, but he didn't."

Dekka said, "Guess it's a good thing Jack likes your act, Breeze. Mike here got away."

Brianna had no answer.

"Don't let it shake you up, girl," Dekka said. "You had a bad day. We've all had a very bad day." She sat down beside Mike and put her arm around his shoulders. "I'm so sorry about Mickey. I know you guys were buds."

Mike shook her off. "You don't care about Mickey. You care about her because she's a freak, like you."

Dekka decided to let that go. Couldn't blame Mike for being a little crazed. Couldn't really blame him if he fell apart completely.

To Brianna, Dekka said, "You had a close call. But right now the important thing is you start listening to other people and not do crazy stuff that leaves you trapped on a roof when we need you. Or worse yet, sliced up."

"Yeah," Brianna said, abashed. Then, recovering a little of her usual sass, she added, "Thanks, *Mom*."

Dekka loved that. Brianna's wild recklessness. She loved that. So much the opposite of Dekka herself. She didn't let Brianna know she loved it because right now Dekka was in charge, responsible. But Brianna wouldn't be Brianna without the crazy part.

Alive. She was alive.

And had a thing for Jack.

But alive.

THIRTY-ONE

13 HOURS, 35 MINUTES

COME TO ME. *I have need of you.*

"I can't breathe," Lana said, although if she spoke with her mouth, she heard no sound from it, nor did she feel her tongue and lips moving.

The gas compound deprives you of oxygen.

Yes. That was it. The gas. One spark and . . . somewhere she had a lighter. One spark and she would be free. Dead. Dead-free.

She laughed and the laughter became crimson daggers stabbing into her brain. She clutched her head and cried out in pain. She heard no sound. She did not feel her hands pressed against her temples.

Crawl to me.

Body not working. Was it? Was she on her hands and knees? Was her body still real?

Was she blind, or was it too dark to see?

Had she been unconscious? How long?

Moving, she was sure she was moving. Only maybe it was a breeze blowing past her.

I expel the carbon-hydrogen compound.

The . . . what? Carbon . . . what? Her mind was reeling, swirling, round and round and as it swirled out came the knives of pain to stab at her, to torture her. Head exploding. Heart hammering in her chest, trying to escape, ripping her ribs apart to get out of her.

No, all hallucination. Madness and lies.

But the pain was real. She could feel that, the pain. And the fear.

The oxygen-nitrogen mix flows.

Air. Replacing the gas. It did nothing to lessen the pain in her head. But her heart slowed.

She could see again, just a little, the headlights of the truck throwing the faintest light down the mine shaft to where she lay face down on rock. Lana brought her hand up in front of her face. Fingers. She could not quite make them out, but she knew they were there.

She touched her face. She could feel her hand. She could feel her cheek. Wet with tears.

Come to me.

No.

But she was on hands and knees now, moving. The rock tore the flesh of her palms and knees.

No. I won't come to you.

But she came. Moved. Hands and knees. Crawled.

Had it ever been possible to resist it?

No.

I am the gaiaphage.

You are mine.

I am Lana Arwen Lazar. My mother named me for . . . For something. Someone . . . My . . .

I hunger.

You will help me feed.

Leave me alone, Lana protested feebly as her arms and legs kept moving, her head hung down like a dog. Like . . . like someone . . .

I am the gaiaphage.

What does that mean? Lana asked.

She had more sense of herself now. She could reach into her memory and remember who she was and why she was here. She could recall the foolish hope she had nurtured of destroying the Darkness. The gaiaphage.

But now she saw its hand in everything she had done. From the start it had been calling to her. Twisting her thoughts and actions to its will.

She'd never had a chance.

And now she crawled.

Superman's other girlfriend, Lana. Aragorn's true love, Arwen. Lazar, shortened from Lazarevic. Lazarus, who rose from the dead. Lana Arwen Lazar. That's who she was.

She was unable to stop crawling. Down and down the mine shaft.

Come to me.

I have need of you.

What need? Why me?

You are the Healer.

You have the power.

Are you hurt? A flicker of hope at the thought that the creature might be wounded.

Lana's limbs were so heavy now, she could barely move. Barely slide her knees two inches across rough stone. Barely push her palms forward. But her eyes now registered the faint green glow she had remembered always from her first trip down this awful mine shaft.

A glow like luminescent watch dials. A glow like the glow-in-the-dark stars Lana's dad had pasted to her ceiling when she was little.

The thought of her father tore at Lana's soul. Her mother. Her father. So far away. Or dead. Or, who knew? Who would ever know?

She imagined them seeing her. As if she were bacteria on a slide and her mother and father were looking down through a gigantic microscope. Seeing their daughter like this. Crawling in the dark. Terrified. Hungry. So afraid.

Crawling toward the Darkness. Slave to the gaiaphage.

She stopped moving, commanded by the voice in her head. She panted, waiting, sweat pouring off her.

Place your hand on me.

"What?" she whispered. "Where? Where are you?"

She swung her weary head around, peering into the radioactive dark, seeing nothing but faintly glowing rock.

No. Looking closer, forcing herself to look, she saw that it was not rock. Her unwilling eyes seemed to bore into the faint green glow and there began to see not a

single mass of rock but a seething, pulsating swarm. Thousands, maybe millions of tiny crystalline shapes, hexagons, pentagons, triangles. The largest were perhaps half the size of her smallest fingernail. The smallest were no bigger than a period on a page. Each sprouted countless tiny legs, so that what Lana saw appeared as a vast ant colony, an insect hive, all green and glittering, pulsing like an exposed heart.

Place your hand on me.

She resisted. But she knew, even as she fought the gaiaphage's will, that she was doomed to lose. Her hand moved. Trembling, it moved. She saw her fingers dark against the green glow.

She touched it, felt it, and it was like touching rough sand on the beach. Only this sand moved, vibrated.

For a moment there was only that simple sensation.

Then, the gaiaphage showed her what he wanted.

She saw creatures. A creature of living fire. A clockwork snake. Monsters.

And she saw a Russian nesting doll.

One doll . . . inside another . . . inside another . . . and another . . .

Now she knew him, knew in a moment of blinding clarity what he was. Now she could feel his hunger. And now she sensed his fear.

He needed her, this foul creature made of human and alien DNA, of stone and flesh, nurtured on hard radiation in the depths of space and now in the depths of the earth. The glowing food had all been consumed in the thirteen years the gaiaphage had grown and mutated down here in the darkness.

It was hungry. Food was coming. When the food came, he would be strong enough to use Lana's power to create a body. He had used her power to give Drake his whip hand, to make a monster of him. He would use her now, once he had fed, to create a monstrous body of his own. Bodies inside of bodies, bodies that could be used and then cast aside as another emerged.

To move.

To escape the mine. That was his goal.

To walk the FAYZ and destroy all who resisted him.

Sam's day was a series of wild mood swings.

Taylor bounced in to tell him that Mickey Finch had been killed escaping from Caine. But that Mike Farmer had survived. And now Caine was without hostages.

Then a fire broke out in a house where two five-year-olds shared a place with two nine-year-olds. One of the nine-year-olds had been smoking pot.

Fire Chief Ellen got the fire truck to the scene in time to keep the fire from spreading to the house next door. Water pressure still held strong at that end of town.

The kids had all made it out alive.

Then, as he was standing on the street with the sun rising and smoke pouring from the burned house, trying to decide how, or if, he should punish a kid for smoking weed and starting a fire, he felt a slight gust of wind.

"Hey, Sammy," Brianna said.

Sam stared at her. She grinned at him.

Sam breathed a big sigh of relief. "I should kill you, disappearing like that."

"Come on," Brianna said, stretching her arms wide, "Hug it out."

She embraced Sam—quickly—then stepped back. “That’s all, big boy, I don’t want Astrid mad at me.”

“Uh-huh.”

“So, when do we go take out Caine and get the lights back on?”

Sam shook his head. “Can’t do it, Breeze.”

“What? What?” What do you mean you can’t do it? He’s sitting there with no hostages. We can take him.”

“There are other issues,” Sam said. “We’ve got trouble here between freaks and normals.”

Brianna made a dismissive sound. “I’ll run around and slap some of them a few times, they’ll get over themselves, and we’ll get busy at the power plant.” She leaned close. “I found a way in through the roof.”

That was interesting news. Interesting enough to make Sam reconsider. “A way into what? The turbine room?”

“Dude, there’s a door on the roof. I don’t know where it goes, but it has to go into the turbine room. Probably.”

Sam tried to shake himself out of his funk, but he couldn’t quite do it, couldn’t quite focus. He felt deflated. Weary beyond belief. “You’re hurt,” he observed.

“Yeah, and it stings, too. Where’s Lana? I need some curing. Then we can do some butt-kicking.”

“We lost Lana. She took off.”

That piece of news rocked even Brianna’s eager confidence. “What?”

“Things are not going well,” Sam said.

He felt Brianna’s worried gaze. He wasn’t setting a good example. He wasn’t exactly taking charge. He knew all that. But he couldn’t shake off the indifference that sapped his every attempt to formulate a plan.

“You need some rest,” Brianna said at last.

“Yeah,” Sam said. “No doubt.”

The voices were familiar. Dekka. Taylor. Howard.

“Sun’s coming up,” Taylor said. “The sky’s turning gray.”

“We have to do something about Brittney and Mickey,” Dekka said.

“I don’t deal with dead bodies.” Howard.

“I guess we could, you know, send them back to town for Edilio to bury,” Dekka said.

Taylor sighed. “Things are bad back there. I’ve never seen Sam like that. I mean, he’s just . . .”

Dekka said, “He’ll get over it.” She didn’t sound too sure of that. “But yeah, maybe this isn’t the time to ask him to speak at a burial.”

“Maybe we could just cover them up. You know, haul Mickey over here, maybe just put a blanket over them or something for now.”

“Yeah. One of these cars around here must have a blanket in the trunk. A tarp. Something. Get Orc to pop some trunks open, huh?”

Which was how Brittney ended up nestled next to Mickey, under the shelter of a painter’s drop cloth.

She felt no pain.

She saw no light.
She heard, but barely.
Her heart was still and silent.
Yet she did not die.

Albert had no time to waste. He and Quinn had finally told Sam about their gold mission. About Lana going off with Cookie.

They'd found Sam listless, not as mad as either of them had expected. He'd listened with his eyes closed and a couple of times Albert thought he might have nodded off.

It had been a relief not to have Sam rage at them. But also disturbing. After all, they were delivering very bad news. Sam's nonreaction was unreal. Sam wasn't acting like Sam.

All the more reason for Albert to get his act together. He'd sent a disbelieving Quinn off to fish.

"I don't care how tired you are, Quinn: we have a business to run."

And then he'd gotten down to work.

The problem for Albert was melting the gold. The melting point for gold was three times higher than the melting point for lead, and nothing Albert could find achieved that temperature. Certainly none of the equipment at his McDonald's, none of which was working now anyway, with the power out.

Albert despaired until, rummaging through the hardware store looking for a solution, he noticed the acetylene torch.

He hauled two torches and all the spare acetylene tanks he could find to the McDonald's. He locked the door.

He placed a large cast-iron pot on the stove and heated it to maximum. It wouldn't melt the gold, but it would slow down the cooling process.

He placed one of the gold bars into the pot, fired the torch, and aimed the blue pencil point flame at the gold. Instantly the metal began to sweat. Then to run off in a tiny river of molten gold.

An hour later he popped his first six gold bullets from the bullet mold.

It was exhausting work. Hot work. But he got so he could produce twenty-four bullets an hour. He worked without pause for ten hours straight and then, exhausted, starving and dehydrated, he counted out 224 of the .32-caliber bullets.

Kids knocked on the door, demanding to be let in for the McClub. But Albert just posted a sign saying, "Sorry: We Are Closed This Evening, Please Come Back Tomorrow."

He drank some water, ate a meager meal, and did some calculations. He had enough gold to produce perhaps four thousand bullets, which, equally distributed, would mean just over ten bullets for each person in Perdido Beach. The job would take weeks.

But he didn't have nearly enough acetylene to manage it. Which would mean that in order to melt all the gold he would need the help of the one person least likely to want to help: Sam.

Albert had seen Sam burn through brick. Surely he could melt gold.

In the meantime Albert intended to distribute a single bullet to each person. Sort of

as a calling card. A sign of what was coming.

And then, a paper currency backed up by the gold, and finally, credit.

Despite his weariness, Albert hummed contentedly as he sat with a yellow legal pad and a pen, writing out possible names for the new currency.

“Bullets” was obviously not the appropriate term. He wanted people thinking “money,” not “death.”

Dollars? No. The word was familiar, but he wanted something new.

Euros? Francs? Doubloons? Marks? Chits? Crowns?

Alberts?

No. Over the top.

Units?

It was functional. It meant what it said.

“The problem is, whatever we call them, we don’t have enough,” Albert muttered. If there were going to be just four thousand of the new . . . whatever . . . they’d obviously have to be worth a lot, each one. Like, to start with, ten slugs should . . .

Slugs?

They were slugs, after all.

To start with, if a kid had the original ten slugs he was given, then each slug would have to be worth more than, say, a single one-can meal. So he needed, in addition to the slugs, smaller units. A currency that would be worth, say, one tenth of a slug.

But any attempt to make up paper currency would just send everyone running to find a copier. He needed something that could not be duplicated.

An idea hit him. A memory. He ran for the storeroom that had long since been cleaned out of food. There were two boxes on the wire shelves. Each was filled with McDonald’s Monopoly game pieces—tickets—from some long-forgotten promotion.

Twelve thousand pieces per box. Hard to counterfeit.

He would have enough to make change for four thousand slugs at a rate of six Monopoly pieces per slug.

“A slug equals six tickets,” Albert said. “Six tickets equals a slug.”

It was a beautiful thing, Albert thought. Tears came to his eyes. It was a truly beautiful thing. He was reinventing money.

THIRTY-TWO

09 HOURS, 3 MINUTES

BUG WAS LEERY now. Sam's people knew about him. They had since the big battle of Perdido Beach. But now they had begun to take countermeasures. The sudden attack with spray paint had shaken Bug's self-confidence.

So when Caine drew him aside, careful not to let Drake overhear, and gave him a new assignment, Bug was dubious.

"They're out there waiting for anyone who comes out," Bug argued. "Dekka's out there for sure. Bunch of kids with guns. And probably Sam, hiding somewhere maybe."

"Keep your voice down," Caine said. "Listen, Bug, you're doing this: the easy way or the hard way. Your choice."

So Bug was doing it. Not liking it, but doing it.

He began by drifting into invisibility. Even when he was visible, kids tended to overlook him. They would forget he was there. Once he'd faded, they seldom seemed to remember him.

He stood in the corner of the control room for a while, out of sight. Making sure no one—by which he meant Drake—was going to miss him.

Things had calmed down a little since it became clear that Sam's people were not going to rush in, guns and laser hands blazing.

But the room was still tense. Drake and Caine paranoid, waiting for attack from outside, or from each other. Diana sullen, sleepy. Computer Jack obviously in pain from his injuries, popping Advil like crazy, but still pecking away at the keyboard. Drake's bully boys had found some guy's handheld game and were taking turns playing it till the batteries failed. Then they'd go off in search of more batteries.

No one missed Bug.

So he slipped out of the room, inches away from Drake, fearing the sudden lash of his whip as he held his breath.

Outside, things were better than he'd expected. Dekka was sitting in the front seat of a car, half dozing, half arguing with Taylor and Howard. Orc was at the far edge of the parking lot idly smashing car windshields with a tire iron. And two, no three, kids with guns, concealed behind cars, around corners, all waiting for trouble. All bored, too.

And in very bad moods. Bug heard fragments of grouching as he passed.

". . . Sam just takes off and leaves us here and . . ."

". . . if you're not some powerful freak, no one gives a . . ."

". . . I swear I am going to cut off my own leg and eat it, I'm so hungry . . ."

". . . rat doesn't taste as bad as you'd think. The trouble is, finding a rat . . ."

Bug slipped past them and reached the road. Easy-peasy, as they used to say back in kindergarten.

From there it was a long, long walk. With nothing to eat.

Bug felt like his stomach was trying to kill him. Like it had become this enemy inside him. Like cancer or whatever. It just hurt all the time. He'd found his mouth

watering when he heard the kid talking about eating a rat.

Bug would eat a rat. In a heartbeat. Maybe he wouldn't have even the day before, but now, he hadn't eaten in a very long time. Maybe the time had come to start eating bugs again. Not as a dare, but simply for a meal.

He wondered how long you could go without food before you died. Well, one way or another, he was going to get some food. He'd managed to slip into Ralph's before, and it was kind of on the way to Coates.

Had to eat, man. Caine had to understand that.

He'd get to Coates and find the freaky dream girl in plenty of time.

Bug reached into his pocket and pulled out the map Caine had drawn onto a piece of printer paper. It was pretty good, pretty clear. It led from Coates, down around the hills, out into the desert. An "X" marked something Caine had labeled "Ghost Town." A second "X," almost on top of the town, was labeled "Mine."

On the map was a written message to anyone who challenged Bug. It read:

Bug is following my orders. Do what he says. Anyone who tries to stop him deals with me. Caine.

Bug was to gather up the dreamer, Orsay, and, using whatever guys he could round up at Coates, get her to the "X" labeled "Mine."

"I don't know if it dreams or not," Caine had said. "But I think maybe all its thoughts are dreams, kind of. I think maybe Orsay can get inside its head."

Bug had nodded like he understood, though he didn't.

"I want to know what it plans for me," Caine instructed Bug. "You tell her that. If I bring it food, what will it do to me? You tell Orsay that if she can tell me the dreams of the Darkness, the gaiaphage, I will cut her loose. She'll be free."

Then Caine had added, "Free from me, anyway."

It was an important mission. Caine had promised Bug first choice of any food they got in the future. And Bug knew he'd better succeed. People who failed Caine came to bad, bad ends.

It was a very long walk to Ralph's. The place was still guarded. Bug could see two armed kids on the roof, two by the front door, two by the loading dock in back. And the place was hopping, kids crowding at the door, pushing and yelling.

Many were there to get their daily ration of a couple of cans of horrible food, doled out by bored fourth graders who had already grown cynical.

"Dude, don't try and play me," one was saying as he turned a girl away. "You were here two hours ago getting food. You can't just change clothes and trick me."

Others were not there to get food but electricity. Ralph's was on the highway, outside of the town proper. Obviously it still had electricity, because extension cords had been strung through the front door and power strips attached. Kids were lined up charging iPods, rechargeable flashlights, and laptops.

Bug would tell Caine about the electricity at the store. That would earn him some brownie points. Caine would get Jack to find a way to cut it off.

The fact that the power was still on meant that the automatic door also still worked. Bug had to be careful to follow someone else in.

The store was an eerie place. The produce section, which was the first thing he

saw, was empty. Most of the rotting produce had been shoveled out, but they had not done a thorough job. A big squash was so rotted, it had been reduced to a liquid smear. There were corn-on-the-cob leaves scattered, onion skins, and on the floors a sticky gray goo that was the residue of the cleanup effort.

The meat section stank, but it was empty nonetheless.

Shelves were acres of emptiness. All the remaining food was gathered into a single aisle in the middle of the store.

Careful to avoid brushing against any of the half dozen or so workers, Bug walked along the aisle.

Jars of gravy. Packets of powdered chili mix. Jars of pimentos and pickled onions. Artificial sweetener. Clam juice. Canned sauerkraut. Wax beans.

In a separate section with its own guard was a slightly more inviting shelf. A sign read, "Day Care Only." Here, there were cylinders of oatmeal, cans of condensed milk, boiled potatoes, and cans of V8 juice, though not many.

Things were bad in Perdido Beach, Bug reflected. The days of candy and chips were definitely gone. Not even a cracker to be seen, let alone a cookie. He'd been really lucky to score that handful of Junior Mints on his spy mission to the power plant.

That was luck. And now, Bug had some more luck. It was purely by chance that he discovered the secret of Ralph's. He had dodged aside to avoid a couple of kids and ended up cowering in front of the swinging doors that led to the storeroom area. A swing of the door had revealed two kids manhandling a plastic tub filled with ice.

Bug couldn't enter the storeroom without pushing the door and risking discovery. But he figured it might be worth it: anything someone else wanted to hide was something Bug wanted to find out about.

He took a deep breath, ready to run for it if necessary. He pushed the swinging door open and slid through. The kids with the bin were gone. But he heard movement around the corner, behind a wall of cartons marked "plastic cups."

There was the work area that had once belonged to the butchers. Now four kids, in rubber aprons that dragged to the floor, were wielding knives.

They were cutting up fish.

Bug stood and stared, not believing what he was seeing. Some of the fish were big—maybe three feet long—silver and gray, with white and pink insides. Other fish were smaller, brown, flat. One of the fish looked so ugly, Bug figured it must be deformed. And two of the fish didn't look like fish at all, but rather like soggy, featherless blue birds, or maybe like bats.

The aproned kids were chatting happily—like people who were eating well, Bug thought bitterly—as they sliced open the fish and, with many cries of, "Ewww, this is so gross," sluiced the fish guts into big, white plastic tubs.

Others then took the cleaned fish, cut off their heads and tails, and scraped the scales from them under running water.

Bug hated fish. Really, really hated it. But he would have given anything, done anything, to have a plate full of fried fish. Ketchup would have helped, but even without it, even knowing that ketchup might never be seen again, the idea of a big plate of hot anything seemed wonderful.

It made Bug want to swoon. Fish! Fried, steamed, microwaved, he didn't care.

Bug considered his options. He could grab a fish and run. But although people couldn't see him easily, they'd sure be able to see a fish flying through the store and out the door. And those kids at the door and on the roof probably weren't good shots, but they didn't have to be when they were firing machine guns.

He could try to conceal a fish down his pants or under his shirt. But that assumed the kids with the gutting knives were slow to react.

A kid Bug recognized came in: Quinn. One of Sam's friends, although at one point, he'd been with Caine.

"Hey, guys," Quinn said. "How's it going?"

"We're almost done," one answered.

"We had a good day, huh?" Quinn said. There was obvious pride in his tone. "Did you guys all get some to eat?"

"It was, like, the most delicious thing I've ever eaten in my entire life," a girl said fervently. She almost choked up with emotion. "I never even used to like fish."

Quinn patted her on the shoulder. "Amazing what tastes good when you get hungry enough."

"Can I take some home for my little brother?"

Quinn looked pained. "Albert says no. I know this looks like a lot of fish, but it wouldn't even be a mouthful per person in the FAYZ. We want to wait till we have some more frozen. And . . ."

"And what?"

Quinn shrugged. "Nothing. Albert just has a little project he's working on. When he's ready, we'll tell everyone that we have a little fish available."

"You'll catch more, though, right?"

"I'm not counting on anything. Listen, though, guys, you know you have to keep this to yourselves, right? Albert says anyone tells about this, they lose their job."

All four nodded vigorously. The price of disobedience was losing access to a fried-fish meal. That would be enough to scare most kids into behaving.

One of the guys looked around, like he was suspicious. He looked right at Bug, though his eyes slid right over him. Like he sensed something but couldn't put his finger on it.

The hunger was terrible. It had been bad when all Bug hoped to get was a can of beets. But the mere existence of fresh fish . . . he was imagining the smell. He was imagining the flavor. He was slavering, drooling, his stomach . . .

"If you give me some fish, I'll tell you a secret," Bug said suddenly.

Quinn jumped about a foot.

Bug turned off his camouflage.

Quinn reached for one of the knives and yelled, "Guards! Guards, in here!"

Bug held out his hands, showing he had no weapon. "I'm just hungry. I'm just so hungry."

"How did you get in here?"

"I want some fish. Give me some fish," Bug pleaded. "I'll tell you everything. I'll tell what Caine's doing. I am so hungry."

Quinn looked profoundly uncomfortable. Even nervous. Two armed kids rushed into the room. They looked to Quinn for direction, and pointed their guns without any real conviction.

Quinn said, “Oh, man. Oh, man.”

“I just want to eat,” Bug said. He broke down crying. Sobbing like a baby. “I want some fish.”

“I have to take you to Sam,” Quinn said. He didn’t seem to be happy about the idea.

Bug fell to his knees. “Fish,” he begged.

“Give him one bite,” Quinn said, making his decision. “One single bite. One of you go and bring Sam and Astrid. They can decide whether to give this little creep any more.”

One of the guards took off.

Quinn looked down at the weeping Bug. “Man, you have picked a bad time to switch sides.”

His surfboard was still leaning against the washing machine in the tiny room off the kitchen. A Channel Island MBM.

Sam wanted to touch it, but couldn’t bring himself to. It was everything he had lost in the FAYZ.

His wetsuit hung from a peg. The can of wax was on the rickety shelf next to the laundry detergent and the fabric softener.

The ball of light was still there in his bedroom. Still floating in the air, just outside of Sam’s bedroom closet.

He hadn’t been back to his old home in a long time. He’d forgotten the light would be there.

Strange.

He passed his hand through it. Not much of a sensation.

He remembered when it first happened. He’d been scared of the dark. Back then. Back when he was Sam Temple, some kid, some random kid who just wanted to surf.

No. That wasn’t true, either. He’d already stopped being just some random kid. He’d already been School Bus Sam, the quick-thinking seventh grader who had taken the wheel when the bus driver had had a heart attack.

He’d been that.

And he’d been the kid who had freaked out, not understanding that the argument between his mother and stepfather was no big thing. He’d thought his stepfather was going to hit his mother.

So, by the time Sam, in a panic, had created the light that would not die, he had already been School Bus Sam, and the person who’d burned a grown man’s hand off.

Not some random teenager.

He hated this house and hated this room. Why had he come here?

Because everyone knew he hated it, so they wouldn’t come looking for him here. They’d search for him everywhere and not find him.

The stuff he had in his room—the clothes, the books, the old school notebooks, the pictures he had taken once with a waterproof camera while he was surfing—none of it meant anything to him. Some other kid’s stuff, not his. Not anymore.

He sat on the end of his bed, feeling like an intruder. A strange feeling since this was the only place he’d stayed in the last three months that he had any real claim to.

He gazed at the ball of light. “Turn off,” he said.

The ball did not respond.

Sam raised his palms, aimed them toward the light, and thought the single word, Dark.

The light disappeared.

The room was plunged into darkness. So dark, he couldn't see his hand in front of his face. All over town, kids were sitting in the dark, just like this. He supposed he could go around and create little light balls in every house in town. Sam, the electrician.

He was no longer afraid of the dark. That realization surprised him. The dark almost felt cozy, now. Safe. No one could see him in the dark.

There was a list in his head, a list that kept scrolling and scrolling. Words and phrases. One after another. Each representing a thing he should be doing.

Zekes. Caine and the power plant. Little Pete and his monsters. Food. Zil and Hunter. Lana and . . . whatever. Water. Jack. Albert.

Those were the headlines. Buzzing around those great big things were thousands of smaller things, like a nest of hornets. Kids fighting. Dogs and cats. Broken windows. Grass. Gasoline that needed to be rationed. Trash piling up. Toilets plugged. Teeth needing to be brushed. Kids drinking. Bedtimes. Mary throwing up. Cigarettes and pot.

Things to do. Decisions to make.

No one listening.

And what about Astrid?

And what about Quinn?

And what about kids talking more openly about stepping off when the Big One-Five rolled around?

And around and around and around it whirled through his head.

He sat in the dark on the end of his bed. He wanted to cry. That's what he wanted to do. But there wouldn't be anyone to come and pat him on the shoulder and tell him everything would be okay.

There was no one. And things wouldn't be okay.

It was all coming apart.

He imagined himself facing a tribunal. Stone faces glaring at him. Accusations. You let them starve, Sam. You let normals turn against freaks.

Tell us about the death of E.Z., Mr. Temple.

Tell us what you did to save the kids at the power plant.

Tell us how you failed to find a way out of the FAYZ.

Tell us why, when the FAYZ wall came down, we found kids dead in the dark.

They were down to eating rats, Mr. Temple.

We have evidence of cannibalism.

Explain that to us, Mr. Temple.

Sam heard soft footsteps in the family room. Of course. There was one person who would know where he was hiding.

The bedroom door opened with a squeak. A flashlight found his face. He closed his eyes to block the light.

The flashlight snapped off. Without a word she came and sat beside him.

For the longest time neither of them spoke. They sat side by side. Her leg was

against his.

“I’m feeling sorry for myself,” he said at last.

“Why?”

It took him a few beats to realize she was kidding. She knew the list in his head as well as he did.

“Whatever vitally important thing you came here to tell me?” he said. “Just don’t, okay? I’m sure it’s absolutely life or death. But just don’t.”

He could sense her hesitation. With sinking heart he realized he had guessed correctly. There was some new crisis. Some new thing that absolutely demanded Sam Temple’s attention, his decisiveness, his leadership.

He didn’t care.

Astrid remained silent. Silent for too long. But she seemed to be rocking back and forth, just slightly. And he almost thought he heard her whispering.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m praying.”

“What for?”

“A miracle. A clue. Food.”

Sam sighed. “What food?”

“A Quiznos. Turkey, bacon, and guacamole.”

“Yeah? If God gives you a Quiznos, can I have a bite?”

“No way. You have to pray for your own food.”

“Three hundred kids are praying for food. And yet, we have no food. Three hundred kids praying for their parents. Praying for this all to be over.”

“Yeah,” she admitted. “Sometimes it’s hard having faith.”

“If there’s a God, I wonder if he’s sitting in the dark on the end of his bed wondering how he managed to screw everything up.”

“Maybe,” Astrid said with just a little bit of a laugh.

Sam was not in a laughing mood. “Yeah? Well to hell with your God.”

He heard a sharp intake of breath. It gratified him. Good. Let her be shocked. Let her be so shocked, she went away and left him to sit here alone in the dark.

Neither of them spoke for a long while. Then Astrid stood up, breaking the slight physical contact between them.

“You don’t want to hear this,” Astrid said, “but they couldn’t find you, so they found me. And now I’ve found you.”

“I really don’t care,” Sam warned.

But Astrid would not stop. “Bug has come over to our side. He was on a mission for Caine. They have a freak who can see dreams and Caine wanted Bug to get her, take her to some mine in the hills. Some monster.”

“Yeah?” Sam said. Not like he cared. Like he was just being polite.

“And Cookie showed up. He had to walk all the way back to town. He walked through the night. He had a note from Lana.”

Nothing. Sam had nothing to say to that.

Astrid sat quiet for a second then added, “Bug says they call it the gaiaphage. Lana calls it the Darkness.”

Sam covered his face with his hands. “I don’t care, Astrid. Handle it yourself. Pray to Jesus and maybe He’ll handle it.”

“You know, Sam, I’ve never thought you were perfect. I know you have a temper. But I’ve never known you to be mean.”

“I’m mean?” He laughed bitterly.

“Mean. Yes, that was mean.”

Their voices were rising swiftly. “I’m mean? That’s the worst you can throw at me?”

“Mean and self-pitying. Does that make it better?”

“And what are you, Astrid?” he shouted. “A smug know-it-all! You point your finger at me and say, ‘Hey, Sam, you make the decisions, and you take all the heat.’”

“Oh, it’s my fault? No way. I didn’t anoint you.”

“Yeah, you did, Astrid. You guilted me into it. You think I don’t know what you’re all about? You used me to protect Little Pete. You use me to get your way. You manipulate me anytime you feel like it.”

“You really are a jerk, you know that?”

“No, I’m not a jerk, Astrid. You know what I am? I’m the guy getting people killed,” Sam said quietly.

Then, “My head is exploding from it. I can’t get my brain around it. I can’t do this. I can’t be that guy, Astrid, I’m a kid, I should be studying algebra or whatever. I should be hanging out. I should be watching TV.”

His voice rose, higher and louder till he was screaming. “What do you want from me? I’m not Little Pete’s father. I’m not everybody’s father. Do you ever stop to think what people are asking me to do? You know what they want me to do? Do you? They want me to kill my brother so the lights will come back on. They want me to kill kids! Kill Drake. Kill Diana. Get our own kids killed.

“That’s what they ask. Why not, Sam? Why aren’t you doing what you have to do, Sam? Tell kids to get eaten alive by zekes, Sam. Tell Edilio to dig some more holes in the square, Sam.”

He had gone from yelling to sobbing. “I’m fifteen years old. I’m fifteen.”

He sat down hard on the edge of the bed. “Oh, my God, Astrid. It’s in my head, all these things. I can’t get rid of them. It’s like some filthy animal inside my head and I will never, ever, ever get rid of it. It makes me feel so bad. It’s disgusting. I want to throw up. I want to die. I want someone to shoot me in the head so I don’t have to think about everything.”

Astrid was beside him, and her arms were around him. He was ashamed, but he couldn’t stop the tears. He was sobbing like he had when he was a little kid, like when he had a nightmare. Out of control. Sobbing.

Gradually the spasms slowed. Then stopped. His breathing went from ragged to regular.

“I’m really glad the lights weren’t on,” Sam said. “Bad enough you had to hear it.”

“I’m falling apart,” he said.

Astrid gave no answer, just held him close. And after what felt like a very long time, Sam moved away from her, gently putting distance between them again.

“Listen. You won’t ever tell anyone . . .”

“No. But, Sam . . .”

“Please don’t tell me it’s okay,” Sam said. “Don’t be nice to me anymore. Don’t even tell me you love me. I’m about a millimeter from falling apart again.”

“Okay.”

Sam heaved a huge sigh. Then another. Then, “Okay. Okay. Tell me what’s in Lana’s letter.”

THIRTY-THREE

07 HOURS, 58 MINUTES

HUNTER WAS HUNGRIER than he would have thought possible. He'd been hungry for a long time, living on the slimy, tasteless, awful stuff they handed out at Ralph's. Three cans of goo a day. That's what kids called it. Only sometimes the word wasn't "goo" but something harsher.

But now he was far beyond that. Now the days of three cans of goo seemed like the good old days.

After leaving Duck he'd been spotted and chased by Zil's friends. He'd barely escaped. And in order to get away, he'd had to go the one direction they didn't expect: out of town.

He had crossed the highway. Running, scared, feeling he was being chased even when he wasn't. Feeling like at any minute Zil and his thug friends might catch him. And then . . . and he didn't want to think too hard about what came then.

It seemed so crazy. So impossible. Zil had never been like his best friend or anything, but they had shared a house. They had been buddies. Not close, but buddies. Guys who would chill and watch a game or check out girls or whatever. Zil and him and Harry and . . .

And of course that was the problem: Harry.

He hadn't meant to hurt Harry. It wasn't really his fault. Was it?

Was it?

Hunter had slunk across the highway and it was like it was a border or something. Like he was crossing from one country into another. Perdido Beach on one side, something else on the other.

He thought at first about going to Coates. But Coates wasn't the answer to any question that Hunter could think of. Coates meant Drake and Caine and that deceptive witch, Diana. Mostly, Drake. Hunter had seen Drake at the Thanksgiving Battle. Back at the time Hunter had not even known he was developing powers. He was a bystander, mostly getting in the way of the guys who were doing the real fighting. Standing there watching in sheer, wild-eyed terror as Sam fired massive jolts of energy from his hands and Caine picked up things and people and threw them around.

And the coyotes. They were part of it, too.

But it was Drake who had haunted Hunter's nightmares. Whip Hand, he called himself, and that was accurate enough. But it wasn't the whip hand that terrified Hunter. It was the sheer, insane violence in the boy. The madness.

No. Not Coates. He couldn't go there.

He couldn't go anywhere.

Hunter had spent the remainder of the night hiding in one of the abandoned homes that nestled up against the hills.

But he had not slept well. The fear and the hunger made sleep impossible.

Well, Hunter told himself, if he was still this desperate in two days, he had a solution. Not a good solution, maybe, but a solution. In two days Hunter would turn fifteen. Fifteen was the poof, the big step-off. Later to the FAYZ.

He had heard all about how to survive. How to stay in the FAYZ, fight the temptation. But he'd also heard that lately more and more kids were saying, forget it: I hit fifteen, I am out of here.

They said at the moment of the poof you were tempted with the one thing you wanted most. By the one person you missed most. If you could reject that temptation, you stayed in the FAYZ. If you gave in . . . well, that was the thing. No one knew what happened if you went for it.

Hunter knew what would tempt him to accept. A cheeseburger. Or a slice of pizza. Not candy, it wasn't about candy. Not anymore. It was all about meaty goodness now.

If some demon came to him with a rack of Applebee's ribs, Hunter had no serious doubt that he would reach for it, whatever the consequence.

He would trade his life for an In-N-Out Double-Double. The only hesitation in his mind was whether the demon would actually let him eat it or would just zap him into nonexistence, still hungry.

Hunter hid in the house all night and well into the morning, afraid to step outside. But no matter how hard he searched, he found nothing to eat. Nothing. The house had been cleaned out completely. The cupboards were all open, the refrigerator door wide open, all the telltale signs that Albert's gatherers had been through.

Nothing. To. Eat.

Hunter stood vacant, hopeless, in the living room. He stared at the backyard and thought about the grass and weeds. Weeds were plants, after all. Animals ate them. They would at least fill his stomach.

Grass and weeds. Boiled. He could do that.

Then he saw the deer.

It was a doe. Hyper alert, with a face that managed to be both cute and stupid. The doe blinked her big black eyes.

A deer. As big as a calf.

Hunter was moving toward the back door before he'd thought through what he was doing or why.

He moved swiftly. He opened the back porch door. The deer, startled, took off in a bounding run. Hunter raised his hands and thought, Burn.

The deer did not fall over dead. Instead, it made a squealing sound Hunter had not known deer could make. The deer kept running, but one leg dragged.

Hunter aimed again and thought, Burn.

The deer stumbled. Its front legs kept motoring, but its hind legs were immobilized. It fell on its face.

Hunter ran to it. He found the deer still alive. Struggling. She looked at him with her big, soft eyes and for a moment he hesitated.

"I'm sorry," he said.

He aimed his hands at her head. In seconds she had stopped thrashing. The dark eyes turned opaque.

She smelled like a steak on the grill.

Hunter burst into tears. He sobbed wildly, out of control. It was like what he'd done to Harry. Poor Harry. And now this poor animal, who was just hungry herself.

He didn't want to eat the deer. It was crazy. She'd been alive, munching weeds just a minute earlier. Alive. Now dead. And not just dead, but partly cooked.

He told himself he would not eat the deer. But even as he was telling himself he wouldn't, couldn't, shouldn't . . . he was finding the biggest knife in the kitchen.

Orsay Pettijohn was no longer hungry for dreams. She was hungry for food.

Since coming to Coates she had eaten barely enough to stay alive. The situation was desperate. Kids were going into the surrounding woods looking for mushrooms, chasing squirrels and birds. One boy had made a trap and managed to catch a raccoon. The raccoon had bitten the boy repeatedly before being beaten to death with a piece of rebar.

A girl named Allison had collected a bowl full of mushrooms. She had reasoned that cooking them would make them safe. She microwaved them till they were rubbery but fragrant.

Orsay had smelled them cooking and had been driven nearly crazy by the smell. One of the boys had attacked Allison, beaten, her and stolen the mushrooms as Allison wept and cursed.

Within a few minutes the boy was vomiting. Then he began raving, crying, shouting at things that weren't there. He'd fallen silent after a while. No one had entered his room since to see if he was dead or alive.

Some kids had gathered grass and weeds and boiled them. They had not gotten very sick, just a little. But they hadn't really gotten full, either.

Kids were thin. Their cheeks were hollow. They didn't look like starvation victims yet, because the serious hunger was only a few days old. But soon, Orsay knew, bellies would bloat and hair would turn red and crisp, and deadly resigned lethargy would set in. She had done a report once on famine, never imagining it would be something she would experience.

More and more kids made dark jokes about cannibalism.

Orsay was less and less sure she wouldn't go along.

Unless, of course, she herself was the meal.

She was lying in her bungalow, in the woods, out behind the school, watching an old download of a show that seemed to be from another planet. The download came with a commercial for Doritos. The characters ate food all the time. It was impossible to believe that world had ever been real.

Suddenly, Orsay was aware of another person in the room. She didn't see him or hear him. She smelled him.

He smelled like . . . like fish. Her stomach rumbled and her mouth watered.

"Who's there?" she demanded, frightened.

Bug appeared slowly. He emerged from the background of Mose's shabby room.

"What do you want?" Orsay demanded, not really afraid of Bug now that she knew it was him. The smell, the fat, luscious aroma of fish, had her slavering like a hungry dog.

"I need you to do something," Bug said.

"Did Caine send you?"

Bug hesitated. He glanced aside and for a few seconds faded into the background again. Then he reappeared. His face was twisted into a very un-Bug-like expression of determination. He glanced warily over his shoulder as if fearing that some second version of himself was lurking, listening. "They have fish."

“I can smell it,” Orsay whimpered.

“I brought some for you,” Bug said.

Orsay felt like she might faint. “Can I have it?”

“First you have to promise you’ll do what I say.”

Orsay knew Bug was a little creep. Who knew what he would want her to do? But she also knew she wasn’t going to resist. There was just about nothing she wouldn’t do for food. Fish would be much, much better than the other type of meat kids were considering.

“What do I have to do?” Orsay asked.

“We have to take a walk. Then you have to do your thing. There’s some, like, creature or whatever. They want you to watch its dreams. See what it wants.”

“The fish,” Orsay whispered urgently. “Do you have it with you?”

Bug drew a Ziploc bag out of the pocket of his hoodie. Inside was white, crumbly, smashed-up fish. Orsay lunged for it, tore the packet open with trembling fingers, and ate it like an animal, sticking her mouth into the bag.

She didn’t stop until she had turned the bag inside out and licked the plastic clean. “Do you have any more?” she begged.

“First, you do your thing. Then we go back to town and talk.”

“We’re doing this for the Perdido Beach kids?” Orsay asked.

Bug snorted. “We’re doing this for whoever gives us the best offer. Right now, Sam’s guys have some fish. So we’re with them. But if Drake gets hold of us, somehow, we’ve been on his side all along. Right?”

“I’m too weak to walk a long way,” Orsay said.

“We only have to get as far as the highway. A guy will be there with a car.”

THIRTY-FOUR

06 HOURS, 3 MINUTES

EDILIO DROVE THE creepy little mutant, Bug, and the girl he'd brought along with him. He wasn't happy about having to do this. Mostly he wanted to stay in town. Nightfall could bring trouble. And Sam . . . well, Sam wasn't acting like Sam.

Sam had looked like a zombie listening to Quinn and Albert's confession last night.

And then, this morning, Bug told his story. It was every kind of bad news rolled into one shamefaced confession after another, and Sam had just stared. Fortunately Astrid had stepped up.

Sam, Edilio, Brianna, Taylor, Quinn, Albert, Astrid—the seven of them in Astrid's living room, listening as Bug alternately groveled and whined.

Then, Astrid read Lana's letter.

Sam:

I'm going to try to kill the Darkness. I'd explain what that means, but I don't even know. I only know that it's the scariest thing you can imagine. I guess that's not too helpful.

I had no choice. It had its hooks in me, Sam. It was in my head. It's been calling to me for days. It needs me for something, I don't know what. But whatever it is, I can't let it happen.

Hopefully I'll be fine. If not, take care of Patrick. Cookie, too.

—Lana

"I knew she was having some problems," Quinn said, sounding guilty. "I didn't know about this, though. I mean . . . it's like Lana used me and Albert so she could get back out to the desert."

"That would be putting a convenient spin on your own sneakiness, Quinn," Astrid had snapped.

"She brought up the gold to me," Albert said thoughtfully, not at all intimidated by Astrid's anger. "It was a good suggestion. So I jumped at it. But it came from her, originally. Maybe what we need to think about is whether Lana is working with this creature."

"No," Quinn said.

Everyone waited for him to explain. He shrugged and repeated, "No." And then he added, "I don't think so."

"We need Lana," Sam said, finally breaking his gloomy silence. "It almost doesn't matter if she's helping this thing. Friend or enemy, we need Lana."

"Agreed," Albert said, as though the conversation were one between him and Sam, like it was just the two of them debating what to do. For a guy who had been caught breaking various rules, Albert didn't seem too worried.

But then he wouldn't, would he? Edilio reflected. He had food. Food was power now. Even Astrid wasn't really going after Albert, although she obviously didn't like

him much.

“We need to know what this creature is,” Albert said.

Sam looked at Bug, who had been ordered to remain visible. “What’s this Orsay girl’s thing?”

Bug shrugged. “She sees people’s dreams, I think.”

“And Caine wants her to spy on the creature.” Almost despite himself Sam was becoming more engaged. Edilio had seen the wheels begin to turn again in his friend’s head. It was a huge relief. “If Caine wants it, maybe we want it, too,” Sam had said, and one by one the others nodded agreement. “Albert’s right: we need to know what we’re dealing with.”

Which was how Edilio had ended up playing chauffeur to Bug and this strange girl.

“What’d you say your name was?” Edilio asked, making eye contact with her in the rearview mirror.

“Orsay.”

She probably wasn’t bad looking, under normal circumstances. But right now she looked terrified. And gaunt. Her hair was all over the place. And although Edilio wasn’t one to complain, one or both of them back there smelled, and not just like Quinn and Albert’s fish.

“Where you from, Orsay?”

“I lived at the ranger camp. In the Stefano Rey.”

“Huh. That’s kind of cool.”

She didn’t look as if she agreed. Then she said, “You have a gun.”

Edilio glanced at the machine pistol on the seat beside him. Two full clips rattled with each bump. “Yeah.”

“If we see Drake, you have to shoot him.”

Edilio pretty much agreed. But he had to ask, anyway. “Why?”

“I’ve seen his dreams,” Orsay said. “I’ve seen inside him.”

They were off-road, heading vaguely toward the hills. They had found Hermit Jim’s shack—Edilio had a good sense of direction—but none of them had ever been to this mine shaft. All they had were the directions Caine had given Bug. The sun was setting behind the hills, turning them an ominous dark purple. Night would come too soon. No way Orsay could do whatever it was she was supposed to do in time for them to get back to town before full night fell.

“What exactly are you supposed to be doing?” Edilio asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you’re a freak, right? Bug wasn’t too clear.”

Bug looked up at the sound of his nickname. Then, as if in response, he faded from view.

“I can see dreams. I told you,” Orsay said, and looked out of the window.

“Yeah? You wouldn’t want to see my dreams. They’re kind of boring.”

“I know,” the girl said.

That got Edilio’s full attention. “Say what?”

“Long time back. You and Sam and Quinn and a girl named Astrid. And the other one. I saw you hiking through the woods.”

“You were there, huh?” Edilio said. He pursed his lips, not at all happy with the

idea that some girl could see his dreams. He'd said his dreams were boring. Mostly they were. But sometimes, well, sometimes they weren't something he wanted a stranger sitting in on. Especially a girl.

He squirmed in his seat.

"Don't worry," Orsay said with a trace of a smile. "I'm used to . . . you know. Whatever."

"Uh-huh," Edilio muttered.

The Jeep bounced and rattled as they went through a rocky patch. They had the top up and buttoned tight. It was dusty and Edilio didn't trust Bug not to drop off and simply disappear.

Then, too, there were the coyotes. Edilio kept an eye out for them.

They were closing in on the hills. There was the fold formed by a spur, just like Caine had shown on the map he'd drawn for Bug.

There was a bad look about the place. The shadows seemed deeper than they should be for the middle of the day.

"I'm not crazy about this," he said to no one.

"Do you have family?" Orsay asked.

The question surprised Edilio. People tended to avoid talking about family. No one knew what had happened to the

families. "Sure."

"When I'm scared I try to think about my dad," Orsay said.

"Not me," Bug said.

"Not your mom?" Edilio asked.

"No."

"Because me, I think about my mom. In my mind, you know, she's like beautiful. I mean, I don't know if she was . . . is . . . in reality? Right? But in here," Edilio tapped his head. "In here she's beautiful." He tapped his chest. "In here, too."

They rounded the end of the rocky spur and there, in pitiless sunlight, a ghost town lay revealed.

Edilio put on the brakes.

"That look like what Caine told you?" he asked Bug.

Bug nodded.

"Okay."

"Caine said go through the town. Past a building that's still standing. Up a path. Mine shaft."

"Uh-huh," Edilio said. He knew what he was supposed to do. But he didn't like it. Not at all. Less, now that he was here. He was not a superstitious person, at least he didn't think so, but there was something very wrong about this ghost town.

He put the Jeep into gear and crept ahead, no more than ten miles an hour. The last thing he wanted to do was have to figure out how to change a tire.

"I don't like this place," Orsay said.

"Yeah. Let's not go here for spring break," Edilio said.

Through the town.

Past the ramshackle building.

The path was narrow, but the Jeep managed it at a crawl.

"Stop!" Orsay cried.

Edilio slammed on the brakes. They came to rest beside a high outcropping of rock. If this had been an old Western, Edilio thought, this is where the ambush would take place.

He lifted the gun. It was a reassuring weight in his hand. He checked to make sure it was cocked. Thumb on the safety. Finger resting on the trigger guard, just like he taught his recruits.

He listened but didn't hear anything.

"Why did we stop?" Edilio asked Orsay.

"Close enough," she whispered. "I . . ."

Edilio twisted in his seat. "What is it?"

What he saw shocked him. Orsay's eyes were wide, glittering whites showing all around.

"What's with her?" Bug asked in a quivering voice.

"Orsay. Are you okay?" Edilio asked.

Her only answer was a moaning sound so unearthly that at first Edilio didn't realize it was coming from her. It seemed to generate from her chest, a sound too deep for this frail girl. It was something closer to an animal growl.

"Girl's crazy," Bug moaned.

Orsay began to tremble. The trembling escalated until she was shaking, in spasm, like a person being electrocuted. Her tongue protruded from her mouth, gagging her.

She was biting her tongue. Like she was trying to bite it off.

"Hey!" Edilio slammed the glove compartment open and yanked everything out with frantic fingers, screwdriver, flashlight, a thick digital tire gauge. He grabbed the tire gauge and pushed his way into the backseat. He yelled, "Grab her, hold her!" to Bug, who instead shrank away.

Edilio grabbed her by the hair, there was nothing else he could hold with one hand, twisted his fist into her hair until he had a firm purchase, yanked her head forward, and shoved the tire gauge between her teeth.

Her jaws clamped hard, so hard, they cracked the plastic of the tire gauge. Blood flowed from her mouth, but her teeth no longer closed on her tongue.

"Hold that in her mouth!" Edilio yelled at Bug.

Bug just stared, paralyzed.

Edilio yelled a curse and said, "Do it or I swear I will shoot you!"

Bug snapped out of his trance and grabbed Orsay's head with his hands.

Edilio threw the Jeep into reverse and began backing up as fast as he could go, down the path. The first he noticed of the coyotes was when he felt a bump and heard a canine yelp of pain.

One hand on the wheel, yelling in fear, Edilio smashed the Jeep into an embankment. He threw it into drive, advanced a few feet to get clear, threw it, gears grinding into reverse again as a huge, snarling face appeared beside him. Coyote teeth slavered and tore at the plastic.

Edilio snap-aimed and fired. The burst was short, maybe five rounds, but more than enough to dissolve the coyote's head into red mist.

Down they bumped, down the path, smashing and jolting.

Edilio could barely hold the wheel.

Then, suddenly, they were on flat terrain. He spun the wheel as two coyotes hurled

themselves at the plastic sheath. The impact of their bodies was so great, it pushed the plastic in and slammed Edilio's arm, knocking his hand off the wheel, stunning him.

But his foot was on the gas pedal and he floored it. The Jeep plowed straight toward a building. Edilio grabbed the wheel, slammed on the brakes, twisted hard, fish-tailed into a two-wheel turn, and roared away from the ghost town.

The coyote pack followed for a while, then fell away as it became clear that they would never catch the speeding car.

Bug still had Orsay in a headlock. But she was making more reasonable sounds, now, seeming to ask to be freed.

"Let her go," Edilio ordered.

Bug released Orsay.

She wiped blood with the back of her hand. Edilio found a rag in the debris of the glove compartment and handed it back to her.

"It told me to chew my tongue off," she gasped at last.

"What?" Edilio snapped. "What? Who?"

"Him. It. He told me to chew my tongue off and I couldn't resist," she cried. "He didn't want me to be able to tell you."

"Tell us what? What?" Edilio demanded, desperate and confused.

Orsay spit blood onto the floor of the Jeep. She wiped her mouth again with the rag.

"He's hungry," she said. "He needs to feed."

"On us?" Bug cried.

Orsay stared at Bug. Then she actually laughed. "No. Not on us. Ow. My tongue."

"On what? On what?"

Orsay ignored Bug and spoke to Edilio. "We don't have much time," she said. "Food is coming. People are bringing it to him. And when he feeds he grows strong, and that's when he will use her."

"Use who?" Edilio demanded, knowing the answer before he asked the question.

"I don't know her name. The girl. The one with the healing touch. He can use her to give him legs and arms. To give him a body.

"He's weak now," she added. "But if he gets what he wants . . . becomes what he wants to become . . . then you will never stop him."

"Hungry in the dark," Little Pete said.

He was tucked into his bed, but his eyes were bright.

"I know, Petey. We're all hungry. But it's not really dark," Astrid said wearily. "Go beddy boody. Nap time."

It had been a very long night and morning. She wanted Pete to take a nap so she could catch some sleep as well. She could barely hold her head up. It was hot in the house with the power off and the air-conditioning dead. Hot and stuffy.

She had been badly shaken by Sam's meltdown. She wanted to be sympathetic. She was sympathetic. But more, she was frightened. Sam was all that really stood between the relative decency of Perdido Beach and the violent psychopathy of Caine and Drake and Diana.

Sam was all that protected Little Pete, and Astrid herself.

But he was breaking down. PTSD, she supposed, post-traumatic stress disorder.

What soldiers get after they spend too much time in combat.

Everyone in the FAYZ probably had it to one extent or another. But no one else had been in the middle of every violent confrontation, every new horror, and also been saddled with all the endless, endless details. There had been no downtime for Sam. No break.

She remembered Quinn laughing about how Sam never danced. She loved him, but it was true that Sam was lousy at relaxing. Well, if she ever got the chance, she would have to help him find a way.

“He’s afraid,” Little Pete said.

“Who?”

“Nestor.”

Nestor was the nesting doll Sam had accidentally crushed. “I’m sorry Nestor got broken. Go to sleep, Petey.”

She bent over to kiss him on his forehead. Of course he gave no response. He didn’t hug her or ask her to read him a story, or say, “Hey, thanks for taking care of me, sis.”

When he spoke, it was only about the things in his head. The world outside meant little or nothing to him. That included Astrid.

“Love you, Petey,” she said.

“He has her,” Little Pete said.

She was already out of the door when that last statement registered. “What?”

Pete’s eyes closed.

“Petey. Petey.” Astrid sat down beside him and put her hand on his cheek. “Petey . . . is Nestor talking to you?”

“He likes my monsters.”

“Petey. Is . . .” She barely knew how to ask the question. Her brain was fried. She was beyond exhausted. She lay down beside her brother and cuddled close to his indifferent body. “Tell me, Petey. Tell me about Nestor.”

But Little Pete was already asleep. And in seconds, so was Astrid.

It was in sleep that she began to fit together the pieces of the puzzle.

THIRTY-FIVE

02 HOURS, 53 MINUTES

TWENTY-ONE HOURS WITH no food. Not a bite.

No likelihood of food suddenly appearing.

Jack's stomach no longer growled or rumbled. It cramped. The pains would come in waves. Each pain would last a minute or so, and stretch out over the course of an hour. Then there would be a reprieve of an hour, sometimes an hour and a half. But when the pain came back, it was worse than before. And lasted longer.

It had started in earnest after about twelve hours. He'd been hungry before that, hungry for a long, long time, but this was different. This wasn't his body saying, "Hey, let's eat." This was his body saying, "Do something: we're starving."

A new round of pains was just beginning. Jack dreaded it. He wasn't good with pain. And this pain was worse, somehow, than the pain in his leg. That pain was outside. This pain was inside.

"Have you figured it out yet?" Caine demanded. "Have you got it, Jack?"

Jack hesitated. If he said yes, then the next round of this nightmare would begin.

If he said no, they would sit here and sit here and sit here until they all starved.

He didn't want to say yes. He knew now what Caine planned. He didn't want to say yes.

"I can do it," Jack said.

"You can do it now?"

"I can withdraw a single-fuel rod from the pile," Jack said.

Caine stared at him. Almost as if this wasn't the answer he wanted.

"Okay," Caine said softly.

"But I have to start by lowering the control rods all the way. This will stop the reaction, which means it turns off all electricity."

Caine nodded.

Diana said, "You mean, there won't be any power for anyone. Not just Perdido Beach."

"Unless someone restarts the reactor," Jack said.

"Yeah," Caine said, but distracted, like his head was somewhere else.

"I can lift out a power rod. It's twelve feet long. Actually it contains pellets of uranium 235. It's like a very long, thin can filled with pebbles. It's extremely radioactive."

"So your plan is to kill us all?" Diana said.

"No. There are lead-lined sheaths they use to carry the rods. They aren't totally effective, but they should shield us for the time we need. Unless . . ."

"Unless?" Caine demanded.

"Unless the sheath is damaged. Like if you drop it."

"Then what happens?" Diana demanded.

"Then we're hit with massive doses of radiation. It's invisible, but it's like someone is shooting tiny bullets at you. They blow millions of tiny holes through your body. You get sick. Your hair falls out. You vomit. You swell up. You die."

No one said anything.

“So we don’t drop it,” Drake said finally.

“Yeah. We carry it for miles and we don’t drop it,” Diana said. “While Sam and Dekka and Brianna are coming at us. I can’t see how that would be a problem.”

Jack said, “The closer you are, the deadlier it is. So if you’re a couple feet away, you’re dead real quickly. If you’re farther away, you die slowly. If you’re far enough away, maybe you don’t die until you develop cancer. And if you’re even farther away, you’re safe.”

“I choose farther away,” Diana said dryly.

“How long to get ready?” Caine asked.

“Thirty minutes.”

“It’s late enough now we should wait for dark,” Caine said. “How do we get out?”

Jack shrugged. “There’s a loading dock behind the reactor.”

Caine sagged into a chair. He bit savagely at a thumbnail. Drake watched, making no attempt to disguise his contempt.

“Okay,” Caine said at last. “Jack, get everything ready. Drake, we’ll need a diversion. You attract Sam’s attention out front. Then you catch up with us.”

“Let’s just grab a truck,” Drake suggested.

“We can’t go up the coast road. They’ll see us right away,” Caine said. “We have to go overland. There are trails going up over the hills. We find a way to the highway. Cross it. Then get a vehicle and head into the desert.”

“Why should we sneak?” Drake asked. “We’ll have the uranium, right? Who is going to mess with us? Who is going to take a chance on you dropping it?”

“Let me ask you something, Drake,” Caine said. “If you were Sam, and you saw me and you and Diana and Jack all together marching up the coast road, and you saw that I was carrying this big, dangerous radioactive thing around, what would you do?”

Drake frowned.

“Oh, look: Drake’s trying to think,” Diana said.

“This is why I run things and you don’t, Drake. Let me explain it in terms you might grasp. If I’m Sam, and I see the four of us, and I figure I can’t go after us . . .” Caine held up four fingers. One by one he subtracted them. He left the middle finger up.

“He takes the rest of us out,” Drake said. He gritted his teeth, and his eyes blazed with suppressed rage.

“So if the three of you want to just walk out of here all bold and brave, let me know,” Caine said, meeting Drake’s glare with one of his own. Then he leaned close to Drake, almost embracing him. He brought his mouth to Drake’s ear and whispered, “Don’t start thinking you can take me down, Drake. You’re useful to me. The minute I start thinking you’re no longer useful . . .”

He smiled, patted Drake’s gaunt cheek, and with a hint of his old swagger said, “We’re going to reshuffle the deck. Sam thinks he holds all the cards. But we’re going to change everything.”

“We’re going to feed the monster who has his hooks in your head,” Diana said coldly. “Don’t try to dress it up. We’re feeding a monster and hoping it will show its gratitude by letting go of your leash.”

“Let it go, Diana,” Caine said. The bluster was gone.

Diana glanced to see that Drake was out of earshot. “Bug’s not coming back. You know that.”

Caine chewed at his thumb. Jack had the unsettling thought that he might be hungry enough to eat his own finger.

“You don’t know that,” Caine said. “He might have had trouble finding Orsay. He wouldn’t turn against me.”

“No one’s loyal to you, Caine,” Diana said. “Drake is itching to take you down. No one at Coates is rushing to bail you out. You only have one person who actually cares about you.”

“You?”

Diana didn’t answer. “I know it has a hold on you, Caine. I’ve seen it. But that monster of yours isn’t loyal to *you*, either. It will use you and throw you away. It will be everything and you will be nothing.”

“Most of what I have to say is speculative,” Astrid began.

Sam, Astrid, Edilio—almost from the start, they had been a team. They’d fought Orc when he was calling himself Captain Orc and trying to dominate the FAYZ. They’d fought Caine and Pack Leader. They had learned to survive the Big One-Five.

Now, the picture of something much more terrible was becoming clear.

“From what Edilio has said, what Lana’s letter said, what we’ve learned of Drake’s story from Lana in the past, and all the little things we’ve pieced together.”

She glanced at Little Pete, who sat in a chair by the window, looking out at the slowly sinking sun and nodding mechanically. “And from what I’ve been able to guess from my brother. Something . . . maybe some type of freak, a mutated human. Maybe a mutated animal . . . maybe something else entirely that we don’t understand at all . . . is in that mine shaft.”

“This thing, this gaiaphage, has the ability to reach out, mind-to-mind, and influence people. Maybe especially people it has had some contact with. Like Lana,” said Sam.

“Or like Orsay,” Edilio interrupted. “Someone with that kind of mind, you know? Like, sensitive, or whatever.”

Astrid nodded. “Yes. Some may be more vulnerable than others. I am sure, now, that it is in contact with Little Pete.”

“They talk?” Edilio asked skeptically.

Astrid rolled her head, stretching her neck forward, trying to shake off the tension that tightened her jaw. Sam was struck by how beautiful she still was. Despite everything. But he saw as well how delicate she seemed, how thin and fragile. She had lost weight, like everyone. Cheekbones more prominent than before, eyes bruised by exhaustion and worry. There was a welt just in front of her temple.

“I don’t think they talk, not like you mean,” Astrid said. “But they can feel each other. Petey’s been trying to warn me . . . I didn’t understand.”

“Short version,” Sam said in a low voice. “What do you think?”

Astrid nodded. “You’re right. I’m sorry, I’m not . . .” Her voice trailed off. But she shook her head vigorously and refocused. “Okay, it’s some mutant creature. Origin unknown. It has great power to influence minds. That power is greater over people who’ve already encountered the creature. Like Lana. Drake.

“And possibly Caine,” Astrid added.

Sam said, “You think Caine has had a run-in with this gaiaphage?”

“You asked for the short version. So I’m leaving out the epistemology.”

Sam recognized Astrid’s favorite ploy: dazzling people with polysyllables. He managed a faint smile. “Go ahead. Leave out the . . . whatever it was.”

“Suddenly,” Astrid went on, “after months of relative quiet, Caine reemerges. We know from Bug that he was in some kind of a coma, or delirium, before that. But suddenly, he’s better. And the first thing he does is charge off to take over the power plant.”

“At the same time, Lana begins to feel the gaiaphage calling to her. And Petey is starting to talk about something being hungry in the dark.”

“Orsay says the thing is expecting to be fed soon,” Edilio said.

“Yes. And then, there’s Duck.”

Sam’s eyebrows shot up. “Duck?” He had not expected this.

“No one listened much to his story. Me included,” Astrid admitted. “But he kept saying there was a cave down there that glowed. Like from radioactivity. He said like something from *The Simpsons*.”

“Yeah?” Edilio prompted.

“The power plant is at the center of the FAYZ,” Astrid said. “We know it was going into meltdown when Little Pete reacted by creating this . . . this bubble. But why were things changing even before that? How did Little Pete acquire that kind of power?”

“The accident thirteen years ago,” Sam said, realizing it even as he said it.

“The accident. We’ve always said it was a meteorite that hit the plant. But maybe it wasn’t just a meteorite. Maybe there was more to it.”

“Like what?”

“Some people theorize that life on Earth grew from a simple organism that reached this planet by comet or meteorite. So, let’s say something as simple as a virus was alive on the object that hit the power plant. Virus plus radiation equals mutation.”

“So that’s what this gaiaphage is?” Sam asked.

“Please don’t act like I just told you the answer, okay?” Astrid said. “Because I’m totally off in guesswork. And it doesn’t really explain much, even if it’s true. Big ‘if.’ Really big ‘if.’”

“But?” Sam prompted.

“But maybe this thing that’s been living under the ground for thirteen years has been living on radiation. Feeding on it. Think about a virus that could survive thousands of years in the environment of space. The only possible food source would be hard radiation.”

The next part was hard for Astrid. Sam could see the way her lip quivered. “The power company lied: they never cleaned up all the radiation from the accident. It’s been under our feet all this time, seeping into the water, being absorbed into the food we eat.”

Astrid’s father had been an engineer at the power plant. She must be wondering whether he had known of the deception.

“They may not even have known they didn’t get it all,” Sam said. “The people who worked there—they probably didn’t know.”

Astrid nodded. The quiver stopped. The tight anger in her expression remained. “As the gaiaphage mutated, so did some of us. Maybe some kind of synthesis. I don’t know. But one safe guess is that the gaiaphage began to run out of food. It needs more. It can’t get to it, it can only attempt to make others do its will. I think—I believe—that the meltdown Little Pete stopped was caused by someone at the plant. Obeying the gaiaphage. Attempting to blow up the plant, which would spread radiation everywhere, kill everything nearby . . . except for the creature that lives on radiation.”

“Little Pete stopped the meltdown. Created the FAYZ. But he did not destroy the gaiaphage. And the gaiaphage is still hungry.”

“Hungry in the dark,” Little Pete said.

“Caine’s going to feed it,” Sam said.

“Yes.”

“And then?”

“And then, the gaiaphage will survive and adapt. It can’t go on living in a hole in the ground, relying on others. It needs to be able to escape. To move freely. And to survive attacks from us.”

“Maybe it’s good if it comes out to fight,” Edilio said. “Maybe we can kill it.”

“It knows what powers we have,” Astrid said. “And it has had some help imagining ways to build a body that would be invulnerable.”

“Help? Help from who?”

Sam put his hand on Edilio’s arm, calming him. “From someone who doesn’t know what he’s doing,” he said.

“Nestor,” Little Pete said.

“Try some, dude. What are you, three years old?” Antoine tried to pass the joint to Zil. Zil waved it off.

“I’ve tried it before,” Zil said. “I didn’t like it.”

“Yeah, right.” Antoine took a long pull off the joint and began coughing like he was hacking up a lung. He coughed so violently, his knee hit the coffee table and knocked over Zil’s water.

“Hey,” Zil yelled.

“Oh, sorry, man,” Antoine said when he could speak again.

Lance took a hit, made a face, and handed it off to Lisa. She giggled, smoked, coughed, then giggled some more.

Zil had never had a girlfriend before. Girls didn’t like him. Not like, *like*. He had never been one of the popular kids.

In the old days Zil was mostly known for the strange lunches his mother packed for him. They were always vegan, organic, and always very “green,” with nothing disposable, nothing prepackaged. Unfortunately much of what his mother packed for his lunch smelled. Vinegar dressing for salads, tapenade or hummus reeking of garlic, stuffed grape leaves.

Zil loved his mom and dad, but the coming of the FAYZ had been liberating in one way: he’d finally been able to eat all the cookies and chips he’d wanted. He’d even done what his parents would have considered unforgivable: he had eaten meat. And he’d liked it.

Of course now he would give anything to have a gooey wad of hummus and some

whole wheat pita bread.

He had no food. What he had were stomach pains. And his crew. His posse. The Human Crew. All of whom, he realized, were losers. Except for Lance. Lance being there kind of made them look cooler than they were. He even managed to look cool by the flickering candlelight.

“The freaks have food,” Turk said for the thousandth time. “They always have food. Regular kids are going hungry, but the freaks always have enough.”

Zil doubted that, but there was no point arguing about it. It wasn't some crazy story about the freaks having food that made him hate them. It was their superior attitude. But whatever.

“I heard Brianna caught some pigeons and ate them,” Lisa said, then giggled. Zil wasn't sure if she always giggled, or was mostly giggling because she was high.

She was drawing on a pad, perching a small flashlight on her lap and using a Sharpie to do variations on the letters “H” and “C” for Human Crew. She had a version that Zil kind of liked where the “H” and the “C” were sort of joined, slanted to one side, all hard edges.

Antoine had found the weed in his parents' bedroom. While conducting yet another desperate search for food.

“That's what I'm saying,” Turk said, pointing at Lisa like she was evidence. “They have their ways of getting food. The freaks all work together.” Turk was not smoking. He was staring at Zil. Like Zil might have some solution. Like Zil was going to have some kind of plan.

Zil didn't have a plan. Zil just knew that freaks were running things in the FAYZ. And not just in Perdido Beach, but up the hill at Coates, too. And now at the power plant. Freaks running everything. Well, freaks and their helpers, like Edilio and Albert and Astrid.

And the other thing Zil knew was that things were a mess. People were starving. And if the freaks were in charge, who else's fault could it be?

“They have food, I guarantee you,” Turk said.

“Yeah, well, we have tree,” Antoine said, and laughed at his own wit.

The front door opened and Zil reached for his baseball bat, just in case. It was Hank. Hank came in, stepped right up to Antoine, who was easily twice his size, and said, “Put that away.”

“What are you, the po-po?”

“This is not about getting stoned,” Hank said. “That's not what Zil is about. That's not what the Human Crew is.”

Antoine looked blearily at Zil. Zil was surprised at hearing himself referred to as if he had some larger meaning. It was flattering. Also confusing.

“Yeah, put away the weed, man,” Zil said.

Antoine made a dismissive noise.

To everyone's amazement, Hank knocked the joint from Antoine's hand.

Antoine rose from the couch, looking like he might flatten little Hank. But Zil said, “No. No fighting between ourselves.”

Lance said, “Yeah. That's right,” but he didn't sound too sure.

It was left to Turk to settle the matter. “Hank's right. Zil's not about us acting like everyone else, like kids. Zil's about us dealing with the freaks. If we sit around getting

high, Zil's not going to be able to deal with the problem. He needs us to be cool."

"Yeah," Lance agreed. "But be cool about what?"

"I found Hunter." Hank delivered the news with quiet pride. Like he was presenting a straight-A report card to his parents.

Zil jumped to his feet. "You found him?"

"Yeah. He's across the highway, hiding out in a house over there. And you'll never guess what he's got there."

"What?"

"Food. The mutant freak killed a deer. Then he cooked it with his freak powers and last I saw he was cutting it up with a knife."

"Keeping it all for himself," Turk said. "Just him and the other freaks. They'll eat venison, the rest of us can go boil some grass or whatever."

Zil's mouth watered. Meat. Actual meat. And not rat or pigeon, but something that was almost like beef.

"I've eaten venison," Lance said. "It's good."

"Has to be better than dog," Antoine said. "Although I'd eat some more dog right now, if I had any."

"What do we do?" Lance asked Zil.

Every eye, even Lisa's, turned to Zil. "What do you think we do?" Zil asked rhetorically, stalling for time.

"We go get him!" Antoine said.

Zil slapped Antoine on the shoulder and laughed. "Yeah." Then he high-fived Hank. "Good work, man. Venison is on the menu."

"Right after we hang Hunter," Hank said.

That stopped the conversation cold.

"Say what?" Lance asked.

Hank looked coldly at Lance. "You think the freak is just going to give us the food? He'll kill us, if he gets the chance. Freaks don't care about us, don't care if we starve. Anyway, he's a murderer, right? What are you supposed to do with a murdering freak?"

Zil swallowed hard. Hank was pushing this thing too far. It was one thing busting on Sam, trying to get some respect for normals.

To Zil's relief, Lance spoke up. "Dude, I don't think we want to, like, kill the guy ourselves."

"It was Zil's idea," Hank said. "That first night. Why did we have a rope with us if we weren't going to execute justice on Hunter?"

The rope had not been Zil's idea. But should he admit that? He'd just figured on giving Hunter a beating. He wanted Hunter to cry and confess that he'd stolen that last shred of beef jerky. He hadn't been thinking about actually killing Hunter. That was just talk.

"You think Sam and Edilio and all of them are going to let us just execute Hunter?" Lance argued.

Hank smiled. It was a strange, little-boy smile. Innocent. "They're all gone. Dekka's at the power plant, right? And Sam and Edilio just blew out of town in that Jeep. The whole bunch of them, off trying to deal with Caine, I guess."

Zil's heart was pounding. His mouth was dry. They weren't really going to do this,

were they?

But Hunter had meat. And how else were they going to get the food from Hunter?

Turk said, "We can't just take out Hunter."

"Right," Zil blurted.

"We have to give him a trial first," Turk said.

And Zil found himself nodding. And he found himself grinning, like that had been his idea all along. And maybe it had been. Maybe it was what he had known in his heart had to happen.

Yes, Zil told himself. You're soft-hearted, but you know it's what's got to be, Zil. You know it's what has got to be.

Every face was turned toward him expectantly. Lisa, not so bad looking, really. Not when she smiled at him like he was some kind of rock star.

"We'll have a trial. Because the Human Crew is not just about doing random violence," Zil said, sounding as though he believed it. Setting aside the fact that random violence, smashing windows and such, was all they'd done so far. "This has got to be about justice. Otherwise the other normals, our people, will be weird about it. So, we have to have a trial. Then we deal with Hunter. Give him justice. And we share some of the deer meat around, right?"

"Yeah," Lance agreed.

"Bring kids over to our side," Zil said. "It'll be like, hey, Zil gave us justice and food."

"It will be the truth," Turk said.

THIRTY-SIX

01 HOUR, 8 MINUTES

DRAKE CREPT TO the hole in the exterior wall. The rim of the hole was still a little warm to the touch. He kept his face in the shadows, looked left, looked right.

Caine wanted a diversion? Fine, he'd get a diversion.

Drake saw Dekka in a lawn chair, head down, maybe dozing. He saw a tarp covering what could only be bodies. He saw two kids playing thumb war. Their guns were leaned against a car. He did not see Sam or his shadow, Edilio. He didn't see Brianna.

The sun was dropping out over the water. Night would fall soon. Caine had warned him to do nothing before Jack turned off the reactor.

"You'll see the lights in the parking lot go out," Jack had said in his usual know-it-all voice. "And you'll hear the turbines suddenly slow down."

Sam had to be out there somewhere, just beyond the narrow slice of parking lot that Drake could see. Had to be. Sam wouldn't have left Dekka all alone with nothing but a couple of idiot sixth graders.

Drake wanted to be the one to take Sam down. If he took Sam down, then no one would ever be able to argue with his claim to be the boss. When the big dogs fight it out, it's the winner who rules. Caine had missed his shot at Sam. Drake wouldn't miss his.

But no matter how long he looked, he saw no evidence of Sam or anyone else worth worrying about.

Just as he was turning away Orc stomped heavily into view. He headed toward the edge of the parking lot, toward some high grass.

Drake laughed silently. The monstrosity had to take a pee.

Okay, so it was Orc and Dekka and a couple kids with rifles. It would be foolish to take any of them lightly. Drake had fought Orc once before and not entirely won the battle. Of course he hadn't been cradling a machine gun then.

Drake rested his left hand on the rim of the hole. Hot but not too hot. He formed his hand into a bridge, then laid the barrel of the gun on his hand. He squatted to get into position. He laid his cheek against the cool plastic stock, closed his left eye, and lined up the rear and forward sights. He wrapped the tip of his tentacle around the trigger.

He shifted the sights left an inch. Another inch. And now they were lined up on Dekka.

Not yet. Wait until Jack had turned off the reactor. Then wait ten minutes more.

But it had better be soon. The sun was casting long purple shadows and if the parking lights went out, Drake wouldn't have much ability to aim.

Dekka dozing. Looked like she was drooling.

A short burst. That's what he would do. Squeeze off a short burst and watch as the little red flowers blossomed all over Dekka's—

"Ahhh!" Howard yelled.

Drake jerked back. So did Howard.

Howard was right in front of him, right at the hole, peering in like some kind of tourist.

Their eyes met.

Drake yanked the gun to the left and fired. The gun bucked in his hands. But Howard had flattened himself against the wall.

Dekka jerked awake.

Drake cursed and aimed the gun at her.

He squeezed the trigger. But Dekka was ten feet in the air and rising swiftly. The lawn chair twirled upward with her.

Drake aimed. Like shooting at skeet, he thought. Lead the target just a little and—

Belatedly Dekka stretched her hands out toward Drake. A suddenly weightless gun barrel rose too much. The burst tore the air over Dekka's head and she fell as her own personal gravity returned.

She slammed into the concrete. The chair landed on her. She didn't move.

Then slowly, slowly, she raised her head.

Drake took his time. He looked at her. Saw that she was looking at him. Saw that she knew he had won. Saw the fear and resignation in her dark eyes.

"Scratch one freak," Drake whispered, and slowly squeezed the trigger.

"We've got to sneak up on him," Hank said. "Get him before he can do anything."

Zil was not happy about Hank giving the orders. Not happy at all. "The important thing is to knock him out fast before he can fry one of us. Then we tie him up and use the tinfoil."

"He'll bake his own hands," Turk said with grim contentment. "Like a turkey."

They made their way on foot, not wanting to be heard driving up. They raced across the highway, like they were being watched. Although they had no idea who might be doing that. It was fun. Like playing soldier when you were a little kid.

There was no sign of Edilio's soldiers. Or of any of Sam's posse.

They could smell the deer as soon as they crossed the road. It was amazing, Zil reflected, how well your sense of smell worked when you were really, really hungry.

Zil motioned Hank and Turk and Lisa to stay put, hide behind the garage. He and Lance crept forward, edged around the side of the garage, crouched to peer through the slats of the fence.

Hunter was wielding a big butcher knife. He was trying, very inexpertly, to slice off the deer's hide. He was making a mess of it. Portions of the animal were cooked almost black. Other parts were bloody. Hunter stopped and hacked out a chunk of meat and stuck it in his greedy mouth.

Zil's own mouth watered, almost uncontrollably. His stomach hurt.

Zil and Lance crept back to the others.

"Greedy chud is eating it all up," Zil reported. "I swear, he's going to eat the whole thing himself."

"Yeah," Lance agreed.

"Okay, here's what we do," Zil said, laying out his plan.

Turk, Hank, Lisa, and Zil took the long way around the house to come up from the other side. Lance had been given a crucial role to play because Hunter didn't know him and had no reason to fear him.

When all was in readiness, Lance stood up behind the fence. "Hey, dude."

Hunter spun, guilty and scared. "What are you doing sneaking up on me? Who are you?"

"Dude, chill. I just smelled the meat. I'm hungry."

Hunter looked deeply suspicious. "I was going to sell it to Albert. Everyone can have some. I just fell asleep, is all, after I got some food. But I was getting it ready now."

Lance climbed over the fence, careful to look nonthreatening. "How about I help you skin that animal? In exchange for a little taste? Plus, you know you have to cut out its guts, right?"

"Of course I know that," Hunter said defensively. "I was getting ready to do that."

Zil thought it was obvious his old roommate knew no such thing. He watched, nervous and impatient, while Lance moved smoothly, confidently toward Hunter.

Hunter's whole attention seemed to be focused on the big, good-looking boy. But he wasn't attacking. He wasn't even threatening.

"Now," Zil whispered.

He and Hank were first through the gate. They moved quickly, but quietly, not quite running.

The mistake came when Lance glanced at them. Hunter saw the flicker in the boy's eyes, looked over his shoulder, spotted Zil, turned too late, and caught Hank's crowbar in the forehead.

He dropped like a sack of rocks.

Hank raised it up to hit him again. "That's enough," Zil said, staying Hank's hand. "Tie him up. Foil his hands." Then when Turk started tying Hunter's hands in front of him, he said, "No, you moron, tie them in back."

Turk grinned sheepishly. "That's why you're the leader."

They bound Hunter tightly. Then Lisa came forward with a roll of Reynolds aluminum foil and wrapped it again and again around Hunter's hands.

Turk then wound a roll of duct tape around Hunter's hands, imprisoning the fingers.

Hunter did not move.

Zil took two steps, snatched up Hunter's dropped knife, and cut a hunk of meat from the deer's hindquarters. The chunk of meat was half cooked, half near raw. He attacked the meat like a hungry wolf. The others laughed and did likewise. Turk ate too much and vomited into a corner of the fence. Then came back to reload.

They fed and laughed with joy at their conquest.

Hunter began to stir. He moaned.

"Too bad we don't have cement around," Zil said. "Drake knew what he was doing when he plastered the freaks."

"Drake's a freak, though, isn't he?" Lisa asked innocently.

The question gave Zil pause. Was Drake a freak? His whip hand had, according to legend, grown to replace the arm Sam had burned off in a fight.

"I guess he is. I don't know for sure," Zil said thoughtfully, chewing the venison.

"We need, like, some way of figuring out," Turk said.

Hunter moaned louder.

"The freak's waking up," Lance said. "He's going to have a headache."

That struck Zil as funny. He laughed. And when he laughed, the others joined in. "See, guys: stick with me and we get nice, fresh meat."

"Got that right," Turk said.

"So, leader, is it time to deal with this chud?" Hank asked, respectful but impatient.

Zil laughed again. The food in his belly filled him with a sense of well-being. He felt almost giddy. And a little sleepy now, with the sun going down.

And he liked the use of "leader" as a title for him. It fit. It felt fine.

Zil Sperry. Leader of the Human Crew.

"Sure," Zil said. "Let's have ourselves a trial." He glanced around the yard. "Turk and Hank, drag him over to the back steps, prop him up."

Hunter could not seem to sit all the way up. He was conscious, but not fully. One of his eyeballs looked funny, and Zil realized it was because the pupil was twice as big as the other. It gave Hunter a stupid look that made Zil laugh.

"You should have just admitted you stole my jerky," he scolded Hunter.

Hank knelt down to get right in Hunter's face. "Do you confess that you stole the leader's jerky?"

Hunter's head lolled to one side. He seemed to be trying to speak, but all that came out was a slurred sound.

"Blrrrr gllll pluh," Turk mimicked.

"I think he said, 'Yeah, I did it,'" Hank mocked.

"I'll interpret for him," Turk said.

Hank asked, "Hunter, do you admit you killed Harry?"

Hunter said nothing, but Turk supplied the answer. "I sure do. I am a freak, nonhuman, chud scum who killed Harry."

Zil laughed happily. "What can we do? He confessed." He adopted a severe tone. "Hunter, I pronounce you guilty. Guilty as charged."

"Now what?" Lisa wondered. "He's hurt. Maybe we should let him go."

Zil was about to agree. His rage against Hunter was mostly burned out, the flames smothered by his sense of joy at having a full belly.

"Going soft on a freak, Lisa?" Hank taunted.

"No," Lisa said quickly.

Hank looked hard at her. "You think if we let him go he'll just forget about this? No. He'll get together with the other freaks and come after us. You think Sam will be gentle with us?"

Zil looked at Lance. "What do you think, big guy?"

"Me?" Lance looked troubled. "Hey, I do what you say, Zil."

So, Zil realized, it was on him. The thought soured the happy buzz. Up until now he had known he could more or less justify his actions. He could say, 'Look, Hunter killed Harry. I was bringing him to justice.' Kids would accept that. Sam might not accept it, but he probably would have no choice but to let it go.

But if they actually executed Hunter, like Hank obviously wanted, then Sam and all his kids would come after Zil. And the reality was, the five of them wouldn't last a minute in a fight with Sam.

If they killed Hunter, it would be open war with Sam. Sam would win.

Zil could not admit that, though. It would make him look pathetic.

He was trapped. If he looked soft, Hank would turn against him. And Hunter was

sure to come after them if they let him go. But killing Hunter would doom Zil.

“We need more kids than just us five,” Zil said. “I mean, we need other kids to be in on this.”

Hank looked wary.

But Zil had an idea now. It was blooming like a flower in his mind. “Sam can fight the five of us, but he can’t take on the whole town, right? Who is he going to boss around if the whole town is against him?”

“How we going to get a bunch of kids to be on our side?” Hank demanded.

Zil grinned. “We have all this meat, right? Kids are really hungry. What do you think they would do for a deer steak?”

Edilio drove faster than he ever had before. Seventy miles an hour down the highway, weaving through the abandoned or crashed trucks and cars. The wind whipped words away as soon as they were spoken, so they drove in silence.

Turning onto the coast road that led to the power plant, Edilio had no choice but to slow down. There were hairpin turns, and a moment’s inattention would send them all hurtling down the slope through brush and boulders into the sea.

Suddenly Edilio screeched to a halt.

“What?” Sam said.

Edilio held up a finger. He strained to hear. And there it was. “Gunfire,” he said.

“Drive,” Sam said.

Orc was peeing when he heard Howard yell, “Ahhh!”

He didn’t care. Howard yelled more than was necessary. He was small and weak and scared easily.

He turned around just as Drake fired. He could see the muzzle flash coming from a hole in the wall.

Dekka was floating. Then falling. And Howard was pressed flat against the wall.

“Orc!” Howard shouted.

Dekka hit the ground. Not really a problem for Orc. He didn’t like Dekka much. She just ignored him, mostly, and looked away whenever he was close to her. Disgusted by the sight of him.

Well, who wasn’t? Orc disgusted himself.

Then he saw the face behind the gun. Drake. Drake had gone after Orc with his tentacle and whipped him. It hadn’t hurt much, but Orc still hadn’t liked it. Drake had been trying to kill him.

Orc didn’t like Drake. That didn’t mean he liked Dekka. But Sam did, and Sam had been fair with Orc. Sam had gotten him beer.

Orc wished he had a beer right now.

Save Dekka, and Sam would probably reward Orc. Saving Dekka—that had to be worth at least a case. Maybe something from a foreign country. Orc hadn’t tried any of that beer yet.

Drake was a hundred yards away. Dekka was half that distance. A motorcycle was parked just five feet away.

Orc grabbed the motorcycle. He held the front wheel in one hand, the handlebars in the other. He twisted hard and the wheel came off easily.

“Someone’s shooting!” one of Drake’s soldiers yelled, rushing in.

“Yeah, guess who?” Diana said.

“Too soon,” Caine snarled. “I told him to wait. Jack. Do it.”

“I don’t want to rush and—”

Caine raised both hands, lifted Jack up in the air, and threw him into the instrument panel.

“Now!” Caine yelled.

They were out of the control room, at a separate monitor that showed the inside of the reactor itself.

Jack punched a sequence of numbers into a keypad.

The electromagnets switched off.

The cadmium control rods plunged like daggers.

It was all silent on the black-and-white monitor. But the effect was immediate. The vibration of the turbines, the steady hum that had been part of the background, suddenly dropped in pitch.

Lights flickered. The monitor picture wobbled then stabilized.

“Is it safe to go in?” Caine demanded.

“Sure, what could be dangerous about a nuclear—”

“Shut up!” Caine shouted. “Open it up, Jack.”

Jack obeyed.

They stepped into a vast room that seemed to be made almost entirely of stainless steel. Stainless-steel floor. Stainless-steel catwalks. Cranes. Caine had the impression of a gigantic restaurant kitchen.

What wasn’t stainless steel was safety yellow. Safety railings. The risers on steps. Signs in yellow and black warning of what surely no one who had made it here needed to be reminded of: radiation hazard.

The dome overhead was like something out of a cathedral. But there were no frescoes decorating the painted concrete.

Caine felt abashed by the scale of the place.

At the center of it all, a circular pit, like some ghastly blue-glowing swimming pool. Not that any sane person would ever be tempted to jump in.

A catwalk went all the way around. And a robotic crane hovered over it. Down there, below, in the sinister depths, were the fuel rods. Each filled with gray pellets that looked like nothing much. Stubby gray cylinders of what might as easily be lead.

A massive forklift held a steel barrel in midair, poised. Right where the driver left it when he poofed.

“I’m starting the sequence,” Jack said, typing furiously, rattled, terrified, but giddy, too.

The robot moved faster than Caine had expected. It perched like a predatory insect above the too-blue water.

It was hot in the room. The emergency generators didn’t keep the air-conditioning running and the temperature began rising almost instantly.

“How long?” Caine demanded.

“To extract it, make it relatively safe, transport it to the used-fuel cooling facility and—”

“We aren’t going to have time for all that,” Caine said. “Drake’s already shooting.

We need to get out of here.”

“Caine, there’s no way to—” Jack began.

“Just grab the fuel rod. Yank it up out of that pool. I’ll take care of the rest,” Caine said.

“Caine, we have to follow procedure just to get the rod out of here. The only way out is through—”

Caine raised both hands. He focused on the convex dome over their heads, the containment vessel that would hold the radiation in if there was ever an accident.

He blasted the concrete with all his power. There was a wallop of sound that hurt Caine’s eardrums.

“What are you doing?” Jack cried.

“Caine!” Diana shouted.

The concrete would not give. Not at this distance. Not with nothing to use as a projectile.

Caine aimed his power at the forklift.

“Be ready, Jack,” Caine grated.

The forklift flew. Like an invisible god had kicked it. It hurtled in a straight line. So fast, it broke the sound barrier with a loud bang that was immediately swallowed up in the far louder crash of steel and iron blowing a hole through concrete.

“How strong you think that fuel rod is?” Caine asked.

“Are you insane?” Diana cried.

“Just in a hurry,” Caine said.

Drake squeezed the trigger.

A line of bullets chewed concrete just in front of Dekka.

Drake fought the recoil and raised the weapon just slightly, and the impacts advanced toward Dekka, who just stared at onrushing death.

Suddenly Drake was on his back. The gun, still in his hands, was blazing away at the ceiling.

A wheel bounced crazily around the room then fell onto a desk with a loud crash.

Drake let go of the trigger. He scrambled to his feet. He looked at the wheel, unable to make sense of it. How had a wheel gone flying through the air, through the hole?

Orc.

Drake ejected the magazine and racked in a replacement. He was bruised and shaken but not badly hurt. He crept back to the hole, cautious lest something else came flying in.

Dekka was no longer on the ground.

Orc was . . .

A massive gravel hand reached in and missed Drake’s head by inches.

Drake fired blindly at the hole.

Then he turned and ran.

THIRTY-SEVEN

01 HOUR, 6 MINUTES

THE JEEP BLEW through the gate. Edilio drove straight to where a shaken, bruised, and seriously angry Dekka was picking herself up off the concrete.

“What happened?” Sam demanded, leaping from the front seat.

The adrenaline was finally kicking in. But even now he felt strangely disconnected. Even now, rushing toward trouble. Like it wasn’t really his trouble. Like it was some other part of him that was doing this.

“I tried to fly,” Dekka said in a low growl. She shook her head and bent over to squeeze her knee. “Ow.”

“We heard something louder than gunfire,” Edilio said. “Like thunder. Or like an explosion.”

“Sorry, I wasn’t noticing thunder,” Dekka said.

Orc came loping over from one direction and Howard from the other.

“Orc, man, that was a seriously cool move,” Howard enthused. He ran to his friend and slapped the monster on the shoulder repeatedly.

“I owe you, Orc,” Dekka said.

“What just happened?” Sam repeated.

Howard answered. “Drake, man. He took a shot at Dekka. Dekka goes zooming up. Then, bam, comes down hard. Orc, man, Orc snatches up this motorcycle, right? He yanks the wheel off it and throws it at Drake. Like a Frisbee.” Howard actually clapped his hands in glee. “Right through the hole you burned in the wall, Sammy. Like sinking a full-court shot.”

“Gonna cost you,” Orc grumbled.

“Oh yeah,” Howard seconded. “Gonna cost. Orc doesn’t save the day for free.”

“No one else heard a really big sound?” Edilio pressed.

“We kind of had guns going off, Edilio,” Dekka snapped.

“You okay, Dekka?” Sam asked.

“I’ll live,” she said.

“Dekka: what do you think would happen to a cave or a mine shaft if you turned off gravity?” Sam asked.

“Is this a quiz?”

“No.”

Dekka nodded. “Okay. I guess if I hit it a few times, on-off, on-off, like that, I guess it would start to crumble. Probably collapse.”

“Yeah.” Sam put his hand on her shoulder. “I have to ask you to do something.”

“I’m going to guess that you want me to crash a cave or a mine shaft. So?”

“So it’s not just some mine shaft,” Edilio said darkly. “There’s a thing inside it. It’s . . . I don’t know how to explain it. It gets inside you. It makes you scared.”

“I need you to go with Edilio. Seal this thing in,” Sam said. “Howard? I need you and Orc to get back to town. I can’t believe I’m even saying this, but I need you two to keep an eye on things in town.”

“That’s going to cost—”

“Yeah. I know,” Sam interrupted Howard. “How about we negotiate later?”

Howard shrugged. “Okay, but I’m trusting you.” He pointed at his own eyes, then at Sam, making an “I’m watching you” gesture.

“What are you going to do?” Dekka asked Sam.

“I’m going to deal with Caine. I have to stop him here.”

“You don’t want to go at Caine and Drake by yourself,” Edilio objected. “No way. I’m not letting you kill yourself.”

Sam forced a laugh. “I wouldn’t dream of it. Howard, as soon as you get to town, find Breeze if you don’t pass her on the way. If you don’t find Brianna, find Taylor. Tell them to send help. And tell them I need someone to let me know what’s going on with you guys at the mine.”

“Maybe should have turned on the phones, huh?” Edilio said. He winced, realizing too late that it sounded like sniping.

Sam said, “Yeah. Add that to the list of mistakes I’ve made lately.”

“Yeah, here’s one not to make, Sam: don’t go in there by yourself.”

“Didn’t I just say I wouldn’t?” Sam said evenly.

Edilio looked him in the eyes. Sam looked down and said, “But in case anything happens to me, you all take orders from Edilio.”

Dekka nodded solemnly.

“Do not do that to me,” Edilio said. “Do not die on me, Sam.”

The fuel rod. Twelve feet long. Sheathed in lead now, but still so dangerous, so deadly.

Jack held what looked like an oversized remote control. His eyes bulged. He swallowed convulsively. He tapped a button on the remote, and the rod stopped moving. He let go a shaky sigh.

The fuel rod hung from the crane, swinging just slightly. Caine found himself drawn to it, wanting to touch it. But it was hot. From twenty feet away it brought beads of sweat out on Caine’s forehead.

Caine heard footsteps coming up from behind. Without turning to look, he said, “You jumped the gun, Drake.”

“Not me,” Drake said, panting. “Howard spotted me.”

“And Sam?” Caine asked, mesmerized by the dull gray fuel rod, by the contrast between its devastating killing power and its featureless exterior.

“He just pulled up with the Mexican.”

Caine glanced at the hole he’d made in the dome. A loose chunk of concrete came loose, fell a long way, and clattered noisily down on some unseen equipment. Through the hole he could see the hillside, purple in the dying light of the sun.

It would take Jack another ten, fifteen minutes, to maneuver the fuel rod to the loading dock. In ten minutes Sam could be here.

“We can’t have Sam on our butts as we move,” Caine said. An idea occurred to him. Beautiful in its simplicity. Kill two birds with one stone.

“Time for you to prove you’re as tough and mean as you think you are, Drake,” Caine said.

“I don’t have to prove anything,” Drake snapped.

Caine met his lieutenant’s furious gaze. He moved close to Drake. Close enough to whisper if he wanted to, but no, he wanted this to be very public. “Drake, when I sent

Diana to get Jack, you know what? She got me Jack. Now, someone needs to stop Sam, or at least slow him down. Should I ask Diana to take care of that? Because she might just find a way. Sam is a guy, after all.”

Diana, bless her twisted heart, immediately saw what Caine was doing.

“Oh, Sam?” She laughed in her knowing way. “You know he’s got to be frustrated with his ice princess. It shouldn’t be too hard for me to . . . slow him down.”

The line would have worked better before Diana had shaved her head and dressed to look like a boy, but Caine saw that Drake immediately took the bait.

“That’s what you want?” Drake asked. “You want me to take Sam down? Either he kills me or I kill him, right? Either way, that’s good for you and this witch here.”

“You’re stalling, Drake,” Caine said.

Caine could practically read the psychopath’s mind as the gears in his head turned over the possibilities. No way Drake could refuse.

No way. Not if he wanted to go on being Whip Hand. Not if he ever hoped to replace Caine.

“I’ll take Sam down,” Drake said in a voice he intended to be menacing but that came out sounding just a little wobbly.

He must have been less than satisfied with the effect. So with a low growl he repeated, “I’ll stop Sam right here.”

Caine nodded, offering just the slightest acknowledgment. He turned away from Drake and winked at Diana, who kept her expression carefully blank.

Poor Drake. It wasn’t enough to be ambitious. A leader had to be smart. A leader had to be ruthless and manipulative, not just a thug.

Great leaders had to know when to manipulate and when to confront.

Most of all, a great leader had to know when to take great risks.

“Let’s hope they built that fuel rod strong,” Caine said.

He raised his hands and the fuel rod rose, floated in the air, tethered at one end to the crane.

“Hit the release,” Caine ordered.

Jack said, “Caine, if it breaks open—”

“Do it!” Caine roared.

Even Drake took a step back. And Jack hit the button that released the robot crane’s hold.

Caine thrust his arms forward, palms out. The cylinder flew like the bolt from a crossbow.

His aim was good. But not perfect. The cylinder scraped the concrete as it shot through the hole.

“That’s the quick way to do it,” Caine said.

“If we find it and it’s broken open, we’re all dead,” Jack moaned.

Caine ignored him. He turned to Drake. He saw shrewd calculation in his lieutenant’s eyes.

“I’ll take care of Sam,” Drake said.

Caine laughed. “Or he’ll take care of you.”

“I’ll catch up with you, Caine,” Drake said.

It was a warning. He left little doubt that if he survived the encounter with Sam, he’d be ready to take Caine down next.

“Tell you what,” Drake said. “I’ll bring you your brother’s hand. He took mine: it’s time I paid him back.”

Sam watched Edilio and the others drive off. He felt strangely peaceful. The first time in days.

The only life he was risking here was his own. And in his mind, he had a plan: If he did this, he was done. Done.

He’d made too many mistakes. He’d overlooked too many things. It wasn’t him who’d thought to try fishing, it was Quinn. And it wasn’t Sam who’d thought of using SUVs to keep harvesters safe from the zekes. It was Astrid.

Sam had been too late, too slow, too distracted, too unsure. He hadn’t moved in time to ration food. He hadn’t motivated enough people to help out. He’d let the resentment between freaks and normals get ugly. He hadn’t protected Ralph’s from Drake, or the power plant from Caine.

Kids were sitting in the dark in Perdido Beach, thinking thoughts of cannibalism. And he was in charge, so it was on him.

Even now, Sam had the nagging feeling that he had missed something vital. Something. A resource.

A weapon.

Well, if he survived this day, he was finished. Let Astrid be in charge. Or Albert. Or Dekka. Best of all, probably, Edilio.

If he won this day, if he stopped Caine, and if Dekka closed the mine shaft, then that was enough. More than enough.

And if one of them failed? If Caine got through and Dekka did not kill the gaiaphage? It had Lana. It had been inside Caine’s mind. It knew what Lana knew, what Caine knew. Drake as well, no doubt. It knew all their strengths and all their limits. And if it became what it wanted to become, then what?

He was missing something.

But what else was new? Soon, it would be someone else’s problem. He was going surfing.

He didn’t need waves, not really. He could just paddle his board out and lie there. Just lie there. That would be fine.

But first . . .

Sam crossed the parking lot to the door of the turbine room. He expected to be challenged. He expected to be shot. But he reached the door and found it unguarded.

A relief. But not a good thing. Caine would have someone watching the door. If he was still inside.

He stepped through into the eerie and unexpected silence. The plant was shut down. The turbines were no longer turning. Normally you couldn’t hear anything. Now he could hear his own footsteps.

He found the passageway to the control room with the door forced inward. It took him a moment to make sense of the tools driven into the floor and bent back.

The control room itself was empty and darker than usual. Emergency lights glowed. The instruments and computer screens were all still on. But there was no sign of life.

A puddle of sticky, drying blood had been tracked all over. Red footprints.

It was not what he expected, this silence. Where was Caine? Where was Drake?

The power plant was a vast complex and they might be anywhere. They could wait for him in a hundred different locations, wait in ambush until he stumbled onto them. Caine could hit him before he had a chance to react.

Sam stood poised, uncertain. What was going on? He wished he had asked Edilio to send Brianna here. She could search the entire plant in two minutes.

Think it through, he ordered himself. They were here to steal uranium. They were going to take their prize to the mine. So how would they do it? Where would they be?

The reactor, of course. That's where the deadly metal was.

"Not a happy thought," Sam said to the empty room.

He headed down the hallway, following the helpful wall signs.

A massive steel door guarded the entry to the reactor. Caine had not bothered to close it behind him.

Down a long, echoing, dimly lit, long hallway. A second massive steel door, this one open as well, though there was a security keypad beside it and surely it must normally be kept closed and locked.

It had been deliberately left open, Sam realized. For him. Was it because Caine had released radioactivity into the area? Was that it? Was his body already absorbing a fatal dose?

No. Caine wouldn't be shortsighted enough to contaminate the whole place so that the power could never be turned back on. The one thing he was sure of was that Caine would want the electricity back on someday, if only so that he could control it.

That made sense. It did not, however, put an end to Sam's fears. If Caine had contaminated the place, then Sam was a dead kid walking.

He stepped into the reactor room. It was hot and airless despite the vast, arching dome overhead. It was impossible not to be frightened by the reactor core itself, that too-blue swimming hole full of pent-up power. Impossible not to know what it represented.

He walked around it, poised, ready, alert. He came around the far side of the reactor, and there, waiting, was Drake Merwin, his whip hand waving lazily at his side. He was leaning calmly against an instrument panel.

"Hey, Sam," Drake said.

"Drake," Sam said.

"You know what's cool, Sam? I never paid that much attention in school, but that's because I never saw how I was going to use any of that stuff." Drake pulled what looked like an oversized remote control from his pocket. He tapped a button.

An urgent alarm blared.

"Walk away, Drake," Sam yelled over the sound of the klaxon.

"I'm going to hurt you, Sam. And you're going to take it."

"What are you doing, Drake?"

"Well, the way I understand it, Sam, there are these control rods. Stick them in, and the reactor goes dead. Pull a few out, and it starts up. Pull them all out at once, and you get a meltdown."

Something was rising from the ominous blue of the pool. Dozens of narrow poles that hung from a glowing circular collar.

"You're bluffing, Drake."

Drake grinned. “Keep thinking that, Sam. What do you think pretty Astrid will look like after her hair starts falling out in clumps?”

He turned the remote around so that Sam could see. “This button right here? It drops the control rods back in. And everyone lives. If no one hits the button . . . well. According to Jack, we’ll die pretty quick. Everyone else in the FAYZ dies slow.”

“You’d die, too,” Sam said, knowing he was just stalling, mind whirring crazily, trying to figure out a way to stop this. Was Drake crazy enough to . . . Yes. Of course he was.

The alarm redoubled in volume and intensity. It was an electronic scream now.

“I’m not worried, Sam, because you won’t let it happen,” Drake shrieked to be heard over the alarm.

“Drake . . .” Sam raised his hands, palms facing Drake.

Drake held his hand out over the glowing, throbbing pool. Held the remote now with just two fingers.

“If I drop it . . .,” Drake warned.

Slowly Sam lowered his arms to his side.

The alarm filled his brain. How many minutes? How many seconds? The control rods rose with majestic inevitability. How long until it was too late?

One more failure, Sam thought dully.

“Don’t you want to know what I want, Sam?” Drake cried.

“Me,” Sam said dully. “You want me.”

“That’s the idea, Sam. And you’re going to stand there and take it. Because if you don’t . . .”

Astrid was with Little Pete, doing one of the long-neglected exercises. This one involved separating balls by color. There was a blue box, and a yellow box; blue balls, yellow balls. Any normal five-year-old could do it. But Little Pete was not any normal five-year-old.

“Can you put the ball where it belongs?” Astrid asked.

Little Pete stared at the ball. Then his eyes wandered.

Astrid took his hand and placed it on a yellow ball. Too hard. She was hurting him.

“Can you put this where it belongs?” Her voice was shrill, impatient.

They were on the floor in Little Pete’s room, sitting in a corner on the carpet. Little Pete was gone in his head, not there, indifferent.

Sometimes she hated him.

“Try again, Petey,” Astrid said. She stopped herself from twisting her fingers together. She was sending signals of being tense. Not helpful.

She should be running exercises like this every day. Several times a day. But she didn’t. She was only doing it now because she couldn’t stand waiting. She needed something to take her mind off Sam.

“Sorry,” she said to Little Pete, who was as indifferent to her apology as to everything else.

Someone knocked at the bedroom door, and she jumped.

The door swung in; it wasn’t closed.

“It’s me, John.”

Astrid climbed to her feet, relieved it was just John. Disappointed it was just John.

“John, what is it?” They wouldn’t send John with bad news. Would they?

“I can’t find Mary.”

A flood of relief, instantly replaced by more worry. “She’s not at the day care?”

He shook his head. His red curls went everywhere, a counterpoint to his serious expression. “She was supposed to come in hours ago. She’s almost never late. I couldn’t leave to look for her because we’re shorthanded and we have so many kids sick. I came as soon as I could. I looked in her room. I didn’t find her there.”

Astrid glanced at Little Pete. He had stalled with his hand on a yellow ball, and seemingly no interest in doing anything with it.

“Let me look,” Astrid said.

They entered Mary’s room. It was as neat and organized as ever. But the bed was unmade.

“She always makes her bed,” Astrid said.

“Yeah,” John agreed.

“What’s that sound?” There was a steady hum. Coming from the bathroom. The fan. Astrid tried to open the bathroom door, but it was blocked. She leaned into it and pushed it open enough to see inside.

Mary was on the floor, unconscious. She was wearing a robe that exposed her calves.

“Oh, my God,” Astrid cried. “Mary!”

“Help me push,” Astrid said. Together they forced the door open enough to let them slip inside. Astrid immediately noticed the smell of vomit.

“She must be sick,” John said.

The toilet water was slightly discolored. There was a thin trail of vomit running from Mary’s mouth.

“She’s breathing,” Astrid said quickly. “She’s alive.”

“I didn’t even know she was sick.”

Then Astrid saw the little zipper bag, a little Clinique cosmetics bag lying with its contents half spilled onto the bathroom tile.

She picked it up. She dumped the contents out on the floor. A mostly empty bottle of ipecac. And several different types of laxatives.

“John, close your eyes for a minute.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m going to open Mary’s robe.” She pulled the knot on the robe’s tie and, feeling vaguely squeamish, opened the robe.

Mary was wearing only panties. Pink. Strange, Astrid thought, that she even noticed. Because the thing most noticeable about Mary was her ribs. They could be easily counted. Her stomach was hollow.

“Oh, poor Mary.” Astrid breathed, and closed the robe again.

John opened his eyes. They were wet with tears. “What’s wrong with her?”

Astrid leaned over to reach Mary’s face. She gently pushed her lips back to see her teeth. She tugged at a lock of Mary’s hair. Strands came loose.

“She’s starving,” Astrid said.

“She’s getting as much food as the rest of us,” John protested.

“She’s not eating. Or when she does eat, she vomits it back up. That’s what the ipecac is for.”

“Why would she do that?” John wailed.

“It’s a sickness, John. Anorexia. Bulimia. Both, I guess.”

“We have to get her some food.”

“Yes.” Astrid didn’t explain that just getting Mary food might not be enough. She’d read about eating disorders. Sometimes, if kids didn’t get treatment, they died.

“Nestor, Nestor, Nestor, Nestor.” It was Little Pete, chanting at the top of his lungs. “Nestor, Nestor, Nestor, Nestor.”

A wave of hopelessness swept through her. Astrid closed her eyes, not wanting to let it get the better of her. She did not need this. Did not need Mary passed out, maybe near death. She already had the autistic brother, and the depressed boyfriend in the middle of some battle. “God forgive me for that,” she chastised herself. “Come on, John, we have to get Mary to Dahra.”

“Dahra just has a medical book. She’s not an expert.”

“I know. Look, I don’t know how to take care of someone with anorexia. At least Dahra’s been reading about medicine.”

“We have to get her some of that deer meat,” John said. “We have to feed her.”

“What deer meat?”

“Zil has a deer,” John said. “He’s going to share it this evening. At dinnertime.”

Despite everything, Astrid’s stomach rumbled. The idea of meat was more compelling than anything else. But even hunger couldn’t quiet the warning bells in her head. “Zil? Zil’s got a deer?”

“Everyone is talking about it,” John said. “Turk is telling everyone that Zil caught Hunter. Hunter had this deer and was keeping it all for himself. Anyone who wants some meat just has to come and help them punish Hunter.”

“At least,” he added, “any normal. No freaks allowed.”

Astrid stared at him. John showed no sign of really understanding what he had just said.

“Is Mary going to be okay?” John asked. “I mean, if we get her to eat some deer meat? Will she be okay?”

“Ahhhhh!” Sam yelled as Drake struck again.

Again and again.

Sam on his knees now. Crying.

Crying like a baby. His shrieks of pain melding with the harsh lunatic blare of the siren.

If only there was some way to record this, Drake thought. If only he could tape this moment so he could watch it again and again.

The great Sam Temple, bleeding and cringing and screaming out in pain as Drake brought his whip hand down again and again.

“Does it hurt, Sam?” Drake gloated. “It kind of hurt when you burned my arm off. Do you think it hurts like that?”

Again. Slash!

And the reward of a terrible groan.

“They said I wet myself while they were cutting off the stump,” Drake said. “Have you done that, yet, Sam? Have you peed yourself, Sam?”

Sam was on his side now, arms over his face, covering himself. The last blow

hadn't even brought a scream. Just a shudder. Just a spasm.

"Time to mess up that face of yours," Drake snarled, and drew back to bring all his force to bear.

Down came the whip hand.

There was a blur. Drake wasn't even sure he had seen anything.

And then it was his own voice crying out in shock and horror. It didn't even hurt at first, didn't hurt, just . . .

Eighteen inches of his tentacle arm lay quivering, jerking spasmodically on the floor like a dying snake.

Blood sprayed from the severed end. He drew it back to stare at the stump.

The wire had appeared from nowhere. Wrapped around one of the catwalk ladders at one end. And at the other end, Brianna, holding the wire tight.

"Hey, Drake," Brianna said. "I heard about your idea for cutting me up with wire. Clever."

Drake's mouth gaped open, but no sound came.

The suddenness of it left him dazed, unable to respond. Frozen.

The severed end still jerked and writhed. Like it had a life of its own.

"The remote!" Sam cried out.

Drake spread his fingers.

The remote fell.

"Breeze!" Sam shouted.

Drake spun away and ran.

Brianna's body moved faster than humanly possible.

Her brain moved at normal speed. So it took her several split seconds to see the remote falling, to realize that if Sam was yelling about it in his condition, it was very, very important.

Another split second to guess that the glowing blue was not a swimming pool.

The remote fell.

Brianna dove.

Her hand gripped the remote just nine inches above the surface of the water.

If she plunged into that water . . .

She tucked her feet, spun around in midair, and hit the rising control rods as hard as she could.

It wasn't elegant. She cleared the lip of the pool and skidded across the floor.

But she had the remote. She stared at it.

Now what?

"Sam? Sam?"

Sam said nothing. She leapt to him, rolled him over, and only then saw to her horror the mess that Drake had made of him.

"Sam?" It came out as a sob.

"Red button," Sam managed to gasp.

THIRTY-EIGHT

53 MINUTES

EDILIO'S HANDS WERE gripping the wheel so tightly, his fingers were white. Dekka noticed.

He was gritting his teeth and then forcing himself to unclench in an unsuccessful effort to relax. Dekka noticed that, too.

She didn't say anything about it. Dekka was not a talkative girl. Dekka's world was inside her, not locked up but kept private. Her hopes were her own. Her emotions were her business, no one else's. Her fears . . . Well, nothing good ever came of showing fear.

The kids in Perdido Beach, like the kids at Coates before that, tended to read Dekka's self-contained attitude as hostile. She wasn't hostile. But at Coates, that dumping ground for problem children, being just a little scary was a good thing.

At Coates, Dekka had belonged to no clique. She'd had no friends. She didn't make trouble, kept her grades up, followed most of the rules, kept her nose out of other people's business.

But she noticed what went on around her. She had known longer than most that some of the kids at Coates were changing in ways that could not logically be possible. She had known that Caine had gained some strange new power. She'd seen Drake Merwin for the dangerously sick creature he was. And Diana, of course, beautiful, seductive, knowing Diana.

Dekka had felt the attraction of the girl. Diana had played her, teased her, mocked her, and left Dekka feeling more vulnerable than she had in a long time. But Diana had told no one Dekka's secret. In the environment of Coates, that fact would have come back to Dekka very quickly.

Diana knew how to keep secrets. For her own purposes.

In those early days at Coates, Dekka had barely noticed Brianna. That attraction had come later, after Caine and Drake had made their move and imprisoned all the budding freaks at Coates.

Dekka had been stuck beside Brianna, the two of them weighed down by the cement blocks encasing their hands. Side by side they'd eaten from a trough. Like animals. That's when Dekka had started to admire Brianna's unbroken spirit.

You could knock Brianna down. But she didn't stay down. Dekka loved that.

Of course, nothing would ever come of it. Brianna was probably totally straight. And with lousy taste in guys, in Dekka's opinion.

"Not far," Edilio said. "The ghost town's just ahead. Be ready."

"Ready for what?" Dekka grumbled. "No one's explained any of this to me. All Sam said is, I'm supposed to crush some cave."

Edilio had his machine gun on his lap. He clicked the safety to the off position. He had a pistol wedged under his leg. He pulled this out, clicked the safety to off, and handed it to Dekka.

"You're starting to worry me just a little bit, Edilio."

"Coyotes," Edilio said. "And worse, maybe."

“What’s the ‘worse’?”

They slowed as they drove down the main street of what Dekka realized must have once been a town. All fallen down now. Sticks and dust and faded smears of cracked, ancient paint.

“Don’t you feel it?” Edilio asked.

And she did. Had for several minutes already, without knowing what it was, what to call it.

“How close do you have to be to do your thing?” Edilio asked.

When Dekka tried to answer, she found her mouth was too dry, her throat too tight. She swallowed dust and tried again. “Close.”

The Jeep reached the bottom of the trail. Edilio pulled the car around so that it was facing away. He left the keys in the ignition. “I don’t want to have to fumble for the keys,” he said. “Hopefully the coyotes haven’t learned to steal cars.”

Dekka found she was strangely reluctant to get out of the Jeep. She saw sympathy and understanding in Edilio’s eyes.

“Yeah,” he said.

“I don’t even know what I’m scared of,” Dekka said.

“Whatever it is,” Edilio said, “let’s go kill it.”

They started up the trail. They soon came upon the fly-covered corpse of a coyote.

“We got one at least,” Edilio said.

They stepped carefully past the dead animal. Edilio kept his machine gun at the ready, sweeping the barrel slowly, side to side. The pistol was heavy in Dekka’s hand. She searched each rock, each crevice, waiting, tense, clenching muscles she didn’t know she had.

Slowly they climbed.

And there, at last, the entrance to the mine.

“Can you do it from here?” Edilio whispered.

“No,” Dekka said. “Closer.”

Dragging feet through the dirt and gravel. Like they were walking through molasses. Every molecule of air seemed to drag at them. Slow-mo. Edilio’s finger flexing spasmodically on the trigger. Dekka’s heart thudding.

Closer.

Close enough.

Dekka stopped. Edilio, with exquisite slowness, turned to point his gun at the two coyotes that had appeared almost by magic just above the mine shaft.

Dekka tucked her pistol into the back of her belt. She had some vague, distant memory of someone telling her, “Better if it goes off to shoot a hole in your butt than in your . . .”

A million years ago. A million miles away. Another planet. Another life.

Dekka raised her hands, spread them wide and . . .

Movement from within the cave.

Slow, steady. A hint of pale flesh in the shadow.

Lana moved like a sleepwalker. She came to a stop just within the cave, under the overhang.

She looked right at Dekka.

“Don’t,” Lana said in a voice not her own.

When Sam came to some time later, Brianna was kneeling beside him, a first-aid kit open on the floor. She was spraying cold liquid bandage onto his worst whip marks.

“Drake,” Sam managed to gasp.

“I’ll take care of him later,” Brianna said. “You first.”

The alarm had stopped blaring.

He tried to sit up, but she pushed him back down. “Dude, you are hurt bad.”

“Yeah,” Sam admitted. “Hurts. Like fire.”

“There’s this,” she said doubtfully. She held up an ocher-colored blister pack. The label read “Morphine Sulfate Injection USP. 10 mg.”

Sam squeezed his eyes shut and gritted his teeth. The pain made him want to scream. It was beyond anything he could endure. Like his flesh was burning, like someone was pressing a red-hot iron against his skin.

“I don’t know,” Sam said through his teeth.

“We need Lana,” Brianna said.

“Yeah,” Sam said. “Too bad I sent Dekka to kill her.”

He lay there feeling waves of pain so great, they made him want to throw up. The morphine would dull the pain. But it would also probably take him out of the battle. No one else could stop Caine. No one else . . .

He had to function . . . had to . . .

He cried out in agony, unable to hold it in, unable to stop himself.

Brianna tore open the blister pack and jabbed the syringe into his leg.

A wave of relief swept through him. But with it, weariness, weirdness, and a dreamy indifference. He was sinking down and down and down into a dark place. Letting himself fall away, leaving Brianna staring down at him as he fell toward the center of the earth.

A resource, some wisp of his remaining consciousness was thinking.

A weapon.

“Breeze,” Sam managed to say.

“What, Sam?”

“Breeze . . .”

“I’m here, Sam.”

It would be ready. The creature knew their powers. Knew their limits. Knew everything Lana knew. Probably everything Caine and Drake knew.

But not everything there was to know.

With a sudden, spasmodic lurch, Sam managed to grab her arm and squeeze it tight. “Breeze. Breeze . . . get Duck.”

“I’m not leaving you, boss,” Brianna argued.

“Breeze. The radiation. You were exposed.”

He couldn’t see the expression on her face. But he heard the sharp intake of breath.

“Am I going to die?” Brianna asked. She made an unconvincing laugh. “No way.”

She was so far away now. Miles away from Sam. In another world. But he still had to reach her.

“Oh, God,” Brianna cried.

“Breeze. Get Duck. The mine. Lana.”

He let go then, and fell into the pit and drifted from reality.

Brianna hit town like Paul Revere riding a rocket. She zoomed down streets, banging on doors, yelling, "Duck! Duck, get your butt out here!"

No Duck. Plenty of kids heard her yelling and ducked. Which on another day she might have found funny.

She ran as fast as she could. Not fast enough to outrun her own fear. Radiation. She had touched the reactor pool.

Was she already doomed?

She ran into Astrid with Brother John and her own little weird brother pulling a red wagon toward town hall. At first she couldn't believe what she was seeing. Mary Terrafino was in the wagon, curled up and covered with a blanket that dragged on the pavement.

Brianna hit the brakes and skidded to a stop in front of Astrid. Little Pete was chanting something at the top of his lungs. "Nestor! Nestor! Nestor!" Crazy. Like a crazy street person. Brianna didn't know how Astrid could stand it.

When Little Pete spotted Brianna, he stopped. His eyes glazed over, and he slowly pulled a handheld game from his pocket.

"Brianna! Is Sam okay?" Astrid cried.

"No. Drake tore him up." She wanted to sound tough, but the sobs came bubbling up and overtook her. "Oh, God, Astrid, he's hurt so bad."

Astrid gasped and covered her hand with her mouth. Brianna put her arms around Astrid and sobbed into her hair.

"Is he going to die?" Astrid asked, voice wobbly.

"No, I don't think so," Brianna said. She stood back and wiped her tears. "I gave him something for the pain. But he's messed up, Astrid."

Astrid grabbed her arm hard, squeezing enough to cause Brianna pain.

"Nestor," Little Pete said.

"Hey," Astrid snapped at Brianna. "Get it together."

It shocked Brianna. She'd never thought of Astrid as weak and girly, really, but she hadn't thought of her as tough, either. But Astrid's jaw was clenched, her eyes cold and steely.

"Nestor," Little Pete repeated.

"I'm supposed to get Duck," Brianna said.

"Duck?" Astrid frowned. "Sam was probably out of his mind."

"Duck," Little Pete said.

Astrid stared at him. Brianna saw the look, could almost hear the wheels spinning in Astrid's brain.

At that moment there was a commotion. Two dozen kids, some cavorting like they were at Mardi Gras, came around the corner into the town plaza. Creeping slowly behind them was a convertible with its top down and its lights flashing. The car's CD player was blaring a song Brianna didn't know.

Splayed across the hood of the car was the half-mangled body of a deer.

Walking behind the car, stumbling, dragging one leg like it wasn't working right, face bloody, came Hunter. His hands were covered with something metallic, and wrapped in duct tape. A rope was around his neck. Holding the rope and sitting atop the backseat, like he was a politician at a parade, was Zil. Lance was driving. Antoine, whom Brianna knew to be a druggie jerk, was riding shotgun. Two other kids she

didn't really know were in the other seats. One of them was holding up a small, hand-lettered sign that read, "Free Food for Normals."

"What the . . .," Brianna said.

"Stay out of it, Brianna," Astrid said. "Go help Sam."

"They can't do this!" Brianna cried.

Astrid grabbed her arm. "Listen to me, Brianna. Your job is to help Sam. Do what he said: get Duck."

"This is major trouble coming, Astrid."

"Bad things," Astrid said. "Very bad things are going on. Listen to me, Breeze. Are you listening?"

Someone must have spotted Brianna because suddenly there were kids rushing toward her from the procession, kids waving baseball bats and tire irons and at least one long-handled ax.

"It's a freak! Get her!"

"She's spying on us!"

"Get out of here, Breeze," Astrid said urgently "Find a way to help Sam. If we lose him, we're done."

"These creeps don't scare me!" Brianna yelled. "Bring it on, you punks!"

To shock her, Astrid grabbed her face. She squeezed it hard, like a very angry mother with a very bad little child. "It's not about you, Brianna! Now get out of here!"

Brianna pulled back. Her face was flushed from anger. The mob was racing toward her. But "racing" meant one thing to them, and a whole different thing to her.

Astrid was probably right. They didn't call her Astrid the Genius for nothing. But Brianna knew if the mob lost her, they'd likely take it out on Astrid.

"Take care of yourself, Astrid," Brianna said.

Brianna zoomed fifty feet away from Astrid and came to a stop. "Hey. Morons. I'm right here. You want a piece? You want a piece of the Breeze?"

The crowd spotted her, turned, and went after her, veering away from Astrid.

"Get her!"

"Get that mutant freak!"

"Yeah, right," Brianna sneered. "Come and get me."

She waited, a coldly furious grin on her face, until the first of her pursuers was within ten feet.

Then she gave the mob a middle-finger salute and zoomed away at a speed even a car couldn't match.

THIRTY-NINE

47 MINUTES

DUCK ZHANG WAS having a fine time if you set aside the fact that no one seemed to be distributing food anymore and he was so hungry, he couldn't see straight.

He'd reached the point where he bitterly regretted the lost hot dog relish he'd intended to give to Hunter.

But on the plus side he was no longer worried about falling through the earth all the way to its molten core. He had begun to figure out how to control this absurd power he had.

Duck was no genius, but it had finally occurred to him that his was the power of density. He could control the density of his body, without growing larger or smaller. If he went one way, he became so dense, he could fall straight into the ground. Like dropping a marble into a bowl of pudding.

Which, as he had discovered, was a bad thing.

But if he went the other way, as he was learning to do, he could float. Not fly, but float. Like a helium balloon. He could do it now even without having to experience violent mood swings. He could simply decide to sink. Or he could decide to float.

Floating was much better. It turned the whole world into a sort of giant swimming pool. And this time around, no one was going to crash his party.

He was floating now about fifty feet above the plaza. He'd started off over by the school. He'd lifted off and then just . . . drifted. The only concern being that he not drift too far from town and end up having a long walk home. Worse still would be drifting out to sea. That could be bad. He could imagine, say, dozing off up here and waking up to find himself two miles out to sea. In the dark. That was a long, long swim.

"What I need," he said to the rooftop below him, "is, like, wings or something. Or like a rocket pack. Then I could fly for real."

"Like Superman."

It was a happy thought. That did make it a little easier to stay comfortably aloft.

One of the other problems was that, unlike water, air was hard to move around in. Going up or down was easy. Going forward or backward was impossible. And even twisting around, for example, if you were lying on your back, well, that was not an easy thing to do, either.

As he was discovering.

He was, in effect, lying on his side at the moment, trying to come all the way around to face the ground. You couldn't really push against air.

But that was okay. He'd figure it out.

One thing he was considering was picking some cabbages or melons. Not now, not with the sun going down. But maybe in the morning. All that lovely, lovely food right out there in the fields. And he would be able to float just above the ground, out of range of the zekes, but able to reach down and snag a nice, juicy cantaloupe.

Only problem was, how to get out over the field to begin with. And then, how to get back. If there was no breeze, he might stay hovering above a deadly zeke field

forever.

That was not a happy thought. Not at all. To make his power really useful he would have to learn how to move once he was in the air.

Right now he was having a hard enough time just keeping his eye on the ground below.

Something was definitely going on down below. There was some big thing going on in the plaza. Someone had driven a convertible right onto the grass. Sam was not going to be happy about that. And now there were maybe fifty kids down there, all milling around like they were having a party.

Duck smelled the meat before he saw it.

He had to squint hard in the failing light. There it was, across the hood of the car. A deer.

Now someone was building a fire in the dry bed of the fountain. The smoke was rising toward Duck, just a whiff, really, although he supposed it could get to be irritating eventually.

He was drifting on the slight breeze, so he wasn't too worried. What he was, was ravenous. The smell of meat was overwhelming. No wonder kids were freaking out.

He couldn't see who the kids were, just the tops of their heads, which didn't tell you much. But then he saw that one boy was tied by a rope to the bumper of the car.

Suddenly Duck had a very bad feeling about this gathering.

He spotted a face he knew, Mike Farmer, one of Edilio's soldiers. He was staring straight up at Duck.

Duck gave a little wave. He smiled. He was about to say, "Hey, what's going on down there?"

Then Mike yelled, "There's one up there! Look! It's one of them!"

One of who? Duck wondered.

Face after face looked up at him. Even the boy who was tied up. Hunter. It was Hunter, and not looking good, either. Looking like he'd been beaten up.

Others in the crowd looked up at Duck. And then, Zil.

Duck found himself staring down at Zil. Meeting his eyes. Realizing in one terrible moment what was happening below. Sam, gone. Edilio, gone. No one in charge. All of the leaders off. And Zil with Hunter as his prisoner and fresh meat on the menu.

"A chud spy!" Turk shouted.

"Get him!" Zil shouted.

Someone threw a rock. Duck saw it rise toward him, arc gracefully, and fall away.

Another rock, closer, but still too low.

Then Mike raised his rifle to his shoulder and took aim.

...

Sam was on the bus. Sun shining so bright through the windows.

It was bouncing along. Quinn there beside him. But something was wrong with Quinn, something Sam didn't want to look at.

Sam felt people staring at him. Eyes on the back of his head. Music playing from far away. Against Me! singing "Borne on the FM Waves of the Heart."

Something was happening at the front of the bus. The driver. He was clutching at

his heart.

I've been here, Sam thought. This happened.

This happened.

Only it would be different this time. Last time, so long ago, he had taken the wheel as the driver slumped over from his heart attack.

But had the driver had a tentacle around his throat?

And had Sam been screaming?

Sam lurched to his feet, startled to find himself doing it. He hadn't intended to. But he was up and lurching from side to side, grabbing seatbacks for support, eyes staring at him.

The driver turned and grinned at him with teeth dripping blood.

The guardrail swung open like a big gate, and the bus roared through and plunged over the cliff. Falling, falling, the rocks and the sea rushing up at him, the whole bus full of kids not really reacting, not caring, just staring and the driver grinning, and now the worms . . .

Sam tried to cry out, but his voice didn't work. He was choked by the driver's snake arm, choked and spinning.

Sam knew it was a dream, yes, had to be because the bus just kept falling forever and nothing could fall forever. Could it?

The dreamscape changed suddenly and he was no longer on the bus. He was coming around the corner into his kitchen and Astrid, not his mother, whom he expected to see, but Astrid, was yelling at someone he couldn't see.

No time for this, Sam told himself. No time for dreaming.

No time to waste here.

Wake up, Sam.

But no part of his body worked anymore. He was glued down. Tied with a thousand tiny ropes that squirmed and writhed like snakes or worms.

And yet now, now, somehow he was moving.

He opened his eyes. Was he seeing this? Was he seeing the room, the floor, the dome ceiling a million miles away?

Was any of it real?

On the floor lay what looked like something washed up from the bottom of the deepest ocean. Pale and fleshy, moist. No more than eighteen inches long. It was pulsating slightly, just a ripple that moved it very slightly. Like a slug might move.

Sam felt sure he should know what the thing was. But he wasn't even sure it was real. And he had to go now. Now or never. Up out of the dark pit and out into the world while the morphine lasted.

Not real, he thought as he moved past the slug.

Maybe, he said to himself, as he shifted one foot forward. Maybe none of it is real. Except for this foot. And that foot. One then the other.

Duck felt the breeze of the first bullet.

He zoomed upward as fast he could. Which was not very fast.

The second bullet was farther from its target.

Duck yelled, "Hey! Stop it!"

"Freak! Freak!" voices cried up at him.

"I didn't hurt anyone!" Duck yelled back.

"So why not come on down here?" Turk shouted. Then, like he had said something brilliant, he accepted a high five from some chubby kid with a bottle of booze in one fist.

Maybe fifty faces were gaping up at Duck, orange highlights and black shadows in the light of the bonfire. Halloween colors. They looked strange. Little ovals with staring eyeballs and open mouths. He could barely even recognize them because this wasn't how you looked at people, from way up high, them with their necks craning.

He saw the barrel of the gun, and the face behind it, one eye open, the other squinted shut. Aiming. At him.

"Get him!" Zil encouraged. "You get the first steak if you can hit him."

"Mike!" Duck yelled. "You're a soldier, dude. You're not supposed to—"

Duck saw the muzzle flash. He heard the bang.

"Why are you shooting at me?" Duck cried.

Careful aim. A muzzle flash. A loud crack.

"Stop, man, stop!"

"You're missing him," Zil yelled.

"Let me have that stupid gun," Hank demanded. He jumped out of the convertible and ran toward Mike.

It may have been Hank's jostling that saved Duck's life. The third bullet whizzed by.

Hank grabbed the gun away.

Meanwhile, Duck had risen another thirty or forty feet, higher than he'd gone before. He was up to a giddy height now. He could see the roof of town hall. He was higher than the steeple of the church had been. He could see the school in one direction, Clifftop in the other. He could see far out to sea.

He was probably a hundred feet up now, ten stories. And up here was just a bit more of a breeze blowing off the water, pushing him gently, like a loose helium balloon, back inland.

Too slow.

Hank fired. A miss. But a close one.

It was insane. He was rising, rising, but too slow, too slow, and Hank had all the time in the world to take careful aim, to line up the back sights with the front, to settle them just below his target, and squeeze off a round.

Duck tensed, awaiting the bullet. Wondering if it would hit his leg, his arm, and merely cause horrible pain. Or strike his heart or head, and finish him.

Hank squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened.

Hank threw the gun at Mike in disgust.

Mike frantically reloaded, but in the time it took him to slide in more bullets, Duck had floated and drifted higher and farther.

Hank fired. By the time the bullet had come close to Duck, gravity had slowed it. Duck could see it fly past his head. He saw the moment it reached its apogee. And then he watched it drop back toward the ground.

Duck threw up as he drifted over the church. Sacrilege, probably. But his stomach was empty, so not much rained down on the shattered building below.

Duck floated on. Away from the horror unfolding in the plaza. They were going to

kill Hunter. Hunter, who had begged for his help.

Nothing he could do: he went where the wind blew. And nothing he could have done—except get shot—if the wind blew him the other way.

“Superpowers,” he said to himself, “don’t always make you a superhero.”

She had lost herself again.

She kept coming and going. One minute there, the next gone.

Sometimes she was inside herself. Inside her own brain. Other times she was somewhere else, looking at herself from a distance.

It was so sad seeing what had become of Lana Arwen Lazar.

Then she would be there, right inside her own lolling head, looking out through her own red-rimmed eyes.

She walked now. Two feet. Walking.

Seeing the stone walls beside her.

Danger ahead—the gaiaphage felt it, and so did she. So did she. Had to be stopped.

Something Lana was supposed to get. Something she had dropped.

She stopped. The gaiaphage didn’t know what to call it. And for a moment Lana couldn’t make sense of the images in her head. The flat-steel surfaces. The cross-hatched grip.

“No,” she begged the creature.

“No, I don’t want to,” she cried as she knelt.

Her hand groped for it. Fingers touched it. It was cold. Her index finger curled around the trigger. If she could just raise it to her own head, if she could . . .

But now she was walking, and the weight was in her hand, so heavy. So terribly heavy.

She reached the truck, still locking the mine shaft entrance. She crawled onto the hood, sobbing. Slid through the shattered window, indifferent to the glass as it cut her palms and knees.

Why couldn’t she stop herself? Why couldn’t she stop this hand, that foot?

The light of the stars overhead was blinding as she stepped into the mouth of the mine shaft.

The enemy there, the danger.

Lana knew the enemy’s name. She knew what the enemy would do. When the gaiaphage had fed, he would be ready for Dekka. More than ready.

But not yet.

“Don’t,” Lana said to Dekka. “Don’t.”

Dekka froze. There was a look of horror on her face.

The other one stood to one side. He carried a gun. Lana knew his name, too. Edilio. But he was not the danger.

“It’s Lana,” Dekka said.

“Lana, run to us,” Edilio said. He held out his hand.

Lana felt an overwhelming feeling of sadness. A sob that filled the world. It was as if that outstretched hand was all she could see, all she could feel.

She wanted so badly to reach for it.

“Come on, Lana,” Edilio urged.

Tears filled Lana’s eyes. Her head moved slowly, side to side. “I don’t want to,”

her voice said.

Lana lifted the gun.

“I don’t . . . ,” Lana whispered.

She took aim. Inside her head a scream a scream a scream.

“Lana, no!” Dekka cried.

Lana didn’t hear the shot. But she felt the gun buck in her hand. She saw the jet of flame.

And she saw Edilio fall straight back.

She saw him land on his back.

His head bounced as he hit.

Lana shifted her aim. Sights lined up on Dekka who seemed paralyzed in shock.

Lana squeezed the trigger.

Click.

Click.

Dekka raised her hands. Her expression was furious, determined. But she did not use her power. Her eyes flickered. She lowered her hands and rushed to Edilio.

Dekka knelt over Edilio. She gasped. Pressed her hand against the wound in his chest. Trying to hold the blood in.

“Lana. Lana,” Dekka pleaded with tears running down her cheeks. “Help him.”

Lana stood confused. The gun wasn’t working. Why wasn’t it working? The question was not hers, the thought not her thought.

The gaiaphage was confused. Why did the weapon not kill? It did not understand. So much it knew. But not everything.

The gun slipped from Lana’s fingers. She heard it clatter on stone.

“Lana, you can save him,” Dekka pleaded.

I can save no one, Lana thought. Least of all myself.

Lana took two steps back.

The last thing she saw was Dekka rushing to Edilio.

Lana returned to her master.

FORTY

38 MINUTES

THE SUN WAS sinking into the sea. Shadows were lengthening in Perdido Beach. The plaza was full of kids, far more kids than Zil could possibly feed with one deer.

It worried him at first. But then he realized the simple solution: Those who would take part in the sacrificing of Hunter would eat. Those who would only watch, would not.

Those who laid hands on Hunter would be a part of Zil's group. They would have demonstrated their loyalty beyond all doubt. Their bridges would be burned. He would own them, body and soul after that.

They would be lifetime members of the Human Crew.

A big fire had been built in the dried-out fountain. Someone clever had raided the hardware store and had rigged a spit onto which big hunks of the deer, chopped into slabs with an ax, were roasting.

The smell was amazing.

Turk had grabbed spray cans and tagged the fountain and some of the sidewalks with Lisa's stylized "HC" logo.

"How we doing this, man?" Antoine asked.

"Doing what?" Zil answered.

"Hunter. How we doing it?"

Hunter had recovered a little from the hit to the head. He had tried to free his hands, but Hank had smacked him good. Cheers had risen from some of the crowd. Others had looked queasy.

"Yank," Turk said, and made a comic hanging motion.

"Where? Is what I mean, man," Antoine said. He was slurring badly, almost to the point of not being intelligible. Drunk.

"There." Lance pointed to the tumbled-down church.

"Where the door used to be? It makes an arch. You can pass a rope up through that hole. One end around Hunter's neck, right? The other end can be really long. You can extend it all the way down through the square, so you could have, like, a hundred kids pulling on it."

He frowned and glanced back and forth. "Pull him up, then you can tie the rope off to one of the trees, around the base."

Zil considered Lance curiously. It seemed strange to find this popular kid getting involved, actually coming up with a plan for an execution. Weird. Lance had none of Hank's seething, crazy rage. None of Turk's desperate toadying. He wasn't a pathetic burn-out like Antoine.

"That's a good plan, Lance," Zil said.

Hank's eyes glittered dangerously.

"If we're going to do this, we better get on with it," Turk said. "Astrid's a freak-lover. And that Brianna. She could be bringing Sam."

"Sam's busy. Besides, I'm not afraid of Sam. We have all these kids with us," Zil said, sounding far more confident than he felt. "But yeah, let's get this thing going."

Hank. Lance. Start stringing the rope.”

Zil climbed up onto the trunk of the convertible. “Everybody! Everybody!”

He had everyone’s attention almost instantly. The crowd was hungry, desperate, and very impatient. Several kids had tried to rush at the meat and grab some right from the flames. They’d had to be beaten back by Hank and a group of kids he’d enlisted as bodyguards.

“The food is ready,” Zil announced to loud cheers.

“But we have something more important to do, first, before we can eat.”

Groans.

“We have to carry out some justice.”

That earned a silent stare until Turk and Hank started raising their hands and yelling, showing the crowd how to act.

“This mutant, this nonhuman scum here, this freak Hunter . . .” Zil pointed, arm stretched out, at his captive. “This chud deliberately murdered my best friend, Harry.”

“Na troo,” Hunter said. His mouth still didn’t work right. Brain damage, Zil supposed, from the little knock on his head. Half of Hunter’s face drooped like it wasn’t quite attached right. It made it easier for the crowd of kids to sneer at him, and Hunter, yelling in his drooling retard voice, wasn’t helping his case.

“He’s a killer!” Zil cried suddenly, smacking his fist into his palm.

“A freak! A mutant!” he cried. “And we know what they’re like, right? They always have enough food. They run everything. They’re in charge and we’re all starving. Is that some kind of coincidence? No way.”

“Na troo,” Hunter moaned again.

“Take him!” Zil cried to Antoine and Hank. “Take him, the murdering mutant scum!”

They seized Hunter by the arms. He could walk, but only by dragging one leg. They half carried, half marched him across the plaza. They dragged him up the church steps.

“Now,” Zil said, “here is how we’re going to do this.” He waved his hand toward the rope that Lance was unspooling back through the plaza.

An expectant pause. A dangerous, giddy feeling. The smell of the meat had them all crazy. Zil could feel it.

“You all want some of this delicious venison?”

They roared their assent.

“Then you’ll all grab on to the rope.”

A dozen or more kids leaped forward to seize the rope. Others hesitated. Glanced toward the church. Glanced toward Hunter being held by Zil’s crew.

Lance had tied a noose.

Hank now pushed it down over Hunter’s head and tightened it around his neck.

But there was a disturbance in the crowd. Someone was pushing through. Kids were yelling at the intruder. There was shoving. But finally Astrid appeared, disheveled, flushed, furious. She wasn’t hauling a wagon anymore. And she didn’t have John with her, which was good, Zil thought: Mary and John were popular. A lot of these kids had little brothers and sisters at the day care.

Astrid was a different story. She was tied to Sam, and a lot of kids thought she was too full of her own self. Plus, she had her creepy little brother with her. And no one

liked him. Rumor had it that he was some kind of powerful freak himself. But was too retarded to do anything much about it.

Waste of time keeping a retard alive when humans were starving.

“Stop this!” Astrid cried. “Stop this now!”

Zil looked down at her. He was almost surprised to realize that he was not intimidated by her. Astrid the Genius. Sam’s girlfriend. One of the three or four most important people in the FAYZ.

But Zil had the power of the crowd behind him. He felt it in his heart and soul, like a drug that made him all-powerful. Invincible and unafraid.

“Go away, Astrid,” he said. “We don’t like traitors here.”

“Oh? And how do we feel about thugs? How do we feel about murder?” She was really very pretty, Zil noticed. Much hotter than Lisa. And now that he was taking over . . .

“We’re here to execute a murderer,” Zil said, pointing at Hunter. “We are bringing justice in the name of all normals.”

“There’s no justice without a trial,” Astrid said.

Zil grinned. He spread his hands. “We had a trial, Astrid. And this chud scum was found guilty of murdering a normal.

“The penalty,” he added, “is death.”

Astrid turned to face the mob. “If you do this, you’ll never forgive yourselves.”

“We’re hungry,” a voice cried, and was immediately echoed by others.

“You’re going to murder a boy in a church?” Astrid demanded, pointing toward the church. “A church? In God’s house?”

Zil could see that those words had an effect. There were some nervous looks.

“You will never wash the stain of this off your hands,” Astrid cried. “If you do this, you will never be able to forget it. What do you think your parents would say?”

“There are no parents in the FAYZ. No God, either,” Zil said. “There’s just humans trying to stay alive, and freaks taking everything for themselves. And you, Astrid, are all about helping the freaks. Why? I really wonder why?”

He was starting to genuinely enjoy this. It was great fun to see pretty, smart Astrid looking helpless.

“You know what I think, people?” Zil said. “I think maybe Astrid has some powers she hasn’t told anyone about. Or else . . .” He paused for dramatic effect. “Or else it’s the little retard who has the powers.”

He saw the fear dawn on her face. Righteous anger surrendering to fear.

So smart, so quick, Astrid was. So dumb, too, Zil thought.

“I think,” Zil said, “we may have another couple of freaks at our little picnic.”

“No,” Astrid whispered.

“Hank,” Zil said, and nodded.

Astrid turned too late to see Hank behind her. He swung. Astrid felt the blow as if it had hit her.

It hit Little Pete.

He fell like a marionette with the strings cut.

“Now!” Zil said. “Grab her.”

Diana could hardly believe it. They had moved quickly, easily up the side of the hill

overlooking the power plant and had found the fuel rod.

It had not been hard to find. A fire had started in the dry brush where it hit. Just a low, scurrying fire. Caine was able to pluck the fuel rod up with ease and hold it high in the air.

Jack stood beneath the fuel rod, sweating from the heat, sweating too from fear, Diana guessed. The only light came from the fire.

"I don't see anything popped or broken," Jack said. He pulled something that looked like a yellow remote control out of his pocket and stared at it.

"What's that?"

"It's a dosimeter," Jack said. He thumbed a switch. Diana heard an irregular clicking sound. Click. Clickclick. Click. Clickclickclick.

"We're okay," Jack said, and breathed a relieved sigh. "So far."

"What's that clicking?"

"Whenever it detects a radioactive particle, it clicks. If it starts clicking constantly, we'll have a problem. There's a tone when it gets to dangerous levels."

Even now, Jack loved showing off his geek knowledge. Even knowing what was happening, what had happened. Guessing, at least, what was ahead.

"What you hear now is just background radiation."

"Let's get out of here," Caine said. "Fire climbs. We need to stay ahead of it."

They climbed the hill. The fire did not catch them. It didn't seem to be spreading. Maybe because there was no wind.

Down the other side to the highway.

No one had come after them. Sam was nowhere to be seen.

They rested—collapsed was more like it—inside an Enterprise Rent-a-Car office. The two soldiers went on a search through dusty desks and file cabinets, looking for food.

One triumphantly produced a small tin of hard peppermints. There were nine mints. Enough for everyone to have one, and then to salivate over the remaining four.

"Time to get a car," Caine announced. He had "parked" the fuel rod outside, leaning it against the exterior wall. "We need something with an open top."

He held up one of the peppermints for the two soldiers to see. "This goes to whoever finds me the best vehicle, with keys."

The two thugs raced for the door. Diana's stomach cramped, wringing a cry from her. A small piece of candy did not cure hunger, it sharpened it.

There were no lights in the office. None on the highway outside. Darkness in every direction except for the pale light of non-stars and a non-moon.

They slumped on sagging office chairs and propped weary feet on the desks.

Diana began laughing.

"Something funny?" Caine asked.

"We're sitting in the dark, willing to sell our souls for another peppermint, with enough uranium to give a terrorist a wet dream." She wiped tears from her eyes. "No, nothing's funny about that."

"Shut up, Diana," Caine said wearily.

Diana wondered if using his telekinetic power to "carry" the fuel rod was tiring him out. Maybe.

Diana forced herself to stand up. She went to Caine and put her hand on his

shoulder. "Caine."

"Don't start," Caine said.

"You don't have to do this," Diana said.

Caine didn't answer.

One of the soldiers stuck his head in. "I found an Escalade. Keys are inside, but it's locked."

"Jack? Go open the car for him," Caine ordered. "While you're at it, rip the roof off."

"Do I get a mint?" Jack asked.

Diana laughed out loud, a borderline hysterical sound.

"What do you think your little friend in the desert will do once you've given it what it wants?" When Caine didn't answer, Diana said, in a puzzled tone, "By the way, should I be saying 'it,' or is it a 'he'?"

Caine covered his face with his hands.

"Does he have a nickname?" Diana went on remorselessly. "I mean, 'gaiaphage' is so long. Can we call him phage? Or maybe just 'G'?"

From outside came the sound of metal ripping, glass shattering. Jack converting an SUV into a convertible.

"The 'G' monster," Diana said.

Seconds later, the door burst inward. Jack.

"Someone's coming," Jack said urgently. "Coming right down the road."

"Driving?" Caine demanded, leaping up.

"No. We just heard footsteps, like someone running."

Diana's heart leaped. Sam. It had to be Sam.

But at the same time, she felt dread. She wanted Caine stopped. She did not want him killed.

Caine ran outside, Diana right behind him, and gunfire erupted. The two soldiers firing blindly down the highway. Bright yellow fire from the muzzles, a deafening noise, and off in the impenetrable gloom the sound of a voice cursing, yelling at them to stop it, followed by furious cursing.

"Stop shooting, you stupid idiots!" Caine roared.

The firing stopped.

"Is that you, Drake?" one of the soldiers called out, shaky and scared.

"I'm going to whip the skin off you!" Drake bellowed.

The gaunt psychopath appeared, eyes glittering in moonlight, hair wild. He was moving strangely, cradling his whip hand with his other hand.

There was something odd about it. Diana couldn't figure out what.

"What kept you?" Caine asked.

"What kept me? Sam. I took him down," Drake said. "Me. I whipped him and tore him up and he will never recover, never, not after what—"

"Whoa," Jack said, so shocked, he dared to interrupt Drake in mid-rant. "Your . . . your thing."

Diana saw then the way Drake's tentacle ended in a flat surface, a stump.

And then, to Diana's astonishment, Drake sobbed. Just once. Just one stifled sob. He is human, after all, Diana thought. Barely. But capable of fear, capable of feeling pain.

“You didn’t kill him?” Caine asked Drake.

“I told you,” Drake yelled. “He’s done for!”

Caine shook his head. “If you didn’t kill him, he’s not done for. In fact, it looks kind of like the last time you fought Sam: you with part of you missing.”

“It wasn’t Sam,” Drake said through clenched teeth. “I’m telling you, I took Sammy Boy down. Me! I took him down!”

“Then why are you looking suddenly . . . stumpy?” Diana asked, unable to resist the urge to take a shot at her nemesis.

“Brianna,” Drake said.

Out of the corner of her eye, Diana noticed the way Jack’s head lifted and his chest puffed out.

“She showed up. Too late to save Sam. You won’t see Sam again.”

“When I see his body, I’ll believe that,” Caine said dryly.

Diana agreed. Drake was too insistent. Too shrill. Too determined to convince them all.

“Let’s move out,” Caine said.

One of the soldiers turned the key on the mutilated Escalade. The battery was weak. It seemed at first it wouldn’t start. But then the engine caught and roared to life. Lights came on inside the car. Headlights were painfully bright.

“Everyone in,” Caine ordered. “If Drake’s right and Sam is down—even temporarily—we’re done sneaking. It’s ten miles to the mine. Twenty minutes and we’re there.”

“Where’s my peppermint?” Jack asked.

Caine raised the fuel rod and held it poised in the air above their heads. Close enough that the heat was like a bright, noon sun.

Little Pete lay unconscious.

Astrid was hauled, kicked, and shoved as Antoine tied her wrists and breathed alcohol into her face.

Her brain was spinning. What to do? What to say to stop the insanity?

Nothing. There was nothing she could say now, not with hunger ruling the mob. She could do nothing but witness.

Astrid looked into each face, searching for the humanity that should speak to them, stop them, even now. What she saw was madness. Desperation.

They were too hungry. They were too scared.

They were going to kill Hunter, and then Zil would come for Little Pete and for Astrid herself. He would have no choice. The instant Hunter died, Zil and his mob would have drawn a line in blood down the middle of the FAYZ.

“Dear Jesus, I know you’re watching,” Astrid prayed. “Don’t let them do this.”

“Are you ready?” Zil shrieked.

The mob roared.

“Dear Lord . . .,” Astrid prayed.

“It’s time for justice!”

“ . . . no.”

“Edilio, don’t die,” Dekka begged.

“Don’t die.”

Edilio made a gurgling sound that might have been an attempt to speak.

Dekka had his shirt open. The hole was in his chest, just above his left nipple. When she held her hands against it, the blood seeped from beneath her palm. When she took her hand away, for even a second, the blood pumped out.

“Oh, God,” Dekka sobbed.

Another gurgle, and Edilio tried to raise his head.

“Don’t try to move,” Dekka ordered. “Don’t try to talk.”

But Edilio’s right hand jerked upward suddenly. He seemed to be trying to grab her collar, but the hand wouldn’t connect, the fingers wouldn’t grasp. Edilio dropped his hand and seemed for a moment to pass out.

But then, with what had to be almost superhuman effort, he said two words. “Do it.”

Dekka knew what he was asking her to do.

“I can’t, Edilio, I can’t,” Dekka said. “Lana’s the only one who can save you now.”

“Do . . .”

“If I do, she’ll die,” Dekka said. She was bathed in sweat, sweat dripping from her forehead, dripping onto his bloody chest. “If I do it, Lana can’t save you.”

“Do . . . uh . . .”

Dekka shook her head violently. “You’re not going to die, Edilio.”

She grabbed him around his chest from behind. Like she was doing the Heimlich maneuver on him. Using his own weight against her slippery hands to seal the wound.

She dragged him away from the mine shaft. Dragged him down the trail, his heels making tracks in the dirt. She wept and sobbed as she went, staggered under the weight, fell into boulders, but put distance between herself and the mine shaft.

Because he was right. He was right, poor Edilio, he was right, she had to do it. She had to collapse that mine. But Edilio wasn’t going to be buried there, no way. No, Edilio would have a place of honor in the plaza.

The honored dead. Another grave. The first one that Edilio had not dug himself.

“Hang in there, Edilio, you’re going to make it,” Dekka lied.

She collapsed at the bottom of the trail, at the edge of the ghost town. Dekka sat on Edilio and pressed down on the wound. The force of the blood was weaker now. She could almost hold the blood back now, not a good thing, no, because it meant he was almost finished, his brave heart almost done beating.

Dekka looked up straight into the glittering eyes of a coyote. She could sense the others around her, closing in. Wary, but sensing that a fresh meal was close at hand.

FORTY-ONE

33 MINUTES

DUCK WAS SO high up, he could see smoke rising from the distant power plant.

He was still shaking from being shot at. Shot at! He had never hurt anyone.

Now it was like he had been drafted into a war he didn't even know was going on. It was nuts. He could have been killed. He might still be killed.

Instead, he had floated away, unharmed.

While others fought to survive. While others stood up against the evil that was being done.

Fortunately the slight breeze was wafting him away from the town square, where all the madness was going on. In a few more minutes he would raise his density and drop gently back to earth. Then, hopefully, he would find some food. The smell of cooking meat had left him crazy with hunger.

"Nothing you could have done, Duck," he told himself.

"That's true," he agreed. "Nothing."

"Not our fault."

He made a weak grab at a seagull that hovered just out of reach, floating on its boomerang-shaped wings. He was hungry enough that he would have eaten the bird raw. In midair.

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed a blur on the ground below. The blur stopped suddenly. He couldn't see her face, but it could only be Brianna. In her hand she held a pigeon.

Brianna could do what Duck could not. Brianna could catch and eat birds. Maybe she would share. After all, they were both freaks. Both on the same side. Right?

"Hey!" he yelled down.

Brianna stared up at him. "You!" she yelled. "I've been looking everywhere for you!"

"I'm so hungry," Duck moaned.

"How did you get up there?"

He was slowly increasing his density, sinking down to earth.

"It goes both ways," Duck said. "It's all about density. I weigh whatever I want to weigh. I can weigh so much, I sink through the ground, or I can float so—"

"Yeah, I don't care. Sam said get you."

"Me?"

"You. Get down here."

She ripped a wing off the pigeon and handed a dripping, gelatinous piece of flesh to Duck, who didn't even hesitate.

He looked up guiltily after a minute of slavering and grunting. "Don't you want some?"

"Nah," she said. "My appetite . . . I don't know. I'm feeling a little sick."

Brianna was looking at him in a way that made him distinctly nervous.

"There'll be some wind resistance," Brianna said.

"Some what?"

“Say you can control your weight? About ten pounds ought to do.”

“Do for what?”

“Jump on my back, Duck. You are going for a ride.”

The morphine did not eliminate the pain. It merely threw a veil over it. It was still there, a terrible, ravening lion, roaring, awesome, overpowering. But held barely at bay.

Barely.

His wounds were shocking to see. Bright red stripes across his back, shoulders, neck, and face. In places the skin had been taken off.

The morphine nightmare had faded and reality had begun to take on some of its usual definition. The ground was down and the sky was up. The stars were bright, the sound of his shoes on the concrete was familiar, as was the sound of his own breath, rasping in his throat.

He had a while. How long, he couldn't guess. A short while, maybe, to stop Caine.

And kill Drake. Because now, for the first time in his life, Sam wanted to take a life.

Drake. He was going to kill Drake. More than any high-minded concern for what Caine might do, it was the thought of Drake that kept Sam moving forward. Destroy Drake before the morphine wore off and the awful pain returned and left him crying and screaming and . . .

Should have done it the first time he'd had the chance.

Should have . . .

The scene appeared around him, shimmering, unreal. The battle on the steps of town hall. Orc and Drake, the hammering fist of the gravel boy, and the slashing whip of the true monster.

Sam had been busy with Caine. He'd barely survived. But he could have, should have, destroyed the psychopath Drake then and there. Put him down like the rabid animal he was.

Reality was wobbly as Sam crossed the parking lot. No one there, now. Dekka gone to . . . gone to do what? His mind was foggy.

Gone to destroy the mine shaft. Her and Edilio.

Lana. If Lana was in there . . . If she . . .

Sam's step faltered. Lana was his only hope. Without her, he would not survive. She could heal him. She could end the pain. Renew him.

So that he could . . .

He sagged into a car. For a while, he couldn't know how long, his mind went away. Consciousness failed. Not quite sleep, though, just a waking nightmare of memories and images and always the pain in his belly, the pain of his scarred flesh.

Keep moving, he told himself. Which way? The town was ten miles away. But that's not where Caine was heading.

The side of the hill behind the power plant was glowing. Like it was burning in patches. A hallucination.

He would never be able to walk that far. The drug would never last that long. Faster. He needed to move faster.

He needed help. Someone . . .

“Someone help me,” he whispered.

He began the long, wearying walk up the sloping road toward the security gate. No way he could move overland. Not a chance. And even . . .

Even . . .

Sam’s head was playing tricks on him now. He saw a light. Like a flashlight. But coming from the ocean.

He sat down hard. The light swept slowly over the parking lot, like someone out at sea was car shopping.

The light crawled over the side of the power plant. It climbed the hill, then came back down. Someone was searching.

But he was just a crumpled form on a road, too small to be spotted. The light would never land on him. It was like some sick game. The light would come his way and then veer off.

He was invisible.

“No, Sam,” he told himself as the realization dawned with ridiculous slowness on his addled brain. “Stupid moron. The one thing you have is light.”

Sam raised his hands high. A pillar of pure green light pierced the night sky.

The searchlight zoomed instantly toward him.

“Yeah, here I am,” Sam said.

It took Quinn a few minutes to beach the boat and climb up the rocks to reach Sam.

“Brah,” Quinn said.

Sam nodded. “Yeah. I look pretty bad. How . . .”

“I was fishing. I saw the fire.” Quinn knelt beside him, obviously unsure what he could do to ease his friend’s suffering.

“I look bad, and my head isn’t exactly on straight,” Sam slurred.

“I’ll get you back to town,” Quinn said.

“No, brah. Get a car.”

“Sam, you can’t . . .”

“Quinn.” Sam took Quinn’s arm and gripped it tight. “Get a car.”

“Back off, doggies,” Dekka growled.

The coyotes moved closer, circling, always circling. Each circuit just a little closer.

“Which one of you is Pack Leader?” Dekka demanded. Desperate. How could she stop them circling closer and closer? “I have an offer. I . . . I can help you. I want to talk to Pack Leader.”

One of the coyotes stopped moving and turned his intelligent face to her. “Pack Leader me.”

The voice was high-pitched, strained, as though the act of attempting speech was painful.

Dekka had only seen Pack Leader from a distance, but she knew this wasn’t him. Pack Leader had a nasty-looking face, a scar on his muzzle. He was old and mangy. This coyote was obviously younger.

“You’re not Pack Leader,” Dekka said.

The coyote tilted his head quizzically. “Pack Leader die. Pack Leader now.”

Pack Leader dead? Maybe this was an opportunity. “If you hurt me,” Dekka

warned, “my people will kill coyotes.”

Pack Leader—the new Pack Leader—seemed to consider this. His eyes were bright and focused, but almost seemed to contain a trace of humor.

“Pack eat dead human,” Pack Leader said in the eerie, grating voice of the mutated coyotes.

“He’s not dead,” Dekka said.

“Pack eat,” Pack Leader said.

“No,” Dekka said. “If you try, we will—”

There was a flash of tan and gray fur and something bowled Dekka over. She rolled and came up into a squat. Three coyotes were on Edilio. Blood was pumping freely from his chest.

“No!” Dekka cried.

She raised her hands and suddenly Edilio was floating up off the ground, along with three panicked, scrabbling, yip yip yipping coyotes.

Pack Leader bounded away to a safe distance.

And there came the sound of a car approaching at high speed.

•••

“Almost there!” Drake cried, ecstatic.

The night wind whipped their faces as the torn-open Escalade bounced and flew. Overhead the fuel rod was like a cruise missile, keeping pace. Caine stood braced against the seatback, hands held high.

Diana could only see the side of his face, but his was not an expression of wild joy like Drake’s. Caine’s eyes stared from beneath low brows. His mouth was drawn back in a grimace. It was the only time Diana had ever looked at him and found him ugly. No trace of the easy charm. The movie star bone structure was there, but now he looked like a shrouded corpse, a mockery, a fading echo.

“Look! Hah hah hah! It’s growing back!” Drake shrieked, and waved the end of his hideous tentacle in her face. He was right. Within the blunt-cut disk a bump was forming, a new growth. Like a salamander’s tail, the whip could be cut, but would regenerate.

“There! It’s the town,” Drake yelled. “There! Now you’ll see. Now you’ll all see!”

“What is this place?” Jack wondered aloud. He glared at Diana, accusing, blaming her.

Not my fault, Diana argued silently. Not my fault, Jack, not my fault you were weak and followed me, you stupid fool, you needy, stupid fool. Not my fault any of this.

I’m just trying to survive. I’m just trying to get by, like always, like always.

It’s what she did, Diana, survive. And always with style. Her own terms, no matter what anyone thought. It was her special genius: being used, but always using back. Being abused, but then returning the abuse, with interest. And remaining, always, Diana, cool Diana.

Not her fault, any of this.

“Look!” one of the soldiers yelled.

Something was happening in the road ahead. Like a small tornado, like a

whirlwind made of coyotes, and there, at the center of the madness, a human body.

“Dekka,” Drake said with special relish.

Dekka dropped the coyotes. Dropped Edilio, too. No choice. Nothing she could do to help him now.

“Good-bye, Edilio,” she whispered.

Now there was only the mine shaft. She ran.

The Escalade skidded to a stop. Drake was out and running after her before the car had even stopped.

She had a head start of no more than thirty feet. And Drake was faster than she was.

The air cracked from the sound of his whip hand. She felt the breeze on the back of her neck. No way she’d make it back up the trail. No way.

Dekka spun and raised her hands.

Suddenly Drake’s legs were pumping in air. He rose off the ground in a vortex of dirt and rock. Like a slow-motion explosion had gone off under him. His whip hand twirled crazily.

“I’ll kill you, Dekka!” he yelled.

Dekka turned gravity back on, and Drake fell from ten feet up.

She turned and ran again, and now the coyotes were around her, bounding along on both sides of the trail, moving ahead of her. They would easily cut her off.

She powered up the hill, breath rasping in her throat. She turned a corner, and there was the new Pack Leader. She raised her hands. Too slow. They came from right and left. Leaped at her from all directions at once.

Dekka went down beneath a snarling, yelping, slashing pile of coyotes.

She screamed and tried to use her power, but iron jaws clamped her wrists.

The powerful made powerless.

The coyotes would have her.

FORTY-TWO

27 MINUTES

DRAKE WAS FIRST up the trail. He was limping, one leg badly bruised by his fall.

Jack was just behind him.

Drake limped up to the snarling coyote pack gathered around their intended kill. One of the coyotes, a creature with bright eyes and an almost human expression of detached interest, snarled a warning.

Dekka was pinioned, helpless. If she was conscious, she showed no sign of it. But she was still alive. Jack could see that she was still alive. And that in a few seconds, less, she wouldn't be.

"Don't worry, my coyote brothers," Drake said with a laugh. "I'm not here to stop you."

Drake looked down and shook his head mockingly at Dekka. "You don't look so good. I don't think this is going to end well for you." Then he looked back at Jack and said, "So much for mutant powers. Right, Jack?"

It was a warning. A threat. But Jack didn't care. He was sick. So sick, so sick deep down inside. He wanted to throw up, but there was nothing in his stomach. He wanted to run away into the night. But Drake or Caine or the coyotes would come for him.

Why was he here?

Because you're a stupid fool, Jack told himself. Smart stupid. Stupid smart.

"Just a little farther," Drake cried from up ahead. "Come meet him, Jack."

Jack stopped and looked back. He saw the fuel rod first. Floating along. Then Caine beneath it. Caine seemed almost bowed over, like he was carrying the weight on his shoulders. Like it was almost too much for him.

Jack felt as if a weight were pressing down on him, a weight that wanted to squeeze the blood from him, crush him like a piece of ripe fruit. Tears were running down his face, although he didn't remember when he had started crying.

For all his supernatural strength, Jack felt as if his arms and legs were stone. Each step took all his strength as he fought against his own paralyzing fear and horror.

Too much. All of it. Brittney, poor Brittney. And now Dekka. How many more would end up like them? And what about Jack himself?

Jack didn't think about what he was doing when he grabbed the nearest coyote by the scruff of its neck. The coyote yelped and tried to twist around to bite him. Jack threw the animal. It flew out of sight.

He grabbed a second coyote and hurled it into the night. A distant thump.

Two coyotes came straight at him, jaws open, teeth bared. Jack drew back and kicked the first. His foot connected with the animal's snout. The coyote's head ripped from its shoulders and went rolling down the trail a crazy bowling ball. The coyote's body stood for a few seconds, even seemed to take a step. Then it fell over.

The other coyotes stared. Then they stuck their tails between their legs and hurried away.

"What's the matter, Jack? Squeamish?"

Drake seemed to grow stronger with each step while Jack felt watery and weak

despite his display of superhuman strength. It wasn't part of him, that strength. It wasn't him.

Drake stood over him at the top of the rise. He was outlined in moonlight, his whip hand twitching in the air.

"I just didn't like seeing it," Jack said. His stomach was in his throat.

Drake's whip reached for Jack and wrapped almost gently around Jack's throat. Drake pulled him close. Drake's mouth tickled his ear as he said voicelessly, "Back my play, Computer Jack."

"What?" Jack said desperately.

"Back my play," Drake said. "And I'll let you live. I'll even let you have Brianna."

Jack placed his hand on Drake's whip. He pried it off his neck. It was almost easy. It would be easy now to yank that hideous arm right off.

Drake laughed uneasily. "Don't start down that path, Jack. You're not the type for rough stuff."

Drake turned away and bounded ahead.

Caine labored up from below. Diana, the witch who had brought all this horror to Jack, was beside Caine. He could almost swear that she was helping Caine walk.

Lana had dropped the gun in the cave. Useless now.

Tried to explain . . . tried to form images that explained . . . But the gaiaphage didn't care, really, it had moved on, not concerned any more by the girl with the power of gravity.

Someone shot Edilio, Lana thought, marveling at the idea. Someone. Edilio.

She had a flash of sensation, the feeling of the gun bucking in her hand.

Someone . . .

She gasped as the gaiaphage split open her mind and poured the images into her brain. Images of monstrosities.

The largest was a shaggy thing like a grizzly bear with eighteen-inch spikes at the ends of its paws . . . creatures that were all sharp edges, as if they'd been assembled out of razor blades and kitchen knives . . . creatures of glowing inner fire. Things that flew. Things that slithered.

But when she saw them, she didn't just see the surface. She saw them inside and out at once. Saw their construction. Saw the way they were folded into one another, one inside another, monster within monster. Like a Russian nesting doll.

Destroy one and liberate the next.

Regeneration. Adaptation. Each new incarnation as dangerous and as deadly as the one before.

The gaiaphage had conceived of the perfect biological machine.

No, not his conception. He had reached into a mind, an imagination infinitely more visionary than his own.

Nemesis. That was the gaiaphage's name for him: Nemesis.

Nemesis with infinite power held in check only by the twists and turns, the blind alleys and sudden high walls inside his own damaged brain.

Nemesis and Healer, used and brought together here, in this way, to make the gaiaphage unstoppable, unkillable.

Only one piece was missing. The food. The fuel.

It is coming, the gaiaphage said.

Soon.

Someone had shot Edilio. And had tried to shoot Dekka.

Lana's shattered, overwhelmed mind, flooded with the gaiaphage's plans, held on to that single fact.

Someone had . . .

From far, so far away, she felt the gun buck in her hand as she squeezed the trigger.

No. No.

Edilio falling.

No.

Lana's mind exploded in a wave of fury so powerful that the gaiaphage's imagery faltered. The fire hose flow of plans and details faded.

I hate you! Lana screamed wordlessly.

The gaiaphage pushed back, forced her down inside her own brain.

But more slowly than it had before.

"He's going to go after you, Caine," Diana whispered in his ear.

Caine's arms ached. He could no longer feel his hands. Holding them up. Using the power. Using it to carry . . .

"Drake will try to kill you," Diana said urgently. "You know it's true."

Caine heard her. But her voice was so tiny, her warning so insignificant compared to the steady throbbing pressure inside his chest.

The gaiaphage's hunger was his hunger now. Feeding it would be feeding himself.

Not true, Caine told himself.

A lie.

"Do this, and you will die, Caine," Diana pleaded. "Do it, and I'll die.

"Stop, Caine.

"Don't do it."

Caine tried to answer, but his mouth was dry and clenched.

Step by step. Up the trail. To it. To him.

Jack was up there. And Drake. Drake talking to Jack. There was a dead coyote lying in the path, headless.

And Dekka, maybe alive, maybe not. Not his concern. Her problem. Shouldn't have backed Sam. Shouldn't have fought against Caine.

Not his problem.

He reached the top of the trail. There was the mine shaft entrance.

The fuel rod hovered in the air.

Feed me.

Caine moved closer.

"Do it!" Drake cried.

"Caine, stop!" Diana said.

Caine moved more easily now on level ground. Closer. Close enough. He could hurl the rod from here. Like a javelin. Right into the shaft.

Like a spear.

Easy.

"Don't," Diana said. Then, "Jack. Jack, you have to stop this."

“No way,” Drake snarled.

“Shut up, you psychotic!” Diana shouted in sudden rage, all subtlety abandoned.

“Go die, you filthy, stupid thug!”

Drake’s eyes went dead. The dangerous, giddy light went out in them. He stared at her with black hatred.

“Enough,” Drake said. “I was going to wait. But if it has to be now, let’s do it.”

His whip lashed out.

FORTY-THREE

13 MINUTES

DRAKE'S WHIP HAND spun Diana like a top.

She cried out. That sound, her cry, pierced Caine like an arrow.

Diana staggered and almost righted herself, but Drake was too quick, too ready.

His second strike yanked her through the air. She flew and then fell.

"Catch her!" Caine was yelling to himself. Seeing her arc as she fell. Seeing where she would hit. His hands came up, he could use his power, he could catch her, save her. But too slow.

Diana fell. Her head smashed against a jutting point of rock. She made a sound like a dropped pumpkin.

Caine froze.

The fuel rod, forgotten, fell from the air with a shattering crash.

It fell within ten feet of the mine shaft opening. It landed atop a boulder shaped like the prow of a ship.

It bent, cracked, rolled off the boulder, and crashed heavily in the dirt.

Drake ran straight at Caine, his whip snapping. But Jack stumbled in between them, yelling, "The uranium! The uranium!"

The radiation meter in his pocket was counting clicks so fast, it became a scream.

Drake piled into Jack, and the two of them went tumbling.

Caine stood, staring in horror at Diana. Diana did not move. Did not move. No snarky remark. No smart-ass joke.

"No!" Caine cried.

"No!"

Drake was up, disentangling himself with an angry curse from Jack.

"Diana," Caine sobbed.

Drake didn't rely on his whip hand now, too far away to use it before Caine could take him down. He raised his gun. The barrel shot flame and slugs, BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM.

Inaccurate, but on full automatic, Drake had time. He swung the gun to his right and the bullets swooped toward where Caine stood like he was made of stone.

Then the muzzle flash disappeared in an explosion of green-white light that turned night into day. The shaft of light missed its target. But it was close enough that the muzzle of Drake's gun wilted and drooped and the rocks behind Drake cracked from the blast of heat.

Drake dropped the gun. And now it was Drake's turn to stare in stark amazement. "You!"

Sam wobbled atop the rise. Quinn caught him as he staggered.

Now Caine snapped back to the present, seeing his brother, seeing the killing light.

"No," Caine said. "No, Sam: He's mine."

He raised a hand, and Sam went flying backward along with Quinn.

"The fuel rod!" Jack was yelling, over and over. "It's going to kill us all. Oh, God, we may already be dead!"

Drake rushed at Caine. His eyes were wide with fear. Knowing he wouldn't make it. Knowing he was not fast enough.

Caine raised his hand, and the fuel rod seemed to jump off the ground.

A javelin.

A spear. He held it poised. Pointed straight at Drake.

Caine reached with his other hand, extending the telekinetic power to hold Drake immobilized.

Drake held up his human hand, a placating gesture. "Caine . . . you don't want to . . . not over some girl. She was a witch, she was . . ."

Drake, unable to run, a human target. The fuel rod aimed at him like a Spartan's spear.

Caine threw the fuel rod. Tons of steel and lead and uranium.

Straight at Drake.

Drake, quick as a snake, twisted his shoulder and neck to the side. The fuel rod did not hit him full in the chest, but struck his shoulder and sent him flying down the dark shaft.

The fuel rod disappeared with him.

There came a loud crash. Dust billowed out of the hole.

Silence.

No sound, but the skitter of falling pebbles inside the shaft.

"Oh, God, did it break open?" Jack moaned. "Oh, my God, I don't want to die."

Caine raised his hands and stood, arms outstretched, right before the mouth of the mine.

The ground began to rumble.

Rock snapped and creaked.

No! the hated voice cried in Caine's mind.

"I'm no one's slave," Caine grated.

No! You will not!

Caine faltered. There were knives in his brain, knives stabbing and stabbing, and the agony was beyond imagining.

"Won't I?" Caine said.

Caine raised his hands high. He reached with his power into the cave and yanked his arms back.

Tons of loose rock, wooden support beams, the shattered fuel rod, a battered old pickup truck, the body of Hermit Jim, and the writhing, cursing figure of a wounded but still living Drake Merwin, came flying out of the cave. Like the cave had vomited up its contents.

The mass of it froze in midair. And then, as Caine formed his hands into a bowl, the suspended mass began to twirl. It swirled like a tornado.

And then, with Drake's cries lost in the howling madness, Caine swept his arms forward and threw the entire spinning mass down the mine shaft entrance.

The noise was so great that Jack clapped his hands over his ears.

Then, a slow-motion rumble and crack and a sudden, overwhelming, earthquake jolt as the mine shaft collapsed. Millions of pounds of rock closed the shaft forever.

Caine walked on wobbly legs to Diana. He knelt beside her. She wasn't moving. He put his ear next to her lovely mouth. He heard no sounds of breathing.

But when he laid his palm on her back, he felt the slightest rise and fall.

Gently he rolled her over. The damage to the side of her head was awful to the touch. He couldn't see clearly, tears filled his eyes, but he could feel a warm slipperiness where her temple should be smooth.

A sob escaped from him.

He heard heavy footsteps. Sam, moving like he was drunk, staggering.

"Sam," Caine said calmly, not taking his eyes off the dark form of Diana, "if you're going to kill me, go ahead. Now would be a good time."

Sam said nothing.

Finally Caine looked at him. Through his tears Caine saw the way Sam wobbled, barely able, it seemed, to stay on his feet. He had been cut up badly. The pain must be excruciating.

Drake's work. Drake had not killed Sam. But he had come close. And it seemed impossible that Sam would survive for long.

Quinn was struggling under the burden of the body he cradled in his arms. The Mexican kid, Caine guessed, or maybe Dekka.

"So. This is the end," Caine said dully. He stroked Diana's cropped hair. "I love her. Did you know that, Sam?"

"It's not over yet," Sam said. His voice shocked Caine. He'd never heard more pain in a voice. He heard a barely suppressed scream beneath the words.

"She can't live," Caine said.

"Edilio's hurt. Almost gone," Quinn said. "They shot him. And Dekka . . ."

"Not me," Caine said. "Not us. They were both like that when we got here."

He was not interested in Edilio or Dekka. Not even interested in Sam. So sad that Diana would die this way, all her beautiful hair gone. She looked younger this way. Innocent. Not a word he or anyone else had ever applied to Diana.

"Lana," Sam said.

Caine felt the faintest flicker. Lana. But where was the Healer?

As if he had heard the question, Quinn said, "She's in there. She's in there, with . . . it."

Caine looked at the mine shaft. He had been down there before. He knew what lay inside. And now, the fuel rod, too.

"We need to . . .," Sam whimpered, unable to finish.

Caine nodded. "She must be dead after that."

"Maybe not," Sam managed to say. "Maybe not."

"There's no way to get in there now, anyway. It's a wall of rock. It's a lot harder to move rock back out. I'd have to move the whole mountain," Caine said. "Hours. Days."

Sam shook his head and bit his lip as though he would bite it off. Caine saw him hold on barely as the pain passed through him.

"May have another way," Sam said finally, staring back down the trail.

"Another way?" Caine asked.

"Duck," Sam said.

And Caine did, instinctively. There was a rush of wind and a cloud of dust and all at once, there was Brianna.

And towing along behind her, like some crazy balloon on a rope, a kid floating in

midair and looking like someone had just taken him on a roller-coaster ride from hell.

“Are we there?” Duck, asked, his eyes squeezed shut. “Am I done now?”

“You want to eat?” Zil roared from atop his convertible perch.

The crowd roared its assent. Though not every voice. Astrid clung to that fact: there was grumbling and uncertainty as well as acquiescence.

“Then grab on to the rope!” Zil cried.

The rope stretched across the plaza. It ended around Hunter’s neck. It would take no more than half a dozen willing executioners to do the foul deed.

Astrid began to pray. She prayed in a loud voice, hoping it would shame them, hoping that somehow it would reach through the madness.

“Grab on!” Zil cried, and he jumped down and seized the rope himself. The rest of his crew did the same.

Then four . . . five . . . ten . . .

Kids Astrid knew by name took hold of the rope.

“Pull!” Zil screamed. “Pull!”

The rope tightened. More came forward and took hold. But others, just a couple, changed their minds and let go.

It was a confusion of hands. A mess that turned suddenly to a shoving match.

The rope still tightened. It became a straight line.

And Astrid, to her eternal horror, saw Hunter lifted off his feet.

But the fight over the rope had turned nastier. Kids were pummeling one another, shouting, swinging wild fists.

The rope slackened. Hunter’s kicking feet touched the ground.

Kids rushed to pull on the rope. Others blocked their way. It was becoming a kind of full-scale riot. And then a couple of kids rushed at the meat, pushing past Antoine and Hank and Turk, literally walking over them in their desperation.

Astrid took advantage of the melee to climb to her feet.

Zil, enraged at losing control, at seeing the venison snatched away by desperate hands, shoved her hard.

“Down on the ground, you freak-lover!”

Astrid spit at him. She could see the color drain from Zil’s furious face. He grabbed a baseball bat, raised it over her. And then he flew into the air.

In his place stood Orc.

Zil was dangling from his fist. Orc drew Zil to within an inch of his own frightening face. “No one hurts Astrid,” Orc bellowed so loud, Zil’s hair was blown back.

Orc took a slow spin. Then a second, faster one, and launched Zil through the air.

“You okay?” Orc asked Astrid.

“I guess so,” she managed to say. She knelt beside Little Pete and touched the egg-sized lump on his head. He moved slightly, then opened his eyes.

“Petey. Petey. Are you okay?” There was no answer, but for Little Pete, that wasn’t abnormal. Astrid looked up at Orc. “Thanks, Charles.”

Orc grunted. “Yeah.”

Howard appeared, threading his way through the scattering mob. “My man, Orc,” he said, and slapped Orc on his massive granite shoulder. Then, to the fleeing crowd,

many loaded down with chunks of venison, he yelled, "Yeah, you better run away. You are some sorry fools messing with Sam's girl. If Orc doesn't get you, Sammy will."

He winked at Astrid. "Your boy so owes us."

"Yeah," Orc agreed. "Someone better beer me pretty soon."

"What happened to Edilio?" Brianna demanded. He was lying on the ground. Silent. Not even the sound of breathing.

Quinn answered. "Edilio's been shot. I don't think he has long."

"I can't believe Dekka let him get hurt," Brianna said. "Where is she?"

Quinn's involuntary glance was all Brianna needed. She flew to where Dekka lay, crumpled like a doll someone had tossed aside.

Brianna breathed hard. Stared. There was a rushing waterfall in her ears. A roar. Then a blur as the world around her screamed past and she hit Caine with all the speed and fury at her command. Caine went sprawling.

Brianna was on him before he could draw breath, and now a rock was in her hand.

"Breeze! No!" Sam yelled.

Brianna froze. Caine was on his back. He did nothing. He did not raise his hands. Barely seemed to notice her as she squatted, poised to hit him with the rock, poised to hit him a hundred times before he could flinch.

"No, Breeze," Sam said. "We need him."

"I don't need him," Brianna hissed.

"Breeze. Dekka's gone. Edilio will be dead in a few minutes. If he isn't already," Quinn said, speaking for Sam, who was clenching his teeth with such force that Brianna thought his molars might splinter. "And Sam . . ."

"What can this piece of filth do?" Brianna demanded.

"We need Lana," Sam managed to say.

Caine picked himself up and brushed the dirt from his shirt. "Diana is dying. The Mexican kid is dying. Dekka, well, you saw her. And Sam doesn't look too good," Caine said. "Lana's in there." He jerked his head toward the collapsed mine shaft.

"What I don't get," Caine continued, "is how we're getting in there to find her. The whole mine collapsed. It will take me a lot longer to dig out than it did to collapse it. I pull stuff out, more falls in."

"Duck," Sam said. "He's going to drill a tunnel."

"Um . . . what?" Duck said.

"Like when they rescue miners," Sam said. "They drill a shaft down to the original shaft."

"Um . . . what?" Duck repeated.

Quinn explained to an obviously baffled Caine, "It seems Duck has the power to sink right down through the ground."

"I don't really think I'm . . .," Duck said.

"He can control his density," Brianna confirmed. "That's why I could carry him here. It was like carrying a backpack. But with more wind resistance."

"He drills," Sam said. "We go in. You've been down there, haven't you, Caine? Is there a place where—" A spasm of pain rocked him so hard, he seemed to lose consciousness for a minute.

"Guys, I don't really . . .," Duck said.

“Don’t you want to be a hero?” Quinn asked.

“No,” Duck said honestly.

“Yeah, me neither,” Quinn admitted. “But, Edilio, he’s a hero. He’s the real thing. And, Sam . . . well, I don’t have to tell you what Sam has done for all of us.” Quinn took Duck’s arm and said, “We need you, Duck. Only you. Only you can do this.”

“Dude, I mean, I want to help, but . . .”

“You get the next fish I catch,” Quinn said.

“Not if I’m buried alive,” Duck argued.

“Fried. Fried up so tender and flavorful.”

“You can’t buy me with food,” Duck huffed. “I . . . I want a swimming pool, too.”

FORTY-FOUR

7 MINUTES

THE MINE SHAFT was collapsed.

Lana stood facing a wall of debris. And for a fleeting moment, she felt hope that this, at last, spelled the end of the monster that had enslaved her.

But from that wall, the battered, blunted end of the fuel rod protruded.

The billions of crystals that were all the body the gaiaphage had swarmed over the spilled uranium pellets.

Lana felt the gaiaphage's anticipation, its rush of bliss. The fear of destruction drained from the creature. And for a while, Lana's mind was almost her own as the gaiaphage reveled in its dark joy.

It was no blessing recovering her senses. Lana knew now beyond any doubt that it had been she who had pulled the trigger and shot Edilio. She who had failed to blow up the cave. She who had allowed this to happen.

Too weak.

A fool, easily manipulated into delivering herself into the service of the monster. Too weak to resist it.

And as it grew stronger, as its fear ebbed, it would reach into her mind again and use her power to build the body that would emerge from this lair. Burying the creature would not stop it. It would create the body that could tunnel its way out, the cunningly designed monster-within-monster nesting doll that could never be killed.

She was the key now. Lana knew that. The tunnel had been shut with a tremendous crash that would seal the gaiaphage in unless she gave it the key to escape.

Only her own death could stop it.

Her will was too weak. Her only hope was delay. The uranium, surely it would kill her. Surely it would destroy her if she did nothing to heal herself.

But would it happen quickly enough?

And would the gaiaphage know what was happening to her and force her to save herself? Did the creature understand that its food was her death?

Duck stood on the hillside. He was a hundred feet or so above the mine shaft. They had made a guess, hoping that this would position him above what Caine said was a wide subterranean chamber.

All guesswork, of course. If Duck didn't eventually fall into an open chamber, he would have to do it again. And again.

Quinn was all but carrying Sam, holding him up with his arms as Sam endured wave after wave of pain.

"The morphine is wearing off," Sam said. "Hurry."

Caine stood ready. Brianna had run off to fetch rope. But when she returned she had fallen to her knees and vomited violently, heaving up nothing.

"Have to do this now," Sam said. He was panting. Holding on by his fingernails.

"Do it, Duck," Quinn urged.

They were all waiting for him. Looking to him. So many lives on the line, and they

were looking to him. To Duck Zhang.

“Oh, man. It better be really good fish,” Duck said.

And then he was falling through the ground. Falling and falling, and waving his arms as he went, tunneling through rock as if it were no thicker than pudding.

Falling and flailing, falling and flailing. Knowing he would be able to float back up and out into the air, but not 100 percent sure. Mostly. Not totally sure. Maybe this time—

Duck slipped suddenly as he fell through the ceiling of the mine shaft. He stopped his fall only after sinking two feet into the mine shaft’s floor.

Duck breathed a sigh of relief. He was not in a wide, open chamber, just in a narrow mine shaft. A miracle he’d hit it.

He wondered if there were bats in here. Well, judging by the scared looks of all the others up above, there was something much worse down here. So maybe bats wouldn’t be a bad thing. Maybe bats would be a good sign.

“Okay!” he yelled up.

No answer.

“Okay! I’m down!” he shouted as loud as he could.

A rope uncoiled and dropped.

Caine was first. He landed gently, using his own power to cushion the drop.

“Dark down here,” Caine said. He yelled up the shaft. “Okay, brother: jump.”

Light shone blindingly bright down the shaft Duck had made. Like eerie sunlight coming through a chink in a shutter.

Caine raised his hands and Sam dropped slowly down the shaft.

Sam seemed to be holding a ball of brilliant light in his hands. Only not holding it, really, Duck realized when his eyes had adjusted. The light just glowed from Sam’s palms.

“I know this place,” Caine said. “We’re just a few dozen feet from the cavern.”

“Duck, we may need you,” Sam said.

“But I was just going to—”

Sam’s legs buckled, and Duck grabbed him just before he hit the ground.

“I’ll stay,” Duck heard himself say.

What? You’ll what? he demanded silently.

Come on, Duck, he told himself. You can’t just run away.

Sure, I can! Duck’s other voice protested.

But just the same, he supported Sam’s weight as they walked deeper into the cave.

Don’t you want to be a hero? Duck mocked himself.

I guess I kind of do, he answered.

“Keep the light on,” Caine said.

Sam could keep the light burning. That he could do. Could do that. Light.

His heart was a rusty, dying engine, hammering like it would fly apart. His body was scalded iron, hot, stiff, impossible to move.

The pain . . .

It was at him now, a roaring tiger that ripped him with every step, tore at his mind, shredded his self-control. He couldn’t live with it. Too terrible.

“Come on, Sam,” Duck said in his ear.

“Aahhhh!” Sam cried out.

“So much for sneaking up on it,” Caine said.

It knows we’re here, Sam thought. No sneaking. No tricking. It knew. Sam could feel it. Like cold fingers prodding his mind, poking, looking for an opening.

This is hell, Sam thought. This is hell.

Keep the light on, Sam told himself, whatever else, keep the light on.

There was a skittering sound as Caine’s feet kicked some loose pebbles that on closer examination were identical, short, cylinders of dark metal.

“The fuel pellets,” Caine said dully. “Well. I hope Lana does radiation poisoning. Otherwise we are all dead.”

“What?” Duck asked.

“That’s uranium scattered all around. The way it was explained to me, it’s blowing billions of tiny holes in our bodies.”

“What?”

“Come on, Goose,” Caine said. “You’re doing great.”

“Duck,” Duck corrected.

“Can you feel the Darkness, Goose?” Caine asked in an awed whisper.

“Yeah,” Duck said. His voice wavered. Like a little kid about to cry. “It feels bad.”

“Very bad,” Caine agreed. “It’s been in my head for a long time, Goose. Once it’s there, it never goes away.”

“What do you mean?” Duck asked.

“It’s touching your mind right now, isn’t it? Leaving its mark. Finding a way in. Once it gets in, you can never shut it out.”

“We have to get out of here,” Duck said.

“You can go, Goose,” Caine said. “I can drag Sam along.”

Sam heard it all from far away. A conversation between distant ghosts. Shadows in his mind. But he knew Duck could not leave.

“No,” Sam rasped. “We need Duck.”

“Do we?” Caine asked.

“The one weapon it doesn’t know we have,” Sam said.

“Weapon?” Duck echoed.

“It opens up just ahead,” Caine said. “The cavern.”

“What is it? What’s it look like?” Duck asked.

Caine didn’t answer.

Sam rode through a spasm of pain. It seemed to come in waves, each worse than the one before. Surfing the pain, he thought. But in the trough between waves, he sometimes had a few seconds of clarity.

He opened his eyes. He turned up the light.

As Caine had said, they were emerging into a space that was no longer a mine shaft but a vast cavern.

But no natural geological event had created this vast, silent hole beneath the ground. No stalactites hung from the arched roof. No stalagmites grew from the floor.

Instead, the stone walls seemed to have been melted and then solidified. There was still a faint smell of burning, though no smoke and no heat except what radiated from the fuel rod behind them in the shaft.

“Figured out where we are yet, Sam?” Caine asked.

Sam groaned.

“Yeah, kind of have other things on your mind right now, huh? You know about the meteor that hit the power plant all those years back, right, Sam? Sure. You’re a townie.”

Sam rode the next wave. He didn’t want to scream. Didn’t want to scream.

“Meteor plows right through the power plant, right into the ground. Like our boy Goose, here: so heavy, moving so fast, it’s like shooting an arrow into butter. Tears a massive hole. Stops here, what’s left of it.”

They had advanced fifty feet into the cathedral space of the cavern.

Sam nodded, not capable at that particular moment of speech. He tried to lift his hands, but their weight was too great.

Caine took his wrists and lifted up his hands, a motion that caused Sam to roar in agony.

But the light shone brighter.

And there, revealed, the thing being born. It was more lump than any definite shape. A seething hive of rushing, twisting, greenish crystals.

But as they watched, the surfaces facing their way took on a perfect, mirrored surface.

“Looks like he’s ready for you, Sam,” Caine said.

Then, a different voice. Eerie and awful.

“I am the gaiaphage,” Lana said.

The transformation had begun when the gaiaphage touched the first of the scattered uranium pellets. Lana felt the surge of power, like grabbing an electrical wire, like grabbing every electrical wire in the world.

She had cried out in the shared ecstasy of that moment.

Food!

The gaiaphage’s terrible hunger was gone. In its place a rush of power. Rage unleashed.

Now! Now it would become!

The billions of crystals that formed the gaiaphage’s shapeless, random form began to rush like ants. Rivulets became streams, streams became rushing rivers. What had been little more than scum on the surface of rocks formed into mounds and peaks. Here and there, sharp points. Here flat and there peaked, here pliable and there stiff.

Crystals folded in endless dimensions, layers within layers. Even at this wild speed it would take days to finish, but already the barest outlines were beginning to reveal themselves.

The gaiaphage that had been spread through a thousand feet of the subterranean cavern now condensed, came together, like stars drawn into a black hole.

Lana could feel it all, as though her own nerves were part of the gaiaphage. And maybe they were, she thought. Maybe there was no longer a line between them. Maybe she was part of it now.

It was all around her. In her ears and nose, in her mouth and hair. Swarming insects covering every square inch of her.

And yet, she had begun to feel a sickness inside her. A feeling that was her own and not the monster’s.

What fed the gaiaphage was blasting her apart, cell by cell.

She had to hide it. Couldn't let it see. She had to die to stop it, had to die of the radiation that churned her stomach.

Around her the crystals were hardening, forming a thick shield. And the surface of that shield began to shine, like steel. No, like a mirror.

A tremor of fear shook the gaiaphage.

Lana opened her eyes and saw the reason. Three dark shapes. Frail, afraid, but standing before the gaiaphage.

Too late, Caine. Your power will not shatter the gaiaphage.

Too late, Sam, she thought. Your burning light will not work.

The third . . . who was that? She felt the question in her own mind take on terrible urgency in the gaiaphage.

The gaiaphage held her like a fly in amber. It revealed her now to the gasps of the humans.

"I am the gaiaphage," Lana's mouth said.

...

Caine stared in horror. Lana's face floated, suspended within a seething mass of what might have been mirrored insects.

"Sam! More light!"

Sam had slipped. He was on his knees. Glowing hands down on the stone floor as he moaned.

Duck was staring, awestruck, at the glittering, shifting monstrosity with the face of a girl in torment.

Caine could not see the extent of the creature, but it felt huge, like it might go on forever.

He reached his hands over his shoulders. Reached back behind him. The bent fuel rod slid from the jumble of rock and debris.

Caine threw his hands forward with all his might. The fuel rod smashed into the monstrous glittering mass. It bounced off and clattered to the ground, spilling more pellets.

Nothing. No effect. Like hitting the gaiaphage with a Q-tip.

"Sam? If you've got anything left, now is the time," Caine cried.

"No," Sam whispered. "It's ready for me. Duck."

"What about him?"

"Duck . . .," Sam said, and fell, facedown. He did not move.

"You got something besides falling into the ground?" Caine shrilled at Duck. "You got some nuclear bomb in your pocket?"

Duck did not answer.

"Sam?" Caine cried, and now the gaiaphage was moving, shifting its weight, undulating toward Caine, with Lana's weeping, twisted face, her mouth speaking but Caine unable to hear from the sound of blood rushing in his ears, knowing it was over, knowing . . .

The gaiaphage poured liquid fire into Caine's brain, overwhelming every sense, crushing consciousness with pain.

You defy me?

Caine rocked back, barely kept his feet.

“Throw me!” Duck cried.

I am the gaiaphage!

“Throw me, throw me!” a voice kept shouting.

“What?” Caine cried.

“Hard as you can!”

The gaiaphage thought nothing of the soft, human body that flew toward him.

Up into the air the human flew. Toward the roof of the cavern.

Down he came.

The gaiaphage would never even feel the slight weight as it . . .

. . . hit with the force of a mountain dropped from the edge of space.

Duck hit the gaiaphage and drilled straight through its crystalline mass.

And straight through the cave floor beneath it.

Into the vortex, like grains of sand in an hourglass, fell the gaiaphage.

FORTY-FIVE

0 MINUTES

KIND OF LIKE the first time, Duck thought.

At the pool that day. Like that. Falling and the water rushing down with him.

Only this water was more like sand. A billion tiny crystals all sucked down the drain that Duck had made in the earth.

He could see nothing as he fell. The crystals filled his eyes and ears and mouth.

He couldn't breathe, and this panicked him and he fell even faster, trying to outrun the monster that fell with him.

No air.

Mind swirling, crazy, not even afraid now, just . . .

Memories flashed like a jerky video. That day when he fell off a pony at his fifth birthday party.

That time he ate the whole pie . . .

His mom. So pretty. Her face . . .

Dad . . .

The pool . . .

He stopped falling. Something had stopped him at last.

Too late, he thought.

Can't fall through to China, Duck thought.

Well, Duck thought, I guess I did want to be a hero.

And then Duck stopped thinking anything at all.

FORTY-SIX

CAINE STOOD IN darkness.

Sam's light was gone.

There was a soft, slurry sound. Like rushing water but without water's music.

Caine stood in darkness as the sound died slowly away.

And now, silence as well as darkness.

Diana. He would never save her now. He might survive, but for the first time in his life, Caine knew that his life, without Diana, would be unbearable.

She had teased him. Abused him. Lied to him. Manipulated him. Betrayed him. Laughed at him.

But she had stuck by him. Even when he had threatened her.

Could what they had really be described as love? He'd blurted it, that word. But were either of them capable of that particular emotion?

Maybe.

But no longer. Not now. Up above, up on the surface, she was dead or close to it. Her blood seeping into the ground.

"Diana," he whispered.

"Am I still alive?"

At first Caine thought it might be her voice. Impossible.

"Light," Caine said. "I need light."

There was no light. For what seemed like an eternity, no light. The voice did not speak again.

Caine sat in the dark, too beaten to move. His brother curled in a ball. Dead, or wishing he was. And Diana . . .

Quinn fought panic as he descended the irregular shaft Duck had cut. The rope felt thin in his hands. The walls of the vertical shaft scraped his back and sides as he descended. Rocks kept falling on his head.

Quinn knew he was not brave. But there was no one left. Something was wrong with Brianna. She was doubled up on the ground, clutching her stomach and crying.

Quinn didn't know what was happening down below. But he knew that if Sam and Caine didn't bring Lana back up out of there, there would be too many deaths for Quinn to even think about.

Had to do this.

Had to.

He reached the bottom of the shaft and felt his legs swing freely. He lost his grip and fell the final few feet.

He landed hard, but without breaking anything.

"Sam?" Quinn whispered, a sound that died within inches of his mouth.

He fumbled for the flashlight in his pocket. He snapped the light on. His eyes had adjusted to the dark. The light seemed blinding. He blinked. He aimed the beam ahead.

There, not a hundred feet away, a human figure in silhouette. Moving.

"Caine?"

Caine turned slowly. His face was stark and white. His eyes rimmed red.

Caine rose slowly, like an arthritic old man.

Quinn rushed to him and shone his light around, sweeping the area. He saw Sam facedown.

And there, standing with her arms at her side, stood Lana.

“Lana,” Quinn said.

“Am I alive?” Lana asked.

“You’re alive, Lana,” Quinn said. “You’re free of it.”

A dark shadow passed over Lana’s face. Her mouth twisted downward. She turned and began to walk away.

Quinn put his arm on her shoulder. “Don’t leave us, Healer. We need you.”

Lana stopped.

“I . . .,” she began.

“Lana,” Quinn said. “We need you.”

“I killed Edilio,” she said.

“Not yet you didn’t,” Quinn said.

Mary Terrafino woke to the taste and smell of fish.

Instantly she twisted her face away. The smell was disgusting.

She looked around wildly. To her amazement she was tied up. Tied to an easy chair in her day care office.

“What am I doing here?” she demanded, bewildered.

“You’re having dinner,” her little brother said.

“Stop it! I’m not hungry. Stop it!”

John held the spoon in front of her. His cherubic face was dark with anger. “You said you wouldn’t leave me.”

“What are you talking about?” Mary demanded.

“You said you wouldn’t do it. You wouldn’t leave me alone,” John said. “But you tried, didn’t you?”

“I don’t know what you’re babbling about.” She noticed Astrid then, leaning against a filing cabinet. Astrid looked like she’d been dragged through the middle of a dog fight. Little Pete was sitting cross-legged, rocking back and forth. He was chanting, “Good-bye, Nestor. Good-bye, Nestor.”

“Mary, you have an eating disorder,” Astrid said. “The secret is out. So cut the crap.”

“Eat,” John ordered, and shoved a spoonful of food in her mouth. None too gently.

“Swallow,” John ordered.

“Let me—”

“Shut up, Mary,” John snapped.

Diana first. Caine would allow no other choice.

Then Edilio, who was so close to death that Lana thought he must have had his hand on the gate of Heaven.

Dekka. Horribly hurt. But not dead.

Brianna, with her hair falling out in clumps.

Last, Sam.

Quinn had hauled him up on the rope, helped greatly by Caine.

Lana sat in the dirt as the sun came up.

Quinn brought her water. "Are you okay?" he asked her.

She could say the words he wanted to hear, but Lana knew she could not make him believe. "No," Lana said.

Quinn sat next to her. "Caine and Diana, they took off. Sam is sleeping. Dekka . . . I don't think she's over it yet."

"I can't cure a person of memories," Lana said dully.

"No," Quinn agreed. "I guess if you could, you'd cure yourself."

He put his arm around her shoulders, and she started crying then. It felt like she could never stop. But it didn't feel bad, either. And Quinn did not leave her. Far off there was the sound of a car's engine.

Quinn said, "Hey, Brianna zipped back to town. Brought Astrid and someone else."

Lana didn't care. Lana didn't think she would ever care about anything again.

But then, there was the sound of a car door opening and closing. And suddenly, Patrick was there, his cold, wet nose thrust insistently against her neck.

Lana put her arms around him, hugged him close, and cried into his fur.

FORTY-SEVEN

IT WAS LATE the next day before Edilio could bring himself to the job at hand. But then he fired up the backhoe and dug two holes in the corner of the plaza.

Mickey Finch. A bullet hole in his back.

Brittney, mangled so badly, no one could look at her. Some sort of slug seemed to have attached itself to her, an eighteen-inch-long thing that could not be pried away from her.

In the end, they buried it with her. She was dead, after all: she wouldn't care.

There was no hole for Duck Zhang. But they put up a cross for him. They had searched the cavern as best they could. But all they'd found was a hole that went down and down seemingly forever.

The hole was collapsing in on itself as Sam shone his light down. It was already filling with tons of rock and dirt.

"No one knew Duck all that well," Sam said at the service. "I don't think anyone would have guessed he'd be a hero. But he saved our lives. He did it willingly. He made the choice to give his life for us."

They put a few wildflowers on the graves.

After the service Edilio took a can of black spray paint and began to paint over the "HC" tags that had appeared on too many storefronts.

THREE DAYS LATER

“SO, HOW’S IT going to work, Albert?” Sam asked. He wasn’t as interested as he should be. Probably because he hadn’t slept much yet. Too much to do. Too much to figure out.

He was done. He’d told them all: He was done. Done being *the* Sam Temple. From now on he was just a kid. Like any other. No longer *the* anything.

But not just yet. Right now there was still too much to do. Kids to feed. A terrible rift to be somehow patched up.

Memories of suffering that would have to be dealt with, somehow, absorbed, accepted.

They were at the edge of the cabbage field. Sam, Astrid, Albert, Edilio, and Quinn.

Quinn was standing in the bed of a pickup truck wearing tall rubber boots. In the truck were a dozen of Duck’s famous blue bats. They kept being hauled in by Quinn and Albert’s fishermen. Perfectly good protein, but so noxious, so foul that even the starving couldn’t gag down the putrid meat.

“We disburse a given amount of gold to every kid,” Albert was explaining. He at least was excited. “Then, if they want, they trade it for paper currency, the McDonald’s game pieces. The gold is kept in a central deposit. They can come back and trade their paper currency for gold anytime they want. This is how they know the paper currency has lasting value.”

“Uh-huh,” Sam said for about the millionth time. He hid a yawn as well as he could.

In the three days since the horror in that cavern, Sam had been kept running. It was a game of whack-a-mole. One crisis after another.

They had found Zil. He had three broken ribs and was in terrible pain. No one felt very sorry for him. Astrid wanted him imprisoned. It might still happen. But Sam had too many other problems on his plate.

Fresh anti-freak graffiti continued to appear in Perdido Beach.

Mary was eating, but Astrid had warned him that that alone meant very little. Mary was a long way from being well.

The power plant was damaged, probably beyond repair. The lights were out everywhere now. Probably forever.

The FAYZ had gone dark.

But Jack was with them again, and maybe Jack could do penance by making things work again. He stood awkwardly near Brianna.

Dekka watched them and kept her silence.

“Let’s do this,” Sam said to Quinn. Then, to Astrid, “I’ll bet you five ’Bertos this doesn’t work.”

Howard had dismissed Albert’s list of names for the new currency and had dubbed them “Albertos.” ’Bertos. The name had stuck. It was Howard’s peculiar genius to invent names for things.

“I don’t need money,” Astrid said. “I need to cut your hair. I like seeing your face. Although I can’t imagine why.”

“Done.” Sam shook her hand, sealing the bet.

“Ready?” Quinn called out.

“Orc, you ready?” Sam asked.

Orc nodded his head.

“Do it,” Sam said.

Quinn lifted one of the blue bats and hurled it into the cabbage field. In a flash, the worms swarmed over it. In seconds it was just bones, like a turkey after a Thanksgiving feast.

“Okay, let’s test this,” Sam ordered.

Quinn tossed the second bat to Orc. Orc caught it and walked into the field. After a dozen steps, he tossed the blue bat ahead of him.

Again, the surge of worms. Again, the zekes reduced it to bones.

“Okay, Orc,” Sam said.

Orc bent down and yanked up a cabbage.

He tossed it back to land at Sam’s feet. A second and a third cabbage followed.

The zekes made no move toward Orc.

But they wouldn’t be sure until the zekes were offered something more easily digested than Orc’s stone feet.

“Breeze?” Sam said.

Brianna hefted a bat and zipped into the field. Sam waited, tense, knowing she was faster than the worms, but still . . .

Brianna tossed the bat. The zekes hit it.

And Brianna ripped a cabbage from the ground.

“You know,” Astrid said, “I seem to recall a certain condescending—one might even say contemptuous—response when I first suggested negotiating with the zekes.”

“Huh,” Sam said. “Who would ever be dumb enough to be condescending to you?”

“Oh, it was this bald guy I know.”

Sam sighed. “Okay. Okay. Grab your scissors and do your worst.”

“Actually,” Astrid said, “there’s something else you have to do first.”

“Always something,” Sam said gloomily.

Quinn joined them and apologized for stinking of fish.

“Brah, don’t apologize. You’re a very big part of keeping people from starving.”

The other reason the danger of mass starvation had receded for a while, at least, was Hunter. He had recovered most of his function, although his speech seemed permanently slurred, and one eye drooped above a down-twisted mouth.

Hunter had been charged with killing Harry. He had been sentenced to exile from Perdido Beach. He would live apart from them, alone, but living up to the name his parents had given him.

So far, Hunter had killed a second deer and a number of smaller animals. He dropped them at the loading dock of Ralph’s. He asked for nothing in return.

Dekka bent over and lifted one of the cabbages. “This would go great with some roasted pigeon.”

Hunter’s trial had been carried out by a jury of six kids, under rules set up by the Temporary Council: Sam, Astrid, Albert, Edilio, Dekka, Howard, and the youngest member, Brother John Terrafino.

“Well, back to work, huh?” Sam said.

“Get in the car,” Astrid said.

“What are—”

“Let me rephrase. By order of the Temporary Council: get in the car.”

She steadfastly refused to explain what was happening on the drive back to town. Edilio drove, and he was equally mum.

Edilio pulled up and parked in the town beach parking lot.

“Why are we going to the beach? I have to get back to town hall. I have, like, all this stuff—”

“Not now,” Edilio said firmly.

Sam stopped walking. “What’s up, Edilio?”

“I’m supposed to be the sheriff, right? That’s my new title?” Edilio said. “Okay, then, you are under arrest.”

“Under arrest? What are you talking about?”

“You are under arrest for trying to kill a kid named Sam Temple.”

“Not funny.”

But Edilio persisted. “Trying to kill a kid . . . just a *kid* . . . named Sam Temple. By stressing him out with the whole load of the world on his back.”

Sam didn’t find it amusing. Angry, he turned back toward town. But there was Astrid, close on his heels. And Brianna. Quinn, too.

“What are you all up to?” Sam demanded.

“We voted,” Astrid said. “It was unanimous. By order of the Perdido Beach Temporary Council, we sentence you, Sam Temple, to relax.”

“Okay. I’m relaxed. Now can I get back to work?”

Astrid took his arm and all but hauled him across the beach. “You know what’s interesting, Sam? I’ll tell you what’s interesting. A fairly small disturbance in deep water, creating a ripple, a surge, can become a pretty impressive wave as it nears shore.”

Sam noticed that someone had set up a tent on the beach. It looked forlorn.

Out to sea, a boat putted by, its motor chugging in low gear.

“Is that Dekka out on the boat?” Sam asked.

They reached the tent. Lying in the sand there were two surfboards. Quinn’s. And Sam’s.

“Your wet suit’s inside, brah,” Quinn said.

Sam resisted. But not for long. After all, the council had authority now. And if they said he had to go surfing, well . . .

Ten minutes later Sam was facedown on his board. His feet were already tingling from the cold water. The sun was already baking his back through the wet suit. The taste of salt was in his mouth.

Out to sea, the boat had anchored. Dekka stood in the bow and raised her hands high. The water rose, rose, a big bulge of water temporarily released from the force of gravity.

Dekka let it drop, and the ripple fanned out.

“You even remember how to get up on that thing?” Quinn teased.

The ripple had become a wave. A fast-moving wave. It would break big. Not north shore Oahu big, maybe, but big enough for a ride.

Sam smiled at last. “You know, brah? I think it may just come back to me.”

In a hole. Lightless. Soundless.

Not even the sound of a beating heart.

Nothing moved but the pale slug that shared this terrible place with her.

Pray for me, Tanner, Brittney begged.

Pray for me . . .

PRAISE FOR THE GONE SERIES

Gone

“This intense, marvelously plotted, paced, and characterized story will immediately garner comparisons to *Lord of the Flies*, or even the long-playing world shifts of Stephen King, with just a dash of *X-Men* for good measure. A potent mix of action and thoughtfulness—centered around good and evil, courage and cowardice—renders this a tour de force that will leave readers dazed, disturbed, and utterly breathless.”

—ALA Booklist (starred review)

“If Stephen King had written *Lord of the Flies*, it might have been a little like this novel. Complex issues, from peer pressure to the science of nuclear power, are addressed with the teen audience in mind.”

—VOYA (starred review)

Hunger

“Like *Gone*, this novel is not for the faint of heart or weak of stomach. Nonstop action.”

—School Library Journal

“Readers will be unable to avoid involuntarily gasping, shuddering, or flinching while reading this suspense-filled story. The tension starts in the first chapter and does not let up until the end. The story is progressing with smart plot twists, both in actions and emotions.”

—VOYA (starred review)

CREDITS

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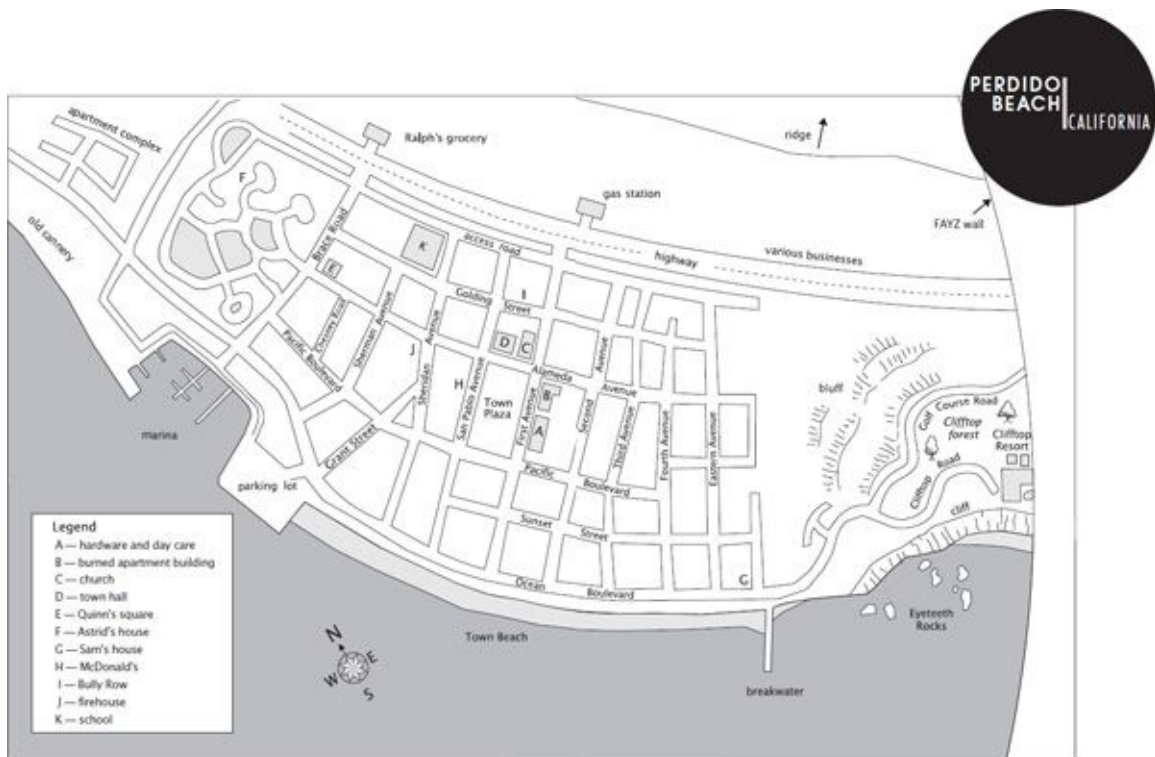


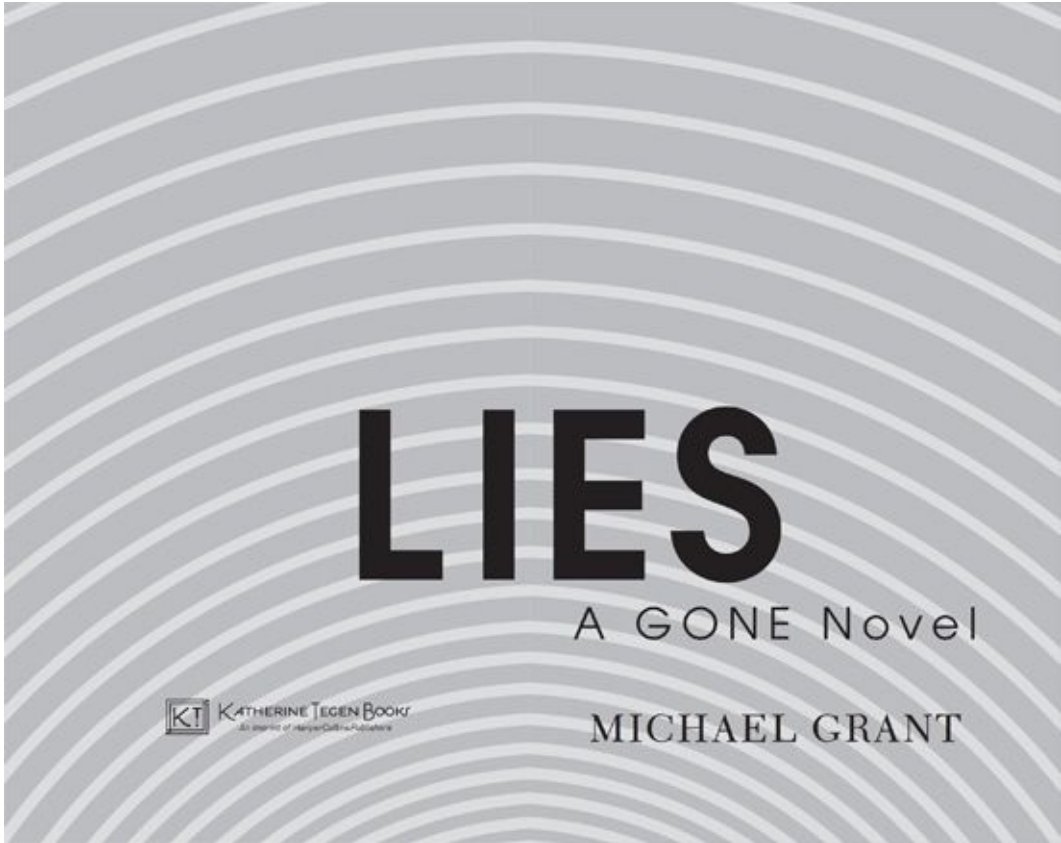
A **GONE** NOVEL

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MICHAEL GRANT

MAPS





DEDICATION

For Katherine, Jake, and Julia

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Forty-Four: Three Days Later

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ONE

66 HOURS, 52 MINUTES

OBSCENE GRAFFITI.

Smashed windows.

Human Crew tags, their logo, along with warnings to freaks to get out.

In the distance, up the street, too far away for Sam to want to chase after, a couple of kids, maybe ten years old, maybe not even that. Barely visible in the false moonlight. Just outlines. The kids passing a bottle back and forth, taking swigs, staggering.

Grass growing everywhere. Weeds forcing their way up through cracks in the street. Trash: chip bags, six-pack rings, supermarket plastic bags, random sheets of paper, articles of clothing, single shoes, hamburger wrappers, broken toys, broken bottles, and crumpled cans—anything that wasn't actually edible—formed random, colorful collections. They were poignant reminders of better days.

Darkness so deep, you'd have had to walk off into the wilderness in the old days to experience anything like it.

Not a streetlight or a porch light. Electricity out. Maybe forever.

No one wasting batteries, not anymore. Those, too, were in very short supply.

And not many trying to burn candles or light trash fires. Not after the fire that burned down three homes and burned one kid so bad, it took Lana, the Healer, half a day to save him.

No water pressure. Nothing coming out of fire hydrants. Nothing to do about fire but watch it burn and get out of its way.

Perdido Beach, California.

At least it used to be California.

Now it was Perdido Beach, the *FAYZ*. Wherever, whatever, and whyever that was.

Sam had the power to make light. He could fire it in killing beams from his hands. Or he could form balls of persistent light that would hang in the air like a lantern. Like lightning in a bottle.

But not too many people wanted Sam's lights, what kids called Sammy Suns. Zil Sperry, leader of the Human Crew, had forbidden any of his people to take the lights. Most of the normals complied. And some freaks didn't want a bright advertisement of who and what they were.

The fear had spread. A disease. It leaped from person to person.

People sat in the dark, afraid. Always afraid.

Sam was in the east end, the dangerous part of town, the part Zil had declared off-limits to freaks. He had to show the flag, so to speak, demonstrate that he was still in charge. Show that he wouldn't be intimidated by Zil's campaign of fear.

Kids needed that. They needed to see that someone would still protect them. That someone was *him*.

He had resisted that role, but it had come to him, anyway. And he was determined to play it out. Whenever he let up, whenever he lost focus, tried to have a different life, something awful happened.

So he walked the streets at two in the morning, ready. Just in case.

Sam walked near the shore. There was no surf, of course. Not anymore. No weather. No vast swells crossing the Pacific to crash in magnificent showers of spray against Perdido's beaches.

The surf was just a soft whisper now. *Shhh. Shhh. Shhh.* Better than nothing. But not much better.

He was heading toward Clifftop, the hotel, Lana's current home. Zil had left her alone. Freak or not, no one messed with the Healer.

Clifftop was right up against the FAYZ wall, the end of Sam's area of responsibility, the last part of his walk-through.

Someone was walking down toward him. He tensed, fearing the worst. There was no question that Zil would like to see him dead. And out there—somewhere—Caine, his half brother. Caine had been helpful in destroying the gaiaphage and the psychopath Drake Merwin. But Sam didn't kid himself into believing that Caine had changed. If Caine was still alive, they would meet again.

And God knew what other horrors were out in that fading night—human or not. Out in the dark mountains, the black caves, the desert, the forest to the north. The too-calm ocean.

The FAYZ never let up.

But this just looked like a girl.

"It's just me, Sinder," a voice said, and Sam relaxed.

"T'sup, Sinder? Kind of late, huh?"

She was a sweet Goth girl who managed mostly to stay out of the various wars and factions raging within the FAYZ.

"I'm glad I ran into you," Sinder said. She had a steel pipe in one hand, the grip cushioned with duct tape. No one walked around without a weapon, especially at night.

"You okay? You eating?"

That had become the standard greeting. Not, "How are you?" But, "Are you eating?"

"Yeah, we're getting by," Sinder said. Her ghostly pale skin made her seem very young and vulnerable. Of course the pipe, the black fingernails, and the kitchen knife stuck in her belt made her seem not entirely gentle.

"Listen, Sam. I'm not someone who, like, you know, wants to tell on people, or whatever," Sinder said. Uncomfortable.

"I know that," he said. He waited.

"It's Orsay," Sinder said, and glanced over her shoulder, guilty. "You know, I talk to her sometimes. She's kind of cool, mostly. Kind of interesting."

"Yep."

"Mostly."

"Yeah."

"But, you know, weird maybe, too." Sinder made a wry grin. "Like I'm one to talk."

Sam waited. He heard the sound of a glass bottle shattering and high-pitched giggling from the distance behind him. The kids throwing their emptied bottle of booze. A boy named K. B. had been found dead with a bottle of vodka in his hand.

“Anyway, Orsay, she’s at the wall.”

“The wall?”

“On the beach, down by the wall. She’s like, she thinks . . . Look, talk to her, okay? Just don’t tell her I told you. Okay?”

“Is she down there now? It’s, like, two A.M.”

“That’s when they do it. They don’t want Zil or . . . or you, I guess, giving them a hard time. You know where the wall runs down from Clifftop to the beach? Those rocks out there? That’s where she is. Not alone. Other kids are there, too.”

Sam felt an unwelcome tingle running up his spine. He’d developed a pretty good instinct for trouble over the last few months. This felt like trouble.

“Okay, I’ll check it out.”

“Yah. Cool.”

“‘Night, Sinder. Take care.”

He left her and continued walking, wondering what new craziness or danger lay ahead. He climbed the road up past Clifftop. Glanced up at Lana’s balcony.

Patrick, Lana’s Labrador, must have heard him because he gave a short, sharp warning bark.

“Just me, Patrick,” Sam said.

There were very few dogs or cats still alive in the FAYZ. The only reason Patrick had not ended up as dog stew was because he belonged to the Healer.

From the top of the cliff Sam looked down and thought he could make out several people on the rocks, right down in the surf that wasn’t quite surf. They were big rocks, dangerous back in the days when Sam would take his board out there with Quinn and wait for a big one.

Sam didn’t need light to scale down the cliff. He could have done it blind. In the old days he’d done it hauling all his gear.

As he reached the sand, he heard soft voices. One speaking. One crying.

The FAYZ wall, the impenetrable, impermeable, eye-baffling barrier that defined the boundaries of the FAYZ, glowed almost imperceptibly. Not even a glow, really, a suggestion of translucence. Gray and blank.

A small bonfire burned on the beach, casting a faint orange light over a small circle of sand and rock and water.

No one noticed Sam as he approached. So he had time to identify most of the half-dozen kids out there. Francis, Cigar, D-Con, a few others, and Orsay herself.

“I have seen something . . .,” Orsay began.

“Tell me about my mom,” someone cried out.

Orsay held up her hand, a calming gesture. “Please. I will do my best to reach your loved ones.”

“She’s not a cell phone,” the dark girl beside Orsay snapped. “It is very painful for the Prophetess to make contact with the barrier. Give her some peace. And listen to her words.”

Sam squinted, not quite able to recognize the dark-haired girl in the flickering firelight. Some friend of Orsay’s? Sam thought he knew every kid in the FAYZ.

“Begin again, Prophetess,” the dark-haired girl said.

“Thank you, Nerezza,” Orsay said.

Sam shook his head in amazement. Not only had he not known that Orsay was

doing this, he hadn't known she'd acquired her own personal manager. Not someone he recognized, the girl called Nerezza.

"I have seen something . . .," Orsay began again, and faltered as though expecting to be interrupted. "A vision."

That caused a murmur. Or maybe it was just the sighing sound of the water on the sand.

"In my vision I saw all of the children of the FAYZ, older kids, younger, too. I saw them standing atop the cliff."

Every head swiveled to look up at the cliff. Sam ducked, then felt foolish: the darkness concealed him.

"The kids of the FAYZ, *prisoners* of the FAYZ, gazed out into a setting sun. Such a beautiful sunset. Redder and more vivid than anything you've ever seen." She seemed to be mesmerized by that vision. "Such a red sunset."

All attention was again focused on Orsay. Not a sound from the small crowd.

"A red sunset. The children all gazed into that red sun. But behind them, a devil. A demon." Orsay winced as if she couldn't look at this creature. "Then, the children realized that in that red sun were all their loved ones, arms outstretched. Mothers and fathers. And all united, all filled with longing and love. Waiting so anxiously to welcome their children home."

"Thank you, Prophetess," Nerezza said.

"They wait . . .," Orsay said. She raised one hand, waved it toward the barrier, fluttered. "Just beyond the wall. Just past the sunset."

She sat down hard, a puppet whose strings had been cut. For a while she sat there, crumpled, hands open, palms up on her lap, head bowed.

But then, with a shaky smile she roused herself.

"I'm ready," Orsay said.

She laid her palm against the FAYZ wall. Sam flinched. He knew from personal experience how painful that could be. It was like grabbing a bare electrical wire. It didn't do any damage, but it sure felt like it did.

Orsay's narrow face was scrunched up in pain. But when she spoke her voice was clear, untroubled. Like she was reading a poem.

"She dreams of you, Bradley," Orsay said.

Bradley was Cigar's real name.

"She dreams of you . . . you're at Knott's Berry Farm. You're afraid to go on the ride. . . . She remembers how you tried to be brave. . . . Your mother misses you. . . ."

Cigar sniffled. He carried a weapon of his own devising, a toy plastic light saber with double-edged razor blades stuck into the end. His hair was tied back in a ponytail and held with a rubber band.

"She . . . she knows you are here. . . . She knows . . . she wants you to come to her. . . ."

"I can't," Cigar moaned, and Orsay's helper, whoever she was, put a comforting arm around his shoulders.

". . . when the time comes . . .," Orsay said.

"When?" Cigar sobbed.

"She dreams that you will be with her soon. . . . She dreams . . . just three days, she knows it, she is sure of it. . . ." Orsay's voice had taken on an almost ecstatic tone.

Giddy. "She's seen others do it."

"What?" Francis demanded.

". . . the others who have reappeared," Orsay said, dreamy now herself, as if she was falling asleep. "She saw them on TV. The twins, the two girls Anna and Emma . . . she saw them. . . . They give interviews and tell . . ."

Orsay yanked her hand back from the FAYZ wall as if she had just noticed the pain.

Sam had still not been seen. He hesitated. He should find out what this was about. But he felt strange, like he was intruding on someone else's sacred moment. Like he would be barging into a church service.

He sank back toward the cliff's deepest shadows, careful not to be heard over the soft *shush . . . shush . . . shush* of the water.

"That's all for tonight," Orsay said, and hung her head.

"But I want to know about my dad," D-Con urged. "You said you could do me tonight. It's my turn!"

"She's tired," Orsay's helper said firmly. "Don't you know how hard this is for her?"

"My dad is probably out there trying to talk to me," D-Con wailed, pointing at a specific place on the FAYZ barrier, as if he could picture his father right there, trying to peer through frosted glass. "He's probably right outside the wall. He's probably . . ." He choked up, unable to continue, and now Nerezza gathered him to her as she had Cigar, comforting him.

"They're all waiting," Orsay said. "All of them out there. Just beyond the wall. So many . . . so many . . ."

"The Prophetess will try again tomorrow," the helper said. She raised D-Con to his feet. "Go now, all of you. Go. Go!"

The group rose reluctantly, and Sam realized that they would soon be heading straight for him. The bonfire collapsed, sending up a shower of sparks.

He stepped back into a crevice. There wasn't a square inch of this beach and this cliff that he didn't know. He waited and watched as Francis, Cigar, D-Con, and the others climbed up the trail and away into the night.

An obviously exhausted Orsay climbed down from the rock. As they passed, arm in arm, the helper bearing Orsay's weight, Orsay stopped. She looked straight at Sam, though he knew he could not be visible.

"I dreamed her, Sam," Orsay said. "I dreamed her."

Sam's mouth was dry. He swallowed hard. He didn't want to ask. But he couldn't stop himself.

"My mom?"

"She dreams of you . . . and she says . . . she says . . ." Orsay sagged, almost fell to her knees, and her helper caught her.

"She says . . . let them go, Sam. Let them go when their time comes."

"What?"

"Sam, there comes a time when the world no longer needs heroes. And then the true hero knows to walk away."

TWO

66 HOURS, 47 MINUTES

*Hushaby, don't you cry,
go to sleep little baby.
When you wake, you shall have
All the pretty little ponies . . .*

IT WAS PROBABLY always a beautiful lullaby, Derek thought. Probably even when normal people sang it, it was beautiful. Maybe even brought tears to people's eyes.

But Derek's sister, Jill, was not a normal person.

Beautiful songs could sometimes take a person out of themselves and carry them away to a place of magic. But when Jill sang, it was not about the song, really. She could sing the phone book. She could sing a shopping list. Whatever she sang, whatever the words or the tune, it was so beautiful, so achingly lovely, that no one could listen and be untouched.

He wanted to go to sleep.

He wanted to have all the pretty little ponies.

While she sang, that was all he wanted. All he had ever wanted.

Derek had made sure the windows were shut. Because when Jill sang, every person within hearing came to listen. They couldn't help it.

At first neither of them had understood what was happening. Jill was just nine years old, not a trained singer or anything. But one day, about a week ago, she'd started singing. Something stupid, Derek recalled. The theme song to *The Fairly OddParents*.

Derek had stopped dead in his tracks. He'd been unable to move. Unable to stop listening. Grinning at the rapid-fire list of Timmy's wishes, wanting each of those things himself. Wanting his own fairy godparents. And when at last Jill had fallen silent, it was like he was waking up from the most perfect dream to find himself in a gray and awful reality.

It took only a day or so before Derek figured out that this was no ordinary talent. He'd had to face the fact that his little sister was a freak.

It was a terrifying discovery. Derek was a normal. The freaks—people like Dekka, Brianna, Orc, and especially Sam Temple—scared him. Their powers meant they could do whatever they wanted. No one could stop them.

Mostly the freaks acted okay. Mostly they used their powers to do things that needed doing. But Derek had seen Sam Temple in the middle of a fight. Sam against that other mega-freak, Caine Soren. They had destroyed a big part of the town plaza trying to kill each other. Derek had curled up in a ball and hidden as best he could while that battle raged.

Everyone knew the freaks thought they were special. Everyone knew they got the best food. You never saw a freak reduced to eating rat meat. You never saw a freak eating bugs. A few weeks earlier, when the hunger was at its worst, Derek and Jill had

done that. They'd caught and eaten some grasshoppers.

Freaks? They never had to sink that low. Everyone knew that. At least that's what Zil said.

And why would Zil lie?

And now Derek's own little sister was one of *them*. A mutant. A freak.

But when she sang . . . when she sang, Derek was no longer in the dark and desperate FAYZ. When Jill sang, the sun was bright and the grass was green and a cool breeze blew. When Jill sang, their mother and father were there, along with everyone else who had disappeared.

When Jill sang, the nightmare reality of life in the FAYZ faded away to be replaced by the song, the song, the song.

Derek was in that place now, soaring on magical wings toward Heaven.

When I die, hallelujah by and by . . .

A song about death, Derek knew. But so beautiful when Jill sang it. It pierced his heart.

Oh how glad and happy when we meet . . .

Oh how happy, even though they sat in the dark in a house full of sad memories.

The beam of light was startling.

Jill stopped singing. It was devastating, that silence.

The beam of light shone through the gauzy curtains. It played around the room. Found Derek's face. Then swiveled until it had lit up Jill's freckled face and turned her blue eyes glassy.

The front door of the house flew open with a crash. The strike plate shattered.

The intruders spoke no words as they rushed in. Five boys carrying baseball bats and tire irons. They wore an assortment of Halloween masks and stocking masks.

But Derek knew who they were.

"No! No!" he cried.

All five boys wore bulky shooter's earmuffs. They couldn't hear him. But more importantly, they couldn't hear Jill.

One of the boys stayed in the doorway. He was in charge. A runty kid named Hank. The stocking pulled down over his face smashed his features into Play-Doh, but it could only be Hank.

One of the boys, fat but fast-moving and wearing an Easter Bunny mask, stepped to Derek and hit him in the stomach with his aluminum baseball bat.

Derek dropped to his knees.

Another boy grabbed Jill. He put his hand over her mouth. Someone produced a roll of duct tape.

Jill screamed. Derek tried to stand, but the blow to his stomach had winded him. He tried to stand up, but the fat boy pushed him back down.

"Don't be stupid, Derek. We're not after you."

The duct tape went around and around Jill's mouth. They worked by flashlight. Derek could see Jill's eyes, wild with terror. Pleading silently with her big brother to save her.

When her mouth was sealed, the thugs pulled off their shooter's earmuffs.

Hank stepped forward. "Derek, Derek, Derek," Hank said, shaking his head slowly, regretfully. "You know better than this."

“Leave her alone,” Derek managed to gasp, clutching his stomach, fighting the urge to vomit.

“She’s a freak,” Hank said.

“She’s my little sister. This is our home.”

“She’s a freak,” Hank said. “And this house is east of First Avenue. This is a no-freak zone.”

“Man, come on,” Derek pleaded. “She’s not hurting anyone.”

“It’s not about that,” a boy named Turk said. He had a weak leg, a limp that made it impossible not to recognize him. “Freaks with freaks, normals with normals. That’s the way it has to be.”

“All she does is—”

Hank’s slap stung. “Shut up. Traitor. A normal who stands up for a freak gets treated like a freak. Is that what you want?”

“Besides,” the fat boy said with a giggle, “we’re taking it easy on her. We were going to fix her so she could never sing again. Or talk. If you know what I mean.”

He pulled a knife from a sheath in the small of his back. “Do you, Derek? Do you understand?”

Derek’s resistance died.

“The Leader showed mercy,” Turk said. “But the Leader isn’t weak. So this freak either goes west, over the border right now. Or . . .” He let the threat hang there.

Jill’s tears flowed freely. She could barely breathe because her nose was running. Derek could see that by the way she sucked tape into her mouth, trying for air. She would suffocate if they didn’t let her go soon.

“Let me at least get her doll,” Derek said.

“It’s Panda.”

Caine rose through layers of dream and nightmare, like pushing his way through thick curtains that draped his arms and legs and made his every move tiring.

He blinked. Still dark. Night.

The voice had no obvious source, but he recognized it, anyway. Even if there had been light he might not have seen the boy with the power to fade away and almost disappear. “Bug. Why are you bothering me?”

“Panda. I think he’s dead.”

“Have you checked his breathing? Listened to his heart?” Then another thought occurred to him. “Why are you waking me up to tell me someone’s dead?”

Bug didn’t answer. Caine waited, but Bug still couldn’t say it out loud.

“Do what you gotta do,” Caine said.

“We can’t get at him. He didn’t just die. He got in the car, right? The green one?”

Caine shook his head, trying to wake up all the way, trying to make the trip back to full consciousness. But the layers of dream and nightmare, and memory, too, dragged at him, confused his brain.

“There’s no gas in that car,” Caine said.

“He pushed it. Till it got rolling,” Bug said. “Then he jumped in. It rolled on down the road. Until he got to the bend.”

“There’s a railing there,” Caine said.

“He went through it. Crash. Bumpety-bump all the way down. It’s a long way

down. Me and Penny just climbed down, so I know it's a long way down."

Caine wanted this to stop. He didn't want to have to hear the next part. Panda had been okay. Not a horrible kid. Not like some of Caine's few remaining followers.

Maybe that explained why he would drive a car off a cliff.

"Anyway, he's totally dead," Bug said. "Me and Penny got him out. But we can't get him up the cliff."

Caine got to his feet. Legs shaky, stomach like a black hole, mind filled with darkness. "Show me," he said.

They walked out into the night. Feet crunched on gravel now interrupted by tall weeds. Poor old Coates Academy, Caine thought. It had always been so meticulously maintained back in the old days. The headmaster would definitely not have approved of the big blast hole in the front of the building, or the garbage strewn here and there in the overgrown grass.

It wasn't a long walk. Caine did not speak. He used Bug sometimes; Bug was useful. But the little creep was not exactly a friend.

In the pearly starlight it was easy to see where the railing had been ripped apart. It was like a steel ribbon, cut then left half curled, dangling over the side.

Caine peered through the darkness. He could see the car. It was upside down. One door was open.

It took a few minutes for him to locate the body.

Caine sighed and raised his hands. It was near the limits of his range, so Panda didn't come flying up off the ground. He sort of scuffed and scooted along at first. Like an invisible predator was hauling him away to its lair.

But then Caine got a better "grip" and Panda rose off the ground. He was on his back, staring up at the unreal stars, eyes still open.

Caine levitated the boy up from the crash, up and up until he brought him to as gentle a stop as he could. Panda lay now on the road.

Without a word, Caine started walking back to Coates.

"Aren't you going to carry him back?" Bug whined.

"Get a wheelbarrow," Caine said. "Carry your own meat."

THREE

63 HOURS, 31 MINUTES

THE WHIP CAME down.

It was made of flesh, but in his nightmare it was a snake, a writhing python that sliced the flesh from his arms and back and chest.

The pain was too terrible to endure. But he had endured it.

He had begged for death. Sam Temple had begged to die. He had begged the psychopath to kill him, to end it, to give him the only relief possible.

But he had not died. He had endured.

Pain. Too small a word. Pain and awful humiliation.

And the whip kept coming down, again and again, and Drake Merwin laughed.

Sam woke up in a bed of tangled, sweat-soaked sheets.

The nightmare did not leave him. Even with Drake dead and buried under a mountain of rock, he had Sam under the control of his whip hand.

“Are you okay?”

Astrid. Almost invisible in the darkness. Only the faintest starlight filtered through the window and framed her as she stood there in the doorway.

He knew what she looked like. Beautiful. Compassionate, intelligent blue eyes. Blond hair all wispy and wild since she’d just gotten up from her own bed.

He could picture her all too easily. A picture more detailed than real life. He often pictured her as he lay alone in his bed. Far too often, and for too long. Too many nights.

“I’m fine,” Sam lied.

“You were having a nightmare.” It wasn’t a question.

She came in. He could hear the rustle of her nightgown. He felt her warmth as she sat at the edge of his bed. “The same one?” she asked.

“Yeah. It’s getting kind of boring now,” he joked. “I know how it ends.”

“It ends with you alive and well,” Astrid said.

Sam said nothing. That had been the outcome: He had survived. Yes, he was alive. But well?

“Go back to sleep, Astrid,” he said.

She reached for him, fumbled just a little, unable to find his face. But then her fingers touched his cheek. He turned away. He didn’t want her finding the wetness there. But she wouldn’t let him push her hand away.

“Don’t,” he whispered. “You just make it harder.”

“Is that a joke?”

He laughed. The tension broke. “Well, not an intentional one.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to, Sam.” She bent over and kissed his mouth.

He pushed her away. “You’re trying to distract me. Make me think about something else.”

“Is it working?”

“Yes, I’d say it’s working very well, Astrid.”

“Time for me to go.” She stood up and he heard her moving away.

He rolled out of bed. His feet hit the cold floor. "I need to do a walk-through."

She stopped in the doorway. "Sam, I heard you come in two hours ago. You've had almost no sleep. And it will be dawn in a couple of hours. The town will survive that long without you. Edilio's kids are on duty."

Sam pulled on a pair of jeans and zipped them up. He considered telling her about Orsay, about this latest craziness. But there would be time for that later. No rush.

"There are things out there that Edilio's guys can't handle," Sam said.

"Zil?" Astrid said. The warmth was rapidly draining out of her voice. "Sam, I despise Zil as much as you do. But you can't take him on yet. We need a system. Zil is a criminal, basically, and we need a system."

"He's a punk creep, and until you come up with your great system, someone needs to keep an eye on him," Sam snapped. Before Astrid could react angrily to his tone, he said, "Sorry. I didn't mean to take it out on you."

Astrid came back into the room. He hoped it was because she was just too attracted to him to leave, but that wasn't it. He could barely see her but could hear and feel that she was very close.

"Sam. Listen. It's not all on your shoulders anymore."

"You know, I seem to remember a time when you were all in favor of me taking on the responsibility," Sam said. He pulled a T-shirt over his head. It was stiff with salt and smelled like low tide. That's what happened when you washed clothes in salt water.

"That's right," Astrid said. "You're a hero. You are without a doubt the biggest hero we have. But, Sam, we're going to need more in the long run. We need laws and we need people to enforce laws. We don't need . . ." She stopped herself just in time.

Sam made a wry face. "A boss? Well, it's just kind of hard to adjust that quickly. One day I'm just me, minding my business. Then the FAYZ comes and suddenly everyone is telling me to step up. And now you all want me to back off."

Orsay's words came back to him, up from the fuzzy, sleepy recesses of his memory. *The true hero knows when to walk away.* It could have just as easily been Astrid saying that.

"I want you to go back to bed is all," Astrid said.

"I know how you can get me to go back to bed," he teased.

Astrid pushed him playfully, palm on his chest. "Nice try."

"Truth is, I can't go back to sleep now, anyway," Sam said. "I might as well take another walk."

"Well, try not to kill anyone," Astrid said.

It was meant as a joke, but it bothered Sam. That's what she thought of him? No, no, it was just a joke.

"Love you," he said as he headed for the steps.

"Me too," she said.

Dekka never remembered dreams. She was sure she had them because sometimes she woke up with a shadow on her mind. But she never really recalled details. The dreams or nightmares must have come—they said everyone dreamed, even dogs—but all Dekka retained was a sense of foreboding.

Her dreams—and her nightmares—were all in the real world.

Dekka's parents had sent her away. They'd sent her to Coates Academy, a boarding school for troublesome kids. In Dekka's case the "trouble" was not the few incidents of misbehavior she'd been involved in. Nor was it the occasional fight—Dekka had a habit of defending girls who had no other defender, and sometimes that resulted in a confrontation. Nine times out of ten, the fights went nowhere. Dekka was big and strong and fearless, so bullies usually found an excuse to walk away once they realized Dekka wouldn't. But on half a dozen occasions blows had been traded.

Dekka won some and lost some.

But the fights weren't the problem for her parents. Dekka's parents had taught her to stand up for herself.

The problem had been a kiss. A teacher had seen her kissing a girl and had called her parents. It wasn't even at school. It was in a parking lot outside a Claim Jumper Restaurant.

Dekka remembered every detail of that kiss. It was her first. It had scared her like nothing before ever had. And later, when she'd caught her breath, it had excited her like nothing before ever had.

It had upset her parents. To put it mildly. Especially when Dekka used the "L" word openly for the first time. Her father was not going to have a lesbian daughter. He'd put it quite a bit more crudely than that. He had slapped her face, hard, twice. Her mother had stood there dithering and ineffectual, saying nothing.

So it was off to Coates to be with fellow students who ranged from decent kids whose parents just wanted to be rid of them, all the way to the brilliant, manipulative bully, Caine, and his creep of a henchman, Drake.

Her parents imagined she would be under constant discipline. After all, Coates had a reputation for fixing damaged kids. And a part of Dekka wanted to be "fixed" because that would make life so much easier. But she had never chosen to be what she was, any more than she had chosen to be black. There was no "fixing" her.

But at Coates, Dekka had met Brianna. And all thought of changing herself, of becoming "normal," evaporated.

She had fallen in love with Brianna at first sight. Even back then, long before Brianna became "the Breeze," she had a swagger and a style that Dekka found irresistible. A feeling she had never shared with Brianna. Probably never would.

Where Dekka was gloomy and internal, Brianna was loud, brash, and reckless. Dekka had looked for some evidence that Brianna might be gay, too. But when she was honest, Dekka had to admit that this didn't seem to be the case.

But love wasn't rational. Love didn't have to make sense. Neither did hope. So Dekka held on to her love and to her hope.

Did she dream about Brianna? She didn't know. Probably didn't want to know.

She rolled out of bed and stood up. It was pitch-black. She found her way to the window and pushed back the blinds. Dawn was still an hour off, at least. She had no clock. What was the point?

She looked toward the beach. She could just make out the sand and the faint phosphorescence of the water's edge.

Dekka found the book she was reading, *The Unknown Shore*. It was one of a series of seafaring books she'd found in the house. It was an unusual choice, but she found it strangely reassuring to inhabit a very different world for a while each day.

She carried it downstairs to the one light in the house. That light was a small ball that floated in midair in her “family room.” A Sammy Sun, kids called them. Sam had made it for her, using the weird power he had. It burned night and day. It was not hot to the touch, had no wire or other source of energy. It simply burned like a weightless lightbulb. Magic. But magic was old news in the FAYZ. Dekka had her own.

Dekka rummaged in her cupboard and found a cold, boiled artichoke. There were a lot of artichokes to be had in the FAYZ. Not exactly bacon and eggs and hash browns, but better than the alternative, which was starving. The food supply in the FAYZ—the mordantly named Fallout Alley Youth Zone—was tenuous, generally unpleasant, and, occasionally, literally sickening, but Dekka had endured protracted hunger in earlier months, so a breakfast artichoke was fine with her.

In any case, she’d lost some weight. She supposed that was a good thing.

She felt more than heard a rush of air. The door slammed, a sound that arrived at the same time as Brianna. Brianna came to a vibrating stop in the middle of the room.

“Jack’s hacking up a lung! I need cough medicine!”

“Hi, Brianna,” Dekka said. “It’s kind of the middle of the night.”

“Whatever. Nice pj’s, by the way. You pick those up at Gap for Truck Drivers?”

“They’re comfortable,” Dekka said mildly.

“Yeah. For you and your twelve closest friends. You’ve got curves—unlike me—you should show proud, that’s all I’m saying.”

“Jack’s sick?” Dekka reminded her, hiding a smile.

“Oh, yeah. Coughing. All achy and grumpy.”

Dekka suppressed her jealousy that Brianna was caring for a sick boy. And Computer Jack, at that. Computer Jack was a tech genius who, as far as Dekka could tell, had absolutely zero moral center. Wave a keyboard under his nose and he’d do whatever you wanted.

“Sounds like the flu,” Dekka opined.

“Well, duh,” Brianna said. “I didn’t say he had anthrax or black plague or whatever. But you don’t get it: Jack coughs, he doubles up, right? Maybe stomps his foot or smacks the bed, right?”

“Ah.” Jack, much to his own dismay, had developed a mutant power. He was as strong as ten grown men.

“He broke my bed!”

“He’s in your bed?”

“He didn’t want to smash any of his stupid computers at his stupid place. So he came over to my place. And now he’s smashing my place. So here’s my plan: You come over, right? And you levitate him, right? If he’s in the air, he can’t do any damage.”

Dekka peered at Brianna. “You’re loony, you know that? If there’s one thing we have plenty of, it’s houses. Stick him somewhere unoccupied.”

“Huh,” Brianna said, sounding a bit deflated. “Yeah.”

“Unless you just want me to come over and keep you company,” Dekka said, hating the hopeful tone in her own voice.

“Nah, that’s cool. Go back to bed.”

“You want to check upstairs for cough medicine?”

Brianna held up a half-empty bottle of some red liquid. “I already did. You were

talking. Saying something. Thanks.”

“Okay,” Dekka said, unable to entirely conceal her disappointment that Brianna had refused her offer of help. Not that Brianna would notice. “Flu usually goes away on its own after a week or so. Unless it’s a twenty-four-hour flu. Either way, Jack won’t die of it.”

“Yeah, okay. Later,” Brianna said. And she was gone. The door slammed.

“Of course sometimes flu can be fatal,” Dekka said to emptiness. “A girl can hope.”

FOUR

62 HOURS, 33 MINUTES

THEY BROUGHT HIM a leg. A calf, to be specific. Caine was still the leader of the dwindling tribe of Coates kids, after all. Down to fifteen of them now, with Panda gone.

Bug had found a wheelbarrow and rolled Panda to the school. He and some of the others had built a fire of fallen branches and a few desks.

The smell had kept everyone awake through the rest of the night.

And now, in the hour before dawn, their own faces smeared with grease, they'd brought him a leg. The left one, Caine guessed. A token of respect. And an unspoken desire that he join them in their crime.

As soon as Bug left, Caine began trembling.

Hunger was a very powerful force. But so were humiliation and rage.

Down in Perdido Beach the kids had food. Not much, maybe, but Caine knew that the threat of starvation had receded for them. They weren't eating well in Perdido Beach. But they were eating much better than the kids at Coates.

Everyone who could have defected from Coates already had. Those who were left were kids with too many problems, too much blood on their hands. . . .

It was down to Caine and Diana, really. And a dozen creeps and losers. Only one was any real help in the event of trouble—Penny. Penny, the monster bringer.

There were days when Caine almost missed Drake Merwin. He'd been an unstable mental case, but at least he'd been useful in a fight. He didn't make people think they were seeing monsters, like Penny. Drake *was* the monster.

Drake wouldn't have stared at this . . . this thing on the table. This all-too-recognizable object, charred and blackened. Drake wouldn't have hesitated.

An hour later, Caine found Diana. She was sitting in a chair in her room, watching the sunlight's first rays touch the treetops. He sat on her bed. The springs creaked. She was in shadow, almost invisible in the faint light, nothing but the glitter of her eyes and the outline of a hollow cheek.

In the dark, Caine could still pretend that she was her old self. Beautiful Diana. But he knew that her luscious dark hair was brittle and tinged with rust. Her skin was sallow and rough. Her arms sticks. Her legs unstable pins. She didn't look fourteen anymore. She looked forty.

"We have to give it a try," Caine said without preamble.

"You know he's lying, Caine," Diana whispered. "He's never been to the island."

"He read about it in some magazine."

Diana managed an echo of her old snarky laugh. "Bug read a magazine? Yeah. Bug's a big reader."

Caine said nothing. He sat still, trying not to think, trying not to remember. Trying not to wish there had been more to eat.

"We have to go to Sam," Diana said. "Give ourselves up. They won't kill us. So they'll have to feed us."

"They will kill us if we give ourselves up. Not Sam, maybe, but the others. We're

the ones responsible for turning out the lights. Sam won't be able to stop them. If not freaks like Dekka or Orc or Brianna, then Zil's punks."

The one thing they still had at Coates was a pretty good idea of what was going on in town. Bug had the ability to walk unseen. He was in and out of Perdido Beach every few days, sneaking food for himself, mostly. But also overhearing what kids were saying. And supposedly reading torn magazines he didn't bother to sneak back to Coates.

Diana let it go. Sat quietly. Caine listened to her breathing.

Had she done it? Had she committed the sin herself? Or was she smelling it on him now and despising him for it?

Did he want to know? Would he be able to forget later that her lips had eaten that meat?

"Why do we go on, Caine?" Diana asked. "Why not just lie down and die. Or you . . . you could . . ."

The way she looked at him made him sick. "No, Diana.

No. I'm not going to do that."

"You'd be doing me a favor," Diana whispered.

"You can't. We're not beat yet."

"Yeah. I wouldn't want to miss this party," Diana said.

"You can't leave me."

"We're all leaving, Caine. All of us. Into town to be taken out one by one. Or stay here and starve. Or step outside as soon as we get our chance."

"I saved your life," he added, and hated himself for begging. "I . . ."

"You have a plan," Diana said dryly. Mocking. One of the things he loved about her, that mean streak of mockery.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah. I have a plan."

"Based on some stupid story from Bug."

"It's all I've got, Diana. That, and you."

Sam walked the silent streets.

He felt unsettled by his encounter with Orsay. And unsettled, too, by his encounter with Astrid in his bedroom.

Why hadn't he told her about Orsay? Because Orsay was saying the same thing Astrid was saying?

Let it go, Sam. Stop trying to be all things to all people. Stop playing the hero, Sam. We're past all that.

He had to tell Astrid. If only to have her walk him through it, make sense of this thing with Orsay. Astrid would analyze it clearly.

But it wasn't that simple, was it? Astrid wasn't just his girlfriend. She was the head of the town council. He had to officially report on what he had learned. He was still getting used to that. Astrid wanted laws and systems and logical order. For months Sam had been in charge. He hadn't wanted to be, but then he was, and he'd accepted it.

And now he was no longer in charge. It was liberating. He told himself that: it was liberating.

But frustrating, too. While Astrid and the rest of the council were busy playing Founding Mothers and Founding Fathers, Zil was running around unopposed.

The thing with Orsay at the beach had shaken him. Was it possible? Was it even slightly possible that Orsay was in contact with the outside world?

Her power—the ability to inhabit other’s dreams—was not in doubt. Sam had once seen her walking through his own dreams. And he had used her to spy on the great enemy, the gaiaphage, back before that monstrous entity had been destroyed.

But this? This claim that she could see the dreams of those outside the FAYZ?

Sam paused in the middle of the plaza and looked around him. He didn’t need the pearly light to know that weeds now choked the formerly neat little green spaces. Glass was everywhere. Windows not broken in battle had been shattered by vandals. Garbage filled the fountain. On this site the coyotes had attacked. On this site Zil had tried to hang Hunter because Hunter was a freak.

The church was half destroyed. The apartment building had burned down. The storefronts and town hall steps were covered with graffiti, some just random, some romantic, most of it messages of hate or rage.

Every window was dark. Every doorway was in shadow. The McDonald’s, once a sort of club run by Albert, was closed up. There was no electricity to play music anymore.

Could it be true? Had Orsay dreamed his mother’s dreams? Had she spoken to Sam? Had she seen something about him that he had failed to see in himself?

Why did that thought cause him such pain?

It was dangerous, Sam realized. If other kids heard Orsay talking that way, what would happen? If it was bothering *him* this much . . .

He was going to have to have a talk with Orsay. Tell her to knock it off. Her and that helper of hers. But if he told Astrid, it would all get too big. Right now he could just put a little pressure on Orsay, get her to stop.

He could just imagine what Astrid would do. Make it all about free speech or whatever. Or maybe not, maybe she’d see the threat, too, but Astrid was better with theories than she was with just walking up to people and telling them to stop.

In one corner of the plaza were the graves. The makeshift markers—wooden crosses, one inept attempt at a Star of David, a few just boards shoved upright into the dirt. Someone had knocked most of the headstones over and no one had yet had time to put them back.

Sam hated going there. Every kid buried in that ground—and there were many—was a personal failure. Someone he had not kept alive.

His feet stepped onto soft earth. He frowned. Why would there be dirt clods?

Sam raised his left hand over his head. A ball of light formed in his palm. It was a greenish light that darkened shadows. But he could see that the ground was disturbed. Dirt everywhere, not piled up, more like clods and shovels full had been thrown.

In the center, a hole. Sam brightened the light and held his hand over the hole. He peered down inside, ready to strike if something attacked. His heart was hammering in his chest.

Movement!

Sam leaped back and fired a beam of light down into the hole. The light made no sound, but the dirt hissed and popped as it melted into glass.

“No!” he cried.

He tripped, fell on his rear in the dirt, and already he knew he’d made a mistake. He’d seen something move, and when he fired the searing light he’d seen what it was.

He crawled back to the edge of the hole. He looked over the edge, illuminating the scene with one cautious hand.

The little girl looked up at him, terrified. Her hair was dirty. Her clothes were muddy. But she was alive. Not burned. Alive.

There was tape over her mouth. She was struggling to breathe. She had a doll clutched tight. Her blue eyes pleaded.

Sam lay flat, reached down, and took her outstretched hand.

He wasn’t strong enough to lift her cleanly up. He had to drag and haul, reposition, haul some more. And by the time she made it up out of the hole she was covered in dirt from head to toe. Sam was almost as dirty, and panting from the effort.

He pulled the tape from her face. It wasn’t easily done. Someone had wound it around and around. The little girl cried when he pulled the tape from her hair.

“Who are you?” Sam asked.

He noticed something strange. He raised the level of light. Someone had written in magic marker on the girl’s forehead.

The word was “Freak.”

Sam’s palm went dark. Slowly, careful not to scare her, he put his arm around the girl’s heaving shoulders.

“It will be okay,” he lied.

“They . . . they said . . . why . . .” She couldn’t finish. She collapsed against him, weeping onto his shirt.

“You’re Jill. Sorry, I didn’t recognize you at first.”

“Jill,” she said, and nodded and cried some more. “They don’t want me to sing.”

Job one, Sam told himself: take care of Zil. Enough. Whether Astrid and the council liked it or not, it was time to take care of Zil.

Or not.

Sam stared at the hole from which he’d pulled Jill, really seeing it for the first time. A hole in the ground where none should be. Something about it . . . something terribly wrong.

Sam gasped, sucked air sharply. A chill ran up his spine.

The horror here was not that a little girl had fallen into a hole. The horror was the hole itself.

FIVE

62 HOURS, 6 MINUTES

SAM TOOK JILL to Mary Terrafino at the day care. Then he found Edilio, woke him up, and walked him to the town plaza. To the hole in the ground.

Edilio stared at it.

“So the girl fell in, walking around in the night,” Edilio said. He rubbed sleep out of his eyes and shook his head vigorously.

“Yeah,” Sam said. “She didn’t make the hole. She just fell in.”

“So what made the hole?” Edilio asked.

“You tell me.”

Edilio peered more closely at the hole. From the first need, Edilio had taken on the grim duty of digging the graves. He knew each one, knew who was where.

“*Madre de Dios*,” Edilio whispered. He made the sign of the cross on his chest. His eyes were wide as he turned to Sam. “You know what this looks like, right?”

“What do you think it looks like?”

“It’s too deep for being so narrow. No way someone did this with a shovel. Man, this hole wasn’t dug *down*. It was dug *up*.”

Sam nodded. “Yeah.”

“You’re pretty calm,” Edilio said shakily.

“Not really,” Sam said. “It’s been a strange night. What . . . who . . . was buried here?”

“Brittney,” Edilio said.

“So we buried her when she was still alive?”

“You’re not thinking straight, man. It’s been more than a month. Nothing stays alive that’s in the dirt for that long.”

The two of them stood side by side, staring down into the hole. The too-narrow, too-deep hole.

“She had that thing on her,” Edilio said. “We couldn’t get it off her. We figured she’s dead, so what’s it matter, right?”

“That thing,” Sam said dully. “We never figured out what it was.”

“Sam, we both know what it was.”

Sam hung his head. “We have to keep this quiet, Edilio. If we put this out there, the whole town will go nuts. People have enough to deal with.”

Edilio looked distinctly uncomfortable. “Sam, this isn’t the old days. We have a town council now. They’re supposed to know whatever’s going on.”

“If they know, everyone will know,” Sam said.

Edilio said nothing. He knew it was true.

“You know that girl Orsay?” Sam asked.

“Of course I know her,” Edilio said. “We almost got killed together.”

“Do me a favor and kind of keep an eye on her.”

“What’s up with Orsay?”

Sam shrugged. “She thinks she’s some kind of prophet, I guess.”

“A prophet? You mean like those old dudes in the Bible?”

“She’s acting like she can contact people on the other side. Parents and all.”

“Is it true?” Edilio asked.

“I don’t know, man. I doubt it. I mean, no way, right?”

“Probably should ask Astrid. She knows this kind of stuff.”

“Yeah, well, I’d rather wait on that.”

“Hey, hold up, Sam. Are you asking me to not tell her about that, either? You got me hiding two big things from the council?”

“It’s for their own good,” Sam said. “And for everyone’s good.” He took Edilio’s arm and drew him close. In a low voice he said, “Edilio, what kind of experience do Astrid and Albert really have? And John? Not to mention Howard, who we both know is just a jerk. You and me, we’ve been through every fight there’s been since the FAYZ came. I love Astrid, but she’s so into her ideas about how we have to get everything organized that she’s not letting me do what I need to do.”

“Yeah, well, we kind of do need some rules and stuff.”

“Of course we do,” Sam agreed. “We do. But in the meantime, Zil is kicking freaks out of their homes, and someone or something just dug its way up out of the ground. I need to be able to deal with stuff without everyone looking over my shoulder all the time.”

“Man, it isn’t cool to lay this on me,” Edilio said. Sam did not respond. It would be lousy to pressure Edilio any further. Edilio was right: it was wrong to ask this of him.

“I know that,” Sam said. “It’s just . . . look, it’s temporary. Until the council gets its act together and comes out with all its rules, someone still has to keep things from falling apart. Right?”

Finally Edilio sighed. “Right. Okay, I’ll get us a couple shovels. Fill this in quick before people start coming out.”

Jill was too old for the day care. Sam had known that. But he had dumped her in Mary’s lap, anyway.

Great. Just what Mary needed: one more kid to look after.

But it was hard to say no. Especially to Sam.

Mary cast a weary glance around the day care. What a mess. She’d have to round up Francis and Eliza and some of the others and take another shot at bringing some order to this disaster. Yet again.

She glanced with bitterness at the milky plastic sheet that covered the blown-out wall between the day care and the hardware store. How many times had Mary asked for some help dealing with it? The hardware store had been looted many times and the axes and sledgehammers and blowtorches were mostly gone, but there were still nails and screws and tacks strewn everywhere. Kids had to be watched constantly because they absolutely would crawl under the plastic and end up poking one another with screwdrivers and then crying and fighting and demanding Band-Aids, which had run out long ago and . . .

Mary took a deep breath. The council had a lot to do. A lot of problems to deal with. Maybe this wasn’t their top priority.

Mary forced a smile for the girl, who watched her solemnly and clutched her doll.

“I’m sorry, sweetie: what’s your name again?”

“Jill.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Jill. You can stay here for a while until we work something else out.”

“I want to go home,” Jill said.

Mary wanted to say, *Yeah, we all do, honey. We all want to go home.* But she had learned that bitterness and irony and sarcasm didn’t really help when dealing with the littles.

“What happened? Why were you out on the streets?” Mary asked.

Jill shrugged. “They said I had to go.”

“Who?”

Jill shrugged again, and Mary gritted her teeth. So sick of being understanding. So deeply, deeply sick of being responsible for every stray child in Perdido Beach.

“Okay, then, do you know why you left your house?”

“They said they would . . . hurt me, I guess.”

Mary wasn’t sure she wanted to pry any deeper. Perdido Beach was a community in a permanent state of fear and worry and loss. Kids didn’t always behave too well. Older brothers and sisters sometimes lost it when dealing with their siblings.

Mary had seen things . . . things she would never have believed possible.

“Well, you can stay with us for a while,” Mary said. She gave the girl a hug. “Francis will tell you the rules, okay? He’s that big kid over in the corner.”

Jill turned away reluctantly and took a couple of hesitant steps toward Francis. Then she turned back. “Don’t worry: I won’t sing.”

Mary almost didn’t respond. But something about the way Jill had said it . . .

“Of course you can sing,” Mary said.

“I better not,” Jill said.

“What’s your favorite song?” Mary asked.

Jill looked bashful. “I don’t know.”

Mary persisted. “I’d like to hear you sing, Jill.”

Jill sang. A Christmas carol.

*What child is this who laid to rest
on Mary’s lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet
While shepherds watch are keeping . . .*

And the world stopped.

Later—how much later, Mary could not know—Jill sat down on an unoccupied cot, cradled her doll close, and fell to sleep.

The room had fallen silent as she sang. Every child standing stock-still, as if they’d been frozen. But everywhere eyes were alight and mouths formed dreamy half smiles.

When Jill stopped singing, Mary looked at Francis.

“Did you . . .”

Francis nodded. There were tears in his eyes. “Mary, you need to catch some sleep, hon. Eliza and I will handle breakfast.”

“I’m just going to sit down, rest my feet for a while,” Mary said. But sleep took her, anyway.

Francis woke her what seemed like mere minutes later. “I have to go,” he said.

“Is it time?” Mary shook her head to clear it. Her eyes didn’t seem to want to focus.

“Soon. And I have some good-byes to say first,” he said. He put his hand on her shoulder and said, “You’re a great person, Mary. And another great person has come to see you.”

Mary stood up, not really following what Francis was saying, just knowing that someone was there to see her.

Orsay. She was so slight and fragile looking Mary instinctively liked her. She seemed like one of the kids, almost, one of the littles.

Francis touched Orsay’s hand and almost seemed to bow his head as if in prayer for a moment. “Prophetess,” he said.

“Mother Mary, the Prophetess,” Francis said, performing a very formal introduction. Mary felt like she was meeting the president or something.

“Orsay, please,” Orsay said in a soft voice. “And this is my friend, Nerezza.”

Nerezza was very different from Orsay. She had green eyes and olive skin and hair that was black and lustrous, gathered in a sort of loose wave on one side. Mary did not recall having seen her before. But Mary was trapped in the day care most of the day; she didn’t socialize much.

Francis grinned a little nervously, it seemed to Mary.

“Happy *rebirth*day,” Nerezza said.

“Yes. Thank you,” Francis said. He squared his shoulders, nodded to Nerezza, and to Orsay said, “I have some more people to see, and not much time. Prophetess, thank you for showing me the way.” And with that, he turned away quickly and left.

Orsay seemed almost sickened. As though she wanted to spit something out. She nodded tersely to Francis’s back and gritted her teeth.

Nerezza’s face was unreadable. Deliberately, Mary thought, as though she was concealing an emotion she felt strongly.

“Hi . . . Orsay.” Mary wasn’t quite sure what to call her now. She’d heard kids talking about Orsay being some kind of prophet and she had dismissed it. People said all kinds of crazy things. But clearly she’d had some profound effect on Francis.

Orsay didn’t seem to know what to say next. She looked at Nerezza, who quickly filled the void. “The Prophetess wishes to help you, Mary.”

“Help me?” Mary laughed. “I actually have enough volunteers for once.”

“Not that.” Nerezza waved that off, impatient. “The Prophetess would like to adopt a recently arrived child.”

“Excuse me?”

“Her name is Jill,” Orsay said. “I had a dream about . . .” And then she trailed off, as though she wasn’t quite sure what the dream was. She frowned.

“Jill?” Mary repeated. “The little girl who was terrorized by Zil? She’s only been here a few hours. How did you even know she was here?”

Nerezza said, “She was forced out of her home because she was a freak. Now her brother is too scared and weak to care for her. But she’s too old for the day care, Mary. You know that.”

“Yes,” Mary said. “She’s definitely too old.”

“The Prophetess would care for her. It’s something she wants to do.”

Mary looked at Orsay for confirmation. And after a few seconds, Orsay realized it

was her turn to speak and said, "Yes, I would like to do that."

Mary didn't feel quite right about it. She didn't know what was going on with Orsay, but Nerezza was clearly a strange girl, brooding and even, it seemed to Mary, a little tough.

But the day care didn't take older kids. It couldn't. And this was hardly the first time Mary had temporarily sheltered an older kid who then found another place to get her meals.

Francis seemed to have been vouching for Orsay and Nerezza. He must be the one who had told Orsay about Jill while Mary was sleeping.

Mary frowned, wondering why Francis had been in such a hurry to leave. *Rebirthday*? What was that supposed to mean?

"Okay," Mary said. "If Jill agrees, she can live with you."

Orsay smiled. And Nerezza's eyes glittered with satisfaction.

Justin had wet his bed sometime in the night. Like a baby. He was five years old, not a baby.

But there was no denying he had done it.

He told Mother Mary and she told him it was no big deal, it happened. But it didn't used to happen to Justin. Not when he had a real mommy. It had been a long time since he had peed the bed.

He cried when he told Mother Mary. He didn't like telling her because Mother Mary seemed like she might be getting sick or something. She wasn't as nice as she used to be. He usually told Francis if he had to. Some nights he didn't pee because he didn't drink any water for practically all day. But last night he'd forgotten about not drinking water. So he had, but just a little.

He was five now, older than just about all the kids at the day care. But he was still wetting his bed.

Two big girls had come and taken the singing girl away. Justin had no one to take him away.

But he knew where his house was, his real house with his old bed. He never used to wet that bed. But now he had a stupid bed on the floor, just a mattress, and other kids stepped all over it, so that was probably why he was wetting his bed again.

His old house wasn't very far away. He'd gone there before. Just to look at it and see if it was real. Because sometimes he didn't believe it was.

He had gone to check and see if Mommy was there. He hadn't seen her. And when he opened the door and went inside he had gotten too scared and he had come running back to Mother Mary.

But he was older now. He'd only been four and a half then, and now he was five. Now he probably wouldn't be scared.

And he probably wouldn't pee in his bed if he was at his real home.

SIX

57 HOURS, 17 MINUTES

DAYLIGHT, BRIGHT AND clear.

Sam and Astrid walked through the Mall. It didn't take long. There was the fish stand, already almost bare, with just two small octopi, a dozen or so clams, and a small fish so ugly, no one had yet been brave enough to buy it.

The fish stand was a long folding table dragged from the school cafeteria. Plastic bins were lined up, the gray plastic kind that were used to bus dishes. A droopy cardboard sign held in place by duct tape hung from the front of the table. It read, "Quinn's Seapreme Seafood." And below that, in smaller print, "An AlberCo Enterprise."

"What do you think that fish is?" Sam asked Astrid.

She peered closely at the alleged fish. "I think that's an example of *Pesce inedibilis*," she said.

"Yeah?" Sam made a face. "Do you think it's okay to eat?"

Astrid sighed theatrically. "*Pesce inedibilis*? Inedible? Joke, duh. Try to keep up, Sam, I made that really easy for you."

Sam smiled. "You know, a real genius would have known I wouldn't get it. Ergo, you are not a real genius. Hah. That's right: I threw down an 'ergo.'"

She gave him a pitying look. "That's very impressive, Sam. Especially from a boy who has twenty-two different uses for the word 'dude.'"

Sam stopped, took her arm, and spun her toward him. He pulled her close. "Dude," he whispered in her ear.

"Okay, twenty-three," Astrid amended. She pushed him away. "I have shopping to do. Do you want to eat, or do you want to . . . *dude*?"

"Dude. Always."

She looked at him critically. "Are you going to tell me why you were covered with mud this morning?"

"I tripped and fell. When I saw the girl, Jill, in the dark, I tripped over my own feet." Not exactly a lie. Part of the truth. And he would tell her all of the truth just as soon as he'd had a chance to sort it out. It had been a weird, disturbing night: he needed time to think and work out a plan. It was always better to go to the council with a plan worked out; that way, they could just say okay and let him get on with it.

The Mall had been set up on the playground of the school. That way the younger kids could come and play on the equipment while older kids shopped. Or gossiped. Or checked each other out. Sam found himself looking a bit more carefully at the faces. He didn't really expect to see Brittney walking around here. That was crazy. There had to be some other explanation. But just the same, he kept his eyes peeled.

What he would do if he did actually see a dead girl walking around was something he'd have to think about. As strange as life in the FAYZ could be, that was still one problem he hadn't had to face.

In no particular order the Mall consisted of Quinn's Seapreme Seafood; the produce stand named Gifts of the Worm; a bookstall identified as the Cracked Spine;

the fly-covered stall of Meats of Mystery; Totally Solar—where two enterprising kids had scrounged a half dozen solar panels and would use them to charge batteries; the Sux Xchange where toys and clothing and miscellaneous junk were bartered and sold.

A wood-fired barbecue grill had been set up a little apart. You could take your fish or meat or vegetables there and have them cooked for a small charge. Once grilled over the coals, pretty much everything—venison, raccoon, pigeon, rat, coyote—tasted the same: smoky and burned. But none of the stoves or microwaves worked anymore, and there was no more cooking oil, certainly no more butter, so even the kids who chose to cook their own food ended up duplicating the same experience. The only alternative was boiling, and the two girls who ran the place kept a big pot simmering. But everyone agreed that grilled rat was far superior to boiled.

The “restaurant” changed names every few days. It had already been Smokey Sue’s, Perdido I Can’t Believe It’s Not Pizza Kitchen, Eat and Urp, In ’n’ Get Out, Smokey Tom’s, and Le Grand Barbecue. Today the sign read “WTF?” and in smaller letters, “What the Food?”

Kids lounged at two of the three rickety dining tables, chairs tilted back, feet up. Some were eating, some just hanging out. They looked like a junior version of some kind of end-of-the-world movie, Sam thought, not for the first time. Armed, dressed in bizarre outfits, topped with strange hats, men’s clothing, women’s clothing, tablecloth capes, barefoot or wearing ill-fitting shoes.

Drinkable water now had to be trucked from the half-empty reservoir up in the hills outside of town. Gasoline was strictly rationed so that the water trucks could be kept running as long as possible. The Council had a plan for when the last of the gas was gone: relocate everyone to the reservoir. If there was still any water there.

They calculated they had six months till they ran out of water. Like most council decisions it seemed like bull to Sam. The council spent at least half their time concocting scenarios they would then argue over without ever reaching a decision. They’d been supposedly drafting a set of laws for pretty much the whole time they’d been in existence. Sam had done his best to be patient, but while they were dawdling and debating he still had to keep the peace. They had their rules, he had his. His were the ones most kids lived by.

The Mall lined the western wall of the school gym so as to take advantage of the shade. As the day wore on and the sun rose, the food stalls would run out of stuff and close down. Some days there was very, very little food. But no one had starved to death—quite.

The water was brought down in five gallon plastic jugs and given away free—a gallon per person per day. There were 306 names on the water list.

There was rumor of a couple of kids living out of town in a farmhouse. But Sam had never seen evidence of it. And made-up people were not his problem.

The remaining sixteen known people in the FAYZ were up the hill at Coates Academy, all that was left of Caine’s isolated band. What they ate and drank was not Sam’s concern.

Away from the school’s wall, over in the lesser shade of a “temporary” building, a different group was at work. A girl read tarot cards for one ’Berto. The ’Berto was short for “Albert.” Albert had created a currency based on gold bullets and McDonald’s game pieces. He’d wanted to call the currency something else, but no one

remembered what. So, 'Bertos they were, a play on "Albert," coined by Howard, of course, who had also come up with "the FAYZ" to describe their weird little world.

Sam had thought Albert was nuts with his obsession with creating money. But the evidence was in: Albert's system was producing just enough food for kids to survive. And a lot more kids were working. Far fewer were just hanging out. It was no longer impossible to get kids to go into the fields and do the backbreaking work of picking crops. They worked for 'Bertos and spent 'Bertos, and for now at least starvation was just a bad memory.

The tarot reader was ignored. No one had money to waste on that. A boy played a guitar of sorts while his little sister played a professional drum set they'd liberated from someone's home. They were not good, but they were making music, and in a Perdido Beach without electricity, without recorded music, without iPods or stereos, where computer hard drives grew dusty and DVD players were untouched, even pitiful entertainment was welcome.

As Sam watched, a girl placed a quarter of a melon on the musician's tip plate. They immediately stopped playing, broke the melon into pieces, and wolfed it down.

Sam knew there was a second market, out of sight but easy enough to find for those who were interested. That market sold alcohol and pot and various other contraband. Sam had tried to put a stop to the alcohol and drugs, but he had not accomplished much. He had more pressing priorities.

"New graffiti," Astrid said, looking up at the wall behind the meat stand.

The black and red logo formed a crude "H" and "C." Human Crew. Zil Sperry's hate group.

"Yeah, it's all over town," Sam said. He knew he shouldn't keep talking, but he did, anyway. "If I weren't on a leash I'd go over to Zil's so-called compound and put an end to this once and for all."

"What do you mean? Kill him?" Astrid said, playing dumb.

"No, Astrid. Haul his butt to town hall and stick him in a locked room until he decides to grow up."

"In other words, put him in prison. Because you decide to.

And for as long as you decide to keep him there," Astrid said. "For a guy who never wanted to be in charge, you're awfully willing to be a dictator."

Sam sighed. "Okay, fine. Whatever. I don't want to fight."

"So, how is the little girl from last night?" Astrid asked, changing the subject.

"Mary was taking care of her." He hesitated. Looked over his shoulder to make sure no one was within range to overhear. "Mary asked her to sing. She says it's like the world stops when she sings. Like no one talks, no one moves, the whole preschool just practically froze. Mary says it's like an angel is singing. Just to you."

"An angel?" Astrid said skeptically.

"Hey, I thought you believed in angels."

"I do. I just don't think this little girl is one." She sighed. "More like a siren."

Sam stared blankly at her.

"No," Astrid said. "Not like a police car siren. Like Odysseus. Ulysses. The sirens. The ones who when they sang no man could resist them?"

"I knew that."

"Uh-huh."

"I did. They did a parody on *The Simpsons*."

Astrid sighed. "Why am I with you?"

"Because I'm incredibly attractive?"

"You are mildly attractive, actually," Astrid teased.

"So, I'm a kind of really hot dictator?"

"I don't recall saying 'really hot.'"

Sam smiled. "You didn't have to. It's in your eyes."

They kissed. Not a big passionate kiss, but nice like it was always nice. Someone hooted derisively. Someone else yelled, "Get a room."

Sam and Astrid ignored all that. They were both aware that they were the "first couple" of the FAYZ, and their relationship was a sign of stability to kids. Like seeing Mom and Dad kissing: kind of gross, but kind of reassuring.

"So what are we going to do with the Siren now?" Astrid asked. "She's too old to stay with Mary."

"Orsay took her in," Sam said. He waited to see whether the mention of Orsay would get a reaction from Astrid. No. Astrid didn't know what Orsay was up to.

"Excuse me. Sam?"

He turned around to find Francis. Not the best time to be interrupted, not when he was trying to discuss his attractiveness with Astrid.

"What's up, Francis?"

Francis shrugged. He looked confused and awkward. He stuck out his hand. Sam hesitated; then, feeling slightly ridiculous, he shook Francis's hand.

"I felt like I had to say thanks," Francis said.

"Oh. Oh, um . . . cool."

"And don't take it like it's your fault, okay?" Francis said. "And don't be mad at me. I tried . . ."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's my birthday," Francis explained. "The big One-Five."

Sam felt a bead of sweat roll down his back. "You're ready, right? I mean, you've read the write-up on what you have to do?"

"I've read it," Francis said. But his voice betrayed him.

Sam grabbed his arm. "No, Francis. No."

"It's going to be okay," Francis said.

"No," Astrid said firmly. "You don't want to do this."

Francis shrugged. Then he grinned shyly. "My mom, she needs me. She and my dad just broke up. And, anyway, I miss her."

"What do you mean they just broke up?"

"They've been thinking about it a long time. But last week my dad just took off. And she's alone, right, so—"

"Francis, what are you talking about?" Astrid demanded irritably. "We've been in the FAYZ for seven months. You don't know what's going on with your parents."

"The Prophetess told me."

"The *what*?" Astrid snapped. "Francis, have you been drinking?"

Sam felt frozen, unable to react. He knew instantly what this was about.

"The Prophetess told me," Francis said. "She saw . . . she knows and she told me . . ." He was getting more and more agitated. "Look, I don't want you to be mad at

me.”

“Then stop acting like an idiot,” Sam said, finding his voice at last.

“My mom needs me,” Francis said. “More than you do. I have to go to her.”

“What makes you think the poof takes you to your mother?”

“It’s a door,” Francis said. His eyes clouded over as he spoke. He wasn’t looking at Sam anymore. He was inside his own head, his voice singsong, as if reciting something he’d heard. “A door, a pathway, an escape to bliss. Not a birthday: a *rebirth*day.”

“Francis, I don’t know who is telling you this, but it’s not true,” Astrid said. “No one knows what happens if you step out.”

“*She* knows,” Francis said. “She explained it to me.”

“Francis, I’m telling you not to do this,” Sam said urgently. “Look, I know about Orsay. I know, all right? And maybe she thinks this is true, but you can’t risk it.”

He felt Astrid’s penetrating gaze. He refused to acknowledge the unspoken question.

“Dude, you are the man,” Francis said with a soft smile. “But even you can’t control this.”

Francis turned and walked quickly away. He stopped after a dozen feet. Mary Terrafino was running toward him. She waved her stick-thin arms and yelled, “Francis! No!”

Francis raised his hand and checked his watch. His smile was serene.

Mary reached him, grabbed him by the shirt, and yelled, “Don’t you leave those children. Don’t you dare leave those children! They’ve lost too much. They love you.”

Francis slipped off his watch and held it out to her. “It’s all I have to give you.”

“Francis, no.”

But she was holding air. Yelling at air.

The watch lay in the grass.

Francis was gone.

SEVEN

56 HOURS, 30 MINUTES

“WHAT ELSE HAVEN’T you been telling us, Sam?”

Astrid had immediately called a meeting of the town council. She hadn’t even yelled at him privately. She’d just nailed him with a poisonous look and said, “I’m calling a meeting.”

Now they sat in the former mayor’s conference room. It was gloomy, the only light coming through a window that was itself in shade. The table was heavy wood, the chairs deep and luxurious. The walls were decorated—if that was the right word—with large, framed photos of past mayors of Perdido Beach.

Sam always felt like a fool in this room. He sat in a too-big chair at one end of the table. Astrid was at the other. Her hands were on the table, slender fingers flat on the surface.

Dekka sat scowling, irritated, though Sam wasn’t sure at whom she was directing her dark mood. A piece of something blue was stuck in one of her tight cornrows—not that anyone was foolish enough to point it out or laugh.

Dekka was a freak, the only one besides Sam in this room. She had the power to temporarily cancel gravity in small areas. Sam counted her as an ally. Dekka was not about talking without end and getting nothing done.

Albert was the best-dressed person in the room, wearing an amazingly clean and seemingly un-salty polo shirt and relatively unwrinkled slacks. He looked like a very young businessman who had stopped by on his way to a round of golf.

Albert was a normal, though he seemed nevertheless to have an almost supernatural ability to organize, to make things happen, to do business. Looking at the group through hooded eyes, Sam knew Albert was probably the most powerful person in the room. Albert, more than any other person, had kept Perdido Beach from starving.

Edilio slumped, holding his head with both hands and not making eye contact with anyone. He had a submachine gun propped against his chair, a sight that had become all too normal.

Edilio was officially town marshal. Probably the mildest, most modest and least-assuming person in the council, he was in charge of enforcing whatever rules the council created. If they ever got around to actually creating any.

Howard was the wild card in the group. Sam still wasn’t sure how he had managed to talk his way onto the council. No one doubted that Howard was smart. But no one thought he had an honest or ethical bone in his body. Howard was chief toady to Orc, the glowering, drunken-boy-turned-monster who had fought on the right side a couple of times when it had really counted.

The youngest member was a sweet-faced boy named John Terrafino. He was a normal, too—Mary’s little brother. He seldom had much to say and mostly listened. Everyone assumed he voted however Mary told him to. Mary would have been there, but she was simultaneously indispensable and fragile.

Seven council members. Astrid as chairperson. Five normals, two freaks.

“A few different things happened last night,” Sam said as calmly as he could. He didn’t want a fight. He especially didn’t want a fight with Astrid. He loved Astrid. He was desperate for Astrid. She was the sum total of all the good he had in his life, he reminded himself.

And now she was furious.

“We know about Jill,” Astrid said.

“Zil’s punks. Who wouldn’t still be doing stuff like that if we’d shut them down,” Dekka muttered.

“We’ve voted on that,” Astrid said.

“Yeah, I know. Four to three in favor of letting the sick little creep and his sick little friends terrorize the whole town,” Dekka snapped.

“Four to three in favor of having some kind of system of laws and not just fighting fire with fire,” Astrid said.

“We can’t just go around arresting people without some kind of system,” Albert said.

“Yeah, Sammy,” Howard said with a smirk. “You can’t just go all laser-hands whenever you decide you don’t like someone.”

Dekka shifted in her seat, hunching her strong shoulders forward. “No, so instead we let little girls be kicked out of their own homes and terrorized.”

“Look, once and for all, we can’t have a system where Sam is judge, jury, and executioner,” Astrid said. She softened it a bit by adding, “Although if there’s one person I would trust, it’s him. Sam’s a hero. But we need everyone in the FAYZ to know what’s okay and what’s not. We need rules, not just one person deciding who is out of line and who isn’t.”

“He was a really good worker,” John whispered. “Francis. He was a really good worker. The prees are totally going to miss him. They loved him.”

“I only found out about this last night. Actually, early this morning,” Sam said. He gave a brief description of what he’d seen and heard at Orsay’s gathering.

“Could it be true?” Albert asked. He seemed worried. Sam understood his ambivalence. Albert had gone from being just another kid in the old days, a person no one even really noticed, to being the person who in many ways ran Perdido Beach.

“I don’t think there’s any way for us to know,” Astrid said.

Everyone fell silent at that. The idea that it might be possible to contact parents, friends, family outside of the FAYZ was mind-boggling. The idea that those outside could know what was happening inside the FAYZ . . .

Even now, with some time to digest it, Sam felt powerful and not necessarily pleasant emotions. He had long been plagued by the fear that when the FAYZ wall somehow, some day, came down, he would be held responsible. For lives he had taken. For lives he had not saved. The idea that the whole world might be watching, dissecting his actions, questioning every panicky move, every desperate moment, was disturbing, to say the least.

So many things he didn’t want to have to ever talk about. So many things that could be made to look awful.

Young master Temple, can you explain how you sat by while kids wasted most of the food supply and ended up starving?

Are you telling us, Mr. Temple, that children were cooking and eating their own

pets?

Mr. Temple, can you explain the graves in the plaza?

Sam clenched his fists and steadied his breathing.

“What Francis did was commit suicide,” Dekka said.

“I think that’s a little harsh,” Howard said. He leaned back in his chair, put his feet on the table, and interlaced his fingers over his skinny belly. He knew this would irritate Astrid. In fact, Sam guessed, he did it for just that reason. “He wanted to go running home to Mommy, what can I say? Of course, it’s hard for me to believe that anyone would choose to step out of the FAYZ. I mean, where else do you get to eat rats, use your backyard for a toilet, and live in fear of nineteen different kinds of scary?”

No one laughed.

“We can’t let kids do this,” Astrid said. She sounded quite sure.

“How do we stop them?” Edilio asked. He raised his head, and Sam saw the distress on his face. “How do you think we stop them? When your fifteenth birthday rolls around, the easy thing is to take the poof. You gotta fight to resist it. We know that. So how are we going to tell kids this isn’t real, this Orsay thing?”

“We just tell them,” Astrid said.

“But we don’t *know* if it’s real or not,” Edilio argued.

Astrid shrugged. She stared at nothing and kept her features very still. “We tell them it’s all fake. Kids hate this place, but they don’t want to die.”

“How do we tell them if we don’t know?” Edilio seemed genuinely puzzled.

Howard laughed. “Deely-O, Deely-O, you are such a doof sometimes.” He put his feet down and leaned toward Edilio as if sharing a secret with him. “She means: We *lie*. Astrid means that we lie to everyone and tell them we do know for sure.”

Edilio stared at Astrid like he was expecting her to deny it.

“It’s for people’s own good,” Astrid said in a low voice, still looking at nothing.

“You know what’s funny?” Howard said, grinning. “I was pretty sure we were coming to this meeting so Astrid could rank on Sam for not telling us the whole truth. And now, it turns out we’re really here so Astrid can talk us all into becoming liars.”

“Becoming?” Dekka snarked with a cynical look at Howard. “Wouldn’t exactly be a transformation for you, Howard.”

Astrid said, “Look, if we let Orsay go on with this craziness, we could not only have kids stepping out on their fifteenth. We could have kids not wanting to wait that long. Kids deciding to end it right away and thinking they’d wake up on the other side with their parents.”

Everyone at the table leaned back at once, taking that in.

“I can’t lie,” John said simply. He shook his head, and his red curls shook, too.

“You’re a member of the council,” Astrid snapped. “You have to abide by our decisions. That’s the deal. That’s the only way it works.” Then, in a calmer voice, she said, “John, isn’t Mary coming up on her fifteenth before long?”

Sam saw the jab hit home. Mary was perhaps the single most necessary person in Perdido Beach. From the start she had stepped up and run the day care. She’d become a mother to the littles.

But Mary had her own problems. She was anorexic and bulimic. She ate antidepressants by the handful, but the supply was rapidly running out.

Dahra Baidoo, who controlled the medicines in Perdido Beach, came to Sam secretly and told him that Mary was in every couple of days, asking for whatever Dahra might have. “She’s taking Prozac and Zoloft and Lexapro, and these aren’t just nothing little meds, Sam. People have to go on and off these things carefully, according to the book. You don’t just grab whatever and mix them all up.”

Sam hadn’t told anyone but Astrid about it. And he’d warned Dahra to keep it to herself. Then he’d made a mental note to talk to Mary, and had forgotten to ever follow up.

Now, from John’s stricken expression, Sam could guess that he was far from certain that Mary wouldn’t give in to the poof and step out.

They took a vote. Astrid, Alberto, and Howard shot their hands up immediately.

“No, man,” Edilio said, shaking his head. “I’d have to lie to my own people, my soldiers. Kids who trust me.”

“No,” John voted. “I . . . I’m just a kid and all, but I would have to lie to Mary.”

Dekka looked at Sam. “What do you say, Sam?”

Astrid interrupted. “Look, we could do this temporarily. Just until we find out if Orsay is making this all up. If she came out later and admitted it was all fake, well, we’d have our answer.”

“Maybe we should torture her,” Howard said, only half kidding.

“We can’t just sit by if we think kids are going to be dying,” Astrid pleaded. “Suicide is a mortal sin. These kids won’t be getting out of the FAYZ, they’ll be going to hell.”

“Wow,” Howard said. “Hell? And we know this, how exactly? You don’t know any more than any of us do about what happens after a poof.”

“So that’s what this is about?” Dekka asked. “Your religion?”

“Everyone’s religion is against suicide,” Astrid snapped.

“I’m against it, too,” Dekka said defensively. “I just don’t want to be getting dragged into the middle of some kind of religious thing.”

“Whatever Orsay represents, it’s not a religion,” Astrid said icily.

Sam heard Orsay’s voice in his head. *Let them go, Sam. Let them go and get out of the way.*

His mother’s words, if Orsay was telling the truth.

“Let’s give it a week,” Sam said.

Dekka took a deep breath and blew it out all at once. “Okay. I’ll go with Sam on this. We lie. For a week.”

The meeting broke up. Sam was the first out of the room, suddenly desperate for fresh air. Edilio caught up to him as he was running down the steps of town hall.

“Hey. Hey! We never told them about what you and me saw last night.”

Sam stopped, looked toward the plaza, toward the hole they had refilled.

“Yeah? What did we see last night, Edilio? Me, I just saw a hole in the ground.”

Sam didn’t give Edilio the chance to argue. He didn’t want to hear what Edilio would say. He walked quickly away.

EIGHT

55 HOURS, 17 MINUTES

CAINE HATED DEALING with Bug. The kid creeped him out. For one thing, Bug had become less and less visible. It used to be that Bug would do his disappearing act only when necessary. Then he started doing it whenever he wanted to spy on someone, which was pretty frequently.

Now he would become visible only when Caine ordered him to.

Caine was betting everything on Bug's story. A story of a magical island. It was insane, of course. But when reality was hopeless, fantasy became more and more necessary.

"How much farther to this farmhouse of yours, Bug?" Caine asked.

"Not far. Stop worrying."

"You stop worrying," Caine muttered. Bug was walking invisible through open fields. Nothing but depressions in the dirt where he stepped. Caine was all-too-visible. Broad daylight. Across a dusty, plowed field under a bright, hot sun. Bug said no one was in these fields. Bug said these fields had nothing growing and that none of Sam's people knew about the farmhouse, which was practically unnoticeable, off a dirt road and looked abandoned.

Caine's first question had been, "Then how do you know about them?"

"I know lots of stuff," Bug answered. "Besides, a long time ago you said to keep an eye on Zil."

"So how does Zil know about this farmhouse?"

The voice above the impressions of invisible feet said, "I think one of Zil's guys used to know these kids. Back in the day."

Caine's next question: "Do they have food there?"

"Yeah. Some. But they also have shotguns. And the girl, the sister Emily? She's some kind of freak, I think. I don't know what she does, I ain't seen her do anything freaky, but her brother is scared of her. So is Zil, kind of, only he doesn't show it."

"Great," Caine muttered. He noted that Zil was a kid who wouldn't let himself show fear. Maybe useful.

Caine shaded his eyes with his hand and scanned around, looking for telltale dust plumes from a truck or car. Bug said the Perdido Beach people were low on gas, too, but still drove when they needed to.

He was confident that he could take on and defeat any one freak from Sam's group. With the sole exception of Sam himself. But if it was Brianna and Dekka together? Or even that little preppy nitwit Taylor and a few of Edilio's soldiers?

But right now the real problem was simply that Caine was weak. Walking this distance—miles—was hard. Very hard when his stomach was stabbing him again, and his navel was scraping his spine. His legs were wobbly. His eyes sometimes became unfocused.

One good meal . . . well, not really a good meal . . . was not enough. But it was keeping him alive. Digesting Panda. Panda energy flowing from his stomach through his blood.

The farmhouse was hidden by a stand of trees, but otherwise right out in the open. A long way from the road, yes, but Caine couldn't believe Sam's people had never found it and searched it for food.

Very strange.

"No closer," a young male voice called from the front porch of the house.

Bug and Caine froze.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

Caine couldn't see anyone through the dirty screen.

Bug answered, "We're just—"

"Not you," the voice interrupted. "We know all about you, little invisible boy. We're talking about him."

"My name is Caine. I want to meet the kids who hang out here."

"Oh? You do, huh?" the unseen boy said. "Why should I let you do that?"

"I'm not looking for trouble," Caine said. "But I guess it's only fair to tell you that I can knock your little house down in about ten seconds."

Click click.

Something cold touched the back of Caine's neck.

"Can you? That must be something to see." A girl's voice. Not two steps behind him.

Caine had no doubt that the cold object laid against the nape of his neck was a gun barrel. How had the girl gotten so close? How had she snuck up on them?

"Like I said, I'm not looking for trouble," Caine said.

"That's good," the girl said. "You wouldn't like the kind of trouble I can bring."

"We just want to . . ." Caine couldn't actually think of precisely what it was he just wanted to do.

"Well, come on inside," the girl said.

There was no movement. No walking, no climbing the steps. The farmhouse seemed to warp for a second, and then it was suddenly around them. Caine was standing in a gloomy living room. There were plastic slipcovers on the sagging couch and on a corduroy La-Z-Boy.

Emily was maybe twelve. Dressed in jean shorts and a pink Las Vegas sweatshirt. As Caine had expected, she was holding a huge, double-barreled shotgun.

The boy came in from outside. He seemed completely unsurprised to see that Caine and Bug were standing in his living room. As though this kind of thing happened all the time.

Caine wondered if he was hallucinating.

"Have a seat," Emily said, indicating the couch. Caine sat gratefully. He was exhausted.

"That's a pretty good trick," Caine said.

"It's useful," Emily said. "Makes it hard for people to find us if we don't want to be found."

"You have any electricity?" the brother asked Caine.

"What?" Caine peered at him. "In my pocket? How would I have electricity?"

The boy pointed mournfully at the TV. A Wii and an Xbox were attached. All indicator lights off, of course. Game cartridges were stacked high.

"That's a lot of games."

“The other ones bring them to us,” Emily said. “Brother likes the games.”

“But we can’t play them,” the boy said.

Caine looked at him closely. He did not strike Caine as any sort of genius. Emily, on the other hand, seemed shrewd and focused. She was the one in charge.

“What’s your name?” Caine asked the boy.

“Brother. His name is Brother,” Emily supplied.

“Brother,” Caine said. “Okay. Well, Brother, those games aren’t much fun if you don’t have electricity. Are they?”

“Those others told me they’d get some of that.”

“Yeah? Well, only one person can bring electricity back,” Caine said.

“You?”

“Nope. A kid named Computer Jack.”

“We met him,” Brother interjected. “He fixed my Wii, long time back. Games still worked back then.”

“Jack works for me,” Caine said. He sat back and let that sink in. It was a lie, of course. But he doubted Emily would know that. She wouldn’t know that Jack was in Perdido Beach. And that according to Bug he was sitting in a squalid room reading comic books and refusing to do anything.

“You can get the lights on?” Emily asked with a glance at her anxious brother.

“I can,” Caine lied smoothly. “It would take about a week.”

Emily laughed. “Kid, you look like you can’t even feed yourself. Look at you. You look like a scarecrow. Dirty, hair falling out. And lying like a rug. What *can* you do?”

“This,” Caine said. He raised one hand and the shotgun flew out of Emily’s hand. It hit the wall so hard, the barrel stuck in the plaster like a crossbow bolt. The wood stock quivered.

Brother leaped up, but it was like he hit a brick wall. Caine threw him casually through the window. Glass shattered. There was a loud crash as the boy landed on the screened porch.

Emily was up in a heartbeat and suddenly the house disappeared around Caine. He found himself with Bug, standing in the yard.

“That’s definitely a neat trick,” Caine yelled. “Here’s an even better one.”

With hands outstretched he yanked Brother straight through the porch screen. The mesh wrapped around the boy’s body like a shroud. And he began to rise into the air, struggling feebly, calling out to his sister to save him.

Emily was instantly a foot from Caine, face-to-face.

“Try something,” Caine snarled. “It’ll be a long drop for your idiot brother.”

Emily looked up, and Caine saw the fight go out of her. Brother was still rising, higher and higher. The fall would maybe kill him. It would at the very least cripple him.

“See, I haven’t been spending my days and nights here on the farm,” Caine said. “I’ve been in a few fights. Experience. It’s kind of useful.”

“What is it you want?” Emily asked.

“When the others get here, you let them walk on in. I have to have a little conversation with them. Your shotgun has had it. And your little tricks won’t save you or him.”

“I guess you really want to talk to those boys.”

“Yeah. I guess I do.”

Lana heard the knock at the door and sighed. She'd been reading a book. Meg Cabot. A book from a million lifetimes ago. A girl who became a real-life princess.

Lana read a lot now. There were still plenty of books in the FAYZ. Almost no music, no TV or movies. Plenty of books. She read everything from fun chick lit to heavy, boring books.

The point was to keep reading. In Lana's world there was awake time. And there was nightmare time. And the only thing keeping her sane was reading. Not that she was at all sure she was sane.

Not sure of that at all.

Patrick heard the knock, too, and barked loudly.

Lana assumed it was someone needing healing. That was the only reason anyone came to see her. But from long habit and deeply ingrained fear, she lifted the heavy handgun from the desk and carried it to the door with her.

She knew how to use the weapon. She was very accustomed to the feel of the grip in her hand.

“Who is it?”

“Sam.”

She leaned in to look through the peephole. Maybe Sam's face, maybe not: there were no windows in the hallway outside, and so, no light. She threw the dead bolt and opened the door.

“Don't shoot me,” Sam said. “You'd only have to heal me.”

“Come on in,” Lana said. “Pull up a chair. Grab a soda from the fridge and I'll get the chips.”

“Well, you still have a sense of humor,” Sam said.

He chose the easy chair in the corner. Lana took the chair she had turned around to face the balcony. She had one of the better rooms in the hotel. In the old days it must have cost hundreds of dollars a day with this great view looking out over the ocean.

“So, what's the emergency?” Lana asked. “You wouldn't be here if there wasn't some kind of problem.”

Sam shrugged. “Maybe I'm just here to say hi.”

It had been a while since she had seen him. She remembered the awful damage that had been done to him by Drake. She remembered all too well placing her hands on his flayed skin.

She had healed his body. Not his mind. He was no more completely healed than she was. She could see it in his eyes. It should have created some sympathy between them, but Lana hated seeing that shadow over him. If Sam couldn't get past it, how could she?

“No one ever comes just to say hi,” Lana said. She pulled a pack of cigarettes from her bathrobe pocket and lit one expertly. She inhaled deeply.

She noticed his disapproving look. “Like any of us are going to live long enough to get cancer,” she said.

Sam said nothing, but the disapproval was gone.

Lana looked at him through a cloud of smoke. “You look tired, Sam. Are you getting enough to eat?”

“Well, you really can’t get enough boiled mystery fish and grilled raccoon,” Sam said.

Lana laughed. Then she sobered. “I had some venison last week. Hunter brought it to me. He wondered if I could cure him.”

“Did you?”

“I tried. I don’t think I helped much. Brain damage. I guess it’s more complicated than a broken arm or a bullet hole.”

“Are you doing okay?” Sam asked.

Lana fidgeted and began stroking Patrick’s neck. “Honestly? And you don’t talk to Astrid about it so she comes rushing over here trying to help?”

“Between you and me.”

“Okay. Then, no, I guess I’m not doing okay. Nightmares. Memories. It’s hard to tell which is which, really.”

“Maybe you should try going out more,” Sam said.

“But none of that is happening to you, right? Nightmares and all?”

He didn’t answer, just dropped his head and looked down at the floor.

“Yeah,” she said.

Lana stood up abruptly and went to the balcony door. She stood there, arms crossed over her chest, cigarette burning forgotten in her hand. “I can’t seem to stand being around people. I get madder and madder. It’s not like they’re doing anything to me, but the more they talk or look at me or just stand there, the angrier I get.”

“Been there,” he said. “Still am there, I guess.”

“See, you’re different, Sam.”

“I don’t make you angry?”

She laughed, a short, bitter sound. “Yeah, actually you do. I’m standing here right now and a part of me wants to grab anything I can put my hands on and smash it against your head.”

Sam got up and went to her. He stood just behind her. “You can punch me, if it helps.”

“Quinn used to come see me,” Lana said, as though she hadn’t heard him. “Then he dropped a glass and I . . . I almost killed him. Did he tell you? I grabbed the gun and I had it pointed right at his face, Sam. And I really, really wanted to pull the trigger.”

“You didn’t, though.”

“I shot Edilio,” Lana said, still looking down toward the water.

“That wasn’t you,” he said.

Lana said nothing, and Sam let the silence stretch. Finally, she said, “I thought maybe Quinn and I . . . But I guess that was enough for him to decide to move on.”

“Quinn is working a lot,” Sam said, sounding lame. “He’s out there at, like, four in the morning, every day.”

She slid open the balcony door and flicked the cigarette butt over the rail. “Why did you come, Sam?”

“I have to ask you something, Lana. Something’s going on with Orsay.”

“Yeah.” She pointed toward the beach below. “I’ve seen her down there. It’s been a couple times. Her and some kids. I can’t hear what they’re saying. But they look at her like she’s their salvation.”

“She’s saying she can see through the FAYZ wall. She says she can sense the dreams of people outside.”

Lana shrugged.

“We need to try and figure out if there’s any truth to it.”

“How would I know?” Lana asked.

“One of the possibilities . . . I mean, I wondered . . . I mean, if it’s not a lie, and maybe Orsay really believes it . . .”

“Go ahead, Sam,” Lana whispered. “You want to say something.”

“I need to know, Lana: Is the Darkness, the gaiaphage, is it really gone? Do you still hear its voice in your head?”

She felt cold. She crossed her arms over her chest. Squeezed herself tightly. She could feel her own body, it was real, it was her. She felt her own heart beating. She was here, alive, herself. Not there in the mine shaft. Not a part of the gaiaphage.

“Don’t ask me about that,” Lana said.

“Lana, I wouldn’t if it wasn’t—”

“Don’t,” she warned. “Don’t.”

“I . . .”

She felt her lips twist into a snarl. A wild rage swelled within her. She spun to face him. Stuck her face right in his. “Don’t!”

Sam stood his ground.

“Don’t ever, *ever* ask me about it again!”

“Lana—”

“Get out!” she screamed. “Get out!”

He backed quickly away. Out into the hallway, closing the door behind him.

Lana fell to the carpeted floor. She dug her fingers into her hair and pulled, needing the pain, needing to know that she was real, and here, and now. Was he gone, the gaiaphage?

He would never be gone. Not from her.

Lana lay on her side, sobbing. Patrick came over and licked her face.

NINE

54 HOURS, 42 MINUTES

ZIL SPERRY WAS feeling very good. He'd spent the day waiting for the blow to fall. Waiting for Sam and Edilio to show up at his compound. If they had, he could have made a fight out of it, but he wasn't crazy enough to think he would have won. Edilio's soldiers had machine guns. Zil's Human Crew had baseball bats.

He had more serious weapons, too, but those were not in the compound. Not with that freak Taylor able to pop in anywhere, anytime and see whatever she wanted.

And then, there were the other freaks: that glowering lesbian thug Dekka, the brat Brianna. And Sam himself.

Always Sam.

The compound was four houses at the end of Fourth Avenue, past Golding. The street dead-ended there in a sort of cul-de-sac. Four not-very-big, not-very-fancy houses. They'd set up a roadblock of cars to form a wall across Fourth Avenue. The cars had to be pushed into place—the batteries were all dead, all except the few vehicles Sam's people kept in running condition.

At the center of the roadblock was a narrow gap, an opening. A square and blocky once-white Scion was in position to one side of the opening. It was light enough that four kids could push it across the opening to block the gate.

Dekka could of course simply lift the thing into the air. That and the rest of Zil's defenses.

But they had not come after him. And Zil knew why. The town council was too gutless. Sam? He would have come after him. Dekka? She would love to come after him. Brianna had zipped through the compound a few times already, using her freak speed to blow past sentries almost unseen.

Zil had strung wire after that. Let Brianna come through again, she'd get the surprise of her life.

Sam was the key. Kill Sam, and Zil might be able to handle the rest.

At noon, when everyone would be scrounging lunch, Zil led Hank, Turk, Antoine, and Lance out of the compound, across the highway, and north to the foothills of the ridge.

The farmhouse. That freak Emily and her moron brother. At first Turk had mentioned it as a place he knew from back, before. He'd attended a birthday party there for the boy named Brother. Brother and Emily were homeschooled, and Turk knew them from church.

Turk had been surprised to find Brother and Emily still there. And they'd all been surprised to find that Emily was a seriously powerful freak.

But they had agreed to let Human Crew hide things there.

So Zil had put up with them, made them promises, given them games they couldn't really play in order to have the farm as a safe house. But when the time came . . . well, a freak was still a freak, even if she was useful.

Reaching the farmhouse meant getting past the heavily guarded gas station first. Fortunately there was a deep ditch, an open storm drain running parallel to the

highway and behind the gas station. There were no more storms, so it was dry and choked with weeds. But there was a path there, and as long as they kept quiet, Edilio's soldiers at the gas station wouldn't hear them.

Once past town they walked down the highway for a while. All the pickers would be in the fields having lunch. No one would be hauling produce to town.

The highway was eerily empty. Weeds grew tall on the shoulders of the road. Cars that had crashed there during the first few seconds of the FAYZ still sat empty, dusty, useless. Relics of a dead era. Their doors were ajar, trunk lids raised, windows often shattered. Every glove compartment and trunk had been searched by Sam's people or by scavengers for food, weapons, drugs. . . .

One of those cars had been the source of Zil's small arsenal. They'd found the guns, along with two bricks of compressed marijuana and a couple of fat Baggies stuffed with meth. Antoine had probably snorted half the powder already, stupid tweaker.

He was a problem, Zil realized. Drunks and drug addicts were always a problem. On the other hand, he could be counted on to do what he was told. And if someday Antoine just lost it totally, Zil would find someone else to take his place.

"Keep your eyes sharp," Hank said. "We don't want to be seen."

Hank was the enforcer. Weird, with him being a runty little kid. But he had a vicious streak, Hank did. There was nothing he wouldn't do for Zil. Nothing.

Lance, as usual, walked a little apart. Even now it amazed Zil that Lance was part of his core team. Lance was everything the others were not: smart, handsome, athletic, likable.

And Turk? Well, Turk gimped along on his bad leg and talked. "In the end we're going to have to be totally freak-free," he was saying. "The big ones, the dangerous freaks, we're going to have to take them out.

"Terminate them. With extreme prejudice. That's what they used to say when they meant 'assassinate.' Terminate with extreme prejudice."

Sometimes Zil wished he'd just shut up. He reminded Zil in some ways of Zil's older brother, Zane. Always talking, never shutting up.

Of course what Zane talked about was different. Mostly what Zane talked about was Zane. He had an opinion on everything. He knew everything, or thought he did.

His whole life Zil had barely gotten a word in edgewise around Zane. And when he did manage to contribute to the endless family discussions, Zil mostly earned condescending, even pitying, looks.

His parents hadn't meant it to be that way, probably. But what could they do, really? Zane was the star. So smart, so cool, so good looking. As good looking as Lance.

Zil had realized very early on that he would never, ever, ever be the star. Zane owned that role. He was charming, handsome, and ever-so-smart.

And he was so so so nice to little Zil. "You need some help with that math homework there, Zilly?"

Zilly. Rhyming with silly. Silly Zilly. And Zane the Brain.

Well, where are you now, Zane? Zil wondered. Not here, that's for sure. Zane was sixteen. He had poofed on that first day, that first minute.

Good riddance, big brother, Zil thought.

“So we take out the dangerous freaks,” Turk prattled on. “Take them out. A few we keep around basically as slaves. Like Lana. Yeah, we keep Lana. Only maybe keep her tied up or whatever so she doesn’t get away. And then the others, man, they have to find some other place to go. Simple as that. Out of Sperry Beach.”

Zil sighed. That was Turk’s latest idea: to rename the town Sperry Beach. Make it clear for everyone that Perdido Beach now belonged to the Human Crew.

“Humans only. Freaks out,” Turk said. “We’re going to rule. Can you believe Sam didn’t come after us? They’re all scared.”

Turk could carry on like this forever, talking to himself. It was like he had to go over everything ten times. Like he was arguing with someone who wasn’t answering back.

The last part of the trip was the long trudge across the rutted fields. When they reached it there would be nice, clear, clean water, at least, even if there wasn’t any food. Emily and Brother had their own well. Not enough water to take a shower or anything because the power was off to the pump, so everything had to be pumped up by hand. But you could drink all you wanted. That was rare in dry and hungry Perdido Beach.

Sperry Beach.

Maybe. Why not?

Zil led the way up the stairs. “Emily,” he called out. “It’s us.”

He knocked on the door. This was surprising because every other time Emily had seen them coming she’d pulled her usual pop-up-behind-you freak trick. Sometimes she played with them, disappearing the house and letting them wander around like fools.

Freak. She’d get hers eventually. When Zil was done with her.

Emily opened the door.

Zil’s instincts screamed danger.

He backed away, but something stopped him. Like some invisible giant had wrapped a hand around him.

The invisible hand lifted him slightly off his feet, just enough so that his toes dragged as he levitated inside, past Emily, who stepped aside with a rueful look.

“Let me go!” Zil cried. But now he could see who had him. He fell silent. Caine sat on the couch, barely moving his hand but utterly controlling Zil.

Zil’s heart pounded. If there was any freak as dangerous as Sam, it was Caine. More dangerous. There were things Sam wouldn’t do. There was nothing Caine wouldn’t do.

“Let me go!”

Caine set Zil down gently.

“Stop yelling, huh?” Caine said wearily. “I have a headache and I’m not here to hurt you.”

“Freak!” Zil spat.

“Why, yes. Yes, I am,” Caine said. “I’m the freak who can smack you against the ceiling until you’re nothing but a skin sack full of goo.”

Zil glared hatred. Freak. Filthy, mutant freak.

“Tell your boys to come on in,” Caine said.

“What do you want, freak?”

“A conversation,” Caine said. He spread his hands, placating. “Look, you little creep, if I wanted you dead, you’d be dead. You and your little crew of losers.”

Caine had changed since the first time Zil had seen him. Gone was the smart Coates blazer, the expensive haircut, the tan, and the gym-rat body. Caine looked like a scarecrow version of himself.

“Hank. Turk. Lance. ’Toine,” Zil yelled. “Come on in.”

“Have a seat.” Caine indicated the La-Z-Boy.

Zil sat.

“So,” Caine said conversationally, “I hear you’re not a big fan of my brother, Sam.”

“The FAYZ is for humans,” Zil muttered. “Not freaks.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Caine said. For a moment he seemed to fade, to draw in on himself. Weak from hunger. Or from something else. But then the freak pulled himself together and, with visible effort, plastered on his cocky expression.

“I have a plan,” Caine said. “It involves you.”

Turk, showing more nerve than Zil would have expected, said, “The Leader makes the plans.”

“Uh-huh. Well, *Leader Zil*,” Caine said with only minimal sarcasm. “You’re going to like this plan. It ends with you being in total control of Perdido Beach.”

Zil sat back in the recliner. He tried to recover some of his dignity. “Okay. I’m listening.”

“Good,” Caine said. “I need some boats.”

“Boats?” Zil repeated cautiously. “Why?”

“I kind of feel like taking an ocean cruise,” Caine said.

Sam went home for lunch. Home being Astrid’s house. He still thought of it that way, as hers not his.

Actually her own house had been burned to the ground by Drake Merwin. But she seemed to take ownership of whatever house she was in. This house was home to Astrid and her brother, Little Pete, Mary and her brother, John Terrafino, and Sam. But in everybody’s mind it was Astrid’s house.

Astrid was in the backyard when he got there. Little Pete sat on the deck steps playing with a dead handheld game player. Batteries were in very short supply. At first Astrid and Sam, both of whom knew the truth about Little Pete, were scared. No one knew what Little Pete might do if he went into a complete meltdown, and one of the few things that kept Little Pete pacified was his game.

But to Sam’s surprise, the strange little boy had adapted in the oddest way imaginable: he just kept playing. Sam had looked over his shoulder and seen a blank, black screen. But there was no knowing what Little Pete saw there.

Little Pete was severely autistic. He lived in a world of his own imagining, unresponsive, only rarely speaking.

He was also far and away the most powerful person in the FAYZ. This fact was a secret, more or less. Some suspected a part of the truth. But only a few—Sam, Astrid, Edilio—really grasped the fact that Little Pete had, to some degree, at least, created the FAYZ.

Astrid was stoking a small fire in a hibachi set atop a picnic table. She had a fire

extinguisher close at hand. One of the very few that had survived—kids had found them a lot of fun to play with in the early weeks of the FAYZ.

From the smell, Sam concluded she was cooking a fish.

Astrid heard him but did not look up as he approached. “I don’t want to have a fight,” she said.

“Me neither,” he said.

She poked at the fish with a fork. It smelled delicious, although it didn’t look too good.

“Get a plate,” Astrid said. “Have some fish.”

“That’s okay, I’m—”

“I can’t believe you lied to me,” she snapped, still poking at the fish.

“I thought you didn’t want a fight?”

Astrid shoveled the mostly cooked fish onto a serving dish and set it aside. “You weren’t going to tell us about Orsay?”

“I didn’t say I—”

“You don’t get to decide that, Sam. You’re not the only one in charge anymore. Okay?”

Astrid had an icy sort of anger. A cold fury that manifested itself in tight lips and blazing eyes and short, carefully enunciated sentences.

“But it’s okay for all of us to lie to everyone in Perdido Beach?” Sam shot back.

“We’re trying to keep kids from killing themselves,” Astrid said. “That’s a little different from you just deciding not to tell the council that there’s a crazy girl *telling* people to kill themselves.”

“So not telling *you* something is a major sin, but lying to a couple of hundred people and trashing Orsay at the same time, that’s fine?”

“I don’t think you really want to have this debate with me, Sam,” Astrid warned.

“Yeah, because I’m just a dumb surfer who shouldn’t even be questioning Astrid the Genius.”

“You know what, Sam? We created the council to take pressure off of you. Because you were falling apart.”

Sam just stared at her. Not quite believing she’d said it. And Astrid seemed shocked herself. Shocked at the venom behind her own words.

“I didn’t mean . . . ,” she started lamely, but then couldn’t find her way to explaining just what it was she didn’t mean.

Sam shook his head. “You know, even now, as long as we’ve been together it still surprises me that you can be so ruthless.”

“Ruthless? Me?”

“You will use anyone to get what you want. Say anything to get your way. Why was I ever even in charge?” He stabbed an accusing finger at her. “Because of you! Because you manipulated me into it. Why? So I would protect you and Little Pete. That’s all you cared about.”

“That’s a lie!” she said hotly.

“You know it’s the truth. And now you don’t have to bother manipulating me, you can just give me orders. Embarrass me. Undercut me. But as soon as some problem hits, guess what? It’ll be, oh, please, Sam, save us.”

“Anything I do, I do for everyone’s good,” Astrid said.

“Yeah, so you’re not just a genius now, you’re a saint.”

“You are being irrational,” Astrid said coldly.

“Yeah, that’s because I’m crazy,” Sam snapped. “That’s me, crazy Sam. I’ve been shot, beaten, whipped, and I’m crazy because I don’t like you ordering me around like your servant.”

“You’re really a jerk, you know that?”

“Jerk?” Sam shrilled. “That’s all you’ve got? I was sure you’d have something with more syllables.”

“I have plenty of syllables for you,” Astrid said, “but I’m trying not to use language I shouldn’t.”

She made a show of calming herself down. “Now, listen to me, without interrupting. Okay? You’re a hero. I get that. I believe it. But we’re trying to make the transition to having a normal society. Laws and rights and juries and police. Not one person making all the important decisions and then enforcing his will by shooting killer light beams at anyone who annoys him.”

Sam started to reply, but he didn’t trust himself. Didn’t trust himself not to say something he shouldn’t, something he might not be able to take back.

“I’m getting my stuff,” he said, and bolted for the steps.

“You don’t have to move out,” Astrid called after him.

Sam stopped halfway up the steps. “Oh, I’m sorry. Is that the voice of the council telling me where I can go?”

“There’s no point having a town council if you think you don’t have to listen to it,” Astrid said. She was using her patient voice, trying to calm the situation. “Sam, if you ignore us, *no one* will pay attention.”

“Guess what, Astrid, they’re already ignoring you. The only reason anyone pays any attention to you and the others is because they’re scared of Edilio’s soldiers.” He thumped his chest. “And even more scared of me.”

He stormed up the stairs, grimly pleased with her silence.

Justin got lost once on his way home. He ended up at the school, though, and that was okay, because he knew how to get to his house from there.

Three-oh-one Sherman. He had memorized it a long time ago. He used to know his phone number, too. He had forgotten that. But he had not forgotten 301 Sherman.

His house looked kind of funny when he saw it. The grass was way too tall. And there was a black bag all split open on the sidewalk. Old milk cartons and cans and bottles. That was all supposed to go in recycling. It sure wasn’t supposed to be on the sidewalk. His daddy would go crazy if he ever saw that.

Here’s what Daddy would say: *Excuse ME? Can someone KINDLY explain how GARBAGE is on the SIDEwalk? In what universe is THAT okay?*

That’s how Daddy talked when he got mad.

Justin walked around the trash and almost tripped over his old tricycle. He’d left it there on the front walk a long time ago. He hadn’t even put it away like he should.

Up the stairs to the door. His door. It didn’t feel like his door, really.

He pushed the lever on the heavy brass doorknob. It was stiff. He almost couldn’t do it. But then it clicked and the door opened.

He pushed it and went inside quickly, feeling guilty, like he was doing something

he shouldn't be.

The hallway was dark, but he was used to that. Everything was dark all the time now. If you wanted light, you had to go out and play in the plaza. Which was where he was supposed to be. Mother Mary would be wondering where he was.

He went into the kitchen. Usually Daddy would be in the kitchen; he was the one who mostly did the cooking. Mommy did the cleaning and laundry, and Daddy did the cooking. Fried chicken. Chili. Casserole. Beef Burgundy, but they called it Beef Burpundy after one time when Justin was eating some and burped really loud.

The memory made him smile and be sad at the same time.

No one was in the kitchen. The refrigerator door was open. Nothing was inside except an orange box with some white powder inside. He tasted some and spit it out. It tasted like salt or something.

He went upstairs. He wanted to make sure his room was still there. His footsteps sounded really loud on the stairs and it made him creep slowly, like he was sneaking.

His room was on the right. Mommy and Daddy's room was on the left. But Justin didn't go in either direction, because he noticed right then that he wasn't the only person in the house. There was a big kid in the guest room where Meemaw slept when she came to visit at Christmas.

The big kid was a boy, Justin thought, even though his hair was really long and he was turned away. He was sitting in a chair, reading a book, with his feet up on the bed.

The walls of the room had been covered with drawings and colorings that someone had taped up.

Justin froze in the doorway.

Then he slid backward, turned, and went to his room. The big kid hadn't seen him.

His room was not the same as it used to be. For one thing, there were no sheets or blankets or anything on his bed. Someone had taken his favorite blanket. The nubby blue one.

"Hey."

Justin jumped. He spun around, flushed and nervous.

The big kid was looking at him with a kind of puzzled look on his face.

"Hey, little dude, take it easy."

Justin stared at him. He didn't seem mean. There were lots of mean big kids, but this one seemed okay.

"You lost?" the big kid asked.

Justin shook his head.

"Oh. I get it. Is this your house?"

Justin nodded.

"Right. Oh. Sorry, little dude, I just needed a place to stay and no one was living here." The big kid looked around. "It's a nice house, you know? It has a nice feeling."

Justin nodded, and for some reason started to cry.

"It's cool, it's cool, don't cry. I can move out. One thing we have plenty of is houses, right?"

Justin stopped crying. He pointed. "That's my room."

"Yeah. No prob."

"I don't know where my blanket is."

"Huh. Okay, well, we'll find you a blanket."

They stared at each other for a minute. Then the big kid said, “Oh yeah, my name is Roger.”

“My name is Justin.”

“Cool. People call me the Artful Roger. Because I like to draw and paint. You know, from the Artful Dodger in *Oliver Twist*.”

Justin stared.

“It’s a book. About this kid who’s an orphan.” He waited like he expected Justin to say something. “Okay. Okay, you don’t read a lot of books.”

“Sometimes.”

“I’ll read it to you, maybe. That way, I’d be paying you back for living in your house.”

Justin didn’t know what to say to that. So he said nothing.

“Right,” Roger said. “Okay. I’m . . . um, going to go back to my room.”

Justin nodded fervently.

“If it’s okay with you, I mean.”

“It’s okay.”

TEN

51 HOURS, 50 MINUTES

“THAT’S THE LAST of the fuel,” Virtue reported mournfully. “We can run the generator for another two, three days at most. Then no more electricity.”

Sanjit sighed. “I guess it’s good we finished off the ice cream last month. It’d melt otherwise.”

“Look, *Wisdom*, it’s time.”

“How many times have I told you: Don’t call me Wisdom. That’s my slave name.”

It was a tired old joke between them. Virtue would call him Wisdom only to provoke him, when he thought Sanjit wasn’t being serious.

For a part of his life, Sanjit Brattle-Chance had been called Wisdom by just about everyone. But that part of his life had ended seven months earlier.

Sanjit Brattle-Chance was fourteen years old. He was tall, thin, slightly stooped, with black hair down to his shoulders, laughing black eyes, and skin the color of caramel.

He had been an eight-year-old orphan, a Hindu street kid in Buddhist Bangkok, Thailand, when his very famous, very rich, very beautiful parents, Jennifer Brattle and Todd Chance, had kidnapped him.

They called it adoption.

They named him Wisdom. But they, and every other adult on San Francisco de Sales Island, were gone. The Irish nanny? Gone. The ancient Japanese gardener and the three Mexican groundskeepers? Gone. The Scottish butler and the six Polish maids? Gone. The Catalan chef and his two Basque assistants? Gone. The pool guy/handyman from Arizona, and the carpenter from Florida who was working on an ornate balustrade, and the artist-in-residence from New Mexico who painted on warped sheets of steel? Gone, gone, and gone.

Who was left? The kids.

There were five children all together. In addition to “Wisdom,” they were: Virtue, who Sanjit had nicknamed “Choo”; Peace; Bowie; and Pixie. None of them had started their lives with those names. All were orphans. They came from Congo, Sri Lanka, Ukraine, and China respectively.

But only Sanjit had insisted on fighting for his birth name. *Sanjit* meant “invincible” in Hindi. Sanjit figured he was closer to being invincible than he was to being wise.

But for the last seven months he’d had to step up and at least try to make smart decisions. Fortunately he had Virtue, who was just twelve but a smart, responsible twelve. The two of them were the “big kids,” as opposed to Peace, Bowie, and Pixie who were seven, five, and three and mostly concerned with watching DVDs, sneaking candy from the storeroom, and playing too close to the edge of the cliff.

Sanjit and Virtue were at the edge of the cliff themselves now, gazing down at the crumpled, half-sunk, sluggish yacht a hundred feet below.

“There are hundreds of gallons of fuel down there,” Sanjit observed. “Tons of it.”

“We’ve been over this about a million times, Sanjit. Even if we could get that fuel

up the cliff without blowing ourselves up, we would just be delaying the inevitable.”

“When you think about it, Choo, isn’t all of life really just delaying the inevitable?”

Virtue sighed his long-suffering sigh.

He was short and round where Sanjit was angular. Virtue was black. Not *African-American* black, African black. His head was shaved bald—not his usual look, but he hadn’t liked the way his hair looked after three months without a haircut, and the best Sanjit could do for him was a buzz cut with the electric clippers. Virtue had a perpetually mournful look, like he went through life expecting the worst. Like he was distrustful of good news and morbidly gratified by bad news. Which was true.

Sanjit and Virtue balanced each other perfectly: tall and short, thin and beefy, glib and pessimistic, charismatic and dutiful, a little crazy and utterly sane.

“We are about to lose electricity. No DVDs. We have enough food, but even that won’t last forever. We need to get off this island,” Virtue said firmly.

The swagger seemed to go out of Sanjit. “Brother, I don’t know how to do it. I cannot fly a helicopter. I’ll get us all killed.”

Virtue didn’t answer for a while. There was no point in denying the truth. The small, bubble-canopied helicopter perched on the stern of the yacht was a flimsy-looking thing, like a rickety dragonfly. It could lift the five of them off the island and to the mainland. Or crash into the cliff and burn. Or crash into the sea and drown them. Or just spin out of control and chop them up like they’d been dropped into a giant food processor.

“Bowie is not getting better, Sanjit. He needs a doctor.”

Sanjit jerked his chin toward the mainland. “What makes you think there are doctors there? Every single adult disappeared off this island and off the yacht. And the phones and the satellite TV and everything stopped working. And there’s never a plane in the sky, and no one comes here to find out what’s going on.”

“Yes, I noticed all that,” Virtue said dryly. “We’ve seen boats off toward town.”

“They might just be drifting. Like the yacht. What if there are no adults over there, either? Or what if . . . I don’t know.” Sanjit grinned suddenly. “Maybe it’s nothing but man-eating dinosaurs over there.”

“Dinosaurs? You’re going with dinosaurs?”

Peace was coming across what had once been a perfectly manicured lawn and was now on its way to becoming a jungle. She had a distinctive walk, knees together, feet taking too many short steps. She had glossy black hair and worried brown eyes.

Sanjit steeled himself. Peace had been watching Bowie.

“Can I give Bowie another Tylenol? His temperature is going up again,” Peace said.

“How high?” Virtue asked.

“A hundred and two. Point two.”

“A hundred point two or a hundred and two point two?” Virtue asked a bit impatiently.

“That one. The second one.”

Virtue shot a look at Sanjit, who stared down at the grass. “It’s too early for another pill,” Virtue said. “Put a wet washcloth on his forehead. One of us will be in soon.”

"It's been two weeks," Sanjit said. "It's not just the flu, is it?"

Virtue said, "I don't know what it is. According to the book, the flu doesn't last this long. It could be . . . I don't know, like a million things."

"Like what?"

"Read the stupid book yourself, Sanjit," Virtue snapped. "Fever? Chills? It could be fifty different things. For all I know, it could be leprosy. Or leukemia."

Sanjit noticed the way his brother winced after he said that last word. "Jeez, Choo. Leukemia? That's, like, serious, right?"

"Look, all I can go by is the book. I can't even pronounce most of it. And it goes on and on, maybe this, could be that, I mean, I don't see how anyone understands it."

"Leukemia," Sanjit said.

"Hey, don't act like that's what I said, okay? It was just one possibility. I probably just thought of it because I can actually pronounce it. That's all."

They both fell silent. Sanjit stared down at the yacht and more specifically at the helicopter.

"We could try to patch the lifeboat from the yacht," Sanjit said, although he knew Virtue's answer already. They'd tried to launch the lifeboat. A rope had snagged, and the lifeboat had landed on a spur of rock. The wooden hull had been punctured, the boat had sunk and was now sloshing in between two rocks that slowly, gradually widened the extent of the damage. The lifeboat was a pile of sticks.

"It's the helicopter or nothing," Virtue said. He was not a touchy-feely kid, Virtue, but he squeezed Sanjit's thin bicep and said, "Man, I know it scares you. It scares me, too. But you're Sanjit, invincible, right? You're not that smart, but you have amazing luck."

"I'm not that smart?" Sanjit said. "You'd be flying with me. So how smart are you?"

Astrid settled Little Pete in a corner of her office at town hall. He kept his eyes focused on the long-dead handheld and continued pushing buttons, as if the game were still on. And maybe in Little Pete's head, it still was.

It was the office the mayor had used back in the old pre-FAYZ days. The office Sam had used for a while.

She was still seething from the fight with Sam. They had argued before. They were both strong-willed people. Arguments were inevitable, she supposed.

Plus, they were supposedly in love and sometimes that brought its own set of disagreements.

And they were roommates, and sometimes that caused problems.

But they had never, either of them, fought like this.

Sam had taken his few things and moved out. She supposed he would find an unoccupied house—there were plenty of those.

"I shouldn't have said that to him," she muttered under her breath as she scanned the giant list of things to do. The things that needed doing to keep Perdido Beach functioning.

The door opened. Astrid looked up, hoping and fearing that it was Sam.

It wasn't. It was Taylor.

"I didn't think you walked through doorways, Taylor," Astrid said. She regretted

the edgy tone in her voice. By now the news that Sam had moved out would have spread throughout the town. Juicy personal gossip moved at the speed of light in Perdido Beach. And there was no bigger item of gossip than a breakup between the first couple of the FAYZ.

"I know how cranky you get when I pop in," Taylor said.

"It is a little unsettling," Astrid said.

Taylor spread her hands placatingly. "See? That's why I walked in."

"Next you could work on knocking."

Astrid and Taylor didn't like each other much. But Taylor was an extremely valuable person to have around. She had the ability to instantly transport herself from place to place. To "bounce," as she called it.

The enmity between them went back to Astrid's belief that Taylor had a crush of major proportions on Sam. No doubt Taylor would figure she had a golden opportunity now.

Not Sam's type, Astrid told herself. Taylor was pretty but a bit younger, and not nearly tough enough for Sam, who, despite what he might be thinking right now, liked strong, independent girls.

Brianna would be more Sam's style, probably. Or maybe Dekka, if she were straight.

Astrid shoved the list away irritably. Why was she torturing herself like this? Sam was a jerk. But he would come around. He would realize sooner or later that Astrid was right. He would apologize. And he'd move back in.

"What is it you want, Taylor?"

"Is Sam here?"

"I'm head of the council, and you've just come bursting in and interrupting my work, so if you have something to say, why don't you just say it to me?"

"Meeooow," Taylor mocked her. "Cranky much?"

"Taylor."

"Kid says he saw Whip Hand."

Astrid's eyes narrowed. "What?"

"You know Frankie?"

"Which one?"

"The one who's a boy. He says he saw Drake Merwin walking along the beach."

Astrid stared at her. The mere mention of Drake Merwin gave Astrid chills. Drake was—had been—a boy who proved all by himself that you didn't have to be an adult to be evil. Drake had been Caine's number one henchman. He had kidnapped Astrid. Forced her with threats, with sheer terror, to ridicule her own brother to his face.

He had burned down Astrid's house.

He had also whipped Sam so badly that Sam had almost died.

Astrid did not believe in hate. She believed in forgiveness. But she had not forgiven Drake. Even with him dead, she had not forgiven him.

She hoped there was a hell. A real hell, not some metaphorical one, so that Drake could be there now, burning for all eternity.

"Drake's dead," Astrid said evenly.

"Yeah," Taylor agreed. "I'm just telling you what Frankie is saying. He's saying he saw him, whip hand and all, walking down the beach, covered with mud and dirt and

wearing clothes that didn't fit."

Astrid sighed. "This is what happens when little kids get into the alcohol."

"He seemed sober," Taylor said. She shrugged. "I don't know if he was drunk or crazy or just making trouble, Astrid, so don't blame me. This is supposed to be my job, right? I keep my eyes open and come tell Sam—or you—what's up."

"Well, thanks," Astrid said.

"I'll tell Sam when I see him," Taylor said.

Astrid knew Taylor was trying to provoke her, and yet it worked: she was provoked. "Tell him anything you want, it's still a free . . ." She had started to say *country*. "You're free to say whatever you like to Sam."

But Taylor had already bounced away, and Astrid was talking to air.

ELEVEN

47 HOURS, 53 MINUTES

THE PERDIDO BEACH Anomaly, that's what they called it on the news. The Anomaly. Or the Dome.

Not the FAYZ. Although they knew that's what the kids inside the Anomaly called it.

The parents, the family members, all the other pilgrims who gathered in a special "viewing area" at the southern end of the Dome tended to call it the fishbowl. Sometimes just the bowl. That's what it was to the ones who camped out there in tents and sleeping bags and "dreamed" of their children on the other side: a fishbowl. They knew a little of what was in the bowl, but the little fish, their children, did not know what was outside in the great big world beyond.

Construction was going on in the area. The state of California was rushing through a bypass for the highway. The old road disappeared into the bowl and reappeared on the other side, twenty miles away. It made a mess for the businesses on the coastal route.

And other businesses were springing up on the south side of the bowl. The tourists had to be fed, after all. Carl's Jr. was building a restaurant. So was Del Taco.

A Courtyard by Marriott was being thrown together at startling speed. Next to it a Holiday Inn Express had broken ground.

In her more cynical moments Connie Temple thought every construction company in the state of California saw the bowl as nothing but a huge opportunity to make money.

The politicians were enjoying it all a bit too much, too. The governor had been there half a dozen times, accompanied by hundreds of reporters. Satellite trucks were packed like sardines all up the beach.

But each day Connie noticed the number of reporters and satellite trucks was just a bit smaller than the day before. The world had gone from stunned disbelief to giddy exploitation to the mundane grind of turning a tragedy into a tourist trap.

Connie Temple—Nurse Temple, as she was inevitably called by the media—had become one of two spokespersons for the families.

That was the shorthand for all those who had children locked inside the bowl: *the families*.

Connie Temple and Abana Baidoo.

It was easier before they could know what was happening inside the bowl. At first all anyone had known was that a terrifying thing had happened. An impenetrable energy field had created a dome twenty miles across. They figured out very quickly that the nuclear power plant was at the epicenter.

There were dozens of theories about what it was, that dome. Every scientist in the world, it seemed, had made a pilgrimage to the site. Tests had been conducted, measurements taken.

They had tried drilling through it. Under it. Had flown over it. Had dug beneath it. Had approached it by submarine.

Nothing worked.

Every species of doomsayer from Luddite to End Times nut had had his say. It was a judgment. On America's technological obsession, on America's moral failure. This. That. Something else.

Then the twins had popped out. Just like that. First Emma. Then, a few minutes later, Anna. Alive and well at the exact moment of their fifteenth birthday.

They told tales of life inside the bowl. What they called the FAYZ.

Connie Temple's heart had swelled with pride for what she had learned of her son, Sam. And crashed into despair with tales of her other son, her unacknowledged child, Caine.

Then, nothing. No other kids arrived for a while.

Black despair settled over the families as they realized that it would be only these two. Months passed. Many lost faith. How could kids survive alone?

But then, the Prophetess had reached into their dreams.

One night Connie Temple had a lurid, incredible dream. She'd never had such a detailed dream. It was terrifying. The power of it took her breath away. There was a girl in that dream.

This girl spoke to her in the dream. *It's a dream*, the girl said.

Yes, just a dream, Connie had answered.

Not just a dream. Never say "just" a dream, the girl had corrected. *A dream is a window to another reality.*

Who are you? Connie had asked.

My name is Orsay. I know your son.

Connie had been about to say, *Which one?* But some instinct stopped her. The girl did not look dangerous. She looked hungry.

Do you have a message for Sam? the girl asked.

Yes, Connie said. *Tell him to let them go.*

Let them go.

Let them go off into the red sunset.

Orsay woke with a start. She kept her eyes closed because she could feel the close presence of another person. She wanted to stay asleep and private and alone for just another moment.

But the other person, the girl, would not let her.

Nerezza said, "I know you're awake, Prophetess."

Orsay opened her eyes. Nerezza was close, very close. Orsay could feel her breath on her face.

She looked into Nerezza's eyes. "I don't understand," Orsay said. "I already had that dream. A dream of a woman dreaming." She frowned with the effort of remembering. It was all so strange and wispy and unreal. Like grabbing on to fog.

"It must be a very important dream," Nerezza said.

"The first time, I was at the FAYZ wall. Now I'm seeing the same thing when I sleep. But I've already told Sam the message. Why am I seeing the same thing again?"

"There's a difference between you *delivering* a message and Sam *getting* the message, Prophetess."

Orsay sat up. Nerezza was bothering her. More and more she found herself wondering about Nerezza. But she had become dependent on the girl to guide her and

shield her and take care of her.

“You think I need to repeat the message to Sam?”

Nerezza shrugged and made a modest smile. “I’m not the Prophetess. That’s for you to decide.”

“She said to let the kids go. Into the red sunset.”

“Your vision of the great escape from the FAYZ,” Nerezza said. “The red sunset.”

Orsay shook her head. “This wasn’t a dream I reached for. I wasn’t at the FAYZ wall, I was here, asleep.”

“Your powers are expanding,” Nerezza suggested.

“I don’t like it. It’s like . . . I don’t know. Like they’re coming from somewhere. Like I’m being pushed. Manipulated.”

“No one can push you or control your dreams,” Nerezza said. “But . . .”

“But?”

“Maybe it’s very important that Sam hear you. Maybe it’s very, very important that he not stand in the way of truth.”

“I’m not a prophet,” Orsay said wearily. “I just dream. I don’t know if any of it is even real. I mean, sometimes it seems real, but other times it seems crazy.”

Nerezza took her hand. Orsay found her touch strong and cool. It sent a shiver up Orsay’s arm.

“They’re all telling lies about you, Prophetess,” Nerezza said. “You must not doubt yourself because they are busy, even now, attacking you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“They fear you. They fear your truth. They are spreading lies that you are a false prophet.”

“I don’t . . . What are you . . . I . . .”

Nerezza put her finger on Orsay’s mouth, shushing her. “No. You must be sure. You must *believe*. You must be the Prophetess. Otherwise, their lies will pursue you.”

Orsay lay still as a terrified mouse.

“The fate of false prophets is death,” Nerezza said. “But you are the true Prophetess. And you will be protected by your faith. Believe, and you will be safe. Make others believe, and you will live.”

Orsay stared in horror. What was Nerezza talking about? What was she saying? Who were these people who were telling lies about her? And who would threaten her? She wasn’t doing anything wrong.

Was she?

Nerezza called out in a loud voice tinged with impatience. “Jill! Jill! Come in here.”

The girl came in a few seconds later. She was still carrying her doll, holding on to it for all it was worth.

“Sing for the Prophetess,” Nerezza ordered.

“What song should I sing?”

“It doesn’t really matter, does it?” Nerezza asked.

So, the Siren sang:

Sunny days . . .

And Orsay stopped thinking of anything but sunny, sunny days.

TWELVE

45 HOURS, 36 MINUTES

HUNTER HAD BECOME a creature of the night. It was the only way. Animals hid during the day and came out at night. Opossums, rabbits, raccoons, mice, and the biggest prize of all: deer. The coyotes hunted at night, and Hunter had learned from them.

Squirrels and birds you had to go after in the daytime. But night was the time for Hunter to truly live up to his name.

Hunter's range was wide, from the edge of town, where raccoons and deer came to look for ways into people's backyard gardens, to the dry lands, where snakes and mice and other rodents were to be found. Along the shoreline he could kill birds, gulls, and terns. And once, he had bagged a lost sea lion.

He had responsibilities, Hunter did. He wasn't just Hunter, he was *the* hunter.

He knew the two words were the same, although he could no longer spell the word.

Hunter's head didn't work the way it used to. He knew that. He could feel it. He had murky memories of himself living a very different life. He had memories of himself raising his hand in a classroom to answer a hard question.

Hunter would not have those answers now. The answers he did have, he couldn't really explain with words. There were things he knew, things about the way you could tell if a rabbit was going to run or stand still. Whether a deer could smell you or hear you or not.

But if he tried to explain . . . words didn't come out right.

One side of his face wasn't right. It kind of didn't have any feeling in it. Like one side of his face wasn't anything but a slab of dead meat. And sometimes it felt as if that same dead-meat thing spread into his brain. But the strange mutant power, the ability to direct killing heat wherever he wanted, that remained.

He couldn't talk very well, or think very well, or form a real smile, but he could hunt. He had learned to walk quiet. He had learned to keep the breeze in his face. And he knew that in the night, in the darkest hours, the deer would head toward the cabbage field, drawn there despite the killer worms, the zekes that would kill anything that stepped foot in one of their home fields without permission.

The deer, they weren't that smart. Not even as smart as Hunter.

He walked carefully, treading on the balls of his feet, feeling through his worn boots for the twig or loose rock that would give him away. He moved as quietly as a coyote.

The doe was ahead, moving through the scrub brush, indifferent to the thorns, intent on leading her baby toward the smell of green ahead.

Close. Closer. The breeze blowing from the deer to Hunter, so that they didn't smell him.

A few more feet and he'd be close enough. First the doe. He'd kill her first. The baby wouldn't know how to react. She would hesitate. And he'd take her.

So much meat. Albert would be very excited. There hadn't been many deer lately.

Hunter heard the noise and saw the deer bolt.

They were gone before he could so much as raise his hands, let alone send the invisible killing heat.

Gone. The whole night stalking and tracking and just seconds away from a good kill, and now they were bounding away through the brush.

The noise was people, Hunter knew that right away. Talking and jostling and rattling and tripping and complaining.

Hunter was angry but also philosophical. Hunting was like that: a lot of the time you ended up wasting your time. But . . .

Hunter frowned.

That voice.

He crouched in the brush and quieted his breathing. He strained to hear. More than one person. Boys.

They were coming in his direction, skirting the zeke field.

He could see them now, dark silhouettes. Four of them. He could see them through stalks of weed and tangles of bramble. Stumbling around because they didn't know how to move like Hunter. Stumbling under the weight of heavy packs.

And that voice . . .

“. . . what he wants. That's the problem with mutant freaks like him, you can never trust a word they say.”

That voice . . .

Hunter had heard that voice before. He'd heard that voice crying out to a bloodthirsty mob.

This mutant, this nonhuman scum here, this freak Hunter, this chud deliberately murdered my best friend, Harry.

He's a killer!

Take him! Take him, the murdering mutant scum!

That voice . . .

Hunter touched his neck, feeling again the scrape of the rough rope.

He'd been hurt so bad. Head beaten. Blood running in his eyes. And his words not working . . .

Mind not . . .

Brain confused . . . so afraid . . .

Grab on to the rope!

That voice had urged, pitch rising, bellowing, the mob of kids shrieking and giddy, and the rope had tightened around Hunter's neck and pulled and pulled and he couldn't breathe, Oh God, gasping for air but no air . . .

Grab on to the rope!

They had. They had grabbed on to the rope and pulled and Hunter's neck had stretched and his feet lifted, kicking in the air, kicking and wanting to scream and his head pounding and pounding and eyes going dark . . .

Zil!

Zil and his friends.

And here they were. They didn't even know Hunter was there. They didn't see him. They weren't hunters.

Hunter crept closer. Moving to intersect their path. His powers didn't usually reach more than fifty paces or so. He had to be closer.

“. . . think you're right, Leader," one of the others was saying.

"Can we take a rest?" a third voice whined. "This stuff weighs a ton."

"We should have gone back when it was still light so we could see," Antoine griped.

"Idiot. We waited until dark for a reason," Zil snapped. "You want Sam or Brianna to catch us out in the open?"

"We have guns now."

"Which we will use when the time is right," Zil said. "Not in some open fight with Sam and Dekka and Brianna where they'll take us out."

"When the time is right," one of them echoed.

They had guns, Hunter thought. Sneaking with guns.

"Leader will decide," another voice said.

"Yeah, but . . .," someone began. Then, "Shh! Hey! I think I just saw a coyote. Or maybe it was a deer."

"Better not be a coyote."

BLAM! BLAM!

Hunter dove facedown in the dirt.

"What are you shooting at?" Zil demanded.

"I think it was a coyote!"

"Turk, you idiot!" Zil raged. "Blasting away like a moron!"

"The sound carries, Turk," Hank said.

"Give that gun to Hank," Zil snapped. "Idiot."

"Sorry. I thought . . . it looked like a coyote."

It wasn't a coyote. It was Hunter's deer.

They were moving on now. Still grumping at one another. Still complaining.

Hunter knew he could move faster and more quietly than they did. He could get close enough . . .

He could stretch out his hands and bring the killing heat to Zil's brain. Cook it. Cook it inside his skull.

Like he had Harry . . .

"An accident," Hunter moaned softly to himself. "Didn't mean to . . ."

But he had.

Tears filled his eyes. He wiped at them, but more came.

He'd been defending himself from Zil. So long ago. They'd been roommates, Zil and Harry and Hunter. A stupid argument; Hunter no longer remembered what had started it. He only remembered that Zil had threatened him with a fireplace poker. Hunter had been scared. He'd reacted. But Harry had moved between them, trying to separate them, trying to stop the fight.

And Harry had cried out. Grabbed his head.

Hunter remembered his eyes . . . the way they had turned milky . . . the light going out . . .

Hunter had seen that same dying light in the eyes of many animals since then. He was Hunter the hunter.

Of animals. Not of boys. Not even bad boys like Zil.

Taylor bounced.

Sam's house. Nighttime. Astrid asleep, Little Pete asleep, Mary out at the day care working the night shift, John asleep.

Sam's bedroom empty.

There was still trouble in paradise, Taylor thought with some satisfaction. Sam and Astrid had not made up.

She wondered if it was permanent. Sam was way hot. If Sam and Astrid had broken up for good, hey, maybe there was an opportunity.

She could wake Astrid. That would probably be the proper thing to do. But her instinct said no, especially after Astrid had chilled her earlier.

Boy, was Astrid going to freak when she found out Taylor had gone to Sam first. But this was the kind of thing you took to Sam right away. Too big for Astrid.

Well, too big for anyone, really.

Taylor thought of the fire station. On occasion Sam had stayed there. But all she found there was a sleeping Ellen, the fire chief—the fire chief with no water to spray. Ellen grumbled in her sleep.

Not for the first time Taylor considered the fact that she could be the world's greatest thief. All she had to do was think of a place and, *pop!* There she was. No sound—unless she happened to bang into something once she had materialized. In and out—no sound, no sign—and even if someone was awake, she could bounce right back out before they so much as breathed.

Yep, she could be a great thief. If there had been anything to steal. And only as long as it was small. She couldn't move anything much more than the clothes on her back when she bounced.

She bounced from the fire station to Edilio's place. Edilio now ran a sort of barracks, or whatever you called it. He had occupied a big seven-bedroom house. He had one bedroom to himself, and the other six were used to sleep two guys each. It was his quick reaction force. Half the boys and girls had automatic weapons within easy reach of their beds. One boy was awake. He jumped when he noticed Taylor.

"Go back to sleep; you're dreaming," she said with a wink. "And, dude: smiley face boxers? Really?"

For Taylor it was like changing channels on the TV. It didn't feel like she was moving as she bounced, more like the world was moving around her. It made the world seem unreal. Like a hologram or something. An illusion.

She thought of a place and, like tapping a button on the remote control, suddenly she was there.

The day care.

The beach.

Clifftop—but not Lana's room. The word was out that the Healer was extremely cranky since she'd been practically sucked into the gaiaphage. And no one in her right mind wanted to piss off the Healer.

Finally, it occurred to Taylor where Sam might go to crash on a couch if he was fighting with Astrid.

Quinn was awake, getting dressed in the dark. He seemed strangely unperturbed by Taylor popping in.

"He's here," Quinn said without preamble. "The bedroom at the top of the stairs."

"You're up early," Taylor said.

“Four A.M. Fishing is a job for early risers. Which I am. Now.”

“Well, good luck. Get a tuna or something.”

“Hey, you talking to Sam? Is this some kind of life-and-death emergency? I need to know if I’m going to get killed on my way down to the marina,” Quinn said.

“No.” Taylor waved a dismissive hand. “Not life and death. More like death and life.”

She bounced to the top of the stairs and then, with unusual consideration, knocked on the door.

No answer.

“Oh, well.”

She bounced. Sam, asleep, tangled in a mess of sheets and blankets, facedown in a pillow like he was trying to dig his way through the bed and escape the room.

She grabbed an exposed heel and shook his leg.

“Unh?”

He rolled over fast, hand raised, palm out, ready for trouble.

Taylor was not too worried. She’d done this many times before. At least half the time Sam woke up ready to fire.

“Chill, big boy,” Taylor said.

Sam sighed and rubbed his hand over his face, trying to banish sleep. Definitely nice chest and shoulders. And arms. A little skinnier than he used to be, and not as tan as he’d been back when he was a serious beach rat.

But, oh yeah, Taylor thought: he’d do.

“What is it?” Sam asked.

“Oh, nothing too big,” Taylor said. She examined her nails, having fun with the moment. “I was just out spreading the word. You know, talking to kids who were heading out to see Orsay. It’s all way nocturnal, you know?”

“And?”

“Oh, a little something came up that I thought might be more important than trashing Orsay for Astrid.”

“You mind just telling me what’s going on?” Sam grated.

So much, Sam, Taylor thought. Sooo much. But there was no point complicating things by recounting some crazy kid’s story about Drake. It could only distract from the excellence of her main piece of news.

“Remember Brittney?”

His head snapped up. “What about her?”

“She’s sitting in Howard and Orc’s living room.”

THIRTEEN

45 HOURS, 16 MINUTES

ORC HAD ENDED up crushing every couch or bed Howard had ever found for him. Not immediately, not as soon as he sat down, but within a few days.

That had never stopped Howard. He just kept on trying. The current arrangement was more bed than couch or chair. Three king-size mattresses piled one atop the other and pushed into a corner so that Orc could sit up if he chose by leaning against the walls. A plastic tarp went over the top of the mattress pile. Orc liked to drink. And sometimes when Orc had enough to drink, he might wet the bed. Sometimes he vomited all over it. And then Howard would gather the corners of the tarp and drag it into the backyard to join the pile of similar fouled sheets, broken furniture, puke-reeking mattress pads, and so on that covered most of the yard.

No one had any real idea how much Orc weighed, but he was not light, that was for sure. But not fat, either.

Orc had suffered one of the strangest and most disturbing of mutations. He'd been attacked and very badly hurt by coyotes. Very badly. Large portions of him had been eaten by the ravenous wild beasts.

But he had not died. The torn, mangled, massacred portions of his body had been replaced by a substance that looked like damp gravel. It made a soft slurry sound when he moved.

All that was left of Orc's own skin was a patch around his mouth and one cheek. It seemed unbearably delicate to Howard. Howard could see it, pink flesh turned putty-colored in the unnatural green light.

Orc was awake but just barely. And only because Howard had lied to him and told him he was out of booze.

Orc watched balefully from his perch in the corner as the girl sat in the chair Howard had dragged in from the kitchen.

"You want some water?" Howard asked her.

"Yes, please," the girl said.

Howard, hands shaking, filled a glass from the gallon jug. He handed it to her. She took it with both dirt-caked hands and raised it to her puffy lips.

She drank it all.

Normal. Perfectly normal except for the fact that there was absolutely nothing normal about this.

"You want more?" Howard asked her.

Brittney handed the glass back. "No, thank you."

Howard steadied his breath and shaking fingers and took it. Almost dropped it. Set it down and then it did topple off the edge of the table. It didn't smash, it bounced on the wood, but the sound seemed very loud, anyway. Howard flinched.

The knock at the door was comforting by contrast.

"Thank God," Howard muttered, and ran to answer it.

Sam, with Taylor. Sam looking grim. Well, that was normal enough. Poor Sammy had lost some of his happy-go-lucky surfer boy sparkle.

“Howard,” Sam said in that voice he used when he was trying to hide his contempt.

But there was more going on with Sam. Even shaking with fear, Howard saw it. Something strange about the way he was reacting.

“Hey, thanks for stopping by,” Howard said. “I’d offer you some tea and cookies, but all we have is boiled mole and artichokes. Plus, we kind of have a dead girl in the living room.”

“A dead girl?” Sam said, and there it was again. The wrong reaction. Sam was too calm and too grim.

Of course Taylor had told him. Duh. Of course. That’s why Sam wasn’t surprised. Except there was something still off about Sam’s reaction. Howard had maintained his position by being able to read people pretty well. He’d kept on Orc’s good side for a long time, and managed, despite everything, to wrangle a place on the town council. Despite the fact that Sam surely suspected Howard was the one selling most of the illegal substances in Perdido Beach.

Sam stood there looking at Brittney. Who looked right back at him. Like maybe Sam was a teacher getting ready to ask her a question.

Brittney, can you explain the significance of the Missouri Compromise?

No? Well, then, young lady, you need to go back and reread the assignment.

Oh, and by the way: why are you not dead?

“Hello, Brittney,” Sam said.

“Hi, Sam,” Brittney said.

There was mud even in her braces, Howard noticed. Washed out only a little by the water. He could see a tiny piece of gravel wedged between chrome wires next to Brittney’s left canine.

Weird thing to notice, Howard thought.

Yeah, that’s what’s weird. Not that she’s sitting here chatting.

“How did you get here?” Sam asked.

Brittney shrugged. “I guess I walked. I don’t remember.”

Orc spoke for the first time in his low grumble. “She was standing on the porch when I stepped out to take a whiz.”

Sam glanced at Howard, who nodded.

“Do you know where you are?” Sam asked her.

“Sure. I’m . . . ,” Brittney began. She frowned. Then the frown line disappeared. “I’m here.”

“You know all of us?”

She nodded slowly. “Sam. Howard. Taylor. Orc. Tanner.”

“Tanner?” Taylor blurted.

That rocked Sam back on his heels. Howard was perplexed.

“Who is Tanner?”

“One of the littles who . . . ,” Taylor began, then bit her lip. “He’s her little brother. He was at the day care when . . .”

The pieces fell into place for Howard. He’d forgotten the name. Tanner, one of the preschoolers killed at what people called the Thanksgiving Battle, or the Battle of Perdido Beach. Coyotes mad with fear. Undisciplined gunfire. Drake and Caine and Sam using all their powers.

“Where is Tanner?” Sam asked softly.

Brittney smiled at a space between Howard and Taylor. “Right where he always is.”

“Brittney, do you know what’s happened?” Sam obviously didn’t know quite how to ask the question. “Brittney, do you remember being at the power plant? Caine and Drake came—”

Her scream made everyone jump, even Orc.

A wild shriek, a shocking loud sound, full of something that could only be hatred.

“The demon!” she screamed. An animal howl followed, a sound that rose and lifted the hairs on the back of Howard’s neck and made his insides feel watery.

Suddenly she was silent.

She held up one arm. She stared at it. Like it wasn’t part of her, like it was there and she couldn’t understand why. Her forehead creased in puzzlement.

In the shocked quiet, Sam said, “Brittney, can you tell us—”

“I think I’m sleepy,” Brittney said, dropping her arm back down to her side.

“Okay,” Sam said. “I’ll, um . . . we’ll find someplace for you to stay the night.” He looked at Taylor. “Bounce over to Brianna’s. Tell her we’re coming.”

Howard almost laughed. Brianna would not be thrilled by this. But Sam was reaching out to someone who was unquestioningly loyal to him.

“This doesn’t leave this room,” Sam said.

“More secrets, Sammy?” Howard said.

Sam winced. But he held his ground. “People are scared enough,” he said.

“You’re asking a lot, Sammy boy,” Howard said. “After all, I’m on the council. You’re asking me to keep this from my fellow council members. I don’t need Astrid mad at me.”

“I know about your little booze-and-drug operation,” Sam said. “I’ll mess up your life.”

“Ah,” Howard said smoothly.

“Yeah. I need some time to figure this all out,” Sam said. “I don’t need people talking about . . . about anything.”

Howard laughed. “You mean . . .”

“Don’t,” Sam snapped. “Don’t even say it.”

Howard laughed and crossed his heart. “I swear. I won’t be the first to use the ‘Z’ word.” Then in a stage whisper he said, “Zom—beee.”

“She’s not a zombie, Howard. Don’t be an idiot. “She obviously has some kind of power that lets her regenerate. If you think about it, it’s not that different from what Lana does. After all, she’s physically back together, and she was torn up when we buried her.”

Howard laughed. “Uh-huh. Except somehow I don’t remember Lana ever crawling her way up out of a grave.”

Sam headed toward Brianna’s house. Brittney walked along behind him. Perfectly normal, Howard thought, watching them go. Just another stroll with a dead person.

Little Pete woke up.

Dark. Dark was good. Light filled his brain with too much.

It was quiet. Good. Sounds made his head hurt.

He had to be quiet himself or someone would come and bring light and noise and touching and pain and panic and it would all come at him like a tidal wave a million feet high, spinning him, crushing him, smothering him.

Then he would have to shut down. He would have to turn it all off. Hide from it. Go back to the game, back to the game, because inside the game, it was dark and quiet.

But for now, with no light and no sound and no touch, he could hold on, for just a moment, to . . . himself.

Hold on to . . . to nothing.

He knew where the game was. Just there, on the nightstand, waiting. Calling to him so softly so as not to upset him.

Nemesis, it called him.

Nemesis.

Lana had not slept. She had read and read, trying to lose herself in the book. She had a small candle, not much, but a rare thing in the FAYZ.

She lit a cigarette in the candle and sucked the smoke into her lungs. Amazing, really, how quickly she had become addicted.

Cigarettes and vodka. The bottle was half empty, sitting there on the floor beside her bed. It hadn't worked, hadn't helped her sleep.

Lana searched her mind for the gaiaphage. But it was not with her. For the first time since she had crawled up out of that mine shaft.

It was done with her, for now, at least.

That fact should have given her peace. But Lana knew it would return when it needed her, that it would still be able to use her. She would never be free.

"What did you do, evil old troll?" Lana asked dreamily. "What did you do with my power?"

She told herself that the monster, the gaiaphage . . . the Darkness . . . could only use the Healer to heal, and that no evil could come from that.

But she knew better. The Darkness did not reach out through the back doors of time and space and siphon off her power for no reason.

For days it had been inside her mind, using her to heal.

To heal *who*?

She dropped her hand to the vodka bottle, raised it to her lips, and swallowed the liquid fire.

To heal *what*?

FOURTEEN

30 HOURS, 25 MINUTES

ON THE FIRST day of the disappearance—or, as Sanjit secretly thought of it, the deliverance—he and his brothers and sisters had searched the entire estate.

Not one single adult had been found. No nanny, no cook, no groundskeepers—which was a relief because one of the assistant groundskeepers seemed like kind of a perv—and no maids.

They stayed together as a group, Sanjit cracking jokes to keep everyone’s spirits up.

“Are we sure we want to find anyone?” he’d asked.

“We need grown-ups,” Virtue had argued in his pedantic way.

“For what, Choo?”

“For . . .” This had stumped Virtue.

“What if someone gets sick?” Peace had asked.

“You feel okay?” Sanjit asked her.

“I guess so.”

“See? We’re fine.”

Despite the undeniable creepiness of the situation, Sanjit had been more relieved than worried. He didn’t like having to respond to the name “Wisdom.” He didn’t like being told what to do just about every minute of the day. He didn’t like rules. And then, suddenly, no rules.

He’d had no answer to the repeated questions from the others as to what had happened. All that seemed clear was that all the adults were gone. And the radio and phones and satellite TV were dead.

Sanjit figured he could live with that.

But the little kids, Peace, Bowie and Pixie, had been scared from the beginning. Even Choo, whom Sanjit had never seen upset, had been creeped out.

The simple silence of the empty island was oppressive. The huge house, with some rooms the kids had never even seen, rooms no one had ever used, seemed as big and as dead as a museum. And searching through the butler’s home, through Nanny’s upstairs suite, through the bungalows and dorms, left them feeling like burglars.

But everyone’s mood had improved when they returned to the main house and opened the walk-in freezer in search of a long-overdue dinner that first evening.

“They *do* have ice cream!” Bowie accused. “They’ve had ice cream all along. They lied to us. They have tons of ice cream.”

There were twelve big five-gallon tubs of ice cream. Sixty gallons of ice cream.

Sanjit had patted Bowie on the shoulder. “Are you really surprised, little guy? Cook weighs three hundred pounds, and Annette isn’t far behind.” Annette was the maid who cleaned the children’s rooms.

“Can we have some?”

Sanjit was surprised to be asked for permission that first time. He was the oldest, but it had not really occurred to him that he was in charge.

“You’re asking me?”

Bowie shrugged. "I guess you're the grown-up for now."

Sanjit smiled. "Then, as temporary adult, I decree that we have ice cream for dinner. Grab one of those tubs and five spoons and we don't stop till we hit the bottom."

That had kept everyone happy for a while. But at last Peace raised her hand, like she was in school.

"You don't have to raise your hand," Sanjit said. "What's up?"

"What's going to happen?"

Sanjit had considered this for a few seconds. He was not normally a thoughtful person, he knew that. He was normally a joker. Not a clown, but not someone who took life too seriously. Taking life seriously was Virtue's job.

Back in the days when he'd lived on the Bangkok streets and alleyways there were endless dangers: sweatshop bosses who would try to kidnap you and put you to work fourteen hours a day, cops who would beat you, shopkeepers who would chase you away from their fruit displays with bamboo sticks, and always the pimps who would turn you over to strange foreign men for their own purposes.

But Sanjit had always tried to laugh and not cry. No matter how hungry, how scared, how sick, he'd never given up like some of the kids he saw. He hadn't become brutal, though he surely had survived by stealing. And as he aged on those wondrously exciting, terrifying, never-dull streets he'd nurtured a certain swagger, a certain attitude that made him stand out. He had learned to live each day, not to worry too much about the next. If he had food for the day, if he had a box to sleep in, if the rags on his back weren't crawling with too many lice, he was happy.

"Well, we have plenty of food," Sanjit said, as four faces looked to him for guidance. "So, I guess what we do is just kind of hang out. Right?"

And that was answer enough for that first day. They were all weirded out. But they had always pretty much taken care of one another, not relying too much on the indifferent adults around them. So they had brushed teeth and tucked each other into bed that first night; Sanjit the last to go to his room.

Pixie had come in and slept with him. Then Peace had come, holding a blanket to tearful eyes. And later Bowie, too.

When morning came they woke on schedule. They met for breakfast, which consisted largely of toast with lots of forbidden butter and forbidden jelly and thick slatherings of forbidden Nutella.

They went outside afterward, and that's when they noticed the strange grinding noise.

They had rushed to the cliff's edge. A hundred feet down they saw the yacht. The yacht—a huge, beautiful, sleek white boat so big, it had its own helicopter—had run aground. The knife-sharp prow was crumpled, wedged between huge boulders. Each slight swell lifted the ship and then let it grind slowly back down.

The yacht belonged to their parents. They hadn't even known it was coming, hadn't known their parents were nearby.

"What happened?" Peace asked in a tremulous voice.

Virtue answered, "It ran into the island. It must have been on its way . . . and then . . . then it just ran into the island."

"Why didn't Captain Rocky stop it?"

“Because he is gone,” Sanjit had said. “Just like all the other grown-ups.”

Somehow at that moment it had hit Sanjit. He’d never had much affection for the two actors who called themselves his mother and father, but seeing their yacht smashed heedlessly against the rocks had brought it home.

They were alone on the island. Maybe alone in the whole world.

“Someone will come for us,” Sanjit had said, not quite sure he believed it.

So they had waited. Days. And then weeks.

And then they had begun to ration food. There was still plenty of that left. The island was stocked for parties that sometimes included a hundred guests, all coming in by helicopter or private jet.

Sanjit had seen some of the parties. Lights strewn everywhere, all kinds of famous people in fancy clothes drinking and eating and laughing too loud while the kids were kept in their rooms, occasionally hauled out to say good evening and listen to people talk about how great it was that their parents had been so generous, rescuing “these kids.”

Sanjit had never considered himself rescued.

There was still a lot of food left. But the diesel fuel that ran the generator was running out despite all their efforts to conserve.

And now there was Bowie. Sanjit could usually manage to sidestep responsibility. But he couldn’t let Bowie die.

There were only two ways on or off the island. By small boat—and they had no boat. Or helicopter. And that they had. Sort of.

The time had come to seriously examine the most impossible option.

Sanjit and Virtue found rope in the groundskeeper’s shed. Sanjit anchored one end of the rope around the not-very-secure trunk of a sapling. He hurled the other end out into the void.

“Probably pull the tree down on our heads, huh?” He laughed.

Sanjit and Virtue went down. The rest were told to stay put, stay away from the cliff, and wait.

Twice Sanjit lost his footing and slid down on his butt till he managed to stop by digging his heel into a shrub or rock outcropping. The rope ended up being no use at all for the descent. It lay off to the right of the path, far out of reach.

The boat, the *Fly Boy Two*, was still there, battered, rusting, algae sliming around the waterline. It wallowed in the gentle swell, its bow seemingly hanging on for dear life to the rocks it had hit months earlier.

“How do we get onto the boat?” Virtue asked when they had reached the bottom.

“That’s a really good question, Choo.”

“I thought you were invincible, Sanjit.”

“Invincible, not fearless,” Sanjit said.

Virtue made his wry smile. “If we climb up on that rock, we can maybe grab the guardrail on the bow and pull ourselves up.”

From down here the boat was far larger. And the gentle motion that rocked the crumpled bow back and forth looked a lot more dangerous.

“Okay, little brother, I’m going to do this, okay?” Sanjit said.

“I’m a better climber than you are.”

Sanjit put his hand on his shoulder. “Choo, my brother, there aren’t going to be a

lot of times when I'm brave and self-sacrificing. Enjoy this one. It may be the last you ever see."

To forestall further argument Sanjit climbed up onto the rock spur and made his way carefully, cautiously, to the end, sneakers slipping on rock coated with algae and salt spray. He leaned with one hand against the white hull. He was at eye level with the deck.

He grabbed the frail-looking stainless-steel rail with both hands and pulled himself up until his elbows were at ninety-degree angles. The danger zone was just below him and if he let go, he'd be lucky to survive with just a crushed foot.

His scramble aboard the boat wasn't pretty, but he made it with only a scraped elbow and a bruised thigh. He lay panting, facedown on the teak deck for a few seconds.

"Do you see anything?" Virtue called up.

"I saw my life flashing before my eyes, does that count?"

Sanjit stood up, bending his knees to roll with the boat. No sound of human activity. No sign of anyone. Not exactly a surprise, but in some dark corner of his mind, Sanjit had almost expected to see bodies.

He placed his hands on the rails, looked down at Virtue's anxious face, and said, "Ahoy there, matey."

"Go look around," Virtue said.

"That's 'Go look around, Captain,' to you."

Sanjit strolled with false nonchalance to the first door he found. He'd been on the yacht twice before, back when Todd and Jennifer were still around, so he knew the layout.

It was the same eerie feeling he'd had that first day of the big disappearance: he was going into places he didn't belong, and there was no one to stop him.

Silence. Except for the groan of the hull.

Creepy. A ghost ship. Like something out of *Pirates of the Caribbean*. But very posh. Very nice crystal glasses. Little statues stuck in alcoves. Framed movie posters. Photos of Todd and Jennifer with some kind of famous old actor.

"Hello?" he called, and instantly felt like an idiot.

He went back to the bow. "No one home, Choo."

"It's been months," Virtue said. "What did you think? They were all down here playing cards and eating potato chips?"

Sanjit found a ladder and hung it over the side. "Come aboard," he said.

Virtue climbed up carefully and instantly Sanjit felt a little better. Shielding his eyes he could see Peace up at the top of the cliff, looking down anxiously. He waved to show everything was okay.

"So, I don't suppose you've found a manual for the helicopter lying around?"

"*Helicopters for Dummies*?" Sanjit joked. "No. Not exactly."

"We should look."

"Yeah. That would be great," Sanjit said, momentarily losing his jaunty sense of humor as he looked up at Peace on the cliff. "Because just between you and me, Choo, the idea of trying to fly a helicopter up out of here scares the pee out of me."

Six rowboats set out from the marina under bright stars. Three kids in each boat. Two

pulling oars, one at the tiller. The oars stirred phosphorescence with each stroke.

Quinn's fleet. Quinn's armada. The Mighty Quinn Navy.

Quinn didn't have to take a turn at the oars; after all, he was the boss of the whole fishing operation, but he found he kind of liked it.

They used to just motor out and drop their lines and trail their nets. But gasoline, like everything else in the FAYZ, was in short supply. They had a few hundred gallons of marine fuel left at the marina. That would have to be saved for emergencies, not for daily work like fishing.

So it was oars and sore backs. A long, long day that started long before dawn. It took an hour to get everything ready in the morning, the nets stowed after they'd been dried, the bait, hooks, lines, poles, the boats themselves, the day's food supply, water, life jackets. Then it took another hour of working the oars to get out far enough.

Six boats, three armed with poles and lines, and three dragging nets. They took turns because everyone hated the nets. It was more rowing, dragging the nets back and forth slowly across the water. Then hauling the nets up into the boat and picking fish and crabs and assorted debris out of the cords. Hard work.

Later, in the afternoon, a second batch of boats would go out to fish mostly for the blue water bats. The water bats were a mutated species that lived in caves during the night and flew out into the water during daylight. The only use for the bats was to feed the zekes, the killer worms that lived in the vegetable fields. The bats were the tribute kids paid the zekes. The economy of Perdido Beach was doubly dependent on Quinn's efforts.

Today Quinn was with a net boat. He'd let himself go for a long time, getting more and more out of shape in the first months after FAYZ fall. Now he was kind of enjoying the fact that his legs and arms, shoulders, and back were getting stronger. It helped, of course, that he had a better supply of protein than most people.

Quinn worked a long morning, him and Big Goof and Katrina, the three of them having a pretty good day of it. They hauled up a number of small fish and one huge one.

"I thought for sure that was the net being snagged," Big Goof said. He stared happily at the almost-five-foot-long fish in the bottom of the boat. "I believe that's the biggest fish we ever landed."

"I think it's a tuna," Katrina opined.

None of them really knew what some of the fish were. They were either edible or not, either had a lot of bones or didn't. This fish, slowly gasping his last, looked very edible.

"Maybe so," Quinn said mildly. "Big, anyway."

"Took all three of us to haul him aboard," Katrina said, laughing happily at the memory of the three of them slipping, sliding, and cursing.

"Good morning's work," Quinn said. "So, guys. You think it's about time for brunch?" It was an old joke by now. By mid-morning everyone was starving. They'd come to call it brunch.

Quinn dug out the silver coach's whistle he used to communicate across his scattered fleet. He blew three long blasts.

The other boats all dug in their oars and began heading toward Quinn's boat. Everyone found new energy when it was time to assemble for brunch.

There were no waves, no storms, even here, a mile offshore; it was like lolling in the middle of a placid mountain lake. From this far out it was possible to believe that Perdido Beach looked normal. From this far out it was a lovely little beach town sparkling in the sun.

They broke out the hibachi and the wood they'd kept dry, and Katrina, who had amazing skill with these things, started a fire going. One of the girls in another boat cut off the tail section of the tuna, scaled it, and sliced it into purple-pink steaks.

In addition to the fish they had three cabbages and some cold, boiled artichokes. The smell of the fish cooking was like a drug. No one could really think of anything else until it had been eaten.

Then they sat back, with the boats loosely roped together, and talked, taking a break before they spent another hour fishing and then faced the long row back into town.

"I bet that was tuna," a boy said.

"I don't know what it was, but it was good. I wouldn't mind eating another few slices of that."

"Hey, we have plenty of octopus," someone joked. Octopi weren't something you had to catch; they sort of caught themselves, a lot of the time. And no one liked them very much. But everyone had eaten them on more than one occasion.

"Octopus this," someone said, accompanying it with a rude gesture.

Quinn found himself staring off to the north. Perdido Beach was at the extreme southern end of the FAYZ, snugged right up against the barrier. Quinn had been with Sam when in the first days of the FAYZ they'd fled Perdido Beach and headed up the coast looking for a way out.

Sam's plan had originally been to follow the barrier all the way. Foot by foot, over water and land, looking for an escape hatch.

That had not quite happened. Other events had intervened.

"You know what we should have done?" Quinn said, barely realizing that he was speaking out loud. "We should have explored all that area up there. Back when we still had plenty of gas."

Big Goof said, "Explore what? You mean, looking for fish?"

Quinn shrugged. "It's not like we've exactly run out of fish down here. We almost always seem to catch some. But don't you ever kind of wonder if there's better fishing farther north?"

Big Goof considered it carefully. He was not the sharpest pencil in the box; strong and sweet, but not very curious. "That's a long row."

"Yeah, it would be," Quinn acknowledged. "But I'm saying, if we still had gas."

He pulled the visor of his floppy hat low and considered taking just a brief snooze. But no, that wouldn't do. He was in charge. For the first time in his life, Quinn had responsibility. He wasn't going to screw that up.

"There are islands up there," Katrina said.

"Yep." Quinn yawned. "I wish we'd checked all that out. But Goof is right: it's a long, long row."

FIFTEEN

29 HOURS, 51 MINUTES

BRIANNA TOOK BRITTNEY in, as Sam asked. She gave her a room.

Sam had instructed her not to tell anyone. She was fine with that.

Brianna respected Astrid and Albert and the others on the council, but she and Sam, hey, they had been in battle together many times. He had saved her life. She had saved his.

Jack was also at Brianna's, but she didn't think that was really Sam's business, or anyone's. Jack was doing a little better. The flu seemed to have a short shelf life, just one of those twenty-four-hour things. Jack had stopped coughing quite so spectacularly. The walls and floor were safe again. Besides, one of Jack's charming quirks was that if it wasn't on a computer screen, he pretty much didn't see it. So she doubted he would notice their new roomie unless she came with a USB port in her head.

Sam had also asked Brianna not to do anything other than feed Brittney, maybe help her wash up a little, though the closest thing to a shower now was walking into the surf.

"Don't ask her questions," Sam had said quite clearly.

"Why not?"

"Because we may not want to hear the answers," he had muttered. Then, he amended that. "Look, we don't want to stress her, okay? Something very weird has happened. We don't know if this is some kind of freak thing or something else. Either way, she's been through a lot."

"You think?" Brianna had said. "What with being dead and buried and all?"

Sam sighed, but tolerantly. "If anyone's going to question her, it probably shouldn't be me. And definitely not you."

Brianna knew what he was saying. Despite keeping Brittney under wraps, Sam probably figured it would all have to come out soon enough. And he probably figured if anyone was going to question Brittney, it should probably be Astrid.

Well . . .

"So, Brittney, how are you?" Brianna asked. She had been up for a few minutes, which was a long time for Brianna. In a few minutes she had been able to run down to the shore, fill a gallon jug with salt water, and run back to the house.

Brittney was still in the room where Brianna had put her. Still on the bed. Still lying there, eyes open. Brianna wondered if she'd slept at all.

Did zombies sleep?

Brittney sat up in the bed. Brianna set the water down on the nightstand.

"You want to wash up?"

The sheets were smeared with mud, which wasn't much dirtier than they usually were. It was amazingly hard to get things clean by swooshing them around in the ocean, even when you could swoosh at super speed like Brianna.

Things still came out kind of dirty. And crusty with salt. And scratchy. And they gave you rashes.

Brittney sort of smiled, showing her dirty braces. But she showed no interest in cleaning up.

“Okay, let me help out.” Brianna took a dirty old T-shirt off the floor and dipped it in the water. She rubbed at some mud on Brittney’s shoulder.

The mud came off.

But Brittney’s skin did not come clean.

Brianna rubbed some more. More mud came off. No clean skin showed through.

Brianna felt a chill. Brianna wasn’t scared of much. She had grown accustomed to the fact that her super speed rendered her almost invulnerable, unstoppable. She had gone toe-to-toe with Caine and walked away laughing. But this was just plain disturbing.

Brianna swallowed hard. She wiped again. And again, the same thing.

“Okay,” Brianna said softly. “Brittney, I think maybe it’s, like, time for you to tell me what’s going on with you. Because I’d like to know whether you’re sitting there thinking you’d like to eat my brain.”

“Your brain?” Brittney asked.

“Yeah. I mean, come on, Brittney. You’re a zombie. Let’s face it. I’m not supposed to use that word, but someone who rises from the dead and climbs up out of their grave and walks among us: that’s a zombie.”

“I’m not a zombie,” Brittney said calmly. “I’m an angel.”

“Ah.”

“I called upon the Lord in my tribulation and he heard me. Tanner went to Him and asked Him to save me.”

Brianna considered that for a moment. “Well, I guess it’s better than being a zombie.”

“Give me your hand,” Brittney said.

Brianna hesitated. But she told herself if Brittney tried to bite it, she could snatch it back before she sank her teeth in.

Brianna extended her hand. Brittney took it. She pulled it toward her, but not toward her mouth. Instead, she placed Brianna’s hand against her chest.

“Do you feel it?”

“Feel what?” Brianna asked.

“The quiet. I have no heartbeat.”

Brianna felt cold. But not as cold as Brittney. Brianna kept her hand in place. She felt no vibration.

No heartbeat.

“I don’t breathe, either,” Brittney said.

“No?” Brianna whispered.

“God saved me,” Brittney said earnestly. “He heard my prayers and He saved me to do His will.”

“Brittney, you’re . . . you were down there in the ground for a long time.”

“Very long,” Brittney said. She frowned. The frown made creases in the mud that smeared her face. The mud that could not be cleaned off.

“So, you must be hungry, right?” Brianna asked, returning to her primary concern.

“I don’t need to eat. Before, I took water. I swallowed it, but I didn’t feel it go down. And I realized . . .”

“What?”

“That I didn’t need it.”

“Okay.”

Brittney smiled her metal smile again. “So, I don’t want to eat your brain, Brianna.”

“That’s good,” Brianna said. “So . . . what *do* you want to do?”

“The end is coming, Brianna,” Brittney said. “It’s why my prayers were answered. It’s why Tanner and I came back.”

“You and . . . okay. When you say ‘the end,’ what’s that mean?”

“The prophet is already among us. She will lead us from this place. She will lead us to our Lord, out of bondage.”

“Good,” Brianna said dryly. “I just hope the food’s better there.”

“Oh, it is,” Brittney said enthusiastically. “It’s cake and cheeseburgers and everything you would ever want.”

“So you’re the prophet?”

“No, no,” Brittney said with modestly downcast eyes. “I am not the prophet. I am an angel of the Lord. I am the avenger of the Lord, come to destroy the evil one.”

“Which evil one? We have a few. Are we talking pitchforks?”

Brittney smiled, but this time her braces did not show. It was a cool, wintry smile, a secret smile. “This demon does not have a pitchfork, Brianna. The evil one comes with a whip.”

Brianna considered this for several seconds.

“I have someplace I have to be,” Brianna said. She left as quickly as only she could.

“What do you want for your birthday?” John asked Mary.

Mary shook poop from a napkin that was doubling as a diaper. The feces dropped into a plastic trash can that would be taken out later and buried in a trench dug by Edilio’s backhoe.

“I’d like to not do this, that would be a great birthday,” Mary said.

“I’m serious,” John said reproachfully.

Mary smiled and inclined her head toward his, forehead to forehead. It was their version of a hug. A private thing between the two members of the Terrafino family. “I’m serious, too.”

“You should definitely take the day off,” John said. “I mean, you have to get through the whole poof thing. People say it’s kind of intense.”

“Sounds like it,” Mary said vaguely. She dropped the diaper into a second bucket, this one half filled with water. The water smelled of bleach. The bucket rested in a little red wagon so that it could be hauled to the beach. There, laundry workers would do an indifferent job of washing it in the ocean and send it back still stained and itchy with sand and salt.

“You’re ready for it, right?” John asked.

Mary glanced at the watch. Francis’s watch. She’d taken it off while she was washing. How many hours left? How many minutes until the big one-five?

Mary nodded. “I read the instructions. I talked to a person who’d been through it. I did everything I was supposed to.”

“Okay,” John said unhappily. Out of nowhere, John said, “You know Orsay is lying, right?”

“I know she cost me Francis,” Mary snapped. “That’s all I need to know.”

“Yeah! See? Look what happened from him listening to her.”

“I wonder how Jill is doing with them,” Mary wondered aloud. She was on to the next diaper. With Francis gone and no one entirely trained to take over for him, Mary had even more work than usual. And not the best work, either.

“She’s probably okay,” John said.

“Yeah, but if Orsay is this big liar, maybe I shouldn’t have let her take Jill,” Mary said.

John seemed baffled by that, not sure how to respond. He blushed and looked down.

“I’m sure she’s fine,” Mary said quickly, interpreting his look as concern for Jill.

“Yeah. Just because Orsay is, like, lying, that doesn’t mean she’d be bad to Jill,” John said.

“Maybe I’ll go check on her,” Mary said. “In my spare time.” She laughed. It was a running joke that had long since stopped being funny.

“You probably should just stay away from Orsay,” John said.

“Yeah?”

“I mean, I don’t know. I just know Astrid says Orsay’s making everything up.”

“If Astrid said it, it must be true,” Mary said.

John did not answer, just looked pained.

“Okay,” Mary said, “this load can go down to the beach.”

John seemed relieved to have a chance to get away. Mary heard him leave, wagon wheels squeaking. She glanced into the main room. Three helpers there, only one of them really motivated or trained. But they could handle things for a few minutes.

Mary washed her hands as well as she could and dried them by wiping them on her loose-fitting jeans.

Where would Orsay be at this time of day?

Mary stepped outside and took a deep breath of air that didn’t smell like pee or poop. She closed her eyes, enjoying the sensation. When she opened them again she was surprised to find Nerezza walking quickly toward her as though they’d arranged to meet right now and Nerezza was a bit late. “You’re—,” Mary began.

“Nerezza,” the girl reminded her.

“Yeah. That’s right. It’s weird, but I don’t remember having really met you before the other day when you came and got Jill.”

“Oh, you’ve seen me around,” Nerezza said. “But I’m no one important. Everyone knows you, though, Mary. Mother Mary.”

“I was just coming to look for Orsay,” Mary said.

“Why?”

“I wanted to check on Jill.”

“That’s not why,” Nerezza said, almost smiling.

Mary’s expression hardened. “Okay. Francis, that’s why. I don’t know what Orsay told him, but you must know what he did. I can’t believe that’s what Orsay wanted. But you need to stop it, not let it happen again.”

“Stop what from happening?”

“Francis stepped out. He killed himself.”

Nerezza’s dark eyebrows climbed. “He did? No. No, Mary. He went to his mother.”

“That’s stupid,” Mary said. “No one knows what happens if you step out during the poof.”

Nerezza put her hand on Mary’s arm. It was a surprising gesture. Mary wasn’t sure she liked it, but she didn’t shake it off. “Mary: The Prophetess does know what happens. She sees it. Every night.”

“Oh? Because I’ve heard she’s lying. Making it all up.”

“I know what you’ve heard,” Nerezza said in a pitying voice. “Astrid says the Prophetess is lying. But you must know that Astrid is a very religious person, and very, very proud. She thinks she knows all the truth there is to know. She can’t stand the idea that someone else might be chosen to reveal the truth.”

“I’ve known Astrid a long time,” Mary said. She was about to deny what Nerezza had said. But it was true, wasn’t it? Astrid *was* proud. She had very definite beliefs.

“Listen to the words of the Prophetess,” Nerezza said, as though imparting a secret. “The Prophetess has seen that we will all suffer a time of terrible tribulation. This will come very soon. And then, Mary, *then* will come the demon and the angel. And in a red sunset we will be delivered.”

Mary held her breath, mesmerized. She wanted to say something snarky, something dismissive. But Nerezza spoke with absolute conviction.

“Come tonight, Mary, in the hours before dawn. Come and the Prophetess will speak to you herself, I can promise that. And then, I believe, you will see the truth and goodness inside her.” She smiled and crossed her arms over her chest. “She’s like you, Mary: strong and good, and filled with love.”

SIXTEEN

16 HOURS, 42 MINUTES

IN THE HOURS of darkest night, Orsay climbed onto the rock. She had done it many times, so she knew where to place her feet, where to grab on with her hands. It was slick in places and she sometimes worried that she would fall into the water.

She wondered if she would drown. It wasn't very deep, but what if she hit her head on the way down. Unconscious in the water, with the foam filling her mouth.

Little Jill, wearing a fresh dress and no longer clutching her doll quite so tightly, climbed behind her. She was surprisingly nimble.

Nerezza was right behind her as she climbed, spotting her, keeping an eagle eye on her.

"Careful, Prophetess," Nerezza murmured. "You too, Jill."

Nerezza was a pretty girl. Much prettier than Orsay. Orsay was pale and thin and seemed almost concave, like she was hollowed out, caving in on herself. Nerezza was healthy and strong, with flawless olive skin and lustrous black hair. Her eyes were incongruously bright, an amazing shade of green. Sometimes it seemed to Orsay that her eyes almost glowed in the dark.

She was fierce in defending Orsay. A small knot of kids was just at the base of the rock, already waiting. Nerezza had turned back to speak to them. "Lies are being spread by the council because they don't want anyone to know the truth."

The supplicants gazed up with faces full of hope and expectation. They wanted to believe that Orsay was the true prophet. But they had heard things. . . .

"But why wouldn't they want us to know?" someone asked.

Nerezza made a pitying expression. "People who have power usually like to hold on to it." Her tone of knowing cynicism seemed to be effective. Kids nodded, mimicking Nerezza's older, cooler, wiser expression.

Orsay could almost not remember what life had been like before Nerezza became her friend and protector. She'd never even noticed Nerezza around town. Which was weird because she wasn't the kind of girl you overlooked.

Then again, Orsay herself was relatively new in town. She'd been living with her park ranger father in the Stefano Rey National Park and only came down to town long after the coming of the FAYZ.

Orsay had developed her powers before the FAYZ, though. At first she hadn't known what was going on, where the bizarre images in her head were coming from. But eventually she figured it out. She was inhabiting other people's dreams. Walking around inside their sleeping fantasies. Seeing what they saw, feeling what they felt.

Not always a great thing to experience. She'd been inside Drake's head, for example, and that was a snake pit no one wanted to witness.

Over time her powers seemed to have expanded, developed. She'd been asked to try to touch the mind of the monster in the mine shaft. The thing they called the gaiaphage. Or just the Darkness.

It had torn her mind open. Like scalpel blades had sliced through all the barriers of security and privacy in her brain. And after that, nothing had been quite the same.

After that contact, her powers had risen to a new level. An unwelcome level.

When she touched the barrier she could see dreams from the other side. From those out there.

Those out there . . .

She could feel their presence even now as she climbed the rock and neared the barrier. She could feel them but not yet hear them, not yet step into their dreams.

She could do that only when she touched the barrier. For on the other side, outside the barrier, on the other side of that gray, implacable barrier, they touched it, too. Orsay saw the barrier as thin but impenetrable. A sheet of milky glass just a few millimeters thick. That's what she believed, what she felt.

Out there, on the other side, back in the world, parents and friends came as pilgrims to touch the barrier and try to reach the one mind capable of hearing their cries and bearing their loss.

They reached out for Orsay.

She felt them. Most of the time. She'd had doubts at first, still did at times. But it was too vivid not to be real. That's what Nerezza had told her:

Things that feel real are real. Stop doubting yourself, Prophetess.

Sometimes she doubted Nerezza. But she never told Nerezza that. There was something forceful about Nerezza. She was strong, a person with depths Orsay couldn't quite see but could sense.

Sometimes Orsay was almost afraid of Nerezza's certainty.

Orsay reached the top of her rock. She was surprised to realize that there were now dozens and dozens of kids gathering on the beach, or even ascending the base of the rock itself.

Nerezza stood just below Orsay, acting as guard, keeping the kids back.

"Look how many have come," Nerezza said to her.

"Yes," Orsay said. "Too many. I can't . . ."

"You must only do what you *can* do," Nerezza said. "No one expects you to suffer more than you can bear. But be certain to speak with Mary. If you do nothing else, prophesy for Mary."

"It hurts," Orsay admitted. She felt bad admitting it. All these anxious, hopeful, desperate faces turned toward her. And all she had to do was endure the pain in order to ease their fears.

"See! They come despite Astrid's lies."

"Astrid?" Orsay frowned. She'd heard Nerezza saying something about Astrid before. But most of Orsay's thoughts were elsewhere. She was only partly aware of what went on around her in this world. Since that day when she had touched the Darkness she had felt as if the whole world was just a little bleached of color, the sounds muffled. The things she touched she seemed to touch through gauze bandages.

"Yes, Astrid the Genius is telling these lies about you. She is the font of lies."

Orsay shook her head. "You must be wrong. Astrid? She's a very honest girl."

"It's definitely Astrid. She's using Taylor and Howard and a few others. Lies travel quickly. By now everyone has heard. And yet, look how many have come."

"Maybe I should stop doing this," Orsay said.

"You can't let lies bother you, Prophetess. We have nothing to fear from Astrid, the genius who never sees what's right under her nose."

Nerezza smiled her mysterious smile, then seemed to shake herself out of a daydream. Before Orsay could ask her what she meant, Nerezza said, "Let's let the Siren sing."

Orsay had only heard Jill sing twice. Both times had been like mystical religious experiences. It didn't matter what the song was, really, although some songs almost made you feel like you should do more than just stand there listening.

"Jill," Nerezza said. "Get ready." Then, in a louder voice, she addressed those on the beach. "Everyone. We have a really special experience for you. Inspired by the Prophetess, our little Jill has a song for you. I think you'll all really enjoy it."

Jill sang the first lines of a song that Orsay didn't recognize.

*Hushaby, don't you cry,
go to sleep little baby . . .*

The world closed in around Orsay like a soft, warm blanket. Her own mother, her real mother, had never been the kind for singing lullabies. But in her mind it was a different mother, the mother she'd wished she had.

*When you awake, you shall have
all the pretty little ponies . . .*

And now Orsay could see, in her mind's eye, the blacks and the bays, the dapples and grays, all dancing through her imagination. And with them a life she had never had, a world she'd never known, a mother who would sing . . .

Hushaby . . .

Jill fell silent. Orsay blinked, a sleepwalker waking. She saw her followers, the children, all so close together now, they seemed almost to meld into one. They had shuffled ever closer to Jill and now pressed against the rock.

But their eyes were not on Jill, or even on Orsay. They were on that angel-decorated sunset and their own mother's faces.

"Now it's time," Nerezza said to Orsay.

"Okay," Orsay said. "Yes."

She pressed her hand against the barrier. The electric jolt burned her fingertips. The pain was still stunning, even after so many times. She had to fight the compelling urge to pull back.

But she pressed her hand against the barrier, and the pain fired every nerve in her hand, traveled up her arm, searing, burning.

Orsay closed her eyes.

"It's . . . is there . . . is Mary here?"

A voice gasped.

Orsay opened her tear-filled eyes and saw Mary Terrafino toward the back. Poor Mary, so burdened.

Mary, so terribly thin now. Starvation made so much worse by anorexia.

"Do you mean me?" Mary asked.

Orsay closed her eyes. "Your mother . . . I see her dreams of you, Mary." Orsay felt

the images wash over her, comforting, disturbing, blessedly distracting from the pain.

“Mary six years old . . . Your mother misses you. . . . She dreams of when you were little and you were so upset when your little brother got a toy for Christmas that you wanted.”

“The skateboard,” Mary whispered.

“Your mother dreams that you will come to her soon,” Orsay said. “It’s your birthday again, so soon, Mary. So grown up now.

“Your mother says that you have done enough, Mary. Others will take over your work.”

“I can’t . . .,” Mary said. She sounded stricken. “I can’t leave those kids alone.”

“Your birthday falls on Mother’s Day, Mother Mary,” Orsay whispered, finding her own words strange.

“Yes,” Mary admitted. “How did you—”

“On that day, Mother Mary, you will free your children so that you can be Mary the child again,” Orsay said.

“I can’t leave them behind—”

“You won’t, Mary. As the sun sets, you will lead them with you to freedom,” Orsay whispered. “As the sun sets in a red sky . . .”

Sanjit had spent the evening watching a movie starring his adoptive father. *Fly Boy Too*. He’d seen it before. They’d all seen every single one of Todd Chance’s movies. And most of Jennifer Brattle’s movies. Just not the ones with nudity.

But *Fly Boy Too* was of particular interest for a twelve-second clip that showed an actor—or maybe it was an actual pilot, who could tell—flying a helicopter. In this case he was flying a helicopter while trying to machine-gun John Gage—played by Todd Chance—while Gage leaped from car to car of a speeding freight train.

Sanjit had replayed that same twelve-second clip a hundred times, till his brain was swimming and his eyes were glazed over.

Now, with all the others in bed, Sanjit took the late, late shift with Bowie. Or maybe it was the early, early shift.

He sat down in the deep armchair by Bowie’s bed.

There was a goosenecked floor lamp that arched over his shoulder and shone a small circle of light on the book he opened. It was a war novel. About Vietnam, which was a country next to Thailand, where he’d been born. Evidently there had been a war there a long time ago, and Americans had been in that war. That wasn’t what interested him. What interested him was that they used a lot of helicopters and this particular novel focused on a soldier who flew a helicopter.

It wasn’t much, but it was all he had. The author must have done some research, at least. His descriptions sounded good. Sounded like they weren’t just made up.

This was not the way to learn how to fly a helicopter.

Bowie flopped his head angrily to one side, as if he was having a bad dream. Sanjit was close enough to put his hand on Bowie’s forehead. The skin was hot and damp.

He was a good-looking kid, Bowie was, with watery blue eyes and goofy teeth. So pale that sometimes he looked like one of the white marble gods Sanjit had seen in his long-lost childhood.

Those were cool to the touch. Bowie, not.

Leukemia. No, surely not. But it wasn't a cold or flu, either. This had gone on way too long for it to be the flu. Plus, no one else had gotten sick. So it probably wasn't that kind of thing. A catching thing.

Sanjit really did not want to have to see this little boy die. He had seen people die. An old beggar man with no legs. A woman who had died in a Bangkok alleyway after having a baby. A man who'd been stabbed by a pimp.

And a boy named Sunan.

Sanjit had taken Sunan under his wing. Sunan's mother was a prostitute. She'd disappeared one day; no one knew if she was alive or dead. And Sunan had found himself on the streets. He didn't know much. Sanjit had taught him what he could. How to steal food. How to escape when you were caught stealing food. How to get tourists to give you money for carrying their bags. How to get shop owners to pay you for guiding rich foreign tourists to the shop.

How to survive. But not how to swim.

Sanjit had pulled him out of the Chao Phraya River, too late. He'd taken his eyes off the boy for just a minute. When he turned back . . . too late. By the time he'd fished him out of the silty water it was too late.

Sanjit sat back down. He turned back to the book. His hands were shaking.

Peace came in wearing footie pajamas and rubbing sleep out of her eyes.

"I forgot Noo Noo," she said.

"Ah." Sanjit spotted the doll on the floor, picked it up, and handed it to her. "Hard to sleep without Noo Noo, huh?"

Peace took the doll and cradled it to her. "Is Bowie going to be all right?"

"Well, I hope so," Sanjit said.

"Are you learning how to fly the helicopter?"

"Sure," Sanjit said. "Nothing to it. There's some pedals for your feet. This stick thing called a collective. And another stick called . . . something else. I forget. But don't worry."

"I always worry, don't I?"

"Yeah, you kind of do." Sanjit smiled at her. "But that's okay, because the stuff you worry about almost never happens, does it?"

"No," Peace admitted. "But the stuff I hope for doesn't happen, either."

Sanjit sighed. "Yeah. Well, I'm going to do my best."

Peace came and hugged him. Then she took her doll and left.

Sanjit returned to the story, something about a fire with "Charlie." He skimmed along, trying to glean enough clues to figure out how to fly a helicopter. Off a boat. Next to a cliff.

Loaded with everyone he cared about.

SEVENTEEN

15 HOURS, 59 MINUTES

“MOTHER MARY? CAN I get up and be with you?”

“No, hon. Go back to sleep.”

“But I’m not tired.”

Mary put her hand on the four-year-old’s shoulder. She led him back to the main room. Cots on the floor. Filthy sheets. Not much she could do about that anymore.

Your mother says that you have done enough, Mary.

Mother Mary, they called her. Like she was the Virgin Mary. Kids always professed admiration for her. They admired her all to pieces. Big deal. Not really very helpful as Mary trudged through the daily, nightly, daily, nightly grind.

Sullen “volunteers.” Endless battles between the kids over toys. Older siblings constantly trying to dump their brothers or sisters off on the day care. Scratches, scrapes, sniffles, bloody noses, loose teeth, and ear infections. Kids who just wandered off, like Justin, the latest. And endless, endless series of questions to be answered. A demand for attention that never let up, ever, not even for a second.

Mary kept a calendar. She’d had to make her own, carefully drawing it out on a big piece of butcher paper. She needed big spaces to write endless reminders and notes. Every child’s birthday. When a kid first complained of an ear infection. Reminders to get more cloth for diapers. To get a new broom. Things she needed to tell John or one of the other workers.

She stared at the calendar now. Stared at a note she’d made to give Francis a day off in honor of three months’ worth of great work.

Francis had given himself his own time off.

On the schedule a note from weeks earlier to find “P.” That was code for Prozac. She hadn’t found any Prozac. Dahra Baidoo’s medicine cabinet was just about empty. Dahra had given Mary a couple of different antidepressants, but they were having side effects. Vivid, absurd dreams that left Mary feeling unsettled all day long and made her dread sleep.

She was eating what she was supposed to.

But she had started vomiting again. Not every time. Just some of the time. Sometimes it came to a choice between not eating and allowing herself to stick her finger down her throat. Sometimes she couldn’t control both impulses, so she had to choose one.

And then sobbing, filled with hatred for her own mind, for the little cancers that seemed to eat at her soul night and day and night and day.

Your mother misses you. . . .

On the calendar, Mother’s Day was a mark in red, “15th b’day!” She twisted Francis’s watch around and checked the time. Could it really be that late? Sixteen hours now. Sixteen hours until she would be fifteen years old.

Not long. Had to be ready for that, the big fifteen.

Had to be ready to fight the temptation that came to each kid in the FAYZ as they reached that deadly date.

Everyone knew by now what happened. Time would seem to freeze. And while you hung in a sort of limbo, a tempter would come to you. The one person you wanted most to please. The one you wanted most to be reunited with. And they would offer you escape. They would beg you to come across with them, to step out of the FAYZ.

There were a hundred theories of why it happened. Mary had heard numerological theories, conspiracy theories, astrological theories, every variation on aliens, government scientists. . . .

Astrid's explanation, the "official explanation," was that the FAYZ was a freak of nature, an anomaly no one could understand, with rules the kids inside the FAYZ should try to discover and understand.

The weird psychological effect of the big fifteen was just a distortion in the mind. There was no reality to the "tempter" and no reality to the demon that followed it.

"Just your mind's way of dramatizing a choice between life and death," Astrid had explained with her usual slightly superior tone.

Mostly kids didn't think about it. To a ten- or a twelve-year-old, age fifteen seemed a long way off. When your fifteenth started getting closer you started thinking about it, but Astrid—back when they still had electricity and printers—had actually printed up a handy little instruction sheet called "Surviving 15."

Mary didn't think Astrid would ever deliberately lie. No matter what Nerezza said. But she didn't think Astrid was infallible, either.

Mostly Mary didn't have time to waste on philosophical inquiries. To put it mildly. Mostly she was up to her neck in child-related crises.

But the date kept drawing closer. And then . . . Francis.

And now, Orsay.

On that day you will free your children so that you can be Mary the child again . . .

Mary could feel the depression closing in on her. It was a patient stalker. It watched and waited. And when it sensed the slightest weakness, it moved closer.

She had forced herself to eat.

And then she had forced herself to throw up.

She was not stupid. She was not unaware. She knew she was unraveling. Again.

Coming apart at the seams.

And soon she would be in that frozen, timeless stasis that Astrid's helpful booklet had talked about. And she would see her mother's face calling to her. . . .

Lay down the burden, Mary . . .

And go to her . . .

Mary closed her eyes tight. When she opened them, Ashley stood before her. The little girl was crying. She'd had a nightmare and needed a hug.

A kid named Consuela, one of Edilio's soldiers, had seen it first.

She had run to find Edilio. She was one of the late-night shift that kept an eye during the wee hours. She'd come across it, screamed, and gone running for Edilio. That's what she was supposed to do.

And now Edilio was standing over it. Wondering what he was supposed to do. He knew the correct answer: report it to the council. He'd given Sam grief for failing to do that earlier.

But this . . .

“What should I do?” Consuela whispered.

“Don’t tell anyone.”

“Should I get Astrid? Or Sam?”

Perfectly reasonable questions. Edilio wished he had a perfectly reasonable answer. “Take off,” Edilio said. “Good job. Sucks you had to see this.”

She left, grateful to get away. And Edilio stared down balefully at the thing . . . the person . . . the body . . . that would be like a dagger in Sam’s heart.

In the months since the death of Drake Merwin, the defeat of the gaiaphage and the deal with the zekes, a tenuous order and calm had come to the FAYZ.

Edilio felt that tenuous structure, the system Edilio had worked so hard to build, the system he had just started to believe might last, coming apart in his hands now, like tissue paper in a rainstorm.

It had never been real. The FAYZ would always win.

Sam stood over the body. The sight of it rocked him. He took a stagger-step back.

Edilio grabbed him.

Sam felt panic welling up inside of him. He wanted to run. He couldn’t breathe. His heart was pounding in his chest. His veins filled with ice water.

He knew what had happened.

“Hey, Boss,” Edilio said. “You okay, man?”

Sam couldn’t answer. He took air in little gasps. Like a toddler on the edge of tears.

“Sam,” Edilio said. “Come on, man.”

Edilio looked from the mutilated body to his friend and back again.

He had been there. Sam knew the terrible wounds he was seeing. The body of a twelve-year-old boy named Leonard bore marks Sam knew and would never forget.

The marks of a whip.

The street was quiet. No one in sight. No one who could have borne witness.

“Drake,” Sam said in a whisper.

“No, man: Drake’s dead and gone.”

Sam, suddenly furious, grabbed Edilio’s shirt. “Don’t tell me what I’m seeing, Edilio. It’s him,” Sam yelled.

Edilio patiently pried Sam’s fingers off. “Listen, Sam, I know what it looks like. I saw you. I saw what you looked like that day. So, I know, all right? But man, it makes no sense. Drake is dead and buried under tons of rock in a mine shaft.”

“It’s Drake,” Sam said flatly.

“Okay, that’s enough, Sam,” Edilio snapped. “You’re freaking out.”

Sam closed his eyes and felt again the pain . . . pain like nothing he’d imagined could exist outside of hell. Pain like being burned alive.

The blows of Drake’s whip hand. Each one tearing strips of flesh . . .

“You don’t . . . You don’t know what it was like . . .”

“Sam . . .”

“Even after Brianna shot me full of morphine . . . you don’t know . . . you don’t know . . . All right? You don’t know. Pray to God you don’t ever know.”

Taylor chose that moment to bounce in. She took a look at the body and yelped. She covered her mouth and looked away.

“He’s back,” Sam said.

“Taylor, get Sam out of here. Take him to Astrid,” Edilio ordered.

“But Sam and Astrid are—”

“Just do it!” Edilio roared. “And then haul your butt around and get the other members of the council over there. They want to know what’s going on? Fine. Then they can get up out of their beds.”

“It doesn’t go away,” Sam said through gritted teeth. “You know that, Edilio? It doesn’t go away. It’s always with me. It’s always with me.”

“Take him,” Edilio ordered Taylor. “And tell Astrid we need to talk.”

EIGHTEEN

15 HOURS, 57 MINUTES

“WE GO TONIGHT,” Caine said. Weak. So weak in every muscle. Sore. Panting just from climbing the stairs to the dining hall. Like he’d run a marathon.

Starvation. It did that to you.

He tried to count the exhausted, gaunt faces that turned toward him. But he couldn’t keep the number in his head. Fifteen? Seventeen? No more than that, certainly.

The last candle flickered on the table that had once been piled high with turkey loaf and pizza, Jell-O and limp salad, cartons of milk, all the usual school lunchroom fare.

This room had once been full of kids. All so healthy looking. Some thin, some fat, none as gaunt and hideous as what was left here now.

Coates Academy, the fashionable place for the well-off to send their troublesome kids. Kids who started fires. Bullies. Skanks. Druggies. Kids with psychological problems. Or just kids who talked back once too often. Or kids whose parents wanted them gone from their lives.

The difficult, the losers, the rejects. The unloved. Coates Academy, where you could dump your kids and not be bothered by them anymore.

Well, that was certainly working out well for all concerned.

Now, the desperate remnants of Coates. The ones mean enough or lucky enough to survive. Only four of them known to be mutants: Caine himself, a four bar; Diana, whose only power was the ability to gauge another mutant’s powers; Bug, with his ability to almost disappear; and Penny, who had developed an extremely useful power of illusion: she could make a person believe they were being attacked by monsters or stabbed with knives or on fire.

She had demonstrated it on a kid named Barry. Barry had been made to believe he was being chased around the room by spears. It had been funny watching him run in terror.

That was it. Four mutants, only two of which, Caine and Penny, were any good in a fight. Bug had his uses. And Diana was Diana. The only face he wanted to see now.

But she had her head down, resting it on her hands with elbows on her knees.

The others looked to him. They didn’t love him or even like him, but they still feared him.

“I called everyone here tonight because we are leaving,” Caine said.

“Do you have any food?” a voice cried pitifully.

Caine said, “We’re going to get food. We know a place. It’s an island.”

“How are we going to get to an island?”

“Shut up, Jason. It’s an island. Used to be owned by two famous actors you probably remember. Todd Chance and Jennifer Brattle. It’s a huge mansion on a private island. The kind of place they’d have stocked with lots of food.”

“The only way to get there is on a boat,” Jason whined. “How can we do that?”

“We’re going to take some boats,” Caine said with far more confidence than he

felt.

Bug sneezed. He became almost visible when he sneezed.

“Bug knows about this place,” Caine said. “It’s famous.”

“So why didn’t we hear about it earlier?” Diana asked, mumbling at the floor.

“Because Bug is an idiot and it didn’t occur to him,” Caine snapped. “But the island is there. It’s called San Francisco de Sales. It’s on the map.”

He pulled a torn and crumpled paper from his pocket and unfolded it. It was taken from an atlas in the school’s library. “See?” He held it up and was gratified to see flickers of actual interest.

“We’re going to get boats,” Caine said. “We’re going to get them in Perdido Beach.”

That killed whatever faint enthusiasm there had been. “They got all kinds of freaks and guns and all,” a girl nicknamed Pampers said.

“Yeah, they do,” Caine admitted wearily. “But they’re all going to be too busy to deal with us. And if any of them get in our way, I’ll take care of them. Me or Penny.”

Kids glanced at Penny. She was twelve years old. She’d probably been pretty once. A pretty little Chinese-American girl with a tiny nose and surprised eyebrows. Now she looked like a scarecrow, brittle hair, gums red from malnutrition, with a rash that covered her neck and arms in a lacy pink pattern.

Jason said, “I think you’re nuts. Go through Perdido Beach? Half of us can’t even walk that far, let alone fight. We’re starving, man. Unless you have some food to give us, we’ll fall out before we reach the highway.”

“Listen to me,” Caine said softly. “We’re definitely going to need some food. Soon.”

Diana looked up, dreading what Caine might do next.

“The only food we’re going to get is on that island. We reach it, or we find someone else to eat.”

NINETEEN

15 HOURS, 27 MINUTES

IT WAS WEIRD, Zil thought. Weird how it had come to this. Weird how scared he was, how rattly his insides were, but he couldn't let on. Because he was in charge. Because they were all looking to him.

The Leader. Capital "T," capital "L," when Turk said it.

Turk, a creepy little toady with his bad leg and his rat face.

And Hank. Hank was scary. Probably crazy as a loon. Okay, not probably, definitely. Hank was always the one pushing, provoking, demanding.

The others. Twenty-three of them. Antoine, the fat druggie. Max. Rudy. Lisa. Trent. Others Zil barely knew. The only one Zil really even liked was Lance. Lance was cool. Lance was the good-looking, smart one who made Zil feel like maybe this was all okay, like maybe Zil really did deserve to be The Leader, capital "T," capital "L."

Anyway, too late to turn back now. He'd made his deal with Caine. The deal was very simple: there were two people in the FAYZ who Zil had to fear above all others—Sam and Caine. Caine had offered Zil a chance to discredit one and wave good-bye to the other.

The time was now or never.

First things first. Gasoline. And after that it would be too late for second thoughts.

The declaration of total war against the freaks was a minute away.

Twenty-three of them filtered through the dark streets in ones and twos, guns and clubs hidden beneath hoodies and coats. Swaggering, some of them, others creeping along scared like mice. The great fear was that Sam might see them early. Try to stop them before they could start the party.

Zil laughed, not meaning to.

Turk was with him. Neither of them carrying a weapon, nothing that would give Sam an excuse if he stopped them.

"See, that's a Leader," Turk said in his greasy way. "You laugh despite everything."

Zil said nothing. His stomach was in his throat.

So much could go wrong. Brianna. Dekka. Taylor. Edilio. Even Orc. Freaks and freak supporters, traitors. Any one of them could bring this to a sudden halt.

Zil felt as if he was standing at the edge of a cliff.

One step at a time. First, the gas station.

It had to be tonight.

Now.

And the whole town had to burn.

Out of that fire the Human Crew would gather the survivors under Zil's leadership. Then he'd be the Leader, not just of this little crew of losers, but of everyone.

Brittney did not know where she'd been. Or what she'd done since leaving Brianna's house. She had flashes, like single frames pulled out of a movie. A flash of a crawl

space under a house. Of lying in the dirt again, of feeling it cold on her back. Of spiderwebbed wooden beams above her, a comforting coffin lid.

Other flashes showed rocks at the beach. Sand that made it hard to walk.

She remembered seeing kids. Two, at a distance. They ran away when they saw her. But maybe they weren't real. Maybe they were just ghosts because Brittney wasn't totally sure that anyone she saw was real. They looked real on the surface—their eyes and hair and lips were all familiar to her. But at times they seemed to have lights coming out of them in wrong places.

It was hard to know what was real and what was not. All she could know was that Tanner appeared sometimes, just beside her. And he was real.

The voice in her head was real, too, the voice that told her to serve him, to obey, to follow the path of truth and goodness.

Then Brittney remembered feeling that the evil one was close. Very close. She could feel his presence.

Oh, yes: *he* had been here.

But where had she been? She asked her brother, Tanner. Tanner was looking a bit messy, his wounds all too visible.

"Where am I, Tanner? How did I get here?"

"You rose, an avenging angel," Tanner said.

"Yes," Brittney said. "But where was I? Just now? Just before. Where was I?"

There was a noise at the end of the block. Two people walking. Sam and Taylor.

Sam was good. Taylor was good. Neither was allied with the evil one. They didn't seem to see her. They trailed blurs of ultraviolet light behind them, like a slime trail.

"Did you see him, Tanner?"

"Who?"

"The evil one. Did you see the demon?"

Tanner didn't answer. He was bleeding from the awful wounds that had killed him.

Brittney let it go. Indeed she'd already forgotten that she'd asked a question.

"I have to find the Prophet," she said. "I must save her from the evil one."

"Yes." Tanner had assumed his other guise, his angelic raiment. He glowed beautifully, like a golden star. "Follow me, sister. We have good works to perform."

"Praise Jesus," Brittney said.

Her brother stared at her, and for just a moment it seemed he was smiling. His teeth were bare, his eyes red with an inner fire. "Yes," Tanner said. "Praise."

TWENTY

15 HOURS, 12 MINUTES

THE GAS STATION was dark. Everything was dark.

Zil looked up at that sky. Stars shone. Amazingly bright and sharp. Black night, brilliant, eye-piercing white stars.

Zil was no poet, but he could understand why people got sort of mesmerized by stars. Lots of great, important people must have looked up at the stars when they were on the edge, getting ready to do the things that would mark them forever as great.

Too bad these weren't real stars.

Hank appeared, like a ghost. He was with Antoine. Zil saw others in the darkness beside the highway, already gathered. Milling together, scared, nervous, most ready to run like rabbits probably.

"Leader," Hank said in an intense whisper.

"Hank," Zil answered, his voice reassuringly calm.

"The Human Crew awaits your orders."

A murmur of many voices. Scared sheep bleating together, trying to keep their courage up.

Lance was there. "I checked it out. Four of Edilio's soldiers. Two of them asleep. No freaks, as far as I could see."

"Good," Zil said. "If we move fast and get the element of surprise I doubt we'll even have to hurt anyone."

"Don't count on it," Hank said.

"Whatever happens, it's meant to be," Turk said.

"Fate."

Zil swallowed hard. If he showed any weakness it would be over. "This is the beginning of the end for the freaks," he said. "Tonight we take Perdido Beach back for humans."

"You heard the Leader," Turk said.

"Let's go," Hank said. He had a shotgun as big as he was hanging on his shoulder. He slipped it off and ostentatiously clicked the safety to "off."

And then, they were on the move. Walking fast. Zil in the lead with Hank on one side and Lance on the other and Antoine waddling along with Turk in the second row.

No one spotted them as they emerged up onto the highway. Or as they marched in quick-step past the battered old sign showing gas prices.

Past the first pump before a voice cried out, "Hey!"

They kept moving, breaking now into an exhilarating run.

"Hey! Hey!" the voice cried again.

A boy, Zil didn't know his name, was yelling and then a second voice was shouting, "What's happening?"

BLAM!

The sound was deafening. A dagger of yellow fire from the blast.

Hank's shotgun.

The first boy fell back hard.

Zil almost cried out. Almost yelled “Stop.” Almost said “You don’t need to . . .”

But it was too late for that. Too late.

The second soldier raised his own gun, but hesitated. Hank did not.

BLAM!

The second soldier turned and ran. He threw his gun down and ran.

More voices yelling in fear and confusion. Gunfire. Here. There. Wild blasting, everyone who could, explosions of light in the dark.

“Cease fire!” Hank yelled.

The firing continued. But it was all coming from Zil’s own side now.

“Knock it off!” Zil shouted.

The explosions stopped.

Zil’s ears rang. From far off a pitiful voice cried. Cried like a baby.

For a long moment no one said or did anything. The boy who lay on his back made no sound. Zil did not take a closer look.

“Okay, follow the plan,” Hank said, as calmly as if all this was just a video game he’d put on pause.

Kids who had been tasked with bringing bottles began to unload them. Lance went to the hand-pump that brought gasoline up from the underground storage. He began to work it and fill glass bottles held by shaking hands.

“I can’t believe it,” someone said.

“We did it!” one exulted.

“Not yet,” Zil growled. “But it’s beginning.”

Hank said, “Remember: Stuff the rags far down into the bottle like I told you. And keep your lighters dry.”

They found a wheelbarrow in the weeds behind the station. It didn’t roll very well—the wheel was lopsided—but it worked to hold the bottles.

The smell of gasoline was thick in Zil’s throat. He was stressing, waiting for the counterattack. Waiting to see Sam striding up, hands blazing.

That would end it all.

But no matter how hard he peered into the black night, Zil did not see the one freak who would stop him.

Little Pete made a grunting sound as he pushed the buttons and worked the trackpad of his handheld.

Sam sat silent, withdrawn. He had said nothing since Taylor had hauled him through the door and woken Astrid from a fretful sleep.

It was stupid, Astrid realized, not talking to Sam. When Taylor had awakened her, she’d imagined somehow, in her sleepy confusion, that Sam had come running back, all forgiven.

But then Taylor had said she’d be back with the rest of the council and Astrid knew something had gone wrong.

Now they were all there. Well, most of them. Word was Dekka was sick with whatever was going around. But Albert was there, and really, Astrid admitted to herself, so long as Albert and Astrid were there, the important members of the council were present.

Unfortunately, Howard had also come. No one wanted to drag John out into the

night. He could hear about it all later.

They had enough. Astrid, Albert, Howard, and Sam. Five out of seven. And, Astrid couldn't help but note, any vote would be more likely to go in her favor.

They were at the table beneath an eerie Sammy Sun.

"Okay, Taylor, since Sam doesn't exactly seem talkative," Astrid said, "why are we all here?"

"A kid got murdered tonight," Taylor said.

A hundred questions popped into Astrid's head, but she asked the most important one first. "Who was it?"

"Edilio says he thinks it's Juanito. Or Leonard."

"He thinks?"

"Kind of hard to tell," Taylor said, not quite smirking.

"What happened?" Albert asked.

Taylor looked at Sam. Sam said nothing. He stared. First at his own light, hovering in the air. Then at Taylor. He looked pale and almost frail. Like he was suddenly a much, much older person.

"Kid was whipped," Taylor said. "It looked like what happened to Sam."

Sam lowered his head and wrapped his hands behind his neck. He seemed to be trying to hold on to his head, pressing it hard like it might explode.

"Drake's dead," Albert said. Sounding like a guy who really, really hoped it was true. "He's dead. He's been dead."

"Yeah, well . . .," Taylor said.

"Yeah well, what?" Astrid asked, instantly hearing the change in her tone of voice, the evasion.

Taylor shifted uncomfortably. "Look, Edilio told me to bring Sam here and get you guys together. I think Sam is kind of, you know, flashing on stuff that happened."

"That boy was whipped. Just like I was," Sam said to the floor. "I know the marks. I . . ."

"It doesn't mean it was Drake," Albert said.

"Drake's dead," Astrid said. "Dead people don't come back. Let's not be ridiculous."

Howard made a derisive snort. "Okay. That's as far as I go with you on this, Sammy boy." He made a hand-washing gesture.

Astrid slammed her palm on the table, surprising even herself. "Somebody better tell me what all these back-and-forth looks are about."

"Brittney," Howard said, spitting the name out like it was poison. "She came back. Sam had her and stuck her with Brianna, and told me not to talk about it."

"Brittney?" Astrid said, confused.

Howard said, "Yeah. You know, like dead-girl Brittney? Way dead? Dead a long time and buried a long time and suddenly she's sitting in my house chatting? That Brittney."

"I'm still not . . ."

"Well, Astrid," Howard said, "I guess we just found the limits of your big old genius brain. Point is that someone who was very seriously dead is suddenly not so dead anymore."

"But . . .," Astrid started. "But Drake . . ."

“As dead as Brittney,” Howard said. “Which might be a slight problem, since Brittney isn’t exactly dead herself.”

Astrid felt sick to her stomach. No. Surely not. Impossible. Insane. Not even here, not even in the FAYZ.

But Howard wasn’t lying. Taylor’s expression confirmed that. And Sam wasn’t jumping up to dispute it, either.

Astrid stood up. She stared hard at Sam. She could feel a throbbing in her head. “You didn’t tell me? This is happening and you didn’t tell the council?”

Sam barely glanced up.

“He didn’t tell *you*, Astrid,” Howard said, obviously enjoying the moment.

A part of Astrid felt sorry for Sam. She knew he was still a long way from being over the beating he had taken from Drake. One look at him now, head hung, looking small and scared, was proof of that.

But he wasn’t the only one to be terrorized by Drake. Drake had come after her, early on. If she thought about it, she could still almost feel the sting of his slap on her face.

He’d made her . . .

He’d bullied her into calling Little Pete a retard. He’d terrorized her into betraying the person she loved most in the world.

She had managed to put it out of her mind. Why couldn’t Sam do the same?

Howard laughed. “Sammy didn’t want people using the ‘Z’ word.”

“The what?” Astrid snapped.

“Zombie.” Howard made a booga-booga face and stretched his hands out like a sleepwalker.

“Taylor, get out of here,” Astrid said.

“Hey, I—”

“This is council business now,” Astrid said, putting all the frost she could command into her voice.

Taylor hesitated, looked to Sam for guidance. He didn’t look up or stir. Taylor took a second to give Astrid a middle-finger salute and then popped out of the room.

“Sam, I know you’re upset over what happened with you and Drake,” Astrid began.

“Upset?” Sam echoed the word with an ironic smirk.

“But that’s no excuse for you keeping secrets from us.”

“Yeah,” Howard said, “Don’t you know only Astrid is allowed to keep secrets?”

“Shut up, Howard,” Astrid snapped.

“Yeah, we get to lie because we’re the smart ones,” Howard said. “Not like all those idiots out there.”

Astrid turned her attention back to Sam. “This is not okay, Sam. The council has the responsibility. Not you alone.”

Sam looked like he could not care less about what she was saying. He looked almost beyond reach, indifferent to what was going on around him.

“Hey,” Astrid said. “We’re talking to you.”

That did it. His jaw clenched. His head snapped up. His eyes blazed. “Don’t push me. That wasn’t *you* with your skin whipped off and covered in blood. That was *me*. That was me who went down into that mine shaft to try to fight the gaiaphage.”

Astrid blinked. “No one is minimizing what you’ve done, Sam. You’re a hero. But at the same time—”

Sam was on his feet. “At the same time? At the same time you were here in town. Edilio had a bullet in his chest. Dekka was torn to pieces. I was trying not to scream from the . . . You and Albert and Howard, you weren’t there, were you?”

“I was busy standing up to Zil, trying to save Hunter’s life,” Astrid yelled.

“But it wasn’t you and your big words, was it? It was Orc who stopped Zil. And he was there because I sent him to rescue you. Me!” He stabbed a finger at his own chest, actually making what looked like painful impact. “Me! Me and Brianna and Dekka and Edilio! And poor Duck.”

Suddenly, there was Taylor again. “Hey! One of Edilio’s soldiers just came staggering in from the gas station. He says someone attacked, took the place over.”

That silenced the argument.

Sam, with exquisite contempt, turned to his girlfriend and said, “You want to go deal with it, Astrid?”

Astrid flushed red.

“No? I didn’t think so. Guess it will be up to me then.”

He left silence in his wake.

“Maybe we better pass some laws real quick so Sam can save our butts legally,” Howard said.

“Howard, go get Orc,” Albert said.

“Now *you’re* giving me orders, Albert?” Howard shook his head. “I don’t think so. Not you or her,” he said, jerking a thumb at Astrid. “You may not think much of me, you two, but at least I know who saves our butts. And if I got to take orders from someone, it’ll be the someone who just walked out of here.”

TWENTY-ONE

14 HOURS, 44 MINUTES

“**FIND EDILIO** AND Dekka and Brianna,” Sam told Taylor. “Edilio and Dekka to the gas station. Brianna on the streets. We’re going to deal with Zil.”

For once, Taylor did not argue. She bounced away.

He took a deep breath of cold night air and tried to get his head together. Zil. Had to stop him.

But all he could see was Drake. Drake in the shadows. Drake behind bushes and trees. Drake with his whip hand.

Drake, not Zil.

He squeezed his eyes shut. It would be different this time. Back then he’d had no choice but to let Drake take him. No choice but to stand there and endure . . . and endure . . .

He noticed Howard coming up behind him. It surprised him a little, until he realized Howard would see it as an opportunity to use Orc for profit.

“Howard? What kind of shape is Orc in?”

Howard shrugged. “Passed out, dead drunk.”

Sam cursed under his breath. “See if you can get him up.”

He tossed out the orders on automatic. Not needing to think about it. But he still felt like he was in a dream. Not quite focusing.

Drake. Somehow that animal was back. Somehow he was alive.

How was he supposed to fight something that could not be killed? Zil he could handle. But Drake? A Drake who could return from the dead?

I’ll burn him, Sam told himself. I’ll burn him inch by inch. I’ll turn him into a piece of charcoal. I’ll reduce him to ashes.

And scatter the ashes over a mile of sea and land.

Kill him. Destroy him. Destroy the remains of the remains of the remains.

Let him come back from that.

“If I get Orc up, it will cost you,” Howard said. “He’s fought Drake before.”

“I’ll burn him down,” Sam muttered to himself. “I’ll kill him myself.”

Howard seemed to think this was directed at either Orc or him, and scuttled off as quickly as he could without another word.

It wasn’t far to the gas station. Just a few blocks.

Sam walked down the middle of the street. No lights. Silence. His footsteps echoed.

He walked on legs stiff with fear.

He had forgotten to tell Taylor to get Lana. Lana would be needed. Taylor would figure it out, though. Smart girl, Taylor.

He remembered Lana’s healing touch that day as the last effects of the morphine wore off and the pain, like a tidal wave of fire, consumed him. Her touch, and the wave had slowly receded.

He had screamed. He was sure of that.

He had screamed until his throat was raw. And in nightmares since that day.

“Ashes,” Sam said.

Alone on the dark street. Walking toward the thing he feared most in the world.

Astrid was shaking. Every type of emotion. Fear. Fury. Even hate.

And love.

“Albert, I don’t know how long we can keep Sam involved at all,” she said.

“You’re upset,” Albert replied.

“Yes, I’m upset. But that’s not the point. Sam is out of control. If we’re ever going to have a working system we may have to find someone else to play the role of savior.”

Albert sighed. “Astrid, we don’t know what’s out there in the night. And maybe you’re right that Sam is out of control. But me? I’m really glad it’s him out there getting ready to face whatever it is.”

Albert picked up his omnipresent notebook and left.

To a now empty, silent room, Astrid said, “Don’t die, Sam. Don’t die.”

Taylor found Edilio already en route to the gas station. He had just one soldier with him, a girl named Elizabeth. Both were carrying machine pistols, part of the armory they’d found long ago at the power plant.

Elizabeth spun and almost sprayed Taylor when she popped in.

“Whoa!” Taylor yelled.

“Sorry. I thought . . . We heard gunfire.”

“Gas station. Sam’s on his way, told me to get you going in that direction.”

Edilio nodded. “Yeah, we’re on our way.”

Taylor grabbed him and pulled him aside so Elizabeth wouldn’t overhear. “Sam is fighting with Astrid.”

“Great. That’s just what we need: the two of them at each other.” Edilio ran his hand back over his brush-cut hair. He still kept it short unlike most kids, who had given up on personal grooming. “I haven’t heard anyone shooting in the last few minutes. Probably just some drunk fool got hold of a gun.”

“That’s not what your guy said,” Taylor corrected him, talking fast. “He said the station was being attacked.”

“Caine?” Edilio mused.

“Or Drake. Or Caine *and* Drake.”

“Drake’s dead,” Edilio said flatly. Then he made the sign of the cross over his chest. “At least I sure hope so. Where is Brianna? Where’s Dekka?”

“Next on my list,” Taylor said and bounced to the house where Dekka was staying. The house was dark but for a Sammy Sun burning grimly in the living room.

“Dekka?” Taylor yelled.

She heard a stirring coming from upstairs. Taylor bounced to the bedroom to find Dekka sitting up and swinging her legs over the side of the bed.

“Sam sent me. Said you should haul butt to the gas station. Someone’s shooting the place up.”

Dekka coughed. Covered her mouth and coughed again. “Sorry. I guess I have a —” She coughed again, more violently. “I’m okay,” she managed to say.

“Whatever you’ve got, don’t give it to me,” Taylor said, backing away. “Hey, do you know where Brianna is?”

Dekka’s already gloomy expression darkened further. “She’s at her place. With Jack, in case you’re looking for him, too.”

“Jack?” Taylor said, momentarily distracted by the possibility of good gossip. “She’s with Computer Jack?”

“Yeah, Computer Jack. Nerdy kid, glasses, does stupid things like turn off the power plant? That Jack. He’s sick and she’s taking care of him.”

“Okay. Bouncing . . . Wait. I forgot. You might want to keep an eye out for Drake.”

Dekka’s eyebrows shot up. “Say what?”

“Welcome to the FAYZ,” Taylor said, and changed the channel. Dekka’s dark bedroom became Brianna’s.

Jack had set up a cot in the corner of Brianna’s bedroom, but he wasn’t lying on it. Jack was in a big office chair, feet up on a side table with a blanket wrapped around him. He was snoring. His glasses were on the floor. Brianna was in her bed.

“Wake up!” Taylor yelled.

Jack didn’t stir. But Brianna was up and off of the cot in less time than it took for Taylor’s shout to echo.

Brianna said, “What are you—” and then she started coughing.

It was a strange thing to witness because Brianna coughed fast. She did everything fast. It used to be it was only when she ran—something she could do at about the speed of sound. But more and more lately that speed had translated to the rest of her movements, too. So now she coughed much faster than a normal person would cough.

And then she sat down as suddenly as she’d stood up.

Jack’s eyes fluttered open. “Huh,” he muttered. He blinked a couple of times and fished around for his fallen glasses. “What?”

“Trouble,” Taylor said.

“I’m coming,” Brianna said. She stood up again and sat back down again.

“She’s sick,” Jack said. “Like the flu or whatever. What I had.”

“What do you mean she’s sick?” Taylor demanded. “Dekka told me *you* were sick.”

“I was,” Jack grumbled. “I still am, a little, but I’m getting better. Now Brianna’s got it.”

“Interesting,” Taylor said with a leer.

“What’s . . .,” Brianna began, and then started coughing again.

“What’s happening?” Jack asked, completing Brianna’s thought.

“You don’t even want to know,” Taylor said. “Take care of Breeze. Sam can probably handle whatever this is by himself.”

“Handle what?” Brianna managed.

Taylor shook her head slowly, side to side. “If I said Drake Merwin, what would you say?”

“I’d say he’s dead,” Jack said.

“Yeah,” Taylor said, and bounced out of the room.

Sam reached the station. Edilio was already there. Alone.

Edilio didn’t waste any time. “I got here a minute ago,” he said. “Me and

Elizabeth. No one here but Marty and he'd been wounded. Shot in the hand. I sent him to Clifftop with Elizabeth to have Lana fix him."

"What's going on, can you tell?" Sam asked.

"Marty says a whole crowd was here. Shooting, yelling, 'Death to freaks.'"

Sam frowned. "Zil? That's what this is? I thought . . ."

"Yeah, I know what you're thinking, man. This isn't a Drake kind of thing," Edilio said. "Drake shows up, you know it's him, right? He makes sure you know it's him."

"Where are your other soldiers?"

"Run off." Edilio sounded disgusted.

"They're just kids," Sam said. "People shooting at them. In the dark. All of a sudden. Almost anyone would run off."

"Yeah," Edilio said curtly. But Sam knew he was embarrassed. The army was Edilio's responsibility. He picked the kids and trained them and motivated them as well as he could. But twelve-, thirteen-, fourteen-year-old kids were not supposed to be dealing with this kind of craziness. Not even now.

Never.

"You smell that?" Edilio asked.

"Gas. So Zil stole some gas? You think that's it? He wanted to be able to use a car?"

In the pitch black Sam couldn't see Edilio's face but he could feel his friend's doubt. "I don't know, Sam. What's he going to do with a car? Why's he need it so bad, he's going to do this? Zil's a creep but he's not totally stupid. He's got to know this is over the line and we'll go after him."

Sam nodded. "Yeah."

"You okay, man?"

Sam didn't answer. He peered into the darkness. Searched the shadows. Clenched. Ready.

Finally, he forced his fists to relax. Forced himself to take a breath. "I've never set out to hurt anyone," Sam said.

Edilio waited.

"I never set out thinking I'm going to kill someone. I go into a fight and I think, maybe I'll have to hurt someone. Yeah. I think that. And I have. You know: you've been there."

"Yeah, I've been there," Edilio said.

"If it's him, though, I mean if Drake is somehow back . . . it's not going to be about just doing what I have to do. You know?"

Edilio did not answer.

"I've done what I had to do. To save people. Or to save myself. This won't be like that. If it's him, I mean."

"Dude, it's Zil. Zil and Human Crew did this."

Sam shook his head. "Yeah. Zil. But I know he's out there, Edilio. I know Drake is out there. I feel it."

"Sam . . ."

"If I see him, I'll kill him," Sam said. "Not self-defense. I'm not waiting until he attacks. I see him, I burn him."

Edilio grabbed him by both shoulders and got in his face. "Hey! Listen to me,

Sam. You're getting freaked out here. The problem is Zil. Okay? We have real problems, we don't need nightmares. And, anyway, we don't do cold-blooded murder. Not even if it is Drake."

Sam firmly pried Edilio's hands off his shoulders. "If it's Drake, I'm burning him down. If you and Astrid and the rest of the council want to arrest me for doing it, fine. But I'm not sharing my life with Drake Merwin."

"Well, you do what you got to do, Sam, and I will, too. Right now what we got to do is figure out what Zil is up to. So, I'm going to go and do that. You want to come? Or do you want to stand here in the dark talking about murder?"

Edilio stomped away, swinging his machine pistol down into firing position.

For the first time, Sam followed Edilio.

TWENTY-TWO

14 HOURS, 17 MINUTES

DOWN THE ACCESS road they marched, the station lost behind them in the night.

Their numbers had diminished a little. Kids, the weak and scared ones, had peeled off unnoticed, slinking home once they'd had a taste of violence.

Weaklings, Zil thought. Cowards.

Just a dozen of them now, the hard core, pushing a wheelbarrow loaded with softly clinking bottles, trailing the smell of gasoline.

Left at the school. Past the gloomy, darkened buildings. So alien now. So long ago, all of that.

Zil couldn't make out individual windows in the edifice, but he could see approximately where his old home room had been. He imagined himself back then. Imagined himself sitting, bored during morning announcements.

And now here he was at the head of an army. A small army. But dedicated. All together in a great cause. Perdido Beach for humans. Death to freaks. Death to mutants.

On stiff legs he led the march. The march to freedom and power.

Right at Golding. Golding and Sherman, off the northwest corner of the school, that was the target zone, as agreed with Caine. No idea why. Caine had only said that they should start at Golding and Sherman. And move along Sherman toward the water. Burn all they could till they reached Ocean Boulevard. Then, if they still had any left, they could go along Ocean toward town. Not toward the marina.

"If I see you nitwits heading toward the marina, our little agreement is over," Caine had warned.

Nitwits. Zil seethed at the memory. Caine's casual arrogance, his contempt for anyone who wasn't a freak like him. His time would come, Zil vowed.

"We're here," Zil said. But that wasn't a very historic thing to say. And this, make no mistake, was history happening in the FAYZ. The beginning of the end for the freaks. The beginning of Zil being in control.

Zil turned to faces he knew were expectant, giddy, excited. He could hear it in their whispered conversation.

"Tonight we strike a blow for humans," Zil said. That was the line Turk had come up with. Something everyone would be able to quote. "Tonight we strike a blow for humans!" Zil cried, raising his voice, no longer afraid.

"Death to freaks!" Turk shouted.

"Light up!" Hank cried.

Lighters and matches flicked. Tiny yellow pinpoints in the black night, casting eerie shadows on wild eyes and mouths pulled back in grimaces of fear and rage.

Zil took the first of the bottles—Molotov cocktails, Hank said they were called. The spark of the lighter caught the gasoline-saturated wick.

Zil turned and heaved the bottle toward the closest house.

It arced like a meteor, spinning.

It crashed onto the brick steps and burst. Flames spread over several square feet of porch.

No one moved. All eyes were fixed. Faces fascinated.

The spilled gasoline burned blue. For a while it seemed it would do nothing but burn itself out on the porch.

But then a wicker rocking chair caught fire.

And then the decorative lattice.

And suddenly the flames were licking up the pillars that supported the porch roof.

A wild cheer went up.

More bottles were lit. More wild arcs of twirling fire.

A second house. A garage. A parked car sitting on deflated tires.

Cries of shock and horror came from inside the first house.

Zil didn't let himself hear them.

"Onward!" he cried. "Burn it all down!"

Down through the dark they shuffled and stumbled, Caine's starved and starving remnants.

"Look!" Bug cried. No one could see him, of course, or his outstretched pointing hand. But they looked, anyway.

An orange glow lit the horizon.

"Huh. The stupid punk actually did it," Caine said. "We have to hurry. Anyone falls out, they are on their own."

Orsay climbed to the top of the cliff, weary but propelled by Nerezza's helping hand.

"Come on, Prophetess, we're almost there."

"Don't call me that," Orsay said.

"It's what you are," Nerezza said softly but insistently.

The others had all gone ahead. Nerezza always insisted that the supplicants leave the beach first. Orsay suspected it had to do with Nerezza not wanting anyone to see Orsay struggling and scraping her knees on rocks. Nerezza seemed to think it was important for kids to see Orsay as above all that normal stuff.

A prophet.

"I'm not a prophet," Orsay said. "I'm just a person who hears dreams."

"You are helping people," Nerezza said as they rounded a buried boulder that always gave Orsay trouble. "You are telling them the truth. Showing them a path."

"I can't even find my own path," Orsay said as she slipped and landed on her palms. They were scraped, but not too badly.

"You show them the way," Nerezza said. "They need to be shown a way out of this place."

Orsay stopped, panting from exertion. She turned to Nerezza, whose face was just two faintly glowing eyes, like a cat's eyes. "You know, I'm not totally sure. You know that. Maybe I'm . . . maybe it's . . ." She didn't have the word for what she felt at times like this, times of doubt. Times when a small voice down deep inside her seemed to be whispering warnings in her ear.

"You need to trust me," Nerezza said firmly. "You are the Prophetess."

Orsay topped the cliff. She stared. "I must not be much of a prophet. I didn't

foresee this.”

“What?” Nerezza called up from just below.

“The town is burning.”

“Look, Tanner,” Brittney said. She raised one arm and pointed.

Her brother, now glowing a dark green, like a billion little nodules of radioactivity, but still Tanner, said, “Yes. It is time.”

Brittney hesitated. “Why, Tanner?”

He gave no answer.

“Are we doing the Lord’s will, Tanner?”

Tanner did not answer.

“I am doing what’s right. Aren’t I?”

“Go toward the flames, sister. All your answers are there.”

Brittney lowered her arm to her side. It seemed strange, somehow. All of it. All of it so very strange.

She had burrowed up through the wet dirt. How long? Forever and ever. She had burrowed like a mole. Blind. Like a mole. No. Like an earthworm.

Tanner began chanting in a singsong voice. An eerie poem that Brittney remembered from so very long ago. A class assignment, a thing memorized and quickly forgotten.

But it was still buried in her memory. And now it came from Tanner’s mouth, his dead mouth gaping with black-edge fire dribbling like magma.

*But see, amid the mimic rout
A crawling shape intrude!
A blood-red thing that writhes from out
The scenic solitude!
It writhes! — it writhes! — with mortal pangs
The mimes become its food,
And seraphs sob at vermin fangs . . .*

Tanner smiled a ghastly smile and said, “*In human gore imbued.*”

“Why are you saying that? You’re scaring me, Tanner.”

“Not for long, sister,” Tanner said. Soon you will understand the Lord’s will.”

Justin woke suddenly. He immediately rolled to one side and felt the spot where he’d been sleeping. Dry!

See? He’d been right all along. He didn’t wet *this* bed.

But just to be safe he should run out to the backyard and pee because he could feel a little pressure. He was wearing his same old pajamas; they’d been in his same old drawer. They were so soft because they were still from the old days. His mommy had washed these pajamas and made them all soft.

The floor was cold under his bare feet. He hadn’t been able to find his old slippers. Roger had even helped him look. The Artful Roger was nice. The only new thing in this room was a picture Roger had colored for him. It showed a happy Justin with his mommy and daddy and a ham with sweet potatoes and cookies. It was taped on

Justin's wall.

Roger had also found the picture album for him. It was downstairs in the cupboard in the dining room. It was full of pictures of Justin and his family and his old friends.

Now it was under Justin's bed. It made him feel pretty sad looking at it.

Justin crept down the stairs so he wouldn't wake up Roger.

The old toilets didn't work anymore. People all peed and did number two in holes in their backyards. No big deal. But it was scary going out at night. Justin was scared the coyotes would come back.

It was easier than usual to find the hole. It was kind of light out, a flickery orange light.

And it wasn't quiet like it usually was. He could hear kids yelling. And it sounded like someone dropped a glass and broke it. And then he heard someone screaming, so he ran back in the house.

He stopped, amazed. The living room was burning.

He could feel the heat. Smoke was pouring out of the living room, swooping up the stairs.

Justin didn't know what to do. He remembered he was supposed to stop, drop, and roll if he ever caught on fire. But he wasn't on fire—the house was.

"Call 911," he said aloud. But that probably wouldn't work. Nothing worked anymore.

Suddenly a loud beeping noise. Really loud. It was upstairs. Justin covered his ears but he could still hear it.

"Justin!" It was Roger yelling from upstairs.

Then he appeared at the top of the stairs. He was choking from the smoke.

"I'm down here!" Justin yelled.

"Hang on, I'm—" Roger started coughing then. He tripped and went falling down the stairs. He fell all the way on his face. Roger hit the bottom and stopped.

Justin waited for him to get up.

"Roger. Wake up. There's a fire!" Justin said.

The fire was coming out of the living room now. It was like it was eating the carpet and the walls. It was so hot. Hotter than an oven.

Justin started choking from the smoke. He wanted to run away.

"Roger, wake up! Wake up!"

Justin ran to Roger and tugged on his shirt. "Wake up!"

He couldn't move Roger, and Roger did not wake up. Roger made a moaning sound and kind of moved, but then he fell back asleep.

Justin pulled and pulled and cried and the fire must have seen him there crying and pulling because the fire was coming to get him.

TWENTY-THREE

14 HOURS, 7 MINUTES

TAYLOR WAS STARTING to worry by the time she popped into the hallway outside Lana's Clifftop home.

She would never bounce straight into Lana's room. Everyone knew that Lana had been through an unspeakable hell. And no one believed she was totally over it.

But more than concern for Lana's possible delicacy was deep respect and affection for her. There were far too many kids buried in the plaza. But without Lana the number would have been four or five times as high.

Taylor knocked and earned an instant barrage of loud barks from Patrick.

"It's me, Taylor," she called through the door.

A voice that betrayed no sleepiness said, "Come in."

Taylor bounced in, ignoring the door.

Lana was on the balcony, back turned to her.

"I'm awake," Lana said unnecessarily. "There's some trouble."

"You know about it?"

"I can see it," Lana said.

Taylor stepped out beside her. Off to the north, up the coast, the orange glow of fire.

"Some idiot burning down their house with a candle again?" Taylor suggested.

"I don't think so. This is no accident," Lana said.

"Who would start fires deliberately?" Taylor wondered. "I mean, what does it accomplish?"

"Fear. Pain. Despair," Lana said. "Chaos. It accomplishes chaos. Evil things love chaos."

Taylor shrugged. "Probably just Zil."

"Nothing in the FAYZ is ever *just* anything, Taylor. This is a very complicated place."

"No offense, Healer, but you're getting weirder all the time," Taylor said.

Lana smiled. "You have no idea."

Quinn's little flotilla set out to sea. Dark as always. Too early. Sleep still crunchy in everyone's eyes. But that was normal. Routine.

They were a tight little group, Quinn thought. It made him feel good. As much as he had screwed up in his life, he had done this well.

Quinn's fishing fleet. Feeding the FAYZ.

As they cleared the marina and headed out to sea Quinn felt an unusual joy welling up inside him. What did I do when the FAYZ happened? he asked himself. I fed people.

Not a bad thing. A bad start, yes. He had freaked out. He had at one point betrayed Sam to Caine. And he had never gotten over the memory of that awful battle against Caine and Drake and the coyotes.

So many vivid, indelible memories. He wished he could cut them out of his brain.

But other times he realized no, that was foolish. It was all those things that had made him this new person.

He wasn't Quinn the coward anymore. Or Quinn the turncoat. He was Quinn the fisherman.

He pulled on the oars, enjoying the healthy burn in his shoulders. He was facing Perdido Beach.

So he saw the first small flower of flame. An orange pinpoint in the darkness.

"Fire," he said calmly. He was in a pole-fishing boat with two other guys.

The others stirred and looked.

From a nearby boat a shout. "Hey, Quinn, you see that?"

"Yeah. Keep pulling. We're not the fire department."

They set to their oars again and the boats edged farther from shore. Far enough out that they could soon drop hooks and spread nets.

But every eye was on the town now.

"It's spreading," someone said.

"It's jumping from house to house."

"No," Quinn said. "I don't think it's spreading. I think . . . I think someone is setting those fires."

He felt his stomach churn. His muscles, warm from rowing felt suddenly stiff and cold.

"The town is burning," a voice said.

They watched in silence as the orange flames spread and billowed up into the sky. The town was no longer dark.

"We're fishermen, not fighters," Quinn said.

Oars splashed. Oarlocks creaked. The boats pushed water aside with a soft shushing sound.

Sam and Edilio broke into a run. Across the highway onto the access road. Past the rusting hulks of cars that had crashed into one another or into storefronts or simply stalled in the middle of the highway on that fateful day when every driver disappeared.

They ran down Sheridan, passing the school on their right. At least it wasn't on fire. Once they reached the cross-street at Golding the smoke was much thicker. It billowed toward them, impossible to avoid. Sam and Edilio choked and slowed down.

Sam pulled off his T-shirt and bunched it over his mouth, but it didn't do much good. His eyes stung.

He crouched low, hoping the smoke would pass overhead. That didn't work, either.

Sam grabbed Edilio's arm and pulled him along. They crossed Golding and in the lee of houses on Sheridan they found the air was clearer but still reeking. The houses on the west side of Sheridan were black silhouettes cut out of the sheet of flame that soared and danced and curled toward heaven from Sherman Avenue.

They started running again, down the street and around the corner on Alameda, trying to stay on the sweet side of the very slight breeze. The smoke was still thick but no longer blowing toward them.

Fire was everywhere along Sherman. A roaring, ravenous, living thing. It was more intense north of Alameda, but it was moving fast south toward the water down the rest of Sherman.

“Why is the fire moving against the breeze?” Edilio asked.

“Because someone’s setting new fires,” Sam said grimly.

Sam glanced left. Right. At least six houses burning to their right. The rest of that block would go up, no stopping it, not a thing they could do.

“There are kids in some of these houses,” Edilio said, choking from emotion as much as smoke.

At least three fires burned to their left. As they watched Sam saw a twirling firework, a spinning Roman candle that soared and arced downward and crashed into the front of a house far down the block. He couldn’t hear the Molotov cocktail smash over the roar of fire around him.

“Come on!” Sam yelled, and ran toward the newest fire.

He wished he had Brianna with him, or Dekka. Where were they? Both could have helped save lives.

Sam barely missed plowing into a group of kids, some as young as three, all huddled together in the middle of the street, faces lit by fire, eyes wide with fear.

“It’s Sam!”

“Thank God, Sam is here! Sam is here!”

“Sam, our house is burning down!”

“I think my little brother is in there!”

Sam pushed past them, but one girl grabbed his arm. “You have to help us!”

“I’m trying,” he said grimly, and tore himself free. “Come on, Edilio!”

Zil’s mob was backlit by a sheet of orange that consumed the front of a colonial-style house. They danced and cavorted and ran with burning Molotov cocktails.

“Don’t waste them!” Hank shouted. “One Molotov, one house!”

Antoine screamed as he waved a lit bottle. “Aaaaarrggh! Aaaaarrggh!” Almost as if he were the one burning. He threw the bottle high and hard, and it soared straight through an upper floor window of an older wood house.

Immediately there were cries of terror from inside. And Antoine screamed back, an echo of their horror, twisted into savage glee.

Kids came pouring out of the door of the house as flames licked the curtains.

Sam did not hesitate. He raised his hand, palm out. A beam of brilliant green light drew a line to Antoine’s body.

Antoine’s berserk cries ended instantly. He clutched once at the three-inch-wide hole just above his belt. Then he sat down in the street.

“It’s Sam!” one of Zil’s thugs cried.

As one they turned and ran, dropping gas-filled bottles behind. The gasoline spread from the shattered bottles and caught fire instantly.

Sam tore after them in pursuit, racing to leap the patches of burning gasoline.

“Sam, no!” Edilio shouted. Edilio tripped over the body of Antoine, who lay now on his back, gasping like a fish, eyes staring up in horror.

Sam had not noticed Edilio fall. But he heard Edilio’s single shouted warning. “Ambush!”

Sam heard the word, knew it was true, and without thinking dropped and rolled. He stopped just inches away from rolling into burning gasoline.

At least three guns were firing. But Zil’s thugs had had no practice with weapons. They were firing wild, bullets flying in every direction.

Sam hugged the pavement, shaking from the close call.

Where were Dekka and Brianna?

Another weapon was firing now. Edilio's rapid bam-bam-bam, short bursts from his machine gun. There was a big difference between Edilio with a gun and some punk like Turk with a gun. Edilio practiced. Edilio trained.

There was a loud shriek of pain, and the ambush was over.

Sam pried himself up a few inches, enough to see one of Zil's gunmen. The kid was running away, a wraith in the smoke.

Too late, Sam thought. He aimed, straight for the boy's back. The beam of burning light caught the gunman in the back of his calf. He screamed. The gun flew from his hand and clattered on the sidewalk.

Hank ran back to grab it. Sam fired and missed. Hank snarled at him, a face like a wild animal. Hank raced away as Edilio's bullets chased him, plowing a furrow in the hot blacktop.

Sam jumped to his feet. Edilio ran up, panting.

"They're running for it," Edilio said.

"I'm not letting them get away," Sam said. "I'm tired of having to fight the same people again and again. It's time to finish it."

"What are you saying, man?"

"I'm killing Zil. Clear enough? I'm putting him down."

"Whoa, man," Edilio said. "That's not what we do. We're the good guys, right?"

"There has to be an end to it, Edilio." He wiped soot from his face with the back of his hand, but smoke had filled his eyes with tears. "I can't keep doing it and never reaching the end."

"It's not your call anymore," Edilio said.

Sam turned a steely glare on him. "You too? Now you're siding with Astrid?"

"Man, there have to be limits," Edilio said.

Sam stood staring down the street. The fire was out of control. All of Sherman was burning, from one end to the other. If they were lucky it wouldn't jump to another street. But one way or the other, Sherman was lost.

"We should be looking to save any kids that are trapped," Edilio said.

Sam didn't answer.

"Sam," Edilio pleaded.

"I begged Him to let me die, Edilio. I prayed to the God who Astrid likes so much and I said, God, if You're there, kill me. Don't let me feel this pain anymore."

Edilio said nothing.

"You don't understand, Edilio," Sam said so softly, he doubted Edilio could hear him over the roar and crackle of the fire raging all around them. "You can't do anything else with people like this. You have to kill them all. Zil. Caine. Drake. You just have to kill them. So right now, I'm starting with Zil and his crew," Sam said. "You can come with me or not."

He started walking in the direction of the fleeing Hank.

Edilio did not move.

TWENTY-FOUR

14 HOURS, 5 MINUTES

DEKKA COULDN'T JUST lie there. She couldn't. Not when there was a fight. Not when Sam might be walking into danger.

Half the girls in the FAYZ had a crush on Sam, but it wasn't like that for Dekka. What she felt for Sam was different. They were soldiers, the two of them. Sam, Edilio, and Dekka—more than anyone else in Perdido Beach, they were the tip of the spear. When there was trouble, it was the three of them in the middle of it.

Well, the three of them plus Brianna.

Best not to think about Brianna too much. That way lay sadness and misery and loneliness. Brianna was what she was. Wanted what she wanted. Which was not what Dekka wanted.

Almost surely not what Dekka wanted. Although, Dekka had never asked, never said anything.

She doubled over with a fit of coughing as she rose from her bed.

She should probably get dressed at least. Put on some clothes, not stagger out into the street wearing flannel pajama bottoms and a purple hoodie. But another round of strangled coughing left her feeling weak. She had to save her strength.

Shoes. Definitely needed shoes. That was the minimum. She shuffled out of her slippers and searched around under the bed for her sneakers. Found them after more hacking and almost lost the will at that point. Sam didn't need her. Whatever was going on . . .

Then she noticed the orange glow from the window. She pushed back the curtains. The sky was orange. She saw sparks, like fireflies. She pushed the window open and almost gagged on the smoke.

The town was on fire.

Dekka got her shoes on. She found a scarf and her bucket of fresh water. She drank deeply of the water. It was going to be a thirsty night. Then she plunged the scarf into the rest of the water, soaked it, and tied the soggy mess over her mouth and nose. She looked like a pajama-wearing bandit.

Out onto the street. An amazing, awful, unreal scene. Kids were coming past, alone or in small groups, glancing back over their shoulders. Carrying a few pitiful possessions in their arms.

A girl loaded down with a big bundle of dresses staggered past. "Hey! What's going on?" Dekka rasped.

"Everything's burning up," the girl said, and kept moving.

Dekka let her go because now she spotted a boy she knew. "Jonas! What is this?"

Jonas shook his head, scared. Scared and something else.

"Hey, don't walk off, I'm talking to you!" Dekka snapped.

"I'm not talking to you, freak. I'm done with all of you. It's because of you this is happening."

"What are you talking about?" But she'd already guessed. "Is it Zil did all this?"

Jonas snarled at her, his face transformed by rage. "Death to freaks!"

“Hey, fool, you’re a soldier.”

“Not anymore,” Jonas said, and took off at a run.

Dekka wobbled. She was so weak. So unlike her usual self. But there was no doubt about what she had to do. If kids were running away in one direction she had to head in the other. Into the smoke. Toward the bright orange glow that sent up sudden flares of fire, like fingers reaching for the heavens.

Diana stumbled as she raced to keep up. Caine was pushing the pace. The haggard band of Coates kids trotted along, terrified of being left behind.

She had enough strength to keep up, but barely. And she hated herself for having that strength. And hated Caine for giving it to her. For what he had done. For where he had led them to.

But like the others she raced to keep up the punishing pace.

Across the highway. Smooth concrete under foot. Across the access road, and pelting across the school yard. So bizarre, Diana thought. The school yard where the town kids used to play soccer and try out for cheerleader, and now they were running like no one before had ever run on this overgrown field.

The fire was in the east, a wall of flame down Sherman. Their path lay down Brace Road, just two blocks from the fire. It was a straight shot down Brace to the marina.

“What about Sam?” someone asked. “What if we run into him?”

“Idiot,” Caine muttered. “You think this fire is a coincidence? It’s all part of my plan. Sherman cuts off the western end of town. Kids will run toward the plaza, on the other side of Sherman, or down to the beach. Either way, it’s away from us. And Sam will be there with them.”

“Who’s that?” Diana said. She stopped. Caine and the rest stopped as well. Someone walked straight down the middle of Brace. It was impossible to tell at first whether he was walking toward them or away. But Caine knew the silhouette instantly.

The hair on the back of his neck stood on end. No one else looked like that.

No one.

“No,” he whispered.

“Do we keep going?” Penny asked.

Caine ignored her. He turned to Diana. “Am I . . . am I crazy?”

Diana said nothing. Her horrified expression gave Caine his answer.

“He’s moving away,” Caine whispered.

Smoke swirled and the apparition was gone.

“Optical illusion,” Caine said.

“So we keep going straight?”

Caine shook his head. “No. Change of plans. We’ll cut through town. Head for the beach, then make our way back.”

Diana pointed a shaking finger at the burning street beyond. “Go through the fire? Or go down streets that are going to be filled with Sam’s people?”

“I have another way,” Caine said. He crossed quickly to a fence around the backyard of the closest house. “We’ll make our own street.”

He raised a hand and the fence bulged inward. With a rending, tearing sound the fence gave way.

“Backyard to backyard,” he said. “Let’s move.”

“We did it, Leader! We did it!” Hank said. He had to shout to be heard over the roar of the flames.

Antoine lay on the ground, crying loudly. He had pulled off his shirt to see the wound in his side. He lay there, fat and jiggly, as he cried about the pain.

“Man up,” Hank said harshly.

“Are you crazy?” Antoine cried. “I have a hole in me! I have a hole in me! Oh, God. It hurts so bad!”

Perdido Beach was burning. At least a big part of it was. Zil climbed atop a Winnebago in the beach parking lot. He could see much of the town from there.

Sherman was ablaze. It looked like a volcano had erupted in the middle of town. And now the flames were advancing toward the center of town along Alameda.

His doing, all of this. His creation. And now they would all know that he was serious. Now they would all know that you didn’t mess with Zil Sperry.

“Take me to Lana,” Antoine moaned. “You guys have to take me to Lana!”

The sun wasn’t up yet, so it wasn’t possible to see the smoke plume, but Zil sensed that it was huge. There was not a star to be seen in the sky.

“Think we got Sam?” Lance asked.

No one answered.

“Should we go back and get more gas?” Turk asked. He, like everyone else, was ignoring Antoine.

Zil couldn’t answer. A part of him wanted to burn it all down. Every last house. Every vacant, useless store. Burn it all down and dance up here atop the Winnebago while it burned.

The plan was to create chaos. And to help the freak Caine to escape.

“Leader, we need to know what to do,” Turk urged.

“Help me,” Antoine moaned. “We gotta stick together, don’t we? Don’t we?”

Hank said, “Antoine, shut up or I’ll shut you up.”

“He burned a hole in me. Look at it! Look at it!”

Hank glanced up at Zil. Zil turned away. He didn’t have an answer to the problem of Antoine.

The truth was, Zil hated seeing wounds of any kind. He’d always been squeamish about blood. And the one quick glance he’d stolen at Antoine’s injury had made him sick to his stomach.

Which probably didn’t help Antoine much.

Hank said, “Come on, Antoine. Come with me.”

“What? What are you . . . I’ll be good, it’s just that it hurts, man, it hurts so much.”

“Dude, come on,” Hank said. “I’ll get you to Lana. Come on.”

Hank bent low and propped Antoine up as he struggled onto his feet. Antoine shrieked in pain.

Zil climbed down the ladder that was bolted to the back of the Winnebago.

“What do you think, Lance?” Handsome Lance. Tall, cool, smart Lance. If only, Zil thought for not the first time, all Human Crew could look like Lance. Lance reflected well on Zil. Whereas fat, drunken Antoine, Turk with his dragging foot, and Hank with his nasty ferret’s face made it seem that he was surrounded by losers.

Lance looked thoughtful. “Kids are spread all over the place. All confused. What do we do if they decide we were responsible for burning the town and decide to come

after us?”

Turk laughed derisively. “Like the Leader hasn’t thought of that? We tell people it was Sam.”

Zil was surprised by the suggestion. He’d given it no thought, but obviously Turk had.

“Not Sam,” Zil corrected, thinking on the fly. “We blame Caine. Kids won’t believe it was Sam. We say it was Caine and everyone will believe us.”

“Kids saw us throwing Molotov cocktails,” Lance argued.

Turk snorted. “Man, don’t you know? People believe all kinds of stuff if you tell them it’s true. People will believe in flying saucers and stuff.”

“It was Caine,” Zil said, making it up as he went along and liking it more with each word he spoke. “Caine can make people do what he wants, right? So he used his powers to force some of us to do it.”

“Yeah,” Turk said. His eyes lit up. “Yeah, because he wanted to make us look bad. He wanted it to be on us because he’s a freak and we fight the freaks.”

Hank reappeared. He took a position behind Lance. The contrast between the two was all the more clear when they were close together.

“Where’s ’Toine?” Turk asked.

“Dumped him down the beach,” Hank said. “He’s not going to make it. Not with that hole in him. He’d just slow us down.”

“Then he’ll be the first to give his life for the Human Crew,” Turk said solemnly. “That’s major. That’s hard-core. Murdered by Sam.”

Zil reached a sudden realization. “If people are going to believe Caine is responsible for all this, we have to fight Caine.”

“Fight Caine?” Turk said blankly. He took an unconscious step back.

Zil grinned. “We don’t have to win. We just have to make it look real.”

Turk nodded. “That’s really smart, Leader. Everyone will think Caine used us and then we managed to chase him off.”

Zil doubted everyone would believe that. But some would. And that doubt would slow down Sam’s reaction as the council tried to make sense of everything.

Each hour of chaos would leave Zil stronger.

Would his big brother, Zane, have figured it all out this well? And would he have had the nerve to pull it off? Not likely. Zane would have been on Sam’s side.

It was almost a pity he wasn’t here.

TWENTY-FIVE

14 HOURS, 2 MINUTES

EDILIO HAD WATCHED Sam go with a feeling of doom. What chance was there if Sam had lost it? What chance did Edilio have to fix anything?

“Like I could,” he muttered. “Like anyone could.”

It was very hard for him to see what was happening around him. He heard screams. He heard shouts. He heard laughter. He saw only smoke and flame.

Gunshots rang out. From where, he couldn't say.

He glimpsed kids running. So brightly lit, they looked like they were burning. Then they were obscured by the smoke.

“What do I do?” Edilio asked himself.

“Too bad we don't have marshmallows. This is an amazing fire.”

Howard emerged through the smoke behind Edilio. Orc was with him.

“This sucks,” the monster growled. “Burning everything up.”

Ellen, the fire chief, showed up with two other kids. And Edilio began to realize that they were all looking to him for answers. “Fire chief” was a mostly empty title now. There was no water in the hydrants. But at least she had a clue, which was more than Edilio had.

“I think the fire is moving toward the center of town. Lot of kids live between here and there,” Ellen said. “We need to make sure kids get out of the way.”

Yeah,” Edilio agreed, grateful for any useful suggestion.

“And we got to see if anyone is still inside any of these houses that are already burning. Anyone that we can save.”

“Right. Right,” Edilio said. He took a deep breath. “Okay, good, Ellen. You and your guys run ahead of the fire, get people out. Tell them either go toward the beach or cross the highway.”

“Right,” Ellen agreed.

“Orc and Howard and I'll see if we can save anyone.”

Edilio didn't bother to ask Howard or Orc's opinion on that. He just started moving. Straight back down Sherman. He didn't look back to see if they were following. Either they were, or they weren't. If they weren't, well, he couldn't really blame them.

Down the burning street.

The fire was on both sides now. It made a sound like a tornado. The roar rose and fell and rose again. There came a loud crash as a roof collapsed and sparks like an eruption of fireflies billowed into the sky.

The heat reminded Edilio of sticking his face into his mother's oven when she was baking. A blast of burning air first from one side and then the other, buffeting him back and forth.

Glancing back Edilio saw Howard lose his balance and fall. Orc grabbed him and propped him back up.

Smoke filled the air, scalding Edilio's throat, seeming to shrivel his lungs. He breathed in pints, then cups, then teaspoons of air.

He stopped walking. Through the pall he could see an endless vista of flame and smoke ahead. Parked cars burned in driveways. Overgrown, unwatered lawns burned with almost explosive force.

Glass shattered. Beams collapsed. The blacktop street bubbled at the edges, liquefied.

“Can’t,” Edilio gasped.

He turned again to see that Howard was already retreating. Orc stood stolidly, unmoving.

Edilio put a hand on his pebbled shoulder. Unable to speak, choking and crying, Edilio guided him back away from the flames.

Roger did not wake up. The Artful Roger did not wake up.

Justin had to run. He ran into the backyard.

But he couldn’t just do that, he couldn’t, he couldn’t.

So he ran back inside. And he heard Roger coughing like crazy. He was awake! But it was like he couldn’t see, his eyes

were closed, all the smoke, and Roger ran but he hit a wall.

“Roger!”

Justin ran to him and grabbed his shirt tail. “It’s this way!”

He pulled Roger toward the kitchen, toward the back door.

Roger stumbled along with him. But it wasn’t right because the fire and the smoke were in front of him now. The fire had circled around and filled the kitchen.

The dining room. It made him think about the picture album upstairs under his bed. Maybe he could go and grab it really fast.

Maybe, but probably not. There was no door from the dining room into the backyard. But there was a big window, and Justin led Roger to it.

“I’m—” Justin started to say he was going to open the window, but the smoke was everywhere now stinging his eyes, so he had to shut them and choking his throat so he couldn’t talk.

He felt blindly for the window handles.

Caine kept pushing the pace. Push over a fence and move through. Backyards choked with weeds. Stinking swimming pools that had been turned into toilets. Garbage strewn everywhere.

In the dark they stumbled over fence posts and forgotten toys. They banged into rusting swing sets and barbecues.

They were making a lot of noise. Off the street, but noisy.

Kids yelled down at them from dark windows: “Hey, who is that? Get out of my yard.”

Caine ignored them. Keep moving, that was the key. Keep moving, get to the beach.

They had one chance, one chance only. They had to reach the marina within minutes. Sam and his people would be confused by the destruction, running around like crazy trying to figure it out. But sooner or later it would occur to someone, Astrid if not Sam, that it was all a diversion.

Or Sam would take Zil and squeeze him. Then the little punk would give Caine up.

In a heartbeat.

Caine did not want to reach the marina to find Sam waiting for him. Caine was holding on by his fingernails, desperate. He couldn't take Sam on. Not now. Not this night.

Even here, blocks from the fire, the air reeked. The smell of burning was everywhere. Almost enough to cover the smell of human waste.

They reached another street. No alternative but to cross it, as they had earlier streets. But there were too many kids here to easily avoid them. No way around, nothing to do but bluff and keep moving.

They pushed past terrified refugees.

"Keep moving, keep moving," Caine yelled as some of his people peeled off in a vain attempt to beg food from two traumatized, soot-covered five-year-olds.

Then, just down the street, wreathed in smoke, a shape.

"Down!" Caine hissed. "Stop!"

He peered through blurry eyes. Was it? No. Of course not. Madness.

The shape resolved into a kid, a regular kid, with regular hands and arms and nothing at all like that other form he had seen in the smoke.

Caine stood up, feeling foolish for having been spooked. "Move on, move on," he yelled.

He raised his hands and used his power to shove the group forward. Half of them stumbled and fell.

He cursed them. "Move!"

The earlier form in the smoke. That tall, lean body. The arm that went on and on. Impossible. An illusion, just like this one. Imagination fed by exhaustion and fear and hunger.

"Penny, are you doing anything?" Caine demanded.

Penny rasped, "What do you mean?"

"I thought I saw something," Caine said. Then he amended. "Someone. Before."

"It wasn't me," Penny said. "I would never use my powers on you, Caine."

"No," Caine agreed. "You wouldn't." His confidence was draining away. His mind was playing tricks on him. The others would sense it soon. Diana already did. But then she'd had the same hallucination, hadn't she?

"This is too slow," Caine said. "We have to go straight down the street. Penny, either you or me, one of us takes down anyone that gets in our way. Right?"

He plunged down the street, aiming for the beach. He had to fight the urge to look over his shoulder for the boy who could not possibly be there.

They made it safely as far as the beach. But there they ran into a group of maybe twenty kids, all milling around gaping at the fire, crying, giggling, encouraging one another. Half like they were watching a show, half like they were personally burning in those flames.

At first the gaggle of kids didn't notice Caine's group, but then one glanced over and his eyes widened as he saw Diana. And then, Caine.

"It's Caine!"

"Out of my way," Caine warned. The last thing he wanted was a stupid, pointless, and time-wasting fight. He was in a hurry.

"You!" another kid cried. "You started the fire!"

“What? Moron.” Caine pushed past, using his actual hands, not his powers, not looking for trouble right now. But the cry was being taken up by others and now a dozen furious, terrified kids were in his face, yelling and crying and then one threw a punch.

“Enough,” Caine yelled. He raised a hand, and the nearest kid went flying. He landed with a sickening crunch twenty feet away.

Caine never even saw the person who brained him with a crowbar. The blow seemed to come out of nowhere. He was on his knees, too confused to be scared.

He saw the crowbar just before it hit the second time. A weaker blow, and badly aimed, but shockingly painful on the bone of his left shoulder. It sent a numbing electricity all the way down to his fingertips.

He wasn’t going to wait for a third blow. He raised his right hand, but before he could pulverize the little boy, Penny made her move.

The boy leaped back, almost as far as if Caine had thrown him.

He screamed and swung his crowbar wildly around him. When the crowbar flew from his fear-weakened grip, he began punching and clawing the air, eyes wild.

“What’s he seeing?” Caine asked.

“Very large spiders,” Penny answered. “Really large. And they jump really fast.”

“Thanks,” Caine grunted. He stood up and rubbed his numbed arm. “Hope they give him a heart attack. Come on,” he yelled. “It’s not far now. Hang in with me, everyone, by morning you’ll be eating.”

Mary didn’t have the energy to go home. Not much point, really . . . no shower . . . no . . .

She sagged onto the chair in the cramped office. She tried to lift her legs, rest her feet on a cardboard box, but even that required too much energy.

She rattled the pill bottle on her desk. She pried the top off and looked at what she had. She didn’t even recognize the pill, but it must be some kind of antidepressant. That’s all she ever got from Dahra.

She downed it dry.

When had she last taken a pill? She needed to keep track of them.

Two kids down with some kind of flu.

What was she supposed to . . .

What might have been dreams melded seamlessly with memory and Mary wandered for a while in a place filled with sick children and the smell of pee and her mother making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in giant stacks for some event at school and Mary wrapping the sandwiches in Ziploc bags, counting them into recycled plastic Ralph’s bags.

“Did you wet yourself?” her mother asked.

“I guess so. It smells like it.” She wasn’t embarrassed, just annoyed, wishing her mother wouldn’t make an issue out of it.

And then the door was opened and a little girl came and crawled onto Mary’s lap but Mary couldn’t move her arms to hug because her arms were made out of lead.

“I’m so tired,” Mary told her mother.

“Well, we’ve made eight thousand sandwiches,” her mother explained, and Mary saw from the stacks and stacks that teetered comically like something from a Dr. Seuss

book, that it was true.

“You look sickly.”

“I’m fine,” Mary said.

“I want my mommy,” the little girl said in her ear, and warm tears rolled onto Mary’s neck.

“You should come home now,” Mary’s mother said.

“I have to do the laundry first,” Mary said.

“Someone else will do it.”

Mary felt a sudden sharp sadness. She felt herself sinking into the tile floor, shrinking as her mother watched, no longer making sandwiches.

Her mother held the knife covered with peanut butter and raspberry preserves. Globules of red, red fruit dripped from the edge of the knife, which was awfully large for making sandwiches.

“It won’t hurt,” her mother said. She held the knife out for Mary.

Mary jerked awake.

The girl on her lap had fallen asleep and peed. Mary was soaked by it.

“Oh!” she cried. “Oh, get off me! Get off me!” she yelled, still half in her dream, still seeing that knife floating, handle toward her, dripping.

The girl fell to the floor and, stunned, began to cry.

“Hey!” someone yelled from the main room.

“I’m sorry,” Mary mumbled, and tried to stand up. Her legs gave way and she sat down again, too suddenly. As she fell she reached for the knife but it wasn’t real, though the little girl’s cry was, and so was the voice yelling, “Hey, you can’t come in here!”

On the next try Mary managed to stand up. She staggered out. Three kids, faces dull with terror.

Not her age group. Too old.

“What are you doing here?” Mary asked.

The whole room was waking up, kids asking what was going on. Zadie, the helper who’d been yelling, said, “I think something’s wrong, Mary.”

Two more kids pushed through the front door. They smelled of something that wasn’t pee.

A boy ran in, shrieking. He had a livid burn all over the back of his hand.

“What’s going on?”

“Help us, help us!” a boy cried, and now it was all chaos, more kids streaming in the door. Mary recognized the smell now, the smell of smoke.

She pushed none too gently past the new arrivals. Outside, she coughed as she drew a lungful of smoke.

Smoke was everywhere, swirling, hanging ghostly in the air, and an orange glow reflected from the shattered glass of town hall.

Off to the west a tongue of fire suddenly shot into the sky and was swallowed by its own smoke.

No one else was in the plaza. No one but one girl.

Mary rubbed the sleep from her eyes, stared at her. Not possible, not possible, not real, some leftover fragment of dream.

But the girl was still there, face in shadow, a glint of chrome steel glinting from her

braces.

“Have you seen him?” the girl asked.

Mary felt something die inside her, dread and horror like the impact of an explosion in her mind.

“Have you seen the demon?” Brittney asked.

Mary couldn't answer. She could only stare as Brittney's arm began to elongate, to change shape.

Brittney winked. Cold, dead blue eyes.

Mary ran into the day care. She slammed the door behind her and leaned back against it.

TWENTY-SIX

13 HOURS, 43 MINUTES

THE SMOKE ALTERED the familiar streetscape for Sam. He was turned around, unsure for a moment of where he was or which direction was which. He stopped, heard footsteps running behind him, and spun around, hands up, palms out.

But the footsteps headed away.

Sam cursed in frustration. The town was burning down and the smoke made it all but impossible to find the enemy.

He had to do this now, during the heat of battle, before Astrid intervened and forced him once again to sit helpless, waiting for her to invent some system they'd never be able to put in place.

This was the night. This was the time to do what he should have done a month before: finish off Zil and his insanity.

But he would have to find them first.

He forced himself to think. What was Zil up to, aside from the obvious? Why would he decide to burn the town down? It seemed bold for Zil. It seemed insane: Zil lived there, too.

But Sam's thoughts were fractured by the recurring image in his mind of Drake. Out there somewhere. Drake who had somehow come back from the dead.

Of course they'd never seen his body, had they?

"Focus," Sam ordered himself. The problem right now was that the town was burning down. Edilio would be doing whatever he could to save those who needed saving. Sam's job was to stop the terror now.

But where was Zil?

And was he with Drake?

Could the timing all be coincidence? No. Sam didn't believe in coincidence.

Again, a movement glimpsed through a veil of smoke. Again Sam raced toward it. This time the figure did not disappear.

"Don't . . .," a young voice cried out, and then choked and hacked. A boy who looked to be maybe six years old.

"Get out of here," Sam snapped. "Go to the beach."

He ran on, faltered, turned to his right. Where was Drake? No, Zil. Where was Zil? Zil was real.

And all at once he was at the beach wall. He practically tripped over it. He had sent the six-year-old off in the wrong direction. Too late to do anything about that. The kid wasn't the only lost one tonight.

Where were Dekka and Brianna and Taylor? Where were Edilio's soldiers?

What was going on?

Sam saw a group of kids rushing along the sand in the direction of the marina. And for a moment he almost thought he saw Caine. He was hallucinating. Imagining things.

"Freaks out!"

Sam heard it clearly. It seemed very close. Maybe a trick of acoustics.

He tried to penetrate the dark and the smoke but he saw nothing now, not even the hallucinated Caine.

BLAM!

A shotgun blast. He saw the bright flash.

He ran. His feet hit something soft but heavy. He flew and landed facedown. Mouth gritty with sand he climbed to his feet. A body, someone in the sand.

No time for that.

It was time to see who was who and what was what. Sam raised his hands high and a ball of cold brilliant light formed in the air.

In the eerie half-light Sam saw a dozen of Zil's thugs, half armed.

A mob was running away from them.

Another group, smaller, and looking oddly like doddering old people, kicked through the surf toward the distant marina.

Zil and his crew knew immediately who was responsible for the revelatory light. It could only be . . .

"Sam!"

"It's Sam!"

"Run!"

"Shoot him! Shoot him!"

Three shotgun blasts in rapid succession. BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

Sam fired back. Pencils of blistering green light scoured the sand. A cry of pain.

"Don't run away!"

"Cowards!"

BLAM! BLAM!

Someone firing methodically now, working the shotgun pump.

Sam felt a sharp sting in the meat of his shoulder. He hit the dirt, knocking the wind from his lungs.

People running past. He rolled onto his back, hands at the ready.

BLAM!

The pellets hit the sand near enough for Sam to hear the impact.

He rolled away, over and over.

BLAM! BLAM!

Then a click. A curse. More feet running, pummeling the sand.

He leaped up, aimed and fired. The killing green light drew a scream of pain or fear, but the retreating figure didn't stop.

Sam got up more slowly this time. Sand was in his shirt, his mouth, his ears. In his eyes. Smoke and sand and his eyes were streaming. He saw nothing but blurs.

Now the light was working against him, making him an easy target. He waved and the tiny sun blinked out. The beach was dark again, though a faint hint of gray pearled the sky over the ocean.

He spit, trying to get the sand out of his mouth. Rubbed his eyes gently, trying to dislodge the grit.

Someone behind him!

The pain was like fire. A lash that cut through his shirt and tore his flesh.

Sam spun from the impact.

A dark shape.

A razor-sharp whistling sound and Sam, too stunned to move, felt the lash on his shoulder.

“Hey there, Sammy. Long time, huh?”

“No,” Sam gasped.

“Oh, yes,” the voice snarled. The voice Sam knew. The voice he dreaded. The voice that had laughed and crowed as he lay on the polished floor of the power plant, screaming in agony.

Sam blinked, struggled to open one eye, to see what could not possibly be real. He raised his hands and fired blind.

The whistling, whooshing sound. Sam ducked instinctively and the blow went harmlessly by.

“The demon!” a girl’s voice cried.

But it came from behind Sam because he had turned and run.

He ran. Ran blindly down the sand.

Ran and fell and jumped up to run again.

He didn’t stop until he hit the concrete beach wall, smashing his calves. He landed facedown on the ground and lay there, panting.

Quinn had turned the boats to shore, dreading what he would find when they reached land.

The fire had spread and now seemed to cover half the town, although there were no new explosions. The smoke had reached them out at sea. Quinn’s eyes stung. His heart was in his throat.

Not another massacre, not another atrocity. Enough! He just wanted to fish.

The rowers were silenced by the awful spectacle of their homes burning.

They reached the first of the piers and saw a group of kids staggering onto it, no doubt panicked kids running away, thinking the marina would be safe.

Quinn called out to them.

No answer.

His boat touched the bumper that sloshed in the water. His moves were automatic from long practice. He tossed a rope loop over the piling and pulled his boat closer. Oars were shipped. Big Goof jumped onto the pier and secured the second line.

The staggering gaggle of kids on shore ignored them and kept moving. They moved strangely. Like frail old people.

Something strange about them . . .

And familiar.

The dawn was still an hour away. The only light was from the fire. The false stars were blotted by the pall of smoke.

Quinn jumped onto the pier.

“Hey there! Hey!” he yelled. Quinn was responsible for the boats. The marina was his.

The kids kept moving, like they were deaf. They headed down a parallel pier toward the two boats that were kept fueled for rescues: a bass boat and an inflatable Zodiac.

“Hey!” Quinn yelled.

The foremost of the kids turned to face him. They were separated by fifty feet of

water, but even in the faint fire glow Quinn recognized the shape of shoulders and head.

And he recognized the voice.

“Penny,” Caine said. “Keep our friend Quinn busy.”

From the water a monster erupted in a tremendous geyser.

Quinn bellowed in terror.

The monster rose, taller and taller. It had a head like a tortured, deformed elephant. Two black, dead eyes. Curved teeth. The jaw gaped open to reveal a long, pointed tongue.

It roared then, a sound like a hundred massive cellos played with garbage cans for bows. Hollow. Tortured.

Quinn fell back. He fell from the pier. His back hit the edge of his boat. The impact knocked the air out of his lungs and he fell head-down into the water.

Panicked, he breathed. Salt water filled his throat. He gagged and coughed and strained with all his might not to breathe again.

Quinn knew the water. He’d been a good surfer and a very good swimmer. This was not his first experience of being upside down and turned around underwater.

He grabbed onto his fear and kicked hard to bring himself around. The surface, the barrier between water and air, death and life, was ten feet up. One foot kicked dirt. The water was not deep here.

He began to rise.

But the monster was reaching beneath the pier. Insanely long arms, with impossible clawlike hands.

The arms reached for him and he backpedaled away. Panicky, kicking, pushing at the water, lungs burning.

Too slow. One gigantic hand closed around him.

The fingers went through.

No pain.

No contact or sensation at all.

The second claw swiped through the water. It would disembowel him.

But it passed through him.

Illusion!

With the last of his strength Quinn reached the surface. He gagged on air and vomited seawater from his stomach. The monster was gone.

Big Goof hauled him like dead weight into the boat. Quinn lay on the bottom of the boat, uncomfortable atop the oars.

“You okay?”

Quinn couldn’t answer. If he tried he knew he would retch again. His voice was not yet back. He still felt as if he were breathing through a straw. But he was alive.

And now it all fell into place. That monster. The sound it made. He knew them.

Cloverfield.

It was the monster from the movie. The *exact* monster, the *exact* sound.

He sat up and coughed.

Then he stood up in the rocking boat and saw Caine and his crew climbing aboard the two motorboats.

Caine caught sight of him and sent him a wintry, ironic smile. There was a strange

girl with him. She, too, stared at him, but she did not smile. Instead, she bared crooked teeth at him in a grimace that was far more threat than smile.

An engine started, throaty and rough. Then a second.

Quinn stayed where he was. No chance he could take on Caine. Caine could kill him with a gesture.

The two motorboats chugged slowly, cautiously, away from the pier.

There came the sound of running feet. A rush of kids, some armed. Quinn recognized Lance, then Hank. Finally Zil, hanging back, letting the other two get out in front.

They reached the end of the pier. Hank stopped, aimed, and fired.

The shot hit the Zodiac. The air blew out in a sudden exhale. The boat's motor chugged beneath the water as the stern collapsed and sank.

Quinn climbed halfway up onto the pier to see. His jaw dropped.

Caine, wet and furious, rose and levitated above the sinking Zodiac.

He yanked Hank and his gun up into the air. Hank soared, twisting, crying out in terror, helpless. Up and up and up, and all the while Caine floated as his companions foundered.

A hundred feet in the air, Hank came to a stop. And then, down he came. But not falling. Too fast to be a fall. Too fast for it to be mere gravity.

Caine hurled Hank down from the graying sky. Like a meteor. Impossibly fast, a blur.

Hank hit the water. A huge spout went up, like someone had fired off a depth charge.

Quinn knew the waters of the marina. It was no more than eight feet deep where Hank hit. The bottom was sand and shell.

There was not the slightest chance that Hank would come bobbing back up to the surface.

Caine floated as Zil looked on in helpless horror.

"Now that," Caine shouted, "was a mistake, Zil."

Zil and his crew turned tail and ran. Caine laughed and lowered himself into the second boat. Five of his people were still in the water, calling out and waving and then cursing and raging as the motorboat roared away.

TWENTY-SEVEN

13 HOURS, 32 MINUTES

“GET UP,” PEACE whispered. She shook Sanjit’s shoulder.

Sanjit had long been accustomed to being awakened at odd hours. That part of being the oldest kid in the Brattle-Chance family had long since lost its charm.

“Is it Bowie?” he said.

Peace shook her head. “No. I think the world is burning.”

Sanjit raised a skeptical eyebrow. “That seems kind of extreme, Peace.”

“Just come.”

Sanjit groaned and rolled out of bed. “What time is it?”

“It’s almost morning.”

“The key word being ‘almost,’” Sanjit complained. “You know what’s a better time to get up? Actual morning. Much better than ‘almost’ morning.”

But he followed her down the hall to the room she shared with Bowie and Pixie. The house had twenty-two bedrooms, but only Sanjit and Virtue had chosen to sleep by themselves.

Pixie was asleep. Bowie tossed and turned, still under attack from the fever that would not go away.

“The window,” Peace whispered.

Sanjit went to the window. It was almost floor-to-ceiling, a stunning view during the day. He stood there gazing toward the far-distant town of Perdido Beach.

“Go get Choo,” he said after a moment.

She came back with a poisonously cranky Virtue, rubbing sleep from his eyes and muttering.

“Look,” Sanjit said.

Virtue stared, just as Sanjit had done. “It’s a fire.”

“You think?” Sanjit shook his head, awestruck. “The whole town must be on fire.”

Red and orange flames were a bright dot on the horizon. In the gray predawn light he saw a massive pillar of black smoke. The scale seemed ridiculous. The bright fire was a dot, but the smoke seemed to be miles high, shaped like a twisted funnel.

“So that’s where I’m supposed to fly the helicopter?” Sanjit said.

Virtue left and returned a few moments later. He was carrying a small telescope. It wasn’t very powerful. They’d used it at times to try to see details in the town or on the wooded shore closest to the island. It had never shown much. It showed no more now, but even slightly magnified the fire looked terrifying.

Sanjit looked at Bowie, who was whimpering in his sleep.

“I’m getting a very bad feeling,” Virtue said.

“It’s not like the fire can spread here,” Sanjit said, trying to sound nonchalant and failing.

Virtue didn’t say anything. He just stared. And it dawned on Sanjit that his brother and friend was seeing more than just the fire.

“What is it, Choo?”

Virtue sighed, a heavy sound that edged toward a sob. “You never ask me about

where I came from.”

Sanjit was surprised by the turn in the conversation. “Africa. I know you come from Africa.”

“Africa’s a continent, not a country,” Virtue said with a faint echo of his normal pedantry. “Congo. That’s where I’m from.”

“Okay.”

“That doesn’t mean anything to you, does it?”

Sanjit shrugged. “Lions and giraffes and all?”

Virtue didn’t even bother to sneer. “There’s been war there for, like, ever. People killing one another. Raping. Torturing. Stuff you don’t even want to know about, brother.”

“Yeah?”

“I wasn’t in an orphanage when Jennifer and Todd adopted me. I was four years old. In a refugee camp. All I remember is being hungry all the time. And no one taking care of me.”

“Where were your real mom and dad?”

Virtue didn’t answer for a long time, and some instinct warned Sanjit not to push him.

Finally, Virtue said, “They came and started burning down our village. I don’t know why. I was just a little kid. I just know my mother—my birth mom—told me to run and hide in the bush.”

“Okay.”

“She told me not to come out. Or look. She said, ‘Hide. And close your eyes tight. And cover your ears.’”

“But you didn’t.”

“No,” Virtue whispered.

“What did you see?”

“I . . .” Virtue took a deep, shuddering breath. In a strained, unnatural voice he said, “You know what? I can’t tell you. I can’t use words for it. I don’t want the words to come out of my mouth.”

Sanjit stared at him, feeling as if he was looking at a stranger. Virtue had never talked about his early childhood. Sanjit berated himself for being so self-centered, he’d never asked.

“I see that fire and I just have a bad feeling, Sanjit. I have a bad feeling it’s getting ready to happen again.”

Taylor found Edilio with Orc, Howard, Ellen, and a few others. They were retreating from the worst of the fire.

Voices cried pitifully from the upper floors of a house that burned like a match head. Taylor saw Edilio press his hands to his ears.

Taylor grabbed his hand and pulled it away. “There are kids in that house!”

“Yeah?” Edilio said savagely. “Do you think?”

It was so unlike Edilio, it shocked Taylor. The others looked at her like she was an idiot. They all heard the cries. “I can do it,” Taylor said. “I can pop in and out before the fire gets me.”

Edilio’s furious glare softened just a little. “You’re a brave girl, Taylor. But what

are you going to do? You can bounce, but you can't carry anyone out with you."

Taylor stared at the house. It was half a block away and even from this distance the heat was like a furnace.

"Maybe I can . . ." She faltered.

"What's happening in there? You can't stop it. And you don't want to bounce in there just to see it. Believe me," Edilio said. "You don't want to see it."

The cries were not heard again. A few minutes later the roof collapsed inward.

"The fire is spreading on its own now. We should try to make a fire break," Ellen said.

"A what?" Edilio asked.

"A fire break. It's what they do in forest fires. They knock down the trees that are in the path of the fire. It stops the fire from moving tree to tree."

"You talking about knocking down houses?" Howard said. "You talking about Orc knocking down houses. That's going to—"

"Shut up, Howard," Orc said. Not mean, but definite.

Howard shrugged. "Okay, big guy, if you want to get all altruistic."

"Whatever," Orc said.

Dekka ran into Edilio. Literally. She was obviously half blinded by smoke.

"Dekka!" Edilio cried. "Have you seen Sam?"

Dekka tried to answer, choked, coughed, and ended up shaking her head.

"Okay. Come with us. The fire is still spreading."

"What are you—?" she managed to ask.

"We're going to make a fire break," Edilio said. "The fire is jumping house to house. We're going to knock some houses down and push them back."

"Get Jack, too," Dekka said, squeezing the words out and biting off the racking cough that followed.

"Good idea," Edilio said. "Taylor?"

Taylor disappeared.

"Come on, guys," Edilio said, trying to rally his sick, dispirited group. "We can maybe still save a lot of the town."

He led the way and the others followed.

Where was Sam? Usually it would be Sam leading the way. Sam handing out orders.

Was Sam okay? Had he caught up with Zil? Had he done what he threatened to do? Had he killed Zil?

Edilio could still hear echoes of the cries from the burning house. He knew he would be hearing them in his dreams for a long time to come. He wasn't going to manage too much sympathy for Zil if Sam had carried out his threat.

But even now it didn't sit well with Edilio. It was just another symptom of a world gone crazy.

Taylor bounced back as they reached Sheridan Avenue. There was smoke everywhere. The fire was moving across backyards from Sherman to the west side of Sheridan.

"Jack's on his way. Breeze tried to get up but she took like three steps and folded."

"Is she okay?" Dekka asked.

"Flu and super speed don't go too well together, I think," Taylor said. "She'll live."

Edilio tried to make sense of the lay of the land. Fire raged to the west. There was no normal wind, there never was in the FAYZ, but it seemed as if the fire was making its own wind. Blowtorch heat blew. No question the fire would follow that wind.

"It's coming this way," Ellen said.

"Yeah." The fires on Sherman made silhouettes out of the row of houses on the west side of Sheridan.

Suddenly, out of a swirl of smoke came a small boy pulling a larger one behind him.

"Hey, little man," Edilio said. "Get straight out of here."

The little boy, Edilio recognized him now, was Justin. Mary had asked him to keep an eye out for Justin. And Roger. Roger was in a bad way, unable to speak or even open his eyes.

"Don't try to talk," Edilio said. "Justin: get to the plaza, okay? Both of you. Lana will be there, probably. Go to her or go to Dahra Baidoo, okay? Right now! Get out of here!"

The two soot-covered kids took off, choking, staggering, Justin still pulling Roger behind him.

"I don't think we can save the houses on that side," Ellen said. "But the street's pretty wide here. And if we can knock the east-side houses down, push them back, maybe that'll be enough."

Jack came down the street, looking stunned and cautious.

"Thanks for coming, Jack," Edilio said.

Jack shot a dirty look at Taylor, who smiled blandly. Something had gone on there, but now wasn't the time to worry about it. Taylor had convinced Jack, that was all Edilio needed to know.

"Okay," Edilio said. "We're going to take that house down. Taylor, check inside. Dekka, I guess we'll have you weaken it first. Then Orc and Jack can go at it."

Orc and Jack looked each other over. Orc reveled in his strength. Jack was almost embarrassed by his. But that didn't mean he was prepared to be shown up by Orc.

"You take the left side," Orc said.

Taylor popped back. "No one home. I checked every room."

Dekka raised her hands high. Edilio wondered if her being sick would weaken her power. But the porch furniture was rising, weightless, smashing into the overhang. A long-disused bike floated up and into the sky.

The house groaned and creaked. Dirt and garbage rose in a sort of slow-motion, reverse rain.

Then, suddenly Dekka dropped her hands. The bike and furniture and garbage all crashed back to earth. The house complained loudly. A part of the roof fell in.

Orc and Jack moved in.

Orc slammed his fist through a wall near a corner. He hooked his arm through and pulled on the support beams. It was hard work, he strained, but all at once the corner broke. Siding splintered outward, wooden studs cracked and protruded like bones in a compound fracture. The corner of the house sagged.

Jack tore a light pole from its cement base, handed it off to Orc and then grabbed a second metal streetlight for himself. Once the house was reduced to sticks and slabs and broken pipes Dekka raised the whole mess off the ground.

There followed an awkward, dangerous sort of dance. Orc and Jack used the long lamp poles to shove the weightless debris back from the street. But it wasn't an easy thing to manage because Dekka had to keep adjusting gravity to keep the debris from rising skyward, and Orc and Jack had to fight the differing gravity levels that at times made the light poles almost weightless, and at other times returned them to their full weight.

Eventually, the crumpled, shattered home was shoved into the parking spaces behind the buildings that fronted San Pablo and the town plaza. As they finished that first house the fire jumped to the home to their west. But there was now at least a chance that it would be stopped from crossing Sheridan.

Throughout the morning they worked. They slogged up and down three blocks of Sheridan, taking down the most directly endangered houses. Edilio and Howard searched each house, shuttled kids away from the danger, and ran behind Dekka, Orc and Jack, stomping out embers that landed on the east side of the street, smothering smoldering grass with trash can lids and shovels.

The sound of it all, the tearing, ripping and sudden crashes, joined the snapping and crackling and whoosh of the fire that ate its way down the west side of the street.

The sounds of Perdido Beach dying.

TWENTY-EIGHT

13 HOURS, 12 MINUTES

THE BOAT CHUGGED away from Perdido Beach.

There were only seven of them now. Caine. Diana. Penny. Tyrell. Jasmine. Bug. And Paint. Paint had gotten his nickname from huffing paint out of a sock. His mouth was invariably whatever color of paint he'd found most recently. It was red at the moment, Caine noted. Like Paint had gone vampire.

Of the seven, only two had useful powers: Penny and Bug. Diana still had the ability to gauge powers accurately, but how useful would that be?

The other three were here only because they'd had the good luck not to be in the Zodiac. Although maybe that was bad luck: those who had fallen in at the marina were probably being fed by Sam's people.

"Where we going, man?" Paint asked for about the tenth time since they'd set out.

"Bug's island," Caine said. He was feeling patient. He'd gotten this far, proven that he could still hurt Sam, proven that he could still carry out a plan. As weak as he was, he had succeeded in moving himself and his followers from Coates right through the heart of enemy country.

The motor chugged reassuringly. The tiller vibrated in Caine's hand. A memory of the long ago world filled with machines and electronics and food.

It was cramped in the boat. It wasn't much of a craft. A bass boat, shallow-draft, flat-bottomed, low sided. Dirty white fiberglass. Or maybe it was aluminum. Caine didn't care.

There were three life jackets on the boat, just three. Tyrell, Bug, and Penny had them on, strapped with varying degrees of effectiveness. A lifeboat full of starved refugees.

Diana didn't take a life jacket. Caine knew why. She didn't care anymore whether she lived. It had been hours since she had spoken.

It was as if Diana had finally given up. Caine could look at her openly now without having to pretend he wasn't. She would no longer lash out with some mean-funny remark.

She was the wreck of Diana. She was what was left if you took Diana's beauty and wit and toughness away. A crispy-haired, trembling, sullen, sallow-fleshed skeleton.

"I see more than one island," Penny commented.

"Yeah," Caine said.

"Which one is it?"

Not a time to admit that he didn't know. And a bad time, probably, to admit that if they guessed wrong and managed to climb off onto the wrong island they'd probably die there. Not enough strength left in any of them to go island hopping.

"There's food there?" Tyrell asked hopefully.

"Yes," Caine said.

"It's like these totally rich people, these actors," Bug said. A voice from a faint shadow of a boy sitting in the bow.

"Is there enough gas to get there?" Tyrell asked.

"I guess we'll find out," Caine said.

"What if we run out?" Paint asked. "I mean, what do we do if we run out of gas?"

Caine was tired now of playing the confident leader. "We'll float around helpless and die out here on the deep blue sea," he said.

That shut everyone up. Everyone knew what would happen before they just let themselves starve out here, becalmed.

"You saw him," Diana said to Caine. She didn't even have enough energy to look at him.

He could lie. But what was the point? "Yes," Caine said. "I saw him."

"He's not dead," Diana said.

"I guess not."

He deeply disliked the idea that Drake might be alive. Not just because Drake would blame Caine for his death. Not just because Drake would never forgive, never forget, never stop.

Caine hated the idea of Drake alive because he really hoped that death at least was real. He could face dying, if he had to. He could not face dying and then living again.

Jasmine stood up, shaky.

Caine glanced at her, indifferent really, but hoping she wouldn't capsize the boat.

Without a word, Jasmine toppled over the side. She hit the water with a splash.

"Hey," Diana said wanly.

Caine kept his hand on the tiller. Jasmine did not surface. A white lace doily of disturbed water marked where she had sunk gratefully into the deep.

And then there were six, Caine thought dully.

Hank dead.

Antoine gone, lost somewhere in the madness, maybe dead too, as bad as he was hurt.

Zil sat trembling. Home in his stupid little compound, with his stupid little girlfriend, Lisa, staring at him like a cow, with stupid Turk mumbling in the corner, trying to make up some kind of explanation of how all this was really a good thing.

Sam would come for him now. Zil was sure of that. Sam would come for him. The freaks would triumph. If they could kill Hank and maybe Antoine, too, oh God, then it was just a matter of time.

Caine could just as easily have smashed Zil himself into the water that way. If Zil had been the one shooting, Caine would have killed him as easily as he did Hank. Him! The Leader!

It wasn't in the plan. Zil was supposed to use the confusion of the fire to rally as many normals as he could and take over town hall. Make Astrid a prisoner, hold her as a hostage so Sam wouldn't . . .

A stupid plan. Caine's plan. How was he ever going to rally kids in all that chaos? In all the smoke and panic and confusion, with Sam blasting Antoine and then Hank.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

And then, attacking Caine to make it look good. Stupider, still. He couldn't fight the freaks head-on.

Zil could still see the look on Hank's face as he soared into the air. The scream that tore his throat as he came hurtling back down. The stretched-out quality of time as

they waited for Hank to come back up, knowing he wouldn't. Knowing that there was no way to survive that fall.

Like diving off a building into a cereal bowl of water, Lance had said. Hank was deep in the submarine mud. And it could have been Zil. It could have been him with his head buried in wet mud, maybe still alive for just long enough to try to take a breath . . .

"Good thing is, kids will totally believe us now," Turk was saying as he chewed his fingernails.

"What?" Zil snapped.

"With Hank killed by Caine," Turk explained. "I mean, no one's going to think we had a deal with Caine."

Zil nodded absently.

"That's true," Lance said. He didn't quite grin, but almost. And for a second Zil saw something different in Lance. Something that didn't match his handsome face and cool demeanor.

"Maybe we should just stop it."

Lisa. Zil was surprised to hear the sound of her voice. She didn't usually say anything. Mostly she just sat there like a bump on a log. Like a stupid cow. Mostly he hated her, and right now he hated her a lot, because she was seeing the truth, that Zil had lost.

"Just stop what?" Lance asked. He clearly didn't like Lisa, either. Zil knew one thing for sure: Lisa wasn't pretty enough that Lance would ever be interested in her. No, she was just the best Zil could get. At least, so far.

"I mean . . .," Lisa began, but she ended with a shrug and fell silent again.

"The thing we need to do," Turk said, "is keep telling people how it was all Caine. We keep telling people Caine burned the town."

"Yes," Zil said without conviction. He dropped his head and looked down at the floor, the dirty, ratty rug. "The freaks."

"Right," Turk said.

"It was the freaks," Lance said. "I mean, it was. Who pushed us into it? Caine."

"Exactly," Turk said.

"We need some more people, is all," Lance said. "I mean, Antoine was mostly just a stupid druggie. But Hank . . ."

Zil lifted his head. Maybe there was still hope. He nodded at Lance. "Yeah. That's it. We need more kids."

"If kids know we were trying to stop Caine, we'll get plenty more kids," Turk said.

Lance smiled faintly. "We tried to stop Caine burning down the town."

"Hank died trying," Zil said.

He said it. And he knew that Turk already half believed it. In fact, he half believed it himself.

"Lance, kids will listen to you. You and Turk, the two of you, and you too, Lisa: Go out there. Spread the word."

No one moved.

"You have to do what I say," Zil said, trying to sound strong, not like he was pleading. "I'm the Leader."

"Yeah," Turk agreed. "Only . . . I mean, kids may not believe us."

“Are you scared?” Zil demanded.

“I’m not,” Lisa said. “I’ll do it. I’ll go around and tell all our friends the truth.”

Zil peered suspiciously at her. Why was she being brave all of a sudden?

“Cool, Lisa,” he said. “I mean, that would be heroic.”

Lance sighed. “I guess if she can do it, so can I.”

Only Turk kept his seat. He glanced furtively at Zil. “Someone better stay here to protect you, Leader.”

Zil laughed mirthlessly. “Yeah, if Sam comes I’m sure you’ll stop him, Turk.”

“It’s the tribulation,” Nerezza said.

Orsay didn’t say anything. She’d heard that word before. Had she actually used it herself?

As if she’d guessed, Nerezza explained. “Tribulation. A time of trouble. When people look for a prophet to tell them what to do. You prophesied that this would happen.”

“Did I? I don’t remember.” Her memory was a cramped attic full of broken toys and damaged furniture. It was getting harder and harder to be sure where she was. Or when. And she had given up asking why.

They stood on the edge of the burned area, in the middle of Sheridan. The destruction was awful and eerie in the morning light. Smoke still rose from a dozen or more houses. Tongues of flame could still be seen here and there, peeking out from charred windows.

Some houses stood untouched, surrounded by devastation. Like they’d been spared by divine intervention. Some houses were only half burned. Some, you could tell, had been gutted but the exteriors seemed almost intact, aside from soot stain around blackened windows.

A house close by had only its roof gone, burned and fallen in. The cheerful green-painted siding was barely soot smudged, but the top of the house was gone, just a few blackened sticks poking up at the sky. Peering in the windows Orsay could see what was left of roof tiles and timbers, jumbled and black. Like someone had come along, ripped the roof off and used the house as a trash can to dump ashes.

On the other side of the street a different sort of devastation. It looked as if a tornado had come through and shoved an entire street’s worth of houses off their foundations.

“I don’t know what to do,” Orsay said. “How would I tell anyone else?”

“It’s a judgment,” Nerezza said. “You can see that. Everyone can see it. It’s a judgment. A tribulation sent to remind people that they aren’t doing right.”

“But . . .”

“What have your dreams told you, Prophetess?”

Orsay knew what her dreams had told her. Dreams of all those on the outside, all those who saw a girl named Orsay walking inside their sleeping minds. The girl who carried messages to their children and in return showed the parents startling visions of life inside the FAYZ. Visions of their children trapped and burning.

Trapped and dying.

Yes, the dreams of all those good people were anguished, knowing what was happening inside. And they were so frustrated, because they knew—those good

people, those grown-ups, those parents—that there *was* a way out for their terrified children.

Orsay's dreams had shown her that. They had shown her that Francis had emerged safe and sound, welcomed by his parents with tears of gratitude after he took the poof.

That had made Orsay happy. Taking the poof when you reached fifteen let you go free of the FAYZ. It was something she could look forward to herself. Escape, when the time came.

But lately there were different images. These came to her not at the FAYZ wall, not even when she was asleep. They weren't dreams, exactly. Visions. Revelations. They snuck in behind other thoughts. Like burglars creeping inside her brain.

She felt she no longer had any control over what happened inside her head. Like she'd left a door unlocked and now there was no holding back a flood of dreams, visions, vague terrible imaginings.

These new visions showed her not just those who had escaped the FAYZ by reaching the magic age. These new images were of children who had died. And yet, who now held their mothers tight on the outside.

She had seen images of those who had perished last night in the fire. Agony followed by death followed by escape into the loving arms of their parents.

Even Hank. Hank's father, not there waiting at the Dome, but notified by the California Highway Patrol. They'd called him on the phone. Reached him at a bowling alley in Irvine where he was drinking draft beer and flirting with the bartender. He'd had to press one hand over his ear to hear over the sound of rolling balls and crashing pins.

"What?"

"Your son, Hank. He's out!" the CHP had said.

Orsay saw the images, knew what they meant, and felt sick inside from knowing.

"What are your dreams telling you, Prophetess?" Nerezza pressed.

But Orsay couldn't tell her. She couldn't tell her that death itself, not just the poof, not just the big fifteen, was a way out.

Oh, God. If she told people that . . .

"Tell me," Nerezza urged. "I know your powers are growing. I know you are seeing more than ever before."

Nerezza's face was close to Orsay's. Her arm squeezed Orsay's arm. Nerezza pressed Orsay with all the force of her will. Orsay could feel it—that will, that need, that hunger—pushing her.

"Nothing," Orsay whispered.

Nerezza drew back. For a moment a snarl flashed on her face. Like an animal.

Nerezza glared at her. Then, with a will, she softened her expression. "You're the Prophetess, Orsay," she said.

"I don't feel well," Orsay said. "I want to go home."

"The dreams," Nerezza said. "They don't let you sleep very well, do they? Yes, you should get back to your bed."

"I don't want to dream anymore," Orsay said.

TWENTY-NINE

11 HOURS, 24 MINUTES

HUNTER HAD SIX birds in his bag. Three of them were crows, which didn't have much meat on them. One was an owl. Owls tasted pretty bad, but they had more meat. But two were the kind of birds that had colorful feathers and were juicy. Hunter didn't know what they were called, but he always looked for them because they were tasty and Albert would be very happy to get some of those.

He was high on the far side of the ridge, north of town, hauling the sack of dead birds up. Hard work. He carried them slung over one shoulder in a pouch that mothers used to use to carry babies.

Hunter had a backpack with his sleeping bag and his pan and his cup and extra socks and an extra knife. Knives broke sometimes, although the knife he had in his belt had lasted a long time so far.

Hunter was on the trail of two deer. He had tracked them through the night. If he caught them he would kill them. Then he would use his knife and clean them like he had learned to do, spilling their insides out. He wouldn't be able to carry both deer down at the same time. He would have to gut one of them and then hang it from a tree, come back for it later.

Hunter sniffed. He had learned that he could actually smell the animals he was hunting. Deer had a smell, so did raccoons and opossums. He sniffed, but now what reached his nose was the smell of fire.

Hunter's brow creased in concentration. Had he recently made camp near this spot? Or was someone else up here lighting campfires?

He was in a deep cleft, dark trees all around and overhead. He hesitated. The fire smell wasn't right for a campfire. It wasn't just burning wood and brush.

He was standing there, unprepared, when a big deer with a full rack of antlers appeared out of nowhere. It didn't see him. It was running, not in panic but at a steady pace, bounding nimbly along over fallen logs and skirting the thicker thorn bushes.

He aimed both hands at the deer. There was no flash of light. Nothing at all that you could see or hear.

The deer took two more steps and fell forward.

Hunter raced to it. The deer was hurt but not dead.

"Don't worry," Hunter whispered. "It won't hurt."

He held his palm toward the deer's head. The deer's eyes turned milky. And it stopped breathing.

Hunter slid off his pack and his bird bag and drew his knife.

He was excited. This was the biggest deer he'd ever bagged. No way he could carry it. He would have to cut it into pieces. It was going to be a lot of work.

He took a long drink from his canteen and sat down, contemplating the job ahead of him.

Hunter hadn't slept in quite a while, chasing the two other deer. He was sleepy now. And there was no longer any need to keep going. Between the birds and this buck he had two days of butchering and hauling ahead of him just to get it all to town.

There were some shallow caves not far from this spot, but some of them had flying snakes in them. Better not to go near those things. Better to stay out here in the open.

He lay his head on a soft rotted log and fell instantly to sleep.

How long he slept he couldn't know, he had no watch, but the sun was overhead when he woke to the sound of clumsy movement. Someone trying to be sneaky and not doing a very good job of it.

"Hi, Sam," Hunter said.

Sam froze.

Hunter sat up. "What are you doing here?"

Sam looked around like he was searching for an answer. He seemed weird to Hunter. He didn't look like Sam usually looked. He looked like animals sometimes looked when Hunter had them cornered and they knew it was the end.

"I'm just . . . um . . . walking," Sam said.

"Are you running away?" Hunter asked.

Sam looked startled. "No."

"I smell fire."

"Yeah. There's been a fire. In town," Sam said. "So. Is that a deer?"

It seemed like a stupid question to Hunter. "Yes."

"I was getting hungry," Sam confessed.

Hunter smiled his lopsided smile. Half of his mouth didn't work quite right. "I can cook us a bird. But I have to give the deer to Albert."

"Some bird would be great," Sam said.

He sat down cross-legged on the pine needle carpet. He'd been hurt. There was blood on his shirt and he moved his shoulder stiffly.

"I can cook it with my hands. But it tastes better if I cook it with fire."

Hunter gathered dried needles, small branches, and a couple of larger chunks of wood. Soon he had a fire going. He cleaned one of the colorful birds, burned off the pinfeathers, and cut it into smaller pieces. These he skewered with a wire clothes hanger he carried in his backpack and propped them over the coals at the edge of the fire.

He split the meat with scrupulous fairness. Sam ate greedily.

"This isn't a bad life you have up here," Sam said.

"Except when there are mosquitoes. Or fleas," Hunter said.

"Yeah, well everyone's getting fleas since most of the dogs and cats are . . . um . . . gone."

Hunter nodded. Then he said, "I don't have much talking."

When Sam looked puzzled, Hunter explained. "Sometimes my head doesn't want to give me words."

Lana had healed him as well as she could, but the skull had never grown back all the way right. She'd fixed his brain well enough that he didn't pee in his pants like he did for a while after the beating. And when he talked he could mostly make himself understood. But Lana had been unable to return him all the way to normal.

"It's okay," Hunter said, not realizing that he hadn't said any of this out loud. "I'm just different now."

"You're important," Sam said. "You're a lifeline for kids. Do the coyotes ever bother you?"

Hunter shook his head and gulped some more of the hot bird meat. “We made a deal. I don’t go where they’re hunting. And I don’t hunt coyotes. So they don’t bother me.”

For a while neither of them said anything. The fire burned down. The last of the bird was consumed. Hunter pushed dirt onto the fire, smothering it.

“Maybe I could work with you,” Sam said. He held up his own hand. “I can hunt, too, I guess.”

Hunter frowned. This was confusing. “But you’re Sam and I’m Hunter.”

“You could teach me what you know,” Sam said. “You know. About animals. And how to find them. And how to cut them up and all.”

Hunter thought about it, but then the idea slipped out of his brain. And he realized he’d forgotten what Sam was talking about.

“If I go back I’m going to do things,” Sam said. He looked down at the ashes of the near-dead fire.

“You’re good at doing things,” Hunter said.

Sam looked angry. Then his face softened until he looked sad. “Yeah. Only I don’t always want to do those things.”

“I’m Hunter. So I hunt.”

“My real name is Samuel. He was this prophet in the Bible.”

Hunter didn’t know what “prophet” meant. Or “Bible.”

“He was the guy who picked out the first king of Israel.”

Hunter nodded, mystified.

“You believe in God, Hunter?” Sam asked.

Hunter felt a sudden stab of guilt. He hung his head. “I almost killed those boys.”

“What boys?”

“Zil. And his friends. The ones who hurt me. I was hunting a doe, and I saw them. And I could have.”

“Could have killed them.”

Hunter nodded.

“To tell you the truth, Hunter, I wish you had.”

“I’m Hunter,” he said, and grinned because it struck him as funny. “I’m not Boy Killer.” He laughed. It was a joke.

Sam didn’t laugh. In fact, it looked like he wanted to cry.

“You know Drake, Hunter?”

“No.”

“He’s a boy with a kind of snake for an arm. A snake. Or a whip. So he’s not really a boy. So if you ever saw him, you could hunt him.”

“Okay,” Hunter said doubtfully.

Sam bit his lip. He looked like he wanted to say something else. He stood up, knees popping after sitting so long. “Thanks for the meat, Hunter.”

Hunter watched him go. A boy with a snake arm? No. He’d never seen anything like that. That would be something. That would be even weirder than the snakes he’d seen in the caves. The ones with wings.

That reminded Hunter. He pushed up his sleeve to examine the spot where the snake had spit on him. It hurt. There was a little sore, a sort of hole. The hole had scabbed over, like any of the endless number of scrapes Hunter had suffered tearing

through brush.

But as he looked at the scab Hunter was disturbed to see that it was a strange color. Not reddish like most scabs. This was green.

He rolled his sleeve back down. And forgot about it again.

Sanjit stood at the edge of the cliff. The binoculars didn't show much detail. But it wasn't hard to see the plume of smoke. It was like a massive, twisted exclamation point over Perdido Beach.

He tilted the glasses upward. Far up in the sky the smoke seemed to spread out horizontally. Like it was running into a glass ceiling. But that had to be an illusion.

He turned to his right and focused on the yacht. His view traveled from the bow to the stern. The helicopter.

Choo was trying to fly a kite for Pixie. The kite wasn't really taking off. It never did, but Pixie kept hoping and Choo kept trying. Because, Sanjit reflected, as grumpy as Virtue was, he was a good person. Something Sanjit wasn't sure he could say about himself.

Peace was inside, keeping watch over Bowie. His fever had stopped spiking. But Sanjit knew better than to think this was a permanent improvement. They'd been up and down like this for a long time.

He stared at the helicopter. Not a chance he could fly it. He was going to have to convince Choo of that. Because if Sanjit tried to fly the chopper he'd get all of them killed.

And if he didn't then Bowie might die.

He was too lost in his dark thoughts to notice that Virtue was running toward him.

"Hey, there's a boat coming."

"What?"

Virtue pointed at the sea. "Right there."

"What? I don't see anything."

Virtue rolled his eyes. "You really can't see that?"

"Hey, I didn't grow up searching the savannah for lions."

"Lions. That's right. That's what I spent most of my time doing: looking for lions."

Sanjit thought he could almost make out a spot that might be a boat. He aimed the binoculars. It took a while to pick out the boat and he found it by first locating its wake.

"It is a boat!"

"They don't call you Wisdom for nothing," Virtue said dryly.

"There's people in it," Sanjit said. He handed the binoculars to Virtue.

"It looks like maybe a half dozen people," Virtue said. "I can't see them very well. I can't even tell for sure if they're heading this direction. They might be aiming for one of the other islands. Or they might just be fishing."

"The town burns up and suddenly we have a boatload of people on their way here?" Sanjit said skeptically. "I'm going to guess they aren't fishing."

"They're escaping from Perdido Beach," Virtue agreed. "Running from something."

"The fire."

But Virtue shook his head dolefully. "No, brother. Think about it. There's a fire, so

do you jump in a boat and head for an island? No. You just go where there's no fire. Like to the next town."

Sanjit fell silent. He was a little embarrassed. Now that he thought of it, it was obvious. Choo was right. Whatever they were doing in that boat it wasn't about getting away from a fire.

"What do we do if they come here?" Virtue asked.

Sanjit had no easy answer. He stalled. "They'll have a hard time landing. Even with no surf they'll never get off that boat and up the cliffs."

"Unless we help them," Virtue said.

"What they'll do is come around and try to get in by the yacht. If they go the right direction, they'll come around and see it. Pretty good chance they'll end up drowning if they try that. Crushed in between the yacht and the rocks. Even with no surf. It's too tight."

"If we helped them they could make it," Virtue said cautiously. "It'll take them a while to get here. That's not exactly a fast boat. And they're still a long way off." He looked again through the binoculars. "I don't know," he said.

"Don't know what?"

Virtue shrugged. "It's not good to just decide you don't like people, not even give them a chance."

Sanjit felt the hairs on his neck tingle. "What are you saying, Choo?"

"I don't know. I'm not saying anything. They're probably fine."

"Do they look fine?"

Virtue didn't answer. Sanjit noticed that his jaw was tight. Brow furrowed. Lips pressed into a thin line.

"Do they look, fine, Choo?" Sanjit repeated.

"They could be like, refuges, you know?" Virtue said. "What are we going to do? Turn them away?"

"Choo. I'm asking you. Do they look fine to you? Crazy as it sounds, I kind of trust your feelings on things."

"They don't look anything like the men who came out of the jungle to our village," Choo said. "But they *feel* like them."

"Where are we supposed to land?" Diana asked.

The islands, which she'd been watching for what felt like days now, were finally within reach. The motorboat wallowed before bare cliffs that might have been one hundred feet high.

"There has to be something, like a dock or whatever," Bug said. He was nervous, Diana knew. If his story about this island turned out to be a fantasy Caine would make him wish he were dead.

"We are about out of gas," Tyrell said. "Maybe, like a gallon or whatever. I can hear it sloshing around, you know?"

"In which case the boat doesn't matter," Caine said. "We survive here, on the island, or we die." He cast a reptilian look at Bug. "Some of us sooner than others."

"Which way do we go?" Penny wondered aloud. "Right or left?"

"Anyone have a coin we can flip?" Diana asked.

Caine stood up. He shaded his eyes and looked left. Then right. "The cliffs look

lower to the right.”

“Can’t you just go all magic powers and levitate us up to the top of the cliff?” Paint asked and then giggled nervously, slobbering down his red-stained lips.

“I’ve been wondering just that,” Caine said thoughtfully. “It’s a long way up. I don’t know.” He looked down at the kids in the boat. Diana knew what was coming next. She wondered idly who would get the honor.

“Let’s go, Paint,” Caine said. “You’re about useless, might as well be you.”

“What?” Paint’s alarm was comical. Diana would have felt sorry for him another time. But this was life and death and right now.

And Caine was right: Paint didn’t exactly contribute anything vital. He had no powers. He was no good in a fight. He was a druggie moron who had long since fried whatever brain he’d had.

Caine raised his hands and Paint floated up from his seat. It was as if Caine was lifting him from the middle of his body because Paint’s feet dangled and kicked and his arms waved. His long, ratty brown hair drifted and swirled as if he was in a slow-moving tornado.

“No, no, no,” he moaned.

Paint floated out over the water.

“If you lowered him a little it would be like he was walking on water,” Penny said.

Paint moved closer to the cliff, still just a few feet above the water, now twenty or thirty feet away from the boat.

“You know, Penny,” Diana said, “it’s not all that funny. If it works we’ll all be going up the same way.”

Somehow that fact had not occurred to Penny. Diana felt a distant sort of satisfaction at the way sadistic pleasure turned to worry on the girl’s face.

“Okay, now for the altitude,” Caine said. Paint began to rise again, up the cliff face. It was almost bare, hard-packed soil dotted with extrusions of rock and a few scattered bushes that looked like they’d chosen a very precarious spot to grow.

Paint rose. Diana held her breath.

“No, no, no!” Paint’s voice floated back down, ignored. He was no longer kicking. Instead he was trying to twist around to face the cliff, arms straining outward, looking for something—anything—to grab.

Halfway up, the height of a five story building, Paint’s ascent slowed noticeably. Caine took a deep breath. He didn’t seem to be straining physically. His muscles were not taut; the power he had was not about muscles. But his expression was grim and Diana knew that in some unfathomable way he was exerting all his power.

Paint rose, but more slowly.

And then he slipped. Fell.

Paint screamed.

He came to rest just ten feet in the air.

“Let’s go get him,” Caine said. Tyrell lowered the outboard into the water and the boat moved toward the screaming, wailing boy.

Caine dropped him into the boat. He landed hard, fell onto his rear end and began sobbing.

“Well, that didn’t work,” Diana said.

Caine shook his head. “No. I guess it’s too far. I could throw him that far. I’ve

thrown cars that far. But I can't levitate him."

No one suggested throwing Paint. Diana's warning that whatever worked would be done to each of them in turn kept them quiet. Diana mentally measured the distance Paint had traveled. Maybe seventy, eighty feet in all. So. Now she knew how far Caine could reach. The day might come when it would be very good to know that.

THIRTY

10 HOURS, 28 MINUTES

SAM HAD NO idea what he was doing, or even why.

He had run in blind panic from Perdido Beach. That shameful fact filled his mind, driving out even hunger.

He had seen Drake and he had panicked.

Freaked.

Lost it.

After bumming a free meal off Hunter Sam had headed toward the power plant. The power plant was where it had happened.

The beating, the whipping, had been so bad that Brianna had found morphine in the medical supplies at the plant and jabbed the needle into him and even then, even after the painkiller flooded him, the pain was too awful to endure.

But he had endured. And he'd lived through the next nightmarish hours, the morphine hallucinations, the staggering, stumbling, needing-to-scream hours.

He had fought Drake again, but it was Caine who had finally killed the psychopath. Caine had thrown Drake down a mine shaft that then collapsed on Drake's head. Nothing could have survived.

And yet, Drake was alive.

He'd coped since that day by knowing that Drake was dead, buried under tons of rock, dead, gone, never to be faced again. That fact had let him cope.

But if Drake was unkillable . . .

Immortal . . .

Would Drake always be a part of life in the FAYZ?

Sam sat on the edge of the cliff, just half a mile from the power plant. He had found a bike on the way there and ridden it until the tire blew out. Then he had walked down the winding coast road intending to return to the power plant, to that room where it had happened. The place where Drake had broken him.

That was the thing of it, Sam thought, as he looked out over the empty, sparkling sea: Drake had broken something inside him. Sam had tried to put it back together. He'd tried to go back to being Sam. The Sam everyone expected him to be.

Astrid had been a part of it. Love and all. It was so corny, but love had kept him from despair. Love and the cold comfort of knowing that Drake had died while Sam had survived.

Love and revenge. Nice combination.

And responsibility, he realized suddenly. That had helped in a strange way, knowing that kids needed him. Knowing that he was necessary.

Now Astrid was telling him he was not so necessary. And, by the way, not so loved. And the comfort of thoughts of Drake's broken body lying under the ground? Gone.

Sam took off his shirt. The wound in his shoulder didn't look like much. When he probed it with his finger he could feel something hard and round just below the skin.

He squeezed the wound with his fingers, wincing at the pain, squeezed some more

and the dull lead ball came out along with a little blood.

He looked at the ball. A shotgun pellet. About the size of a BB. He tossed it away. A Band-Aid would have been nice, but he would have to content himself with washing the wound.

He started climbing down the cliff, needing something to do, and hoping he might find something to eat down in the tidal pools in the rocks.

It was a tough climb. He wasn't sure he'd be able to get back up once he was down. But physical movement seemed necessary to him.

I could jump in the water and swim, he told himself.

I could swim until I can't swim anymore.

He wasn't afraid of the ocean. You couldn't be a surfer and be afraid of the ocean. He could start swimming, straight out. From here it was ten miles to the distant FAYZ wall. Couldn't see it from here, couldn't usually see it at all until you were up close to it. It had a gray, satiny, pseudo-reflective character that fooled the eye. As far as they knew, it was a complete sphere, a dome, though it looked like the sky, and at night it looked like stars.

He wondered if he could reach the wall. Probably not. He wasn't in as good a shape as he'd been back in the old days.

He'd probably wear out after a mile. If he swam hard, maybe a mile, maybe a mile and a half. And then, if he let it, the ocean would take him down, swallow him up. Not the first person to be taken by the Pacific. There were human bones scattered across the ocean floor, from here to China.

He reached the rocks and bent over awkwardly to rinse the shotgun wound in salt water.

Then he began poking around in the tidal pools. Darting little fish. Some mollusks too tiny to bother opening. But after half an hour he had collected a couple handfuls of mussels, three small crabs, and a seven-inch-long sea cucumber. He placed them all in a small tidal pool. Then he aimed one palm at the pool and blasted it with enough light to set the salt water boiling.

He sat on slick rocks and ate the seafood stew, gingerly picking pieces out of the hot broth. It was delicious. A little salty, which would be bad later unless he found fresh water, but delicious.

It improved his mood, eating. Sitting by the water. Being alone with himself. No one demanding anything of him. No terrible threat to rush off and handle. No nagging details.

Suddenly, to his own amazement, he laughed out loud.

How long had it been since he'd sat by himself, no one in his face?

"I'm on vacation," he said to no one.

"Yes, I'll be taking some time off. No, no, I won't be answering my phone or even checking my BlackBerry. Also, I won't be burning holes in anyone. Or getting the crap beaten out of me."

An outcropping hid Perdido Beach from view, which was just fine. He could make out the nearest of the small islands and looking north he could see the spit of land that jutted out from the power plant.

"Nice place," Sam said, looking around at his rocky perch. "If only I had a cooler of sodas I'd be set."

His mind drifted to Perdido Beach. How were they doing in the aftermath of the fire? How were they dealing with Zil?

What was Astrid doing right now? Probably bossing everyone around with her usual confidence.

Picturing Astrid was not helpful. There were two pictures in his mind, vying for dominance. Astrid in her nightgown, the one that was modest and sensible until she happened to step in front of a light source and then . . .

Sam shook that off. Not helpful.

He pictured the other Astrid with the haughty, cold, contemptuous expression she wore in the council meetings.

He loved the first Astrid. The Astrid who occupied his daydreams and sometimes his night dreams.

He couldn't stand the other Astrid.

Both Astrids frustrated him, although in very different ways.

It wasn't like there weren't other pretty girls in the FAYZ, ready to more or less throw themselves at Sam. Girls who maybe wouldn't be quite so moral, or quite so superior in their attitude.

It seemed to Sam that, if anything, Astrid was getting more and more that way. She was becoming less the Astrid of his daydreams and more the Astrid who had to control everything.

Well, she was head of the council. And Sam had agreed that he couldn't run things all by himself. And he'd never wanted to run anything to begin with. He had resisted, in fact. It had been Astrid who manipulated him into taking on the responsibility.

And then she had taken it away from him.

He wasn't being fair. He knew that. He was being self-pitying. He knew that, too.

But the bottom line with Astrid was that the answer from her was always "No." No to any number of things. But when things went wrong, suddenly it was his responsibility.

Well, no more.

He was done being played. If Astrid and Albert wanted to keep Sam in some little box, where they could take him out and use him whenever they wanted, and then not even let him do his job—they could forget it.

And if Astrid wanted to think of herself and Little Pete and Sam as being some kind of family, only Sam never got to, well . . . she could forget that, too.

You didn't run away because of any of that, a cruel voice in his head said. You didn't run away because Astrid won't sleep with you. Or because she is bossy. You ran away from Drake.

"Whatever," Sam said aloud.

And then, a thought occurred to Sam that rocked him. He'd become a big hero because of Astrid. And when he seemed to have lost her, he stopped being that guy.

Was that possible? Was it possible that arrogant, frustrating, manipulative Astrid was the reason he could play Sam the Hero?

He had shown some courage before, the actions that earned him the nickname School Bus Sam. But he had immediately walked away from that image, done his best to disappear back into anonymity. He'd been allergic to responsibility. When the FAYZ came he'd been just another kid. And even after the FAYZ came he'd done his best to

avoid the role that others wanted to force on him.

But then there had been Astrid. He had done it for her. For her he'd been the hero.

"Yeah, well," he said to the rocks and the surf, "In that case, I'm fine being regular old Sam."

He felt comforted by that thought. For a while. Until the image of Whip Hand bubbled to the surface again.

"It's just an excuse," Sam admitted to the ocean. "Whatever's going on with Astrid, you still have to do it."

He still, no matter what, had to face Drake.

"I'm glad you saw that, too, Choo," Sanjit whispered. "Because otherwise I'd be sure I was crazy."

"It was that kid, that boy. He did it. Somehow," Virtue said.

The two of them were in the rocks atop the cliff. There was scarcely an inch of the island they hadn't explored both before the big disappearance and after. Much of the island had been denuded of trees dating back to a time when someone had raised sheep and goats on the island. But at the fringes there was still virgin forest of scrub oak, mahogany and cypress trees, and dozens of flowering bushes. The island foxes still hunted in these woods.

In other places palm trees swayed high above tumbled rocks. But there were no beaches on San Francisco De Sales Island. No convenient inlets. In the days of sheep ranching the shepherds had lowered the animals in wicker baskets. Sanjit had seen the tumbled remains of that apparatus, had considered trying to swing out over the water for the sheer fun of it, had decided it was crazy when he noticed that the support beams were eaten by ants and termites.

The island was almost impregnable, which was why his adopted parents had bought it. It was one place the paparazzi couldn't reach. In the interior of the island was a short airstrip large enough to accommodate private jets. And at the compound was the helipad.

"They're going east," Sanjit commented.

"How did he do that?" Virtue asked.

Sanjit had noticed about Virtue that he was not quick to adapt to new and unexpected circumstances. Sanjit had grown up on the streets with con men, pickpockets, magicians and others who specialized in illusion. He didn't think what he had just witnessed was an illusion, he believed it was real. But he was ready to accept that and move on.

"It's impossible," Virtue said.

The boat was definitely under way again, heading east, which was good. It was the long way around the island. It would take hours and hours for them to get to where the beached yacht lay.

"It's not possible," Virtue said again, and now it was starting to get on Sanjit's nerves.

"Choo. Every single adult disappears in a heartbeat, there's no TV or radio, no planes in the sky, no boats sailing by. Have you not figured out we're not exactly in the land of possible? We have been picked up, kidnapped, and adopted all over again. Except this time it wasn't to America. I don't know where we are or what's going on.

But brother, we've been through this before, you know? New world, new rules."

Virtue blinked once. Twice. He nodded. "Kind of, we have, huh? So, what do we do?"

"Whatever we have to do to survive," Sanjit said.

And then the old familiar Virtue was back. "That's a nice line, *Wisdom*. Like something out of a movie. Unfortunately it's kind of meaningless."

"Yes. Yes, it is," Sanjit admitted with a grin. He slapped Virtue on the shoulder. "Coming up with something more meaningful is your thing."

"Can you guys handle things for a few minutes?" Mary asked. John glanced at the three helpers, three kids who had either been scheduled or, in the case of one, was a homeless fugitive who had come to the day care looking for shelter and been put to work.

During the night and morning the population of the day care more than doubled. Now the numbers were starting to decline a little as kids drifted off in ones or twos, looking for siblings or friends. Or homes that, from all that Mary had heard, might no longer exist.

Mary knew she probably should not let anyone leave. Not until they were sure it was safe.

"But when would that be?" she muttered. She blinked a couple of times, trying to focus. Her vision was weird. More than just sleepiness. A blur that turned edges to neon when she moved her head too fast.

She searched for and found her pill bottle. When she shook it, it made no sound. "No, no way." She opened it and looked inside. She upended it. Still empty.

When had she finished it off? She couldn't remember. The depression beast must have come for her and she must have fought it off with the last of the meds.

At some point. Before. Must have.

"Yeah," she said aloud, voice slurred.

"What?" John asked, frowning like it was all he could do to pay attention.

"Nothing. Talking to myself. I have to go find Sam or Astrid or someone, whoever is in charge. We're out of water. We need twice the usual amount of food. And I need someone to . . . you know . . ." She lost her train of thought, but John didn't seem to notice.

"Use some of the emergency food to feed them until I get back," Mary said. She walked away before John could ask how he was supposed to stretch four cans of mixed vegetables and a vacuum-pack of spicy dried peas to cover thirty or forty hungry kids.

Near the plaza things didn't look much different than usual. They smelled different—smoke and the acrid stench of melted plastic. But the only evidence of the disaster at first was the pall of brown haze that hovered above the town. That and a pile of debris peeking out from behind the McDonald's.

Mary stopped at town hall, thinking maybe she would find the council hard at work making decisions, organizing, planning. John had gone on a tour with them earlier, but if he was back they should be, too.

She needed to talk to Dahra. See what meds she had available. Get something before the depression swallowed her up again. Before she . . . something.

No one was home in the offices, but Mary could hear moans of pain coming from the basement infirmary. She didn't want to think about what was going on down there. No, not now, Dahra would kick her out.

Even though it would really only take Dahra a few seconds to grab a Prozac or whatever she had.

Mary almost ran smack into Lana who was sitting outside on the town hall steps smoking a cigarette.

Her hands were stained red. No one had water to waste on washing off blood.

Lana glanced up at her. "So. How was your night?"

"Me? Oh, not great."

Lana nodded. "Burns. They take a long time to heal. Bad night. Bad, bad night."

"Where's Patrick?" Mary asked.

"Inside. He helps kids stay calm," Lana said. "You should get a dog for the day care. Helps kids . . . Helps them, you know, not notice that their fingers are burned off."

Something she was supposed to check on. No, not meds. Something else. Oh, of course. "I hate to ask, I know you've had a hard night," Mary said. "But one of my kids, Justin, came in crying about his friend Roger."

Lana almost smiled. "The Artful Roger? He'll live, probably. But all I had time to do was keep him from dying right away. I'll have to spend a lot more time with him before he's going to be drawing any more pictures."

"Z' anyone know what happened?" Mary's lips and tongue felt thick.

Lana shrugged. She lit a second cigarette from the butt of the first. It was a sign of wealth, in a way. Cigarettes were in short supply in the FAYZ. Of course the Healer could have whatever she wanted. Who was going to say no?

"Well, it depends on who you believe," Lana said. "Some kids are saying it was Zil and his idiots. Others are saying it was Caine."

"Caine? That's crazy, isn't it?"

"Not so crazy. I heard crazier from kids." Lana laughed humorlessly.

Mary waited for Lana to add something. She didn't want to ask, but she had to. "Crazier?"

"Remember Brittney? Girl who died in the big fight at the power plant? Buried right over there?" Lana pointed with her cigarette. "I have kids saying they saw her walking around."

Mary started to speak, but her clumsy mouth was dry.

"And even crazier stuff than that," Lana said.

Mary felt a chill deep inside her.

"Brittney?" Mary said.

"Dead things don't always stay dead, I guess," Lana said.

"Lana . . . what do you know?" Mary asked.

"Me? What do I know? I'm not the one with a brother on the council."

"John?" Mary was surprised. "What are you talking about?"

There was a loud groan of pain from the basement. Lana didn't flinch. But she noticed Mary's concerned expression. "He'll live."

"What are you getting at, Lana? Are you, um, saying something?"

"This kid tells me Astrid told him to spread the word that Orsay is full of crap.

Then, same kid says, a couple hours later, Howard tells him to spread the word that anyone who sees anything crazy is full of crap. So the kid says to Howard, what are you talking about 'crazy?' Because everything is crazy in the FAYZ."

Mary wondered if she was supposed to laugh. She couldn't. Her heart was pounding and her head was banging, banging.

"Meanwhile, guess what Sam's doing a couple of days ago? He's over at Clifftop asking me if I happen to have gotten a telephone call from the gaiaphage."

Mary stood very still. She wanted desperately for Lana to explain what she meant about Orsay. Focus, Mary, she told herself.

Lana went on after a moment. "See, what Sam really wanted, was to know whether it's dead. The gaiaphage. Whether it's really gone. And guess what?"

"I don't know, Lana."

"Well, it's not. You know? It's not gone. It's not dead." Lana took a deep breath and stared at the blood dried on her hands like it was the first time she'd noticed. She peeled some off with a thumbnail.

"I don't understand . . ."

"Me neither," Lana said. "It was there with me. In my mind. I could feel it. . . using . . . me." She looked ashamed. Embarrassed. And then her eyes flashed angrily. "Ask your brother, he's in with all of them, Sam and Astrid and Albert. At the same time Sam is asking me whether the gaiaphage is still its old lovable self and council kids are asking other kids to run around dissing Orsay and making sure no one thinks anything's wrong."

"John would never lie to me," Mary said, but with a lack of conviction even she could hear.

"Uh-huh. Something's going wrong. Something's going really, really wrong," Lana said. "And now? The town is half burned and Caine's stealing a boat and heading out to sea. What does that tell you?"

Mary sighed. "I'm too tired for guessing games, Lana."

Lana stood up. She flicked her cigarette away. "Just remember: the FAYZ is working out fine for some people. You ever think about what would happen if the walls came down tomorrow? That would be good news for you. Good for most people. But would it be good for Sam and Astrid and Albert? Here they're big deals. Back in the world they're just kids."

Lana waited, watching Mary closely. Like she was waiting for her to say something or react. Or deny. Something.

All Mary could think to do was say, "John is on the council."

"Exactly. So, maybe you should ask him what's really going on. Because, me? I don't know."

Mary had no answer to that.

Lana squared her shoulders and headed back toward the hell of the basement. She turned halfway down and said, "One other thing I almost forgot: this one kid? He said Brittney wasn't the only officially dead person walking around in the fire."

Mary waited. She tried not to show anything, but Lana had already seen it in her eyes.

"Ah," Lana said. "So you saw him, too."

Lana nodded once and was gone down the stairs.

The Darkness. Mary had only heard of it from others. Like stories of a boogeyman. Lana said it had used her.

Did Lana not see? Or did she simply refuse to see? If it were true that Brittney was somehow alive, that Drake was alive, too, then Mary could guess just how the gaiaphage had used Lana's power.

THIRTY-ONE

9 HOURS, 17 MINUTES

ASTRID HAD WAITED all night for Sam to come back.

Waited all morning.

Smelling the stink of smoke.

From the office in town hall she saw the fire spread the length of Sherman, down the west side of Sheridan, down the single block of Grant Street, and two blocks of Pacific Boulevard.

It seemed certain to reach the plaza. But finally the fire's march stalled.

Now the flames were mostly out, but a plume of smoke continued to rise.

Little Pete was asleep in the corner, curled into a ball with a ratty blanket thrown over him. His game player was on the floor beside him.

Astrid felt a towering wave of disgust. She was furious with Sam. Furious with Little Pete. Mad at the whole world around her. Sickened by everyone and everything.

And mostly, she admitted, sick of herself.

So desperately sick of being Astrid the Genius.

"Some genius," she muttered. The town council, headed by that blond girl, what was her name? Oh right: Astrid. Astrid the Genius. Head of the town council that had let half the town burn to the ground.

Down in the basement of town hall Dahra Baidoo handed out scarce ibuprofen and expired Tylenol to kids with burns, like that would pretty much fix anything, as they waited for Lana to go one by one, healing with her touch.

Astrid could hear the cries of pain. There were several floors between her and the makeshift hospital. Not enough floors.

Edilio staggered in. He was barely recognizable. He was black with soot, dirty, dusty, with ragged scratches and scrapes and clothing hanging in shreds.

"I think we got it," he said, and lay straight down on the floor.

Astrid knelt by his head. "You have it contained?"

But Edilio was beyond answering. He was unconscious. Done in.

Howard appeared next, in only slightly better shape. Some time during the night and morning he'd lost his smirk. He glanced at Edilio, nodded like it made perfect sense, and sank heavily into a chair.

"I don't know what you pay that boy, but it's not enough," Howard said, jerking his chin at Edilio.

"He doesn't do it for pay," Astrid said.

"Yeah, well, he's the reason the whole town didn't burn. Him and Dekka and Orc and Jack. And Ellen, it was her idea."

Astrid didn't want to ask, but she couldn't stop herself. "Sam?"

Howard shook his head. "Didn't see him."

Astrid found a jacket in the closet, probably still there from the real mayor. It was a loud plaid thing. She draped it over Edilio. She went to the conference room and came back with a chair cushion which she slipped under Edilio's head.

"Was it Zil?" Astrid asked Howard.

Howard barked a laugh. "Of course it was Zil."

Astrid clenched her hands into fists. Sam had demanded a free hand to go after Zil. He'd wanted to deal with Human Crew.

Astrid had stopped him.

And the town had burned.

And now the basement was full of hurt kids.

And the ones who were *just* hurt were the lucky ones.

Astrid twisted her hands into a knot, an anguished, prayerful gesture. She had a powerful urge to drop to her knees and demand some kind of explanation from God. Why? Why?

Her gaze fell on Little Pete, sitting quietly, playing his dead game.

"And that ain't all of it," Howard said. "You have some water?"

"I'll get you some," a voice said. Albert had entered the room unnoticed. He found the water jar and poured a glass for Howard, who drained it in one long swallow.

"Thanks. Thirsty work," Howard said.

Albert took the seat Astrid had vacated. "What's the rest of it?"

Howard sighed. "All night kids were coming by, right? Crazy stories. Man, I don't know what's true and what's not."

"Tell us some stories," Albert urged quietly.

Edilio snored softly. something about the sound made Astrid want to weep.

"Okay. Well, you've got kids saying they saw Satan. Seriously, devil horns and all. And others kept it a little more real, saying Caine, but skinny and crazy acting."

"Caine?" Astrid's eyes narrowed. "Caine? Here? In Perdido Beach? That's crazy."

Albert cleared his throat and shifted in his seat. "No. It's not crazy. Quinn saw him, too. Up close. Caine stole the two emergency boats late last night or early this morning. Depending on how you see it."

"What?" The shrill exclamation made Edilio stir.

"Yeah. No question it was Caine," Albert said in a forced calm voice. "He came though while the fire was at its worst and everything was confused. Quinn and his people were just coming back in, wanting to help, and there was Caine and maybe a dozen kids with him."

As Albert laid out the details Astrid grew cold inside. Not a coincidence. It couldn't be a coincidence. It was planned. Somehow in the back of her mind she had pictured Zil just losing it, acting out, maybe losing control of a situation that got out of hand. But that wasn't it. Not if Caine was involved. Caine didn't lose it. Caine planned.

"Zil and Caine?" Astrid said, feeling stupid even thinking it.

"Zil's whole thing is hating freaks," Howard said. "And Caine? Let's face it: he's kind of the Prince of Wales of freaks."

Albert cocked an eyebrow.

"You know, Sammy being the king," Howard explained. "Okay, the joke's no good if I have to explain it."

"Caine and Zil," Astrid said. It felt better somehow putting the names in that order. Zil was a thug. An evil, twisted little creep who exploited the differences between freaks and normals. But smart he was not. Maybe cunning. But not smart.

No. Caine was smart. And in Astrid's mind it was impossible that the stupider of

the two would be in control. No, it had to be Caine behind all this.

“Also . . .,” Albert said.

At the same time, Howard said, “Plus . . .”

Edilio woke up suddenly. He seemed surprised and confused to find himself on the floor. He looked around at the others and scrubbed his face with his hands.

“You missed a little,” Howard said. “Caine and Zil worked together on this.”

Edilio blinked like an owl. He started to get up, then sighed, gave up, and leaned his back against the desk.

“Also,” Albert said before Howard could continue, “there must have been some kind of falling-out. Because Zil’s guys started shooting at Caine as he was pulling away. They got one of the boats. Quinn pulled a couple of Caine’s kids out of the water.”

“What did you do with them?”

Albert shrugged. “We left them. They weren’t going anywhere. They’re starved. And Quinn says he thinks maybe they’ve gone a little crazy.”

Albert picked fastidiously at a spot of something on his pants. “Caine took out Hank. Hank was the one shooting.”

“Jesus,” Astrid said. She crossed herself quickly, hoping that doing so would turn the word from blasphemy to blessing. “How many kids died last night?”

Edilio answered. “Who knows. Two that we know of in the fires. Probably others. Probably we won’t ever know for sure.” A huge sob escaped from him. He wiped at his eyes. “Sorry. I’m just tired.”

He wept silently after that.

“I guess I might as well get this out there, too,” Howard said. “A couple of kids are saying they saw Drake. And a lot have seen Brittney.”

Silence stretched after that. Astrid found a chair and sat down. If Drake was alive . . . If Caine was working with Zil . . .

“Where’s Sam?” Edilio asked suddenly, as though he’d just noticed.

No one answered.

“Where’s Dekka?” Astrid asked.

“In the basement,” Edilio said. “She kept going for a long time. Her and Orc and Jack. But she’s sick. Tired and sick. And she got a bad burn on one hand. That was it for her. I made her go to Dahra. Lana will . . . you know, when she’s done with . . . Man, I’m sorry,” he said as he began crying again. “I can’t be digging graves. Someone else has to do that, okay? I can’t do that anymore.”

Astrid realized that Albert and Howard were both staring at her, one with intense curiosity, the other with a weary smirk.

“What?” Astrid snapped. “You’re both on the council, too. Don’t look at me like it’s all up to me.”

Howard laughed grimly. “Maybe we better get John here, huh? He’s on the council, too. Sammy’s missing, Dekka’s out of it, Edilio’s losing it and he should be losing it, the night he had.”

“Yes. We should get John here,” Astrid said. It felt wrong bringing the little kid into this, but he was on the council.

Howard laughed, loud and long. “Yeah, let’s get John here. That way we can stall for a while longer. We can keep on doing nothing for just a little while longer.”

Albert said, "Take it easy, Howard."

"Take it easy?" Howard jumped to his feet. "Yeah? Where were you last night, Albert? Huh? Because I didn't see you out there on the street listening to kids screaming, seeing kids running around hurt and scared and choking, and Edilio and Orc struggling, and Dekka hacking up her lungs and Jack crying and . . .

"You know who couldn't even take it?" Howard raged. "You know who couldn't even take what was happening? Orc. *Orc*, who's not scared of anything. Orc, who everyone thinks is some kind of monster. He couldn't take it. He couldn't . . . but he did. And where were you, Albert? Counting your money? How about you, Astrid? Praying to Jesus?"

Astrid's throat tightened. She couldn't breathe. For a moment panic threatened to overwhelm her. She wanted to run from the room, run away and never look back.

Edilio got to his feet and put an arm around Howard. Howard allowed it, and then he did something Astrid never thought she would see. Howard buried his face in Edilio's shoulder and cried, racking sobs.

"We're falling apart," Astrid whispered for herself alone.

But there was no easy escape. Everything Howard had said was true. She could see the truth reflected in Albert's stunned expression. The two of them, the smart ones, the clever ones, the great defenders of truth and fairness and justice, had done nothing while others had worked themselves to exhaustion.

Astrid had figured her job was to bring order out of chaos when the night of horror was finally over. And now was the time for her to step up. Now was the time for her to show that she could do what needed doing.

Where was Sam?

It hit her full force then, the shocking realization. Was this how Sam felt? Was this how he'd been feeling since the beginning? All eyes on him? Everyone waiting for a decision? Even as people doubted and criticized and attacked?

She wanted to be sick. She had been there for so much of it. But she hadn't been *the one*. She hadn't been the one making those choices.

And now . . . she was.

"I don't know what to do," Astrid said. "I don't know."

Diana leaned far out over the side of the boat and dipped her head into the water. She kept her eyes closed at first, intending to come straight back up once her hair was wet.

But the flow of cool water around her ears and scalp was so very pleasant that she wanted to see and wanted to stay there. She opened her eyes. The salt water stung. But the pain was a new pain and she welcomed it.

The water was green foam, swirling down the side of the boat. She wondered idly if Jasmine would come floating up toward her, face bloated, pale . . .

But no, of course not. That was a long time ago. Hours. Hours like weeks when you're hungry and sunburned and now thirst is screaming at you to drink, drink the lovely green water like punch, like Mountain Dew, like refreshing mint tea, so cold all around your head.

All she had to do was let go. Slip into the water. She wouldn't last long. She was too weak to swim very long and then she would slide down into the water like Jasmine had done.

Or maybe she could just hold her head down here and take a deep breath of water. Would that do it? Or would she just end up choking and puking?

Caine wouldn't let her drown, of course. Then Caine would be all alone. He would raise her up out of the water. She couldn't drown until Caine was gone, and then she might as well because, as sad as it was to realize, he was all she had.

The two of them. Sick puppies. Twisted, arrogant, cruel and cold, both of them. How could she love someone like that? How could he? Process of elimination? Neither of them could find anyone else?

Even the nastiest, ugliest species found mates. Flies found mates. Worms, well, who knew? Probably. The point being . . .

Sudden panic! She yanked her head back up and gasped at the air. Choked, gasped, and started crying with her face in her hands, sobbing without tears because you needed something inside you to produce tears. The water running down from her hair felt like tears.

No one noticed. No one cared.

Caine was watching the shore of the island as it passed on their left.

Tyrell was checking the gas gauge nervously every two seconds. "Dude, we're on empty. I mean, we are way in the red."

The cliffs were sheer and impossible. The sun beat down on Diana's head and if someone had magically appeared beside her and said, here, Diana, press this button and . . . oblivion . . .

No. No, that's what was amazing as she thought about it. No. She still wouldn't. She would still choose to live. Even this life. Even though it meant spending her days and nights with herself.

"Hey!" Penny said. "Look at that. Isn't that, like, an opening?"

Caine shielded his eyes and stared hard. "Tyrell. In there."

The boat turned lazily toward the cliff. Diana wondered if they were going to just ram the wall. Maybe. Nothing she could do about it.

But then, she saw it, too, nothing more than a dark space in the buff, sun-blasted rock. An opening.

"Probably just a cave," Tyrell said.

They weren't far out from the cliff and it didn't take long for them to see that what at first looked like a cave was actually a gash in the rock face. At some point a part of the cliff had collapsed in on itself, creating a narrow inlet, no more than twenty feet wide at the base, but five times that wide at the top. But the base of the inlet was choked with rock. There was no sandy beach awaiting them, no place to land the boat.

And yet, if a boat could be landed, a person could climb up the back of that rock slide to the top of the cliff.

The engine caught and missed several strokes, sending a shudder through the hull.

Tyrell cursed furiously and said, "I knew it, I knew it!"

The boat kept moving toward the gap. The engine died. The boat lost way.

It drifted and the opening fell slowly away.

Only twenty feet. So close.

Then thirty feet.

Forty.

Caine turned cold eyes on his little crew. He stretched out his hand and Penny rose

from her place in the boat. He flung her toward shore. She flew, tumbling and yelling through the air and landed with a splash just feet from the nearest of the tumbled boulders.

No time to see whether she made it. Caine reached and threw Bug, who disappeared halfway through his flight but created a splash so close to the rocks Diana wondered if he had smashed his head.

The boat kept drifting.

What was Caine's range for throwing a fifty- or seventy-five- or one-hundred-pound person with any accuracy? Diana wondered. That must be close to his limit.

Diana's eyes met Caine's.

"Protect your head," he warned.

Diana locked her fingers together behind her neck and squeezed her arms in tight, covering her temples.

Diana felt a giant, invisible hand squeeze her tight and then she was hurtling through the air.

She didn't cry out. Not even as the rocks rushed toward her. She would hit them head on, no way would she survive. But then gravity had its way and her straight line became a downturned arc.

The rocks, the foamy water, all in the same blink of an eye, and the plunge. Deep and cold, the water filled her mouth with salt.

There was a hard sharp pain as her shoulder hit rock. She kicked her legs and her knees scraped against an almost-vertical wet slurry of gravel.

Her clothing weighed her down, wrapped tight around her, seized her arms and legs. Diana struggled, surprised by how hard she struggled, how much she wanted to reach the bright, sunlit surface, which was a hundred million miles away.

She came up, was caught by the soft swell, and tossed like a doll against a lichen-slicked boulder. She scrabbled with both hands as she choked. Fingernails on rock. Feet plowing crumbling pebbles beneath her.

Suddenly she was up and out of the water from the waist up. On a little shelf of rock, gasping for air.

She waited there for a moment, catching her breath. Then, she pushed on, oblivious to scrapes and rips, to a drier spot. She stopped there, all energy spent.

Caine had already reached shore. He slumped, exhausted, wet, but at the same time, triumphant.

Diana heard voices crying his name.

She blinked water and tried to focus on the boat. It was already so far away. Tyrell and Paint, standing up in it and yelling, "Get me! Get me!"

"Caine, you can't leave us out here!"

"Can you reach them?" Diana asked in a hoarse croak.

Caine shook his head. "Too far. Anyway . . ."

Diana knew the "anyway." Tyrell and Paint had no powers. They would do nothing useful for Caine. They were just two more mouths to feed, two more whiny voices to heed.

"We better start climbing," Caine said. "I can help at the rough spots. We'll make it."

"And there will be food and everything up there?" Penny asked, gazing wistfully

up the cliff.

“We had better hope there is,” Diana said. “We have nowhere else to go. And no way to get there.”

THIRTY-TWO

8 HOURS, 11 MINUTES

ASTRID HAD GONE to look at the burn zone. Doing the right thing.

Kids had yelled at her. Demanded to know why she had let it happen. Demanded to know where Sam was. Deluged her with complaints and worries and crazy theories until she had retreated.

She'd hidden out after that. She'd refused to answer the door when kids knocked. She had not gone to her office. It would be the same there.

But through the day it had eaten at her. This feeling of uselessness. A feeling of uselessness made so much worse by the growing realization that she needed Sam. Not because they were up against some threat. The threat was mostly past now.

She needed Sam because no one had any respect for her. There was only one person right now who could get a crowd of anxious kids to settle down and do what needed to be done.

She had wanted to believe that she could do that. But she had tried. And they hadn't listened.

But Sam was still nowhere to be seen. So despite everything it was still on her shoulders. The thought of it made her sick. It made her want to scream.

"We have to go out, Petey. Walkie, walkie. Let's go," Astrid said.

Little Pete did not respond or react.

"Petey. Walkie, walkie. Come with me."

Little Pete looked at her like she might be there and might not. Then he went back to his game.

"Petey. Listen to me!"

Nothing.

Astrid took two steps, grabbed Little Pete by the shoulders, and shook him.

The game player went flying across the carpet.

Little Pete looked up. Now he was sure she was there. Now he was paying attention.

"Oh, my God, Petey, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," Astrid cried and reached to draw him close. She had never, ever shaken him before. It had happened so suddenly, like some animal in her brain had seized control of her and suddenly she was moving and suddenly she'd grabbed him.

"Ahhh ahhhh ahhhh ahhhh!" Little Pete began shrieking.

"No, no, no, Petey, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to do it."

She wrapped her arms around him but she could not touch him. Some force kept her arms from making physical contact.

"Petey, no, you have to let me—"

"Ahhh ahhh ahhhh ahhh!"

"It was an accident! I just lost control, it's just, I just, I can't, Petey, stop it, stop it!"

She ran to retrieve his game. It was warm. Strange. She carried it back to Little Pete, but for just a moment her step faltered. The room seemed to warp and wobble

around her.

Little Pete's frantic shrieks snapped her back.

"Ahhhh ahhh ahhhh ahhh!"

"Shut up!" Astrid screamed, as confused and unsettled as she was furious. "Shut up! Shut up! Here! Take your stupid toy!"

She stepped back, stepped away, not trusting herself to be near him. Hating him at that moment. Terrified that the enraged thing inside her head would lash out at him again. A voice inside her rationalized it even now. He is a brat. He does these things deliberately.

It was all his fault.

"Ahhh ahhh ahhh ahhh!"

"I do everything for you!" she cried.

"Ahhh ahhh ahhh ahhh!"

"I feed you and I clean you and I watch over you and I protect you. Stop it! Stop it! I can't stand it anymore. I can't stand it!"

Little Pete did not stop. Would not stop, she knew, until he chose to, until whatever crazy loop that was in his head had played itself out.

She sank into a kitchen chair. Astrid sat with her head in her hands running through the list of her failures. Before the FAYZ there hadn't been very many. She'd gotten a B+ once when she should have gotten an A. She'd inadvertently been cruel to people on a couple of occasions, memories that still bothered her, even now. She'd never learned to play an instrument. . . . Wasn't as good as she would like to be with Spanish pronunciations . . .

"Ahhh ahhh ahhh ahhh!"

Before the FAYZ the ratio of success to failure in her life had been hundreds to one. Even in coping with her little brother, back then she'd been as successful as anyone could be.

But since the FAYZ the ratio had reversed. On the positive side she was still alive, and so was her brother. On the negative side there were too many failures to list, though she could recall them all, each and every one in painful detail.

"Ahhh ahhhh ahhh ahhh!"

She had intended to do so many good things. She had wanted to restart therapy and lessons for Little Pete. Failure. She had wanted to get the church fixed up and find some way for kids to attend on Sunday mornings. Failure. She had wanted to write a constitution for the FAYZ, create a government. Failure.

She had tried to stop Albert from making everything about money. She had failed. And just as bad, Albert had succeeded. He'd been right, she had been wrong. It was Albert feeding Perdido Beach now, not her.

She'd wanted to find a way to stop Howard from selling booze and cigarettes to kids. Wanted to reason with Zil, get him to act like a decent human being. Failure and failure.

Even her relationship with Sam had come apart. And now, he'd run away, abandoned her. Had enough, she supposed. Had enough of her and Little Pete and all of it.

Someone had heard it from someone else that Hunter had seen him leaving town. Leaving. Going where? The gossip machine had no answer to that. But the gossip

machine was sure who was to blame: Astrid.

She had wanted to be brave and strong and smart and right.

And now she was hiding out in her home because she knew if she went out, they would all look to her for answers she didn't have. She was the head of the town council in a town that had come close to burning to the ground.

It had been saved. But not by Astrid.

Little Pete fell silent at last. His blank eyes were focused on the game again. Like nothing had happened.

She wondered if he even remembered her loss of control. She wondered if he knew how terrified she was, how hopeless and defeated. She knew he didn't care.

No one cared.

"Okay, Petey," she said, her voice shaky. "We still have to go out. Walkie, walkie. Time to go and talk to my many friends," she said sardonically.

This time he followed her meekly.

She'd meant to visit the burn zone again. To visit the basement hospital. To find Albert and find out how soon he would have food.

But out on the street she was surrounded within minutes, just as she'd known she would be. Kids came to her. More and more kids, until there were dozens of them, trailing her as she tried to make her way back to the burn zone. They yelled, demanded, insulted, pleaded, begged. Threatened.

"Why won't you talk to us?"

"Why don't you answer?"

Because she didn't have any answers.

"Okay," she said finally. "Okay! Okay!" She shoved at a boy who was in her face yelling about his big sister being missing, about her going to visit a friend. Over on Sherman.

"Okay," Astrid said. "We'll have a town meeting."

"When?"

"Right now." She pushed through the crowd, which surged around her as she led the way to the church.

Oh, Sam would get a good laugh out of seeing this. More than once he'd stood up at the altar trying to pacify a bunch of terrified kids. And she, Astrid, had watched, and judged his performance. And when the pressure of it finally got to be too much she had formed the council and tried to push him aside.

Well, Sam, she thought as she stepped onto that ruined altar, you can have this job back any time you like.

The crucifix that long ago Caine had used to crush a boy named Cookie had been propped up and fallen and propped up again. It now lay on a pile of debris. It hurt Astrid to see it there. She considered asking for volunteers to lift it again, but this was not the time. No, not the time for her to ask anything of anyone.

Edilio came in with Albert, but neither rushed to the front to stand in solidarity with her.

"If you guys will all sit down and stop trying to talk at once, we can have a town meeting," Astrid said.

The response was loud and derisive. A wave of bitter words washed over her.

"Hey, the mall is closed, there's no food!"

“No one brought any water down, we’re thirsty!”

“Hurt . . .”

“Sick . . .”

“Scared . . .”

And again and again, where is Sam? Where is Sam? Things like this happen, Sam should be around. Is he dead?

“As far as I know, Sam is fine,” Astrid said calmly.

“Yeah, and we can totally trust you, right?”

“Yes,” Astrid said without conviction. “You can trust me.”

That drew laughter and more insults.

Someone yelled, “Let her talk, she’s the only one even trying.”

“All Astrid does is lie and do nothing,” a voice shot back.

Astrid knew the voice. Howard.

“All Astrid can do is talk,” Howard said. “Blah blah blah. And most of it lies.”

The mob of kids was silent now, watching as Howard stood up slowly, stiffly, and turned to face the kids.

“Sit down, Howard,” Astrid said. Even she could hear the defeat in her tone.

“Did you write some kind of law that made you boss of everyone? Because I thought you were all about laws.”

Astrid fought the urge to walk out. Like Sam had apparently done, just leave town. No loss to anyone.

“We need to figure out how we’re going to organize and deal, Howard,” Astrid said. “People need food.”

“Got that right,” a voice said.

“How are you going to make that happen?” Howard demanded.

“Okay, well, tomorrow everyone will work their regular job,” Astrid said. “It will be bad for a couple of days, but we’ll get food and water going again. The crops are still in the fields. The fish are still in the ocean.”

That had a calming effect. Astrid could feel it. It helped to remind the kids that not everything had been lost in the fire. Yes, maybe she could reach them after all.

“Tell us about the zombie,” Howard said.

Astrid’s face and neck flushed red, betraying her guilt.

“And then maybe you can explain why you stopped Sam from taking Zil out before Zil burned down the town.”

Astrid managed a wry smile. “Don’t you lecture me, Howard. You’re a lowlife drug dealer.”

She could see that the insult hit home.

“If people want to buy things, I make sure they can,” Howard said. “Just like Albert. Anyway, I never put myself up on a pedestal and said I was some big deal. Me and Orc, we do what we do to get by. We’re not the ones being so perfect and mighty and above it all.”

“No, you’re beneath it all,” Astrid said.

Part of her knew that as long as she kept this personal between her and Howard, the others wouldn’t jump in. But that would get them nowhere. Accomplish nothing.

“You still haven’t explained anything, Astrid,” Howard said, as though reading her mind. “Forget me. I’m just *me*. What about a girl who was dead and isn’t dead

anymore? And what about kids saying they've seen Drake walking the streets? You got any answers, Astrid?"

She considered bluffing. Another time, another day, she would have found a way to heap frosty scorn on Howard and shut him down. But she couldn't seem to find that inside herself. Not now.

"You know, Howard," Astrid began in a wry voice, "I've made a lot of mistakes lately and—"

"And what about the Prophetess?" a different voice broke in. "What about Orsay?"

"Mary?" Astrid couldn't believe it. Mary Terrafino, her face red with anger, her voice crackling.

"I just talked to my brother. My brother, who never in his whole life ever lied to me," Mary said.

She walked down the aisle of the church. The crowd parted for her. Mother Mary.

"He admitted it to me, Astrid," Mary said. "He lied. He lied because you told him to."

Astrid wanted to deny it. The words of denial were on the tip of her tongue. But she couldn't make them come out.

"Mary's right, everyone," Howard said. "Astrid told us all to lie. About Brittney and about Orsay."

"Orsay is a fake," Astrid said weakly.

"Maybe," Howard said. "But you don't know that. None of us *know* that."

"Orsay's no fake. She told me something only I knew," Mary said. "And she prophesied that a tribulation was coming soon."

"Mary, that's an old trick," Astrid said. "This is the FAYZ: a tribulation is always coming, in case you haven't noticed. We're up to our necks in tribulation. She's manipulating you."

"Yeah, unlike you," Howard said, his voice dripping sarcasm.

Every eye was on her. Disbelieving. Angry. Accusing. Scared.

"Orsay says we can step out on our fifteenth," Mary said. "She told me to lay down my burden. That was what my mom said in her dream. Put down my burden."

"Mary, you must know better than that," Astrid said.

"No. I don't know better," Mary said so quietly, Astrid almost didn't hear her. "And neither do you."

"Mary, those kids need you," Astrid pleaded.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, this had become life and death. What Mary was talking about was suicide. Astrid was sure of that much. Logic told her this was probably true. But her faith told her even more certainly: giving up, surrendering, accepting something that at the very least looked and felt like suicide could never be good. That was a joke that God would not play.

"Maybe not," Mary said softly. "Maybe what they need is a way out of here, those kids. Maybe their moms and dads are waiting for them and we're the ones keeping them apart."

And there it was: the thing Astrid had feared from the first time she heard of Orsay's so-called prophecies.

The silence in the church was nearly absolute.

"None of the littles are anywhere near their fifteenth," Astrid said.

“And they won’t make it to their fifteenth in this horrible place,” Mary said. Her voice broke. Astrid recognized the desperation: she’d felt it herself as she endured Little Pete’s meltdown. She’d felt it so many times since the coming of the FAYZ.

“We’re in hell, Astrid,” Mary said, almost pleading with her to understand. “This. *This* is hell.”

Astrid could imagine what Mary’s life was like. The constant work. The constant responsibility. The unbelievable stress. The depression. The fear. All of it so much worse for Mary than for just about anyone else.

But this couldn’t go on. This had to be stopped. Even if it meant hurting Mary.

“Mary, you’ve been one of the most important, necessary people in the FAYZ,” Astrid said carefully. “But I know it’s been hard on you.”

Astrid had a sick feeling inside, knowing what she was going to say, what she had to say. Knowing that it was a betrayal.

“Mary, look, I know you’re not able to find the meds you need to take. I know you’ve been taking a lot of drugs, trying to control the things in your head.”

The silence was total in the church. Kids stared at Mary, then at Astrid. It had turned into a test of who they would believe. Astrid knew the answer to that.

“Mary, I know you’re dealing with depression and anorexia. Anyone looking at you knows that.”

The crowd hung on each word.

“I know that you’ve been battling some demons, Mary.”

Mary barked a disbelieving laugh. “Are you calling me crazy?”

“Of course not,” Astrid said, but in such a way that it was clear even to the youngest or dumbest in the room that she was alleging exactly that. “But you do have a couple of mental . . . issues . . . that are possibly distorting your thinking.”

Mary flinched as if someone had hit her. She looked around the room, looking for a friendly face, looking for signs that not everyone was agreeing with Astrid.

Astrid saw those same faces. They had turned stony and suspicious. But all of that suspicion was aimed at Astrid, not at Mary.

“I think you need to stay home for a while,” Astrid said. “We’ll get someone else to run the day care, while you pull yourself together.”

Howard’s jaw was hanging open. “You’re firing Mary? And *she’s* the one who’s nuts?”

Even Edilio seemed amazed. “I don’t think Astrid’s talking about Mary not running the day care,” he said quickly, with a warning look at Astrid.

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about, Edilio. Mary has fallen for Orsay’s lies. It’s dangerous. Dangerous to Mary if she decides to step out. And dangerous to the kids if Mary keeps listening to Orsay.”

Mary covered her mouth with one hand, aghast. The hand touched her lips, then went to her hair. Then she smoothed the front of her blouse. “You think I would ever hurt one of my kids?”

“Mary,” Astrid said, finding a pitiless tone, “you’re a troubled, depressed person off her meds who is talking about how maybe it would be best if those kids died and went to their parents.”

“That’s not what I . . . ,” Mary began. She took a couple of quick, shallow breaths. “You know what? I’m going back to work. I have things to do.”

“No, Mary,” Astrid said forcefully. “Go *home*.” Then, to Edilio she said, “If she tries to enter the day care, stop her.”

Astrid expected Edilio to agree, or at least to do as he’d been told. But when she glanced his way, she knew better.

“I can’t do that, Astrid,” Edilio said. “You keep saying we need laws and all, and you know what? You’re right. We got no law says I have a right to stop Mary. And you know what else we need? We need laws to keep you from trying stuff like this.”

Mary walked from the room followed by loud applause.

“She could hurt those kids,” Astrid said shrilly.

“Yeah, and Zil burned down the town because you said we couldn’t stop him,” Edilio shot back.

“I’m the head of the council,” Astrid pleaded.

“You want us to vote on that?” Howard asked. “Because we can vote right now.”

Astrid froze. She looked out at a sea of faces, not one of which belonged to someone who was on her side.

“Petey. Come on,” Astrid said.

She held her head up high as she walked through the crowd and out of the church.

Another failure. The only comfort was that it would be her last as the head of the council.

THIRTY-THREE

7 HOURS, 51 MINUTES

“I DON’T SEE any big mansion,” Diana said. “I see trees.”

“Bug,” Caine called.

“Good luck finding him,” Diana said. Bug had been clearly visible during the climb up from the water. Caine had caught him once as he fell.

But as they topped the cliff they faced a line of trees, not a fabulous Hollywood hideaway. Trees and more trees.

Penny lost it then. She started yelling, “Where is it? Where is it?” and running into the forest.

“Bug!” Caine shouted. No answer.

“Yeah,” Diana said, “We trusted Bug. And here we are.” She turned and saw the boat. It was drifting farther and farther away. On its way to the distant power plant maybe. Maybe they would survive somehow. Maybe they would be better off than Diana was.

“Sheep!” Penny’s voice from some distance away.

Diana exchanged a look with Caine. Was Penny crazy? Maybe so, but was she hallucinating sheep?

The two of them started forward into the woods. Soon they saw that the trees were just a narrow belt and that beyond them lay a sunny meadow of knee-high grass.

Penny was at the edge of the meadow, staring and pointing and wobbling like she might topple over at any moment.

“They’re real, right?” Penny asked.

Diana shaded her eyes and, yes, they were real. Three dirty-white cotton balls with black faces, almost within reach. The sheep turned and stared at them with stupid eyes.

Caine acted quickly. He raised his hand and snatched one of the sheep off the ground. It flew through the air and smacked with sickening force into a large tree. It fell to the ground, white wool marked with red.

They were on it like tigers. Bug, suddenly visible right there next to them, tearing at the wool, desperate to expose the flesh. But with bare hands and brittle fingernails, even with their dull loose teeth, they couldn’t reach the meat.

“We need something sharp,” Caine said.

Penny found a sharp-edged rock. Too big for her to carry, but not too heavy for Caine. The rock rose in the air and came down like a cleaver.

It was messy. But it worked. And the four of them ripped and tore at chunks of raw mutton.

“Kind of hungry, huh?”

Two kids were standing there like they had appeared out of thin air. The taller one had spoken. His eyes were intelligent, mocking, and wary. The other kid’s face was impassive, expressionless.

Both were dressed in bandages. Bandages wrapped around their hands. The shorter kid had a bandana around his lower face.

The silence stretched as Caine, Diana, Penny, and Bug stared and were stared back

at.

“What are you supposed to be, mummies?” Diana asked. She wiped sheep’s blood from her mouth and then realized that it had saturated her shirt and that there would be no wiping it away.

“We’re lepers,” the tall kid said.

Diana felt her heart skip several beats.

“My name is Sanjit,” the tall boy said, and extended a hand that seemed to be stumps of fingers bound with gauze. “This is Choo.”

“Stay back!” Caine snapped.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Sanjit said. “It’s not always contagious. I mean, sure, sometimes. But not always.”

He dropped his hand to his side.

“You have leprosy?” Caine demanded.

“Like at Sunday school?” Bug said.

Sanjit nodded. “It’s not that bad. It doesn’t hurt. I mean, if your finger falls off, you kind of don’t even feel it.”

“I felt it when my penis fell off, but it didn’t hurt that bad,” the one called Choo said.

Penny yelped. Caine shifted uncomfortably. Bug faded from view as he backpedaled away.

“But people are scared of leprosy, anyway,” Sanjit said. “Silly. Kind of.”

“What are you doing here?” Caine asked warily. He had put down his food, keeping his hands ready.

“Hey, I should ask you that,” Sanjit said. Not harsh but definitely not willing to be pushed around by Caine, either. “We live here. You just got here.”

“Plus, you killed one of our sheep,” Choo said.

“This is the San Francisco de Sales leper colony,” Sanjit said. “Didn’t you know?”

Diana began to laugh. “A leper colony? That’s where we are? That’s what we half killed ourselves getting to?”

“Shut up, Diana,” Caine snapped.

“You guys want to come back to the hospital with us?” Sanjit offered hopefully. “All the adult patients and the nurses and doctors are gone, they just disappeared one day. We’re all by ourselves.”

“We heard there was some movie star’s mansion out here.”

Sanjit’s dark eyes narrowed. He glanced right, as if trying to make sense of what she was saying. Then he said, “Oh, I know what you’re thinking of. Todd Chance and Jennifer Brattle pay for this place. It’s, like, their charity.”

Diana couldn’t stop giggling. A leper colony. That’s what Bug had read about. A leper colony paid for by two rich movie stars. Their charity thing.

“I think Bug may have gotten just a few of the details wrong,” she managed to say between dry, racking laughs that were indistinguishable from sobs.

“You can have the sheep,” Choo said.

Diana stopped laughing. Caine’s eyes narrowed.

Sanjit quickly said, “But we’d rather just have you come back with us. I mean, we’re kind of lonely.”

Caine stared at Choo. Choo stared back, then looked away. “He doesn’t seem to

want us to come to this hospital,” Caine said, indicating Choo.

Diana saw fear in the younger boy’s eyes.

“Have them take off their bandages,” Diana said. All urge to laugh was gone now. Both boys had bright eyes. The visible parts of them seemed healthy. Their hair wasn’t brittle and broken like hers.

“You heard her,” Caine said.

“No,” Sanjit said. “It’s not good for our leprosy to be exposed.”

Caine took a deep breath. “I’m going to count to three and then I’m going to throw your little lying friend there straight into a tree. Just like I did with this sheep.”

“He’ll do it,” Diana warned. “Don’t believe he won’t.”

Sanjit hung his head.

“Sorry,” Choo said. “I screwed it up.”

Sanjit began unwinding the gauze from his perfectly healthy fingers. “Okay, you got us. So, allow me to welcome you to San Francisco de Sales Island.”

“Thanks,” Caine said dryly.

“And yes, we do have some food. Maybe you’d like to join us? Unless you want to stick with your sheep sushi.”

Throughout the morning and early afternoon, the shell-shocked kids of Perdido Beach milled around, lost and confused.

But Albert was neither lost nor confused. Throughout the day kids came to his office in the McDonald’s. He had a booth there, in a corner by the window so he could look out on the plaza and see what passed by.

“Hunter came in with a deer,” a kid reported. “And some birds. About seventy-five pounds of usable meat.”

“Good,” Albert said.

Quinn came in, looking tired and smelling of fish. He sagged into the seat across from Albert. “We went back out. We didn’t do very well since we got started late. But we have maybe fifty pounds usable.”

“That’s good work,” Albert said. He calculated in his head. “We have about six ounces a head of meat. Nothing from the fields.” He tapped the table, thinking. “It’s not worth opening the mall. We’ll do a cookout in the plaza. Roast up the meat, make a stew out of the fish. Charge a ’Berto a head.”

Quinn shook his head. “Man, you really want to get all these kids together in one place? Freaks and normals? As crazed as everyone is?”

Albert thought that over. “We don’t have time to open the mall and we need to get this product out there.”

Quinn made a half smile. “Product.” He shook his head. “Dude, the one guy I’m not worried about when the FAYZ ends—or even if it doesn’t—is you, Albert.”

Albert nodded in agreement, accepting the flattery as a simple statement of fact. “I keep my focus.”

“Yes. You do,” Quinn agreed in a tone that made Albert wonder just what he meant.

“Hey, by the way, one of my guys thinks he saw Sam. Up on the rocks, just down from the power plant,” Quinn said.

“Sam’s not back here yet?”

Quinn shook his head. “The number one question I keep hearing: where is Sam?”

Albert curled his lip. “I think Sam’s having some kind of breakdown.”

“Well, he’s got a right, doesn’t he?” Quinn said.

“Maybe,” Albert allowed. “But mostly I think he’s just pouting. He’s mad because he’s not the only person in charge anymore.”

Quinn shifted uncomfortably. “He’s the one who goes right into the danger when most of us are sitting on our butts or hiding under a table.”

“Yeah. But that’s his job, isn’t it? I mean, the council pays him twenty ’Bertos a week, which is twice what most people make.”

Quinn didn’t look as if he liked that explanation very much. “Doesn’t change the fact that he could get killed. And, you know, it’s still not fair pay or anything. My guys make ten ’Bertos a week to fish, and it’s hard work, but dude, a lot of people could do that job. Only one guy can do Sam’s job.”

“Yes. The only single person. But what we need is more people doing it. With less power.”

“You’re not getting anti-freak, are you?”

Albert pushed the idea away. “Don’t accuse me of being an idiot, okay?” It irritated him, Quinn standing up for Sam. He had nothing against Sam. Sam had kept them safe from Caine and that creep Drake and Pack Leader, Albert understood that. But the time for heroes was on its way out. Or at least he hoped it was. They needed to build an actual society with laws and rules and rights.

This was Perdido Beach, after all, not Sam’s Beach.

“Heard another kid, this is like the fourth, say he saw Drake Merwin during the fire,” Quinn said.

Albert snorted. “There’s a lot of bull going around.”

Quinn looked at him long enough that it almost made Albert uncomfortable. Then, Quinn said, “I guess if it turns out to be true we better hope Sam decides to come back.”

“Orc could take care of Drake. And he’d do it for a pint of vodka,” Albert said dismissively.

Quinn sighed and got up to leave. “Sometimes I worry about you, man.”

“Hey, I’m feeding people in case you didn’t notice,” Albert said. “Astrid talks and Sam pouts, and I get the job done. Me. Why? Because I don’t talk, I just do.”

Quinn sat back down. He leaned forward, elbows on knees. “Man, don’t you remember taking tests in school? Multiple choice: A, B, C, D, or E, all of the above.”

“Yeah?”

“Dude, sometimes the answer is ‘all of the above.’ This place needs you. And it needs Astrid. And it needs Sam. It’s all of the above, Albert.”

Albert blinked.

“I mean, no offense,” Quinn said quickly. “But it’s like Astrid’s yapping away about how we need some kind of system, and you’re counting your money, and Sam’s acting like we should all just shut up and get out of his way and let him fry whoever messes with him. And the three of you aren’t really stepping up. You aren’t working together, which is what all of us regular people need you to do. Because, and really, I’m not trying to be a jerk or whatever, but duh: we do need a system, and we do need you and your ’Bertos, and sometimes we need Sam to just come along and kick some

ass.”

Albert said nothing. His brain was clicking away, but it occurred to him after a minute that he hadn't said anything and that Quinn was waiting for an answer, and cringing a little like he expected Albert to lash out.

Quinn stood up again, shook his head ruefully, and said, “Okay, I get it. I'll stick to fishing.”

Albert met his eyes. “Cookout in the plaza tonight. Spread the word, okay?”

THIRTY-FOUR

7 HOURS, 2 MINUTES

DIANA STARTED TO cry when Sanjit put the bowl of Cheerios in front of her. He poured from a carton of shelf-stable milk and the milk was so white and the cereal so fragrant, so wonderfully noisy as it sloshed around in the blue bowl.

She reached for it with her fingers. Then she noticed the spoon. It was clean. Bright.

With trembling fingers she dipped the spoon into the cereal and raised it to her lips. The rest of the world disappeared then, for just a few moments. Caine and Penny wolfed from their own bowls, Bug completely visible as he did likewise. But all she noticed, all she felt, was the cool crunch, the rush of sugar, the shock of recognition.

Yes, this was food.

Diana's tears ran down her face into the spoon, adding a touch of salt to her second bite.

She blinked and saw Sanjit staring at her. He held the industrial-size box of cereal at the ready in one hand, the carton of milk in the other.

Penny laughed and spilled cereal and milk from her lips.

"Food," Caine said.

"Food," Bug agreed.

"What else do you have?" Caine asked.

"You have to take it slow," Sanjit said.

"Don't tell me how to take it."

Sanjit did not back down. "You aren't the first starving people I've seen."

"Someone else from Perdido Beach?" Caine demanded sharply.

Sanjit exchanged a look with the younger boy, Virtue. He'd told Diana that was his real name.

"So it's pretty bad on the mainland," Sanjit said.

Caine finished his cereal. "More."

"A starving person eats too much all at once, he gets sick," Sanjit said. "You end up puking it all up."

"More," Caine said with unmistakable threat in his voice.

Sanjit poured him a refill, then did the same for the rest of them. "Sorry we don't have any Cap'n Crunch or Froot Loops," Sanjit said. "Jennifer and Todd are into nutrition. I guess it wouldn't do for them to be photographed with fat children."

Diana noted the sardonic tone. And as she gulped the second bowl she noted, too, that her stomach was cramping. She made herself stop.

"There's plenty of food," Sanjit said gently just to her. "Take your time. Give your body time to adjust."

Diana nodded. "Where did you see starving people?"

"Where I grew up. Beggars. Maybe they'd get too sick to beg sometimes, or just have a run of bad luck, and then they'd get pretty hungry."

"Thanks for the food," Diana said. She wiped away tears and tried to smile. But she remembered that her gums were swollen and red and her smile wasn't too

attractive.

"I also saw scurvy sometimes," Sanjit said. "You have it. I'll get you each some vitamins. You'll be better in a few days."

"Scurvy," Diana said. It seemed ridiculous. Scurvy was from pirate movies.

Caine was looking around the room, appraising. They were at a massive wooden table just beyond the kitchen. It could have seated thirty people on the long benches.

"Nice," Caine said, waving his spoon to indicate the room.

"It's the staff table," Virtue said. "But we eat here because the family table is kind of uncomfortable. And the formal dining room . . ." He petered out, fearing he'd said something he shouldn't.

"So, you're like superrich," Penny said.

"Our parents are," Virtue said.

"Our stepparents," Sanjit corrected.

"Jennifer and Todd. 'J-Todd,'" Caine said. "That's what they were, right?"

"I think they preferred 'Toddifer,'" Sanjit said.

"So. How much food do you have?" Caine asked bluntly, not liking that Sanjit wasn't quivering with fear.

It had been a long time since anyone had faced Caine without fear, Diana realized. Sanjit had no idea what he was dealing with.

Well, Sanjit would learn soon enough.

"Choo? How much food do we have?"

Virtue shrugged. "When I figured it out, it was enough for the two of us to last maybe six months," he said.

"There's just the two of you?" Diana asked.

"I thought J-Todd had, like, ten kids or whatever," Bug said.

"Five," Sanjit said. "But we weren't all here on the island."

Diana didn't believe it. Right then, as soon as the words were out of Sanjit's mouth, she didn't believe it. But she kept silent.

"Diana," Caine said. "Have you read our two friends here?"

To Sanjit, Diana said, "I need to hold your hand. For just a moment."

"Why?" Virtue demanded, defending his brother.

"I can tell whether you have any strange . . . mutations," Diana said.

"Like him," Sanjit said, nodding toward Caine.

"Let's hope not," Diana said. Her stomach was settling down enough and now she really, really wanted to know what else was behind the pantry doors.

Sanjit gave her his hand. Palm up. Like he was making a gesture of peace. Open-handed. Trusting. But his eyes were not.

Diana held his hand. His hand was still. Hers was shaking.

She closed her eyes and concentrated. It had been some time since she had done this. She tried to remember the last time, but memories were scattered fragments, too tiring to make sense of.

She felt it work. She squeezed her eyes tight, both relieved and afraid at the same time.

"He's a zero," Diana said. Then, to Sanjit, "Sorry. I don't mean it that way."

"I didn't think you did," Sanjit said.

"You next," Diana said to Virtue.

Virtue held his hand out like he was shaking hands. Fingers curled in as if he was thinking of making a fist. Diana took his hand. There was something there. Not a two bar, not quite. She wondered what his power was, and whether he was even aware of it.

The mutations occurred in different degrees, at different times. Most kids seemed never to develop powers. Some developed powers that were pointless. Only twice had Diana ever read a four bar: Caine and Sam.

“He’s a one,” she told Caine.

Caine nodded. “Well, that’s both bad and good. Bad because if you did have serious powers you might be useful to me. Good because since you don’t, I have very little reason to worry about you.”

“That sounds kind of stupid,” Sanjit said.

Bug and Penny stared in disbelief.

“I mean, it sounds good, but then if you think about it, it doesn’t make any sense,” Sanjit said. “If I did have these powers you’re talking about, I’d be a threat. I don’t, so I’m not as useful as I’d be if I did. Useful and threatening are actually the same thing here.” But as he said it he smiled a huge, innocent-seeming smile.

Caine returned the smile. But it was a shark smiling at Nemo.

No, that was wrong. Sanjit’s smile was slyer than that. Like he knew what he was doing was dangerous.

Not many people held their own with Caine. Diana did. But she had long known that was part of her appeal to him: Caine needed someone who wasn’t intimidated.

But that wasn’t going to work for Sanjit. She wondered if there was some way she could warn him that he wasn’t dealing with a garden variety schoolyard bully who would give him a wedgie.

She saw the dangerous light in Caine’s eyes. She felt the way everyone held their breath. So must Sanjit. But he held Caine’s gaze and kept that infectious smile in place.

“Get me something else to eat,” Caine said at last.

“Absolutely,” Sanjit said. Virtue followed him out of the room.

“He’s lying about something,” Caine said in a low voice to Diana.

“Most people lie,” Diana said.

“But not you, Diana. Not to me.”

“Of course not.”

“He’s hiding something,” Caine said. But then Sanjit and Virtue came back carrying a serving tray loaded with cans of peaches, and a box of graham crackers with big tubs of jelly and peanut butter. Unimaginable luxuries, worth so much more than gold.

Whatever Sanjit was hiding, Diana thought, it was nowhere near as important as what he was giving them.

They ate and ate and ate. Not caring that their stomachs cramped. Not caring that their heads pounded.

Not even caring when weariness and exhaustion caught up with them and one by one their eyes drooped.

Penny slid from her chair, like a passed-out drunk. Diana glanced blearily at Caine to see if he was going to react. But Caine just put his head down on the table.

Bug was snoring.

Diana looked at Sanjit, her eyes barely able to focus. He winked at her.

“Oh,” Diana said, and then crossed her arms on the table and lay her head down.

“It’s going to be really bad when they wake up,” Virtue said. “Maybe we should kill them.”

Sanjit grabbed his brother and pulled him close for a quick hug. “Yeah. Right. We’re a pair of desperate killers.”

“Caine may be, though. When he wakes up . . .”

“The Ambien I gave them should keep them asleep for a while at least. And when they wake, they’ll be tied up. And we’ll be gone,” Sanjit said. “At least, I hope. The way it sounds, we’d better take some time to get food stowed away first. Which means a lot of climbing up and down and up and down.”

Virtue swallowed. “You’re actually going to do it?”

Sanjit’s smile was gone. “I’m going to try, Choo. That’s all I can do.”

THIRTY-FIVE

1 HOUR 27 MINUTES

SAM WAS FINALLY where he'd known all along he would end up. It had taken him all day to get there. The sun was already sinking toward the false horizon.

The Perdido Beach nuclear power plant was eerily silent. In the old days it had kept up a constant roar. Not from the actual nuclear reactor, but from the giant turbines that turned superheated steam into electricity.

Things were as he'd left them. A hole burned into the control room wall. Cars smashed here and there by Caine or by Dekka. All the evidence of the battle that had taken place a few short months ago.

He went in through the turbine room. The machines were big as houses, hunched, coiled metal monsters turned to so much scrap.

The control room, too, as Caine and he had left it. The door ripped from its hinges by Jack. Dried blood—Brittney's, most of it—formed a flaky brown crust on the polished floor.

The ancient computers were blank. The warning lights and indicator lights were all dead, except for a fading pool of illumination cast by a single functioning emergency beam. The battery would be exhausted soon.

No wonder Jack had refused to come back to this place. It wasn't fear of radiation. It was fear of ghosts. It hurt Jack deep down inside, Sam thought, to see machines rendered useless.

Sam's steps echoed softly as he walked. He knew where he was going, where he had to go.

There was a badge on a desk, one of the warning badges that turned color when radiation levels were high. Sam picked it up, looked at it, not sure whether he cared.

Safe or not, he was going to the reactor.

Sunlight shone through the hole Caine had blown in the concrete containment vessel. But it was faint: sunset reflected off the mountains.

Sam raised his hand and formed a ball of light. It didn't reveal anything but shadows.

He reached the spot. Right here Drake had shown Sam that he could cause a chain reaction and kill every living thing in the FAYZ.

Right here Drake had named the price.

This was the floor where Sam had laid down and taken the beating.

Sam saw the wrapper of the morphine syringe that Brianna had stuck into him. Here, too, the floor was coated in a flaky brown scum.

A noise! He spun, raised his hands and shot brilliant beams of light.

Something cracked. He fired again and swept the killing beam from left to right, slowly around the room, burning anything it touched.

A catwalk ladder crashed to the floor. A computer monitor exploded like a burned-out lightbulb.

Sam crouched, ready. Listening.

"If someone's there you'd better tell me," he said to the shadows. "Because I'll kill

you.”

No voice spoke.

Sam formed a second light and tossed it high overhead. Now shadows crossed each other, cast by two competing lights.

Another light and another and another. He formed them with his will and hung them in the air like Japanese lanterns. He saw no one.

His beams had cut cables and melted instrument panels. But there were no bodies lying on the floor.

“A rat, probably,” he said.

He was shaking. The lights were still not enough, it was still too dark. And even if it were light, something could be hiding anywhere. Too many nooks and crannies, too many awkward machines providing possible concealment.

“A rat,” he said, without any conviction. “Something.”

But not Drake.

No, Drake was in Perdido Beach, if in fact he was anywhere outside of Sam’s overworked imagination.

The reactor chamber was only fractionally lighter than when he’d come in. He’d found nothing. He’d learned nothing.

“I blew the crap out of the place though,” he said.

And accomplished? Nothing.

Sam stuck one hand in the neck of his T-shirt. He touched the skin of his shoulder. He reached under his shirt and touched his chest and stomach. Reached around with both hands to run his fingers along his sides and back. New wounds, the still-fresh marks of Drake’s whip. But worse was the memory of old wounds.

He was here. He was alive. He was hurt, yes, but his skin was not hanging in tatters.

And he was very definitely alive.

“Well,” Sam said. “There’s that.”

He had needed to come back to this place because this place filled him with terror. He had needed to take possession of this place. This very place where he had begged to die.

But had not died.

One by one he extinguished the Sammy Suns, until only the faint, indirect rays of sunset lit the room.

He stood for a moment, hoping he was saying good-bye to this place.

Sam turned and walked away, heading toward home.

Brittney woke up facedown in the sand. For a terrible moment she thought she was underground again.

The Lord might ask anything of her, but please God, not that. Not that.

She rolled over, blinked her eyes and was surprised to see that the sun was still in the sky.

She was above the tide line, several body lengths from the thin lace of surf. something, a soggy lump the size of a person, was between her and the water. Half in the surf, legs stretched onto dry land, like he’d been running into the ocean, tripped, and had drowned.

Brittney stood up. She brushed damp sand from her arms, but it stuck to the gray mud that coated her from head to toe.

“Tanner?”

Her brother was not near. She was alone. And now fear began to make her shake. Fear for the first time since she had emerged from the ground. It was a dark, soul-eating monster, this fear.

“What am I?” she asked.

She could not tear her gaze away from the body. She could not stop her feet from moving her closer. She had to see, even though she knew, deep inside knew, that what she would see would destroy her.

Brittney stood over the body. Looked down at it. Shirt torn to ribbons. Puffy lacerated flesh. The marks of a whip.

A terrible animal noise strangled Brittney’s throat. She had been there, on the sand, unconscious when it happened. She’d been right there, just a few feet away when the demon had struck this poor boy.

“The demon,” Tanner said, appearing beside her.

“I have not stopped him, Tanner. I failed.”

Tanner said nothing and Brittney looked at him, pleading. “What is happening to me, Tanner? What am I?”

“You are Brittney. An angel of the Lord.”

“What aren’t you telling me? I know there’s something. I can feel it. I know you’re not telling me everything.”

Tanner did not smile. He did not answer.

“You’re not real, Tanner. You’re dead and buried. I’m imagining you.”

She looked at the damp sand. Two sets of footprints came to this place. Hers. And the poor boy in the surf. But there was a third set as well, not hers, not the boy’s. And this set of footprints did not stretch back across the beach. It was only here. As if it belonged to someone who had materialized out of thin air and then disappeared.

When Tanner still said nothing, Brittney pleaded with him. “Tell me the truth, Tanner. Tell me the truth.” Then, in a trembling whisper, “Did I do this?”

“You are here to fight the demon,” Tanner said.

“How can I fight a demon when I don’t know who or what he is, and when I don’t even know what I am?”

“Be Brittney,” Tanner said. “Brittney was good and brave and faithful. Brittney called on her savior when she felt herself weaken.”

“Brittney was . . . You said Brittney was,” Brittney said.

“You asked for the truth.”

“I’m still dead, aren’t I?” Brittney said.

“Brittney’s soul is in heaven,” Tanner said. “But you are here. And you will resist the demon.”

“I’m talking to an echo of my own mind,” Brittney said, not to Tanner, to herself. She knelt and put her hand on the wet, tousled head. “Bless you, poor boy.”

She stood up. Faced the town. She would go there. She knew the demon would go there too.

Mary worked on the next week’s schedule in her cramped little office. John stood in

the doorway.

In the plaza they were starting to cook food. Mary smelled it, even through the omnipresent stink of pee and poop and finger paint and paste and filth.

Charred, crisping meat. She would need to gag some of it down and do it publicly. Or everyone would look at her and point and whisper “anorexic.”

Crazy. Unstable.

Mary’s losing it.

No longer Mother Mary. Crazy Mary. Off-her-meds Mary. Or on-too-many-meds Mary. Everyone knew now, thanks to Astrid. They all knew. They all could picture it in their heads, Mary searching for Prozac and Zoloft like Gollum chasing the ring. Mary sticking her finger down her throat to vomit up food even while normal people were reduced to eating bugs.

And now they thought she’d been tricked by some fraud. Made a fool of by Orsay.

They thought she was suicidal. Or worse.

“Mary,” John said. “Are you ready?”

He was so sweet, her little brother. Her lying little brother, so sweet and so concerned. Of course he was. He didn’t want to get stuck taking care of all these kids alone.

“That food smells good, huh?” John asked.

It smelled like rancid grease. It smelled sickening.

“Yes,” Mary said.

“Mary.”

“What?” Mary snapped. “What do you want from me?”

“I’m . . . Look, I’m sorry I lied. About Orsay.”

“The Prophetess, you mean.”

“I don’t think she’s a prophet,” John said, head hung down.

“Why, because she doesn’t agree with Astrid? Because she doesn’t think we just have to be trapped here?”

John moved closer. He put his hand on Mary’s arm. She shook him off.

“You promised me, Mary,” John pleaded.

“And you lied to me,” Mary shot back.

There were tears in her brother’s eyes. “Your birthday, Mary. In an hour. You shouldn’t be wasting time on the schedule, you should be getting ready. You have to promise me you won’t leave me or these kids.”

“I already promised you,” Mary said. “Are you calling me a liar?”

“Mary . . . ,” John pleaded, having run out of words.

“Get the kids ready to go outside,” Mary said. “There’s food being cooked. We have to get our share for the littles.”

THIRTY-SIX

47 MINUTES

WORD HAD GONE out about the cookout. But it wasn't really necessary. The smell of food cooking was all that was necessary. Albert had arranged it all with his usual efficiency.

Astrid sat on the town hall steps. Little Pete sat a few steps behind her, playing his dead game like he was playing for his life.

Astrid swallowed, nervous. She smoothed the two sheets of paper in her hands. She kept crumpling them unconsciously and then, realizing what she had done, straightening them out. She pulled a pen out of her back pocket, scratched out some words, rewrote them, scratched them out, and started the whole crumple and uncrumple pattern again.

Albert was nearby, watching the whole place, arms folded over his chest. He was, as usual, the neatest, cleanest, calmest, most focused person there. Astrid envied that about Albert: he set a goal and never seemed to suffer any doubt about it. Astrid was almost, but not quite, resentful of the way he had come to her and ordered her to quit feeling sorry for herself and get her act together.

But it had worked. She'd finally done what she needed to do. She hoped. She hadn't shown the results to anyone yet. People might just decide she was crazy. But she hoped not, because even after all the self-doubt, after all the abuse she'd endured, she still thought she was right. The FAYZ couldn't just be Albert making money and Sam kicking butts. The FAYZ needed rules and laws and rights.

People were coming, drawn by the smell of meat. Not a lot of it per person, Albert had made that clear, but in the aftermath of the fire, with many kids having lost their limited stocks of food, and with nothing coming in from the fields, the prospect of any food at all made stomachs rumble and mouths water.

Albert had guards ready, four of his own people armed with baseball bats, the default weapon of the FAYZ. And two of Edilio's guys, and Edilio himself, walked with guns slung over their shoulders.

The strange thing was how it no longer seemed strange to Astrid. A nine year-old dressed in rags, sharing a bottle of Scotch with an eleven-year-old with a shaved head and a cape made out of an olive green bed sheet. Kids with sunken eyes. Kids with open sores, untreated, barely noticed. Boys wearing nothing but boxer shorts and boots. Girls wearing their mother's glittery formal gowns, shortened with rough scissor hacks. A girl who had tried to remove her own braces with pliers and now couldn't close her mouth because of the jagged wire sticking through her front teeth.

And the weapons. Everywhere weapons. Knives, ranging from big chef's knives stuck in belts, to hunting knives in ornate leather sheaths. Crowbars. Pieces of pipe with taped handles and lanyards. Some had been even more creative. Astrid saw a seven-year-old carrying a wooden table leg to which he had glued big slivers of broken glass.

And it had all become normal.

In this plaza coyotes had attacked screaming, defenseless children. That had

changed a lot of people's attitudes toward weapons.

But at the same time, girls carried dolls. Boys crammed action figures into their back pockets. Stained, torn, ratty comic books still stuck out of waistbands or were clutched in hands with nails as long and filthy as a wolf's. Kids pushed baby strollers loaded with their few possessions.

The kids of Perdido Beach were a mess at the best of times. But it was so much worse now in the aftermath of the fire. Kids were still black with soot or gray with ash.

Coughing was the background noise. The flu that had been going around was sure to spread through this crowd, Astrid thought grimly. Lungs damaged by smoke inhalation would be especially vulnerable.

But they were still alive, Astrid told herself. Against all the odds, more than ninety percent of the kids first trapped in the FAYZ were still alive.

Mary led the preschoolers out of the day care into the plaza. Astrid looked closely. Mary seemed her normal self. She grabbed a little girl who was about to step in front of a boy on a skateboard.

Had she been wrong about Mary? Mary would never forgive her.

"Well, so what?" Astrid muttered wearily. "It's not like I was ever popular."

Then, Zil and a half dozen of his crew swaggered into the plaza from the far side. Astrid clenched her jaw. Would the crowd turn on them? She almost hoped so. People thought because she wouldn't let Sam go after Zil she must not really despise the Human Crew's Leader. That was wrong. She hated Zil. Hated everything he had done and everything he had tried to do.

Edilio moved quickly between Zil and a few of the boys who had started toward him, sticks and knives at the ready.

Zil's kids were armed with knives and bats, and so were those who wanted to take them on. Edilio was armed with an assault rifle.

Astrid hated that this was what life so often came down to: my weapon is bigger than your weapon.

If Sam were here it would be about his hands. Everyone had either seen what Sam could do, or heard the stories retold in vivid detail. No one challenged Sam.

"It's what makes him dangerous," Astrid muttered to herself.

But it was also what had kept her alive on more than one occasion. Her and Little Pete.

She hated Sam for doing this, for just withdrawing like this.

Disappearing. It was passive aggressive. Unworthy of him.

But another part was glad he was gone. If he were here it would be all about him. If Sam were here then every word Astrid spoke would be conditioned on what Sam would say or do. The kids would be watching his face for clues, waiting to see whether he nodded or laughed or smirked or gave them that cool, steely warning look he'd acquired over these last months.

Orc made his way into the crowd. People parted to let him pass. Astrid spotted Dekka, as always left alone by other kids so that she seemed to have a force field around her. The one person Astrid didn't see was Brianna. Brianna wasn't someone you missed or overlooked. She must still be too sick to go out.

"It's time," Albert said over his shoulder.

"Now?" Astrid was surprised.

“Once we feed them they’ll go off in separate directions. I got them here and behaving themselves because of food. Once the food is gone . . .”

“Okay.” Astrid’s heart was in her throat. She clenched her papers again and stood up too suddenly.

“Like Moses, huh?” Albert said.

“What?”

“Like Moses coming down off the mountain with the Ten Commandments,” Albert said.

“Those were written by God,” Astrid said. “This wasn’t.”

She tripped a little walking down the steps but caught herself. No one was paying particular attention as she entered the crowd. One or two kids called out greetings. Many more made rude or hostile remarks. Mostly kids were focused on the small fires, where venison and chunks of fish browned on skewers made of wire clothes hangers.

She reached the fountain, which was close enough to the cook fires that kids noticed when she climbed up and unfolded her papers.

“Everyone . . .,” she began.

“Oh, puh-leeze, not some speech,” a voice heckled.

“I . . . I just have a few things to say. Before you can eat,” Astrid said.

A groan went up. One kid picked up a piece of dirt and tossed it with poor aim—and not too much commitment—at Astrid. Orc took two steps, brushing aside a couple of kids in the process, and made a low growling noise with his scary face right up against the kid’s nose. That signaled the end of dirt throwing.

“Go ahead, Astrid,” Orc rumbled.

Astrid noticed Edilio hiding a smile. Back a million years ago, back in the old life, Astrid had tutored Orc.

“Okay,” Astrid began. She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself down. “I . . . Okay. When the FAYZ came, all our lives changed. And ever since then all we’ve tried to do is get by, day to day. We’ve been lucky because some people worked very hard and took big risks to help us all make it.”

“Can we eat now?” a younger kid cried.

“And we’ve all been focused on getting by and focused on what we’ve lost. Now it’s time to start working on the future. Because we’re going to be here for a while. Maybe for the rest of our lives.”

That drew some very harsh words, but Astrid kept going.

“We need rules and laws and rights and all,” Astrid said. “Because we need to have some justice and some peace.”

“I just want food,” a voice cried.

Astrid plowed ahead. “So, you’ll all get to vote on this. But I’ve written down a list of laws. I kept it simple.”

“Yeah, because we’re too stupid,” Howard said, suddenly just in front of her.

“No, Howard. If anyone was stupid, I was. I kept looking for some perfect system, something that wouldn’t involve compromising anything.”

That got the attention of a few more kids.

“Well, there is no perfect system. So I wrote down an imperfect set of laws.”

“Rule number one: Each of us has the right to be free and to do whatever we want as long as nothing we do hurts anyone else.”

She waited. No heckling. Not even from Howard.

“Two: No one can hurt another person except in self-defense.”

Grudging attention was being paid. Not everyone. But some, and more as she continued.

“Three. No one can take another person’s possessions.”

“Not that we have anything much to take,” Howard said, but was shushed.

“Four. We’re all equal and have exactly the same rights. Freak or normal.”

Astrid saw the glint of anger on Zil’s face. He was looking around himself, seeming to take the temperature of the crowd. She wondered if he would make a move now or wait for another opportunity.

“Five. Anyone who commits a crime—stealing or hurting someone—will be accused and then tried by a jury of six kids.”

Some of the crowd were losing interest again and beginning to cast sidelong glances at the food. But others waited patiently. Even respectfully.

“Six: lying to the jury is a crime. Seven: penalties can be anything from a fine to getting locked up in a jail for a period of a month or more, to permanent exile from Perdido Beach.”

The crowd mostly liked this. There was some clowning around, kids pointing at each other, some shoving, mostly good-natured.

“Eight. We’ll elect a new town council every six months. But the council cannot change these first nine rules.”

“Are we done, yet?” Howard asked.

“One more. The ninth rule,” Astrid said. “And this is the one I have the most doubt about. I kind of hate the idea of this rule. But I can’t see any way around it.” She glanced at Albert and then nodded at Quinn, who frowned and looked confused.

This, finally, got everyone’s attention.

Astrid folded the paper and stuffed it into her pocket. “Everyone has to live by these laws. Normal or freak. Regular citizen or member of the council. Except . . .”

“Except Sammy?” Howard supplied.

“No!” Astrid snapped. Then, more calmly, refusing to be provoked, “No, not except Sam. Except in the event of an emergency. The council will have the right to suspend all other rules for a period of twenty-four hours if there’s a major emergency. In that case the council can appoint a person, or several people, to act as Town Defenders.”

“Sammy,” Howard said. He laughed cynically.

Astrid ignored him and instead focused on Zil. “And if you think that’s directed at you, Zil, you’re welcome to think so.”

In a louder voice Astrid cried, “You’ll all get a chance to vote, but for now, temporarily, these rules will be the law as soon as a majority on the council says so.”

“I vote yes,” Albert said quickly.

“Me, too,” Edilio called out from somewhere in the crowd.

Howard rolled his eyes. He looked at Orc, who nodded his head yes. Howard sighed theatrically. “Yeah, whatever.”

“Okay, then,” Astrid said. “With my vote that’s four out of seven. So. These are the laws of Perdido Beach. The laws of the FAYZ.”

“Can we eat now?” Howard asked.

“One last thing,” Astrid said. “I lied to people. And I got other people to lie. That’s not against any of these rules, but it’s still wrong. The result is that kids won’t really trust me in the future. So I’m quitting the town council. Effective right now.”

Howard began an ironic slow clapping. Astrid laughed. It didn’t even bother her. In fact, she felt like joining in herself. Like she could finally stand outside herself, see herself as shrill and controlling and faintly ridiculous.

Strangely, it made her feel better.

“Now, let’s eat,” Astrid said. She hopped down from the fountain and actually felt lighter when she landed. Like she’d weighed five hundred pounds a minute ago and was now as light and nimble as a gymnast. She patted Howard on the shoulder and went to Albert, who was shaking his head slowly.

“Nice,” Albert said. “You get to quit.”

“Yep. So now I guess I need a job, Albert,” Astrid said. “You have any openings?”

THIRTY-SEVEN

33 MINUTES

“I DIDN’T WET my bed or anything,” Justin said. “At my house I mean.”

Mary ignored him. Instead she watched Astrid’s performance. It made her bitter. Of course Astrid had found a way out of the hole she’d dug for herself. Smart, beautiful Astrid. It must be great to be Astrid. It must be great to have so much confidence that you could just stand up there handing out a set of rules and then blithely walk away, with your pretty blond head held high.

“Can I go see Roger after we eat?”

“Whatever,” Mary said. She’d be out of it all soon. Done with this awful place and these awful people. She’d sit outside with her mother and tell her stories about it.

Astrid was lining up now for barbecue. Astrid and Little Pete together. Kids were clapping her on the back. Grinning at her. Liking her more than they had in the past. Why? Because she had admitted she had screwed up and then she’d quit and left them with a new set of rules to follow.

In her own way Astrid had taken the poof, Mary thought.

How many minutes left until Mary had her own chance at escape? She pulled Francis’s watch from her pocket. Half an hour.

After all the worry and anticipation it still seemed to rush up at her, the time.

John was looking at her now, even as he herded the kids toward the front of the food line. Looking at her. Expecting something from her. Just like everyone else.

Mary should go stand in the food line herself, of course, show Astrid up as a liar for calling her anorexic.

But really, what did Mary have to prove to anyone?

She ignored John’s wave, ignored kids around her, and headed back into the day care.

It was quiet and empty.

This place had been her whole life since the FAYZ. Her whole life. This messy, stinking, gloomy hole. She stared at it. Hated it. Hated herself for letting this define her.

She didn’t hear anyone behind her. But she felt it.

The back of her neck tingled.

Mary turned. There. Behind the milky translucent plastic that covered the jagged hole between the day care and the hardware. A shape. A form.

Mary’s mouth was dry. Her heart pounded.

“Where are they, Mary?” Drake asked. “Where are the snot-nosed little monsters?”

“No,” Mary whispered.

Drake looked at the edges of the cinderblock with detached interest. “This was clever, the way Sam did this. Burned right through the wall. I didn’t see it coming.”

“You’re dead,” Mary said.

Drake snapped his whip hand. The plastic was sliced from top to bottom.

He stepped through. Into the room where he and the coyotes had threatened to kill the children.

Drake. No one else. No one else had those eyes. No one else had that python arm the color of dried blood.

He was dirty, that was the only difference. His face was smeared with mud. Mud was in his hair. Mud was on his clothes.

The whip writhed and curled like it had a life of its own.

“Get out of here,” Mary whispered.

What happened if she died here in the FAYZ? No. She had to get away. And she had to save the children.

Had to. No other choice. She’d been a fool even to think of any other choice.

“I think I’ll wait for the kiddies to come back,” Drake said. He grinned his wolf’s grin and Mary could see mud in his teeth. “I think it’s time to finish what I started.”

Mary wet herself then. She could feel it. But she could not stop it.

“Go,” Drake said. “Go get them. Bring them here.”

Mary shook her head slowly, her muscles watery and weak.

“Go!” Drake roared.

The whip hand lashed out. The tip drew a line of fire on her cheek and she ran from the room.

Zil was frozen with indecision. Astrid had directly threatened him. The Ninth Law? She hadn’t even pretended it wasn’t about him. She had turned her icy blue eyes on him and threatened him. Astrid! That treasonous, freak-loving girl!

And now? Astrid had laid down the law and laid out her threat and now everyone was eating fish and venison and actually talking about Astrid’s laws.

Yesterday Zil had burned down a big piece of the town. The result was supposed to be chaos. But now Albert was dishing out meat and Astrid was dishing out laws and it was as if Zil had done nothing, as if he was not someone to be feared and respected.

Like he was nobody.

Threatened! And once Sam decided to reappear . . .

“Leader, maybe we’d better get back to the compound,” Lance suggested.

Zil stared at him in amazement. Lance was suggesting they slink away? Things must be as bad as Zil feared if even Lance was scared.

“No,” Turk argued, but not very loudly, or very forcibly. “If we run away, we’re done for. We’ll just be waiting there for Sam to come around and finish us off.”

“He’s right,” a girl’s voice said.

Zil spun around and saw a dark-haired girl, a pretty girl, but not someone he knew. Not Human Crew. The thing to do was tell her to take off, stop presuming to speak to him. He was the Leader. But there was something about her . . .

“Who are you?” Zil asked, eyes narrowed, suspicious.

“My name is Nerezza,” she said.

“Weird name,” Turk commented.

“Yes, it is,” Nerezza allowed. She smiled. “It’s Italian. It means darkness.”

Lisa was standing behind Nerezza. Zil could see them both. The contrast did not work to Lisa’s benefit. Nerezza was more beautiful the longer you looked at her.

“Darkness,” Zil said.

“We have that in common,” Nerezza said.

“You know what Zil means?” Zil asked, amazed.

“I know what darkness is,” Nerezza said. “And I know that its time is coming.”

Zil remembered to breathe. “I don’t understand.”

“It will begin very soon,” Nerezza said. “Send this one”—she nodded at Lance—“to bring your weapons.”

“Go,” Zil ordered Lance.

Nerezza tilted her head a little and looked at Zil curiously. “Are you ready to do what has to be done?”

“What has to be done?” Zil asked.

“Killing,” Nerezza said. “There must be killing. It’s not enough to build a fire. The bodies must be fed into the flame.”

“Only the freaks,” Zil said.

Nerezza laughed. “Tell yourself whatever makes you happy,” she said. “The game is chaos and destruction, Zil. Play it to win.”

Edilio saw Nerezza with Zil. He couldn’t hear what they were saying. But he could read body language.

Something was wrong there.

Zil rapt. Nerezza flirting just a little.

Where was Orsay? He’d never seen Nerezza without Orsay. They’d been inseparable.

Lance went tearing off in the direction of Zil’s compound.

Edilio glanced at Astrid, but she was paying no attention. Her little brother had a piece of fish in one hand and his game player in the other.

Little Pete stared at him, as if he’d never seen Edilio before and was surprised by what he saw now. Little Pete blinked once. He frowned. He dropped the last of his fish and went instantly back to his game.

There was a scream. It cut through the chatter and drone of a crowd of kids eating. Edilio’s head snapped around.

Mary was running from the day care. Screaming a word, a name.

“Drake! Drake!”

She tripped and sprawled facedown on the concrete. She rose to her knees and held up scraped, bloody palms.

Edilio raced toward her, none-too-gently pushing wandering kids out of the way.

There was a bright red line on Mary’s face. Magic marker? Paint?

Blood.

“Drake! He’s in the day care!” Mary screamed as Edilio reached her. He didn’t even slow down but leaped past her, swinging his gun into firing position as he ran.

Someone coming out of the day care. Edilio slowed, raised his weapon, aimed. He would give Drake one chance to surrender. He’d give him to the count of three. And then he would squeeze the trigger.

Brittney!

Edilio lowered the gun. Stared in confusion. Had Mary just lost it? Mistaken a dead girl for a dead monster?

“Is Drake inside there?” Edilio demanded.

Brittney frowned in confusion.

“Is Drake in there? Is he in there? Tell me!”

“The demon is not in there,” Brittney said. “But he is near. I can feel him.”

Edilio shuddered. Her braces were still flecked with mud and tiny fragments of gravel.

He pushed past her and stopped at the day care door. He heard two of his soldiers rushing up behind him.

“Stay back unless I call you,” Edilio said. He shouldered through the doorway and swung the barrel of the gun left and right.

Nothing. Empty.

Mary had seen a ghost. Or more likely she was losing it, just like Astrid had said. Too much stress, too many problems, no relief.

Losing it.

Edilio let go of a shaky breath. He lowered the weapon. His finger was trembling on the trigger. Carefully he unclenched and rested his finger against the trigger guard.

Then he saw the plastic sheet, sliced straight down the middle.

“Mary,” Nerezza said. “Terrible things will happen here, and soon.”

Mary stared past her. Eyes searching the crowd. She saw Edilio emerge from the day care. He looked like he’d seen a ghost.

“The demon is coming,” Nerezza said insistently. “All will burn. All will be destroyed. You must take the children to safety!”

Mary shook her head helplessly. “I only have . . . I’m almost out of time.”

Nerezza put a hand on her shoulder. “Mary. You will soon be free. You will be in the loving arms of your mother.”

“Please,” Mary pleaded.

“But you have one last great service left to perform. Mary: you must not leave the children behind to the madness that is coming!”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“Lead them now to the Prophetess. She waits in her place. Take the children there. To the cliff above the beach.”

Mary hesitated. “But . . . I have no food for them there. I won’t have diapers . . . I won’t . . .”

“Everything you need will be there. Trust the Prophetess, Mary. Believe in her.”

Mary heard a terrible scream. A wailing sound of terror that shifted to agony. From the far side of the plaza, out of view.

Children were running. Panicked.

“The FAYZ for humans!” Zil shouted.

A gun went off. Mary could see the littles cowering, terrified.

“Children!” Mary commanded. “Come with me. Follow me!”

Children who had lost parents and grandparents, who had lost friends and school and church. Who had been abandoned, neglected, starved, and terrorized had learned to trust only one voice: Mother Mary.

“Come with me, children!”

The children rushed to her. And Mary, a stumbling shepherd, led them away from the plaza toward the beach.

Brittney had come to the plaza, drawn there not by the smell of food, or by the crowd,

but by a force she didn't understand.

Now she saw children running and screaming.

"Is it the demon?" she asked her angel brother.

"Yes," Tanner answered. "You are."

Brittney saw children running. Running. From her?

She saw Edilio, his face a mask of dread, coming out of the day care, coming toward her. He was staring at her, eyes wide, the whites visible all around.

She did not understand why he should be afraid of her. She was an angel of the Lord. She had been sent to fight the demon.

But now she found herself unable to move. Unable to will her limbs to walk where she wanted, unable to look where she wanted to look. It was so like being dead, she thought, memories of cold earth in her ears and mouth.

Edilio took aim at her.

No, she wanted to say. No. But the word would not come.

"Drake," Edilio said.

He was going to shoot her. Would it hurt? Would she die? Again?

But a mob of fleeing children rushed between them. Edilio raised the gun skyward.

"Run," Tanner urged her.

She ran. But it was hard to run when her arm was growing so long and her consciousness was shriveling as another mind shoved hers aside.

Astrid saw and heard the panic.

Saw the littles running with Mary, a panicky gaggle of stumbling, screaming preschoolers, babies in the arms of Mary's helpers, all racing from the square toward the beach.

In a flash too many images to process.

Zil, with a shotgun in his hands, aiming it in the air.

Edilio just emerging from the day care.

Nerezza smiling calmly.

And Brittney, from behind, facing away from Astrid.

Little Pete playing his game with feverish intensity. Fingers frantic. Like he had never played before.

And then, Nerezza moving quickly, straight toward Astrid, determined. She had something in her hand, a crowbar.

Was Nerezza going to attack her?

Insane!

Nerezza raised the crowbar and brought it down with sudden, shocking force.

Little Pete toppled forward onto his game without making a sound.

Nerezza bent over and yanked Little Pete onto his back.

Astrid cried, "No!" But Nerezza didn't seem to hear her. She raised the crowbar again, this time aiming the pointed end at Little Pete.

Astrid stuck out a hand, too slow, too clumsy. The crowbar came down hard on Astrid's wrist.

The pain was shocking. Astrid screamed in pain and fury. But Nerezza had no interest in her, pushed at her with her free hand like she was a minor irritation. And once again aimed the crowbar at Little Pete. But this time Nerezza was off-balance and

her blow went wild. The crowbar stabbed the dirt beside Little Pete's head.

Astrid was up and shoved Nerezza back a step.

"Stop it!" Astrid cried.

But Nerezza wasn't going to stop. And she wasn't going to be distracted. She was after Little Pete with fanatic focus.

Astrid punched her as hard as she could. Her fist connected with Nerezza's collar bone, not her face. Not enough to hurt the dark girl, but enough to once again throw off her aim.

Now at last Nerezza turned with icy rage on Astrid.

"Fine. You want to go first?" Nerezza slashed horizontally with the crowbar and hit Astrid in the stomach. Astrid doubled over but rushed at Nerezza, head down like a bull, blinded by pain.

She hit Nerezza squarely and knocked her on her back. The crowbar flew from Nerezza's grip and landed in the trampled grass.

Nerezza, quick, squirmed to grab it. Astrid punched her in the back of the head. Then again and again, but Nerezza's hand was nevertheless just inches from the crowbar.

Astrid hauled herself along Nerezza's back, her weight slowing the girl down. Astrid did all she could think to do: she bit Nerezza's ear.

Nerezza's howl of pain was the most satisfying thing Astrid had ever heard.

She clamped her jaw together as hard as she could, yanked her head back and forth, ripping at the ear, tasting blood in her mouth and pounding with her fists at the back of Nerezza's head.

Nerezza's hand closed on the crowbar, but she couldn't reach behind herself to get Astrid. She stabbed blindly with the edged end of the tool, grazing Astrid's forehead, but not dislodging her.

Astrid wrapped her fingers around Nerezza's throat and squeezed, now releasing the ear, spitting something squirmy out of her mouth, and put all her strength into squeezing Nerezza's windpipe.

She felt the pulse in Nerezza's neck.

And she squeezed.

THIRTY-EIGHT

32 MINUTES

SANJIT AND VIRTUE carried Bowie on a makeshift stretcher that was nothing but a sheet stretched between them.

“What are we doing?” Peace asked, twisting her hands together anxiously.

“We are fleeing,” Sanjit said.

“What’s that?”

“Fleeing? Oh, it’s something I’ve done a few times in my life,” Sanjit said. “It’s all about fighting or fleeing. You don’t want to fight, do you?”

“I’m scared,” Peace moaned.

“No reason to be scared,” Sanjit said as he struggled to hold the sheet ends in his fingers while walking backward toward the cliff. “Look at Choo. He doesn’t look scared, does he?”

Actually Virtue looked scared to death. But Sanjit didn’t need Peace losing her head. The scary part was still ahead. Scary had only just begun.

“No?” Peace said doubtfully.

“Are we running away?” Pixie asked. She had a plastic bag of Legos in her hand, no idea why, but she seemed determined to hold onto them.

“Well, we’re hoping to fly away, actually,” Sanjit said brightly.

“We’re going on the helicopter?” Pixie asked.

Sanjit exchanged a look with Virtue, who was struggling along much like Sanjit, legs wobbly, feet tripping in the long grass.

“Why are we running?” Bowie moaned.

“He’s awake,” Sanjit said.

“You think?” Virtue snapped between gasps for air.

“How do you feel, little dude?” Sanjit asked him.

“My head hurts,” Bowie said. “And I want some water.”

“Good timing,” Sanjit muttered.

They had reached the edge of the cliff. The rope was still where he and Virtue had left it the other day. “Okay, Choo, you go down first. I’ll lower the kids down to you one by one.”

“I’m scared,” Peace said.

Sanjit lowered Bowie to the ground and flexed his cramped fingers. “Okay, listen up, all of you.”

They did. Somewhat to Sanjit’s surprise. “Listen: we’re all scared, okay? So no one needs to keep reminding me. You’re scared, I’m scared, we’re all scared.”

“You’re scared, too?” Peace asked him.

“Peeless,” Sanjit said. “But sometimes life gets tough and scary, okay? We’ve all been scary places before. But here we are, right? We’re all still here.”

“I want to stay here,” Pixie said. “I can’t leave my dolls.”

“We’ll come back for them another time,” Sanjit said.

He knelt down, wasting precious seconds, waiting for the cold-eyed mutant creep Caine to step out of the house any moment. “Kids. We are a family, right? And we

stick together, right?”

No one seemed too sure of that.

“And we survive together, right?” Sanjit pressed.

Long silence. Long stares.

“That’s right,” Virtue said at last. “Don’t worry, you guys. It’s going to be okay.”

He almost seemed to believe it.

Sanjit wished he did.

Astrid could feel the arteries and veins and tendons in Nerezza’s neck. She could feel the way the blood hammered trying to reach Nerezza’s brain. The way the muscles twisted.

She felt Nerezza’s windpipe convulsing. Her entire body was jerking now, a wild spasm, organs frantic for oxygen, nerves twitching as Nerezza’s brain sent out frantic panic signals.

Astrid’s hands squeezed. Her fingers dug in, like she was trying to form fists and Nerezza’s neck was just kind of in the way and if she just squeezed hard enough—

“No!” Astrid gasped.

She released. She stood up fast, backed away, stared in horror at Nerezza as the girl choked and sucked air.

They were almost alone in the plaza. Mary had led the littles away at a run, and it had signaled a full-fledged panic that drew almost everyone in her wake. Everyone was pelting toward the beach. Astrid saw their backs as they ran.

And then she saw the unmistakable silhouette that sauntered after them.

He might almost have been anyone, any tall, thin boy. If not for the whip that curled in the air and wrapped caressingly around his body and uncurled to snap and crack.

Drake laughed.

Nerezza sucked air. Little Pete stirred.

Gunfire, a single loud round.

The sun was setting out over the water. A red sunset.

Astrid stepped over Nerezza and turned her brother over. He moaned. His eyes fluttered open. His hand was already reaching for the game player.

Astrid picked it up. It was warm in her hand. A pleasurable sensation tingled her arm.

Astrid grabbed the front of Little Pete’s shirt in her sore fist.

“What is the game, Petey?” she demanded.

She could see his eyes glaze over. The veil that separated Little Pete from the world around him.

“No!” she screamed, her face inches from his. “Not this time. Tell me. Tell me!”

Little Pete looked at her and met her gaze. Aware. But still, he said nothing.

A waste of time demanding Little Pete use words. Words were her tool, not his. Astrid lowered her voice. “Petey. Show me. I know you have the power. *Show me.*”

Little Pete’s eyes widened. Something clicked beneath that blank stare.

The ground split open beneath Astrid. The dirt was a mouth. She cried out and fell, spinning downward, down a tunnel in mud lit by neon screams.

Diana opened one eye. What she saw before her was a wooden surface. A spilled Cheerio was the closest recognizable object.

Where was she?

She closed her eye and asked herself that question again. Where am I?

She'd had a horrible dream, full of gruesome detail. Violence. Starvation. Despair. In the dream she had done things she would never, ever do in real life.

She opened her eyes again and tried to stand up. She fell backward a very, very long way. She barely felt the floor when it smacked her in the back of the head.

Now she saw legs. Table legs, chair legs, the legs of a boy wearing frayed jeans and beyond the splayed, scarred legs of a girl in shorts. Both sets of legs were tied with rope.

Someone was snoring. Someone too close. A snore from an unseen source.

Bug. The name came to her. And with it the shock of knowing that she was not dreaming, had not dreamed.

Better to close her eyes and pretend.

But the girl, Penny, her legs strained against their ropes. Diana heard a moan.

With clumsy hands Diana grabbed the chair and pulled herself up into a seated position. The urge to lie back down was almost irresistible. But hand over hand, and then numb foot over numb foot, Diana pulled herself back up and into the chair.

Caine slept. Bug snored loudly and invisibly on the floor.

Penny blinked at her. "They drugged us," Penny said. She yawned.

"Yeah," Diana agreed.

"They tied us up," Penny said. "How did you get free?"

Diana rubbed her wrists, as though she had been tied up. Why hadn't Sanjit tied her? "Loose knots."

Penny's head wobbled a little. Her eyes wouldn't quite focus. "Caine's going to kill 'em."

Diana nodded. She tried to think. Not easy in a brain still slowed by whatever drug Sanjit had slipped her.

"They could have killed us," Diana said.

Penny nodded. "Too scared," she said.

Or maybe they just aren't killers, Diana thought. Maybe they just weren't the kind of people who could take advantage of a sleeping foe. Maybe Sanjit wasn't the kind of kid who could cut a sleeping person's throat.

"They're running," Diana said. "They're trying to get away."

"Never hide on this island," Penny said. "Not for long. We'll find them. Cut me loose."

Penny was right, of course. Even drugged Diana knew it was true. Caine would find them eventually. And he *was* the kind who killed.

Her true love. He was not the beast Drake was, but something worse. Caine wouldn't kill them in some psychotic rage. He'd kill them in cold blood. Diana staggered out of the room, moving like a drunk, slamming into a doorway, absorbing the pain, moving on. Windows. Big windows in a room so huge it made the furniture arranged here and there in separate pods look like dollhouse toys.

"Hey, untie me!" Penny demanded.

She spotted Sanjit immediately. He was in profile against a red sky, standing at the

edge of the cliff. There was a little girl with him. Not Virtue, some girl Diana had not seen before.

That's what Sanjit had been hiding: there were other kids here on the island.

Sanjit looped a rope around the girl in a sort of web. He hugged her. Leaned down to speak to her face-to-face.

No, not the killing kind, Sanjit.

Then he began to lower the clearly terrified girl out of sight. Over the cliff.

There was a shout from the other room. Bug. He yelled, "Ah ah ah ah! Get them off me!"

Bug was awake. Penny had used her power to give Bug a nice shot of fear adrenalin.

As Diana watched, Sanjit himself climbed over the side. He faced the house as he did so. Did he see Diana standing there, watching?

Diana heard Penny coming into the room, at least as wobbly as Diana herself.

"You stupid witch," Penny snarled. "Why didn't you untie me?"

"Bug seems to have taken care of that," Diana answered.

She had to cut Penny off before she saw what was happening. Before she saw Sanjit.

Diana picked up a vase from a side table. Very pretty crystal. Heavy.

"This is nice," Diana said to Penny.

Penny looked at her like she was crazy. Then Penny's eyes focused beyond Diana. Out of the window.

"Hey!" Penny said. "They're trying—"

Diana swung the vase and caught Penny on the side of the head. She didn't wait to see the effect but staggered, vase still in hand, to the kitchen.

Caine was still asleep. But he wouldn't be for long, maybe, not long enough. Penny's power of hallucination could wake the dead. She would send terrors into Caine's dreams and wake him as she had Bug.

Diana raised the vase over her head. It occurred to her in a moment of wry clarity that while Sanjit might not be the kind of person who would brain someone in their sleep, she apparently was.

But before she could smash the vase down on her true love's head, Diana's flesh erupted. Gaping red mouths appeared on her arms, gnashing with serrated shark's teeth. The mouths were eating her alive.

Diana screamed.

In some corner of her mind she knew it was Penny. She knew it wasn't real, because she saw the mouths but did not feel them, not really, but she screamed and screamed and her fingers let go of the vase. From far off came the sound of shattered crystal.

The red mouths were crawling up her arms, eating her skin, baring muscle and sinew, eating their way to her shoulders.

And then they stopped.

Penny stood there, snarling. Blood streamed from the side of her head. "Don't mess with me, Diana," Penny said. "I could send you screaming off that cliff yourself."

"Let them go," Diana whispered. "They're just nice kids. They're just nice kids."

“Not like us, you mean,” Penny said. “You’re a stupid idiot, Diana.”

“Let them go. Don’t wake Caine up. You know what he’ll do.”

Penny shook her head, disbelieving. “I can’t believe he likes you, not me. You’re not even pretty. Not anymore.”

Diana laughed. “That’s what you want? Him?”

Penny’s eyes gave it all away. She looked longingly, lovingly at Caine, still passed out. “He’s all there is,” she said.

Penny reached with a trembling hand and gently stroked Caine’s hair. “Sorry to have to do this, sweetheart,” Penny said.

Caine woke shouting.

THIRTY-NINE

29 MINUTES

ASTRID FELL AND fell knowing it wasn't real, knowing it was all an illusion of some kind. But it was very hard to believe that when her clothing rippled and her hair flew straight up and her arms were reaching for the walls of a tunnel that couldn't possibly be real but seemed like it was.

But after a while falling began to feel like floating. She was suspended in the air and things no longer streamed past; they floated around.

Symbols, Astrid thought.

She was relieved to see that her brain still worked. Whatever was happening, whatever power was giving her this intense waking dream, it wasn't frying her brain. Reason intact. Words right there where she had left them.

Symbols. Neon symbols arrayed across a dark landscape.

Not even symbols, she realized: avatars.

There was a monstrous face framed with long dark hair that formed snakes. Dark eyes and a mouth that dribbled fire.

There was a female being with orange rays, like sunset beams spraying out of her head.

A male with a hand held up and a green light formed in a ball. This avatar was far away, at the edge of the dark playing field.

One avatar was neither male nor female but half of each sex. Metal teeth and a whip.

Nerezza. Orsay. Sam. But what was the fourth avatar?

It was this fourth avatar that seemed to be in contention between two manipulators, two players. One player was represented by a box. The box was closed but for one edge that shone so bright it was hard to look at. Like a toy box containing a sun.

Petey, Astrid whispered.

The other player she felt rather than saw. She tried to turn her eyes toward it, to see it, but it was always just out of range. And she realized that the light box was restraining her, not allowing her to see the opponent.

For her own good. Protecting her.

Petey would not let her look at the gaiaphage.

Astrid's mind flooded with images of other shadow avatars. Dark avatars. Dead. Victims in the game.

All of these were in neat little rows, like pawns lined up before the soul-killing emptiness that was the gaiaphage.

"Astrid!"

Someone was yelling her name.

"Astrid! Snap out of it!"

The game field disappeared.

Astrid's eyes saw the plaza, her brother just getting to his feet, and Brianna shaking her roughly.

"Hey, what's the matter with you?" Brianna demanded, more angry than

concerned.

Astrid ignored Brianna and searched for Nerezza. She was nowhere to be seen.

"The girl, there was a girl here," Astrid said.

"What's going on, Astrid? I just—" She stopped talking long enough to cough ten, twelve times in startlingly rapid succession. "I just stopped Lance from beating some kid half to death. People all running around like nuts down on the beach. I mean, jeez, I take a day off to get over this stupid flu and suddenly it's craziness everywhere!"

Astrid blinked, looked around, tried to make sense of way too much information. "It's the game," she said. "It's the gaiaphage. It reached Petey through his game."

"Say what?"

Astrid knew she'd said too much. Brianna was not the person to trust with the truth about Little Pete. "Did you see Nerezza?"

"What? The girl who hangs out with Orsay?"

"She's not a girl," Astrid said. "Not really." She grabbed Brianna's arm. "Find Sam. We need him. Find him!"

"Okay. Where?"

"I don't know," Astrid cried. She bit her lip. "Look everywhere!"

"Hey," Brianna said, and then interrupted herself to cough until she was red in the face. She cursed, coughed some more, and finally said, "Hey, I'm fast. But even I can't look everywhere."

"Let me think for a minute," Astrid said. She squeezed her eyes shut. Where? Where would Sam have gone? He was hurt, angry, feeling useless.

No, that wasn't quite right.

"Oh, God, where?" Astrid wondered.

She hadn't seen him since he had gone off to deal with Zil and the fire. What had happened to make him run away? Had he done something he was ashamed of?

No, that wasn't it, either. He had seen the whipped boy.

"The power plant," Astrid said.

"Why would he be there?" Brianna frowned.

"Because it's the place that scares him most," Astrid said.

Brianna looked doubtful. But then her frown lines relaxed. "Yeah," she said. "That would be Sam."

"You have to get him, Brianna. He's Petey's best piece."

"Ummmm . . . what?"

"Never mind," Astrid snapped. "Get Sam here. Now!"

"How?"

"Hey, you're the Breeze, right? Just do it!"

Brianna considered that for a moment. "Yeah, okay. I'm outta—"

The "here" was lost in the wind.

Astrid handed the game player to her brother. He looked down at the ground, oblivious. He felt the game player for a moment, then dropped it.

"You have to keep playing, Petey."

Her brother shook his head. "I lost."

"Petey, listen to me." Astrid knelt before him, held him, then thought better of it and let him go. "I saw the game. You showed me the game. I was inside it. But it's real, Petey. It's real."

Little Pete stared past her. Not interested. Not even seeing her, maybe, let alone hearing her.

“Petey. He’s trying to destroy us. You have to play.”

She shoved the game at him. “Nerezza is the gaiaphage’s avatar. You made her real. You gave her a body. Only you have that kind of power. It’s using you, Petey, it’s using you to kill.”

But if Little Pete cared, or even understood, he showed no sign of it.

It was a panic run. Most of the population of Perdido Beach, all running and no one knowing quite why. Or maybe they all knew why but each had his own reason.

Zil loved it. Here at last was the total blind panic he’d hoped would result from the fires. Here was all order breaking down completely.

Kids on the beach stumbled in the sand. Some ran screaming into the water.

Drake, alive. Drake with his whip hand lashing at them, like he was driving cattle into the sea.

More kids sticking to the road, running parallel to the beach. Zil was with them, running with Turk beside him, looking for the freaks, seeing a kid whose only mutant power was the ability to glow brightly, harmless, but a freak and like all freaks he had to be dealt with.

Turk pulled up, raised his shotgun, aimed and fired. He missed, but the kid panicked and smashed facedown against the curb. Zil kicked him and kept running. He shouted in wild glee as he ran.

“Run, freaks! Run!”

But there were very few freaks in the mass of kids on the road. Too few real targets. But that was okay because the point right now was fear, fear and chaos.

Nerezza had told him it was coming. A freak herself? Zil wondered. He would hate to have to kill her, she was hot and mysterious and so much better than boring, pasty Lisa.

He spotted Lance ahead. Good old Lance, but he had lost his gun and his bat.

“I need a weapon!” Lance cried. “Give me something!”

Turk had a nail-studded stick. He tossed it to Lance. They took off again, a pack of wolves chasing down a terrified herd of cattle.

The older kids were pulling away. But the fat ones, the young ones, they were falling behind, worn out or simply unable to keep up on shorter legs.

They were all crammed onto the curved road that led to Clifftop.

Zil pointed. “That kid there. There! He’s a freak lover!”

Lance got there first and swung the nailed stick. The kid evaded it and hared off the road, tumbling down the slope into bushes and coming to rest against a cactus.

Zil laughed and pointed. “He’s yours, Turk!”

And Zil was off again, with Lance at his side, Lance like a blond warrior god, like Thor, slashing away at everyone now, no longer differentiating between freak or non-freak, they could all die, all of them who had refused to join Zil. “Run!” Zil screamed. “Run, you cowards! Join me, or run for your lives!”

He paused for a minute, winded from running uphill. Lance stopped beside him. Others, half a dozen of them, the Human Crew faithful, each of them a human hero, Zil thought fiercely.

Then Lance's grin fell. He pointed. Back down the road they had just climbed. Dekka, walking, but fast just the same. Relentless.

Someone was beside Zil. He could sense her. Nerezza. He looked at her. Her throat was red, like the first stage of serious bruising. There was a cut on her forehead. Her eyes were bloodshot and her hair was all astray.

"Who did that to you?" Zil demanded, outraged.

Nerezza ignored him. "She has to be stopped."

"Who?" Zil jerked his chin toward Dekka. "Her? How am I supposed to stop *her*?"

"Her powers don't reach as far as your gun, Zil," Nerezza said.

Zil frowned. "Are you sure?"

"I am."

"How do you know? Are you a freak?"

Nerezza laughed. "What am I? What are you, Zil? Are you the Leader? Or are you a coward who hides from some fat, black lesbian freak? Because right now you choose which to be."

Lance glanced nervously at Zil. Turk started to say something but couldn't seem to find the right words.

"She has to be stopped," Nerezza said.

"Why?" Zil asked.

"Because we're going to need gravity, *Leader*."

Mary reached the top of the road, up to Clifftop. A series of smaller pathways led down to the cliff itself.

She looked back to check on her charges and saw the whole population of Perdido Beach seemingly following her.

Kids were spread all down the road, some running, some wheezing and gasping for breath. At the back of the crowd Zil and a handful of gun-toting thugs.

Farther off, kids who had fled to the beach were being herded back onto the road.

This second group fled from a different terror. From where she stood Mary could too clearly see Drake, driving terrified kids before him. Some were in the water. Others tried to climb over the breakwater and the rocks that separated Perdido's main beach from the smaller beach beneath Clifftop.

As the Prophetess had said. The tribulation of fire. The demon. And the red sunset in which Mary would lay down her burden.

Mary cried, "Come with me, children, stay with me!"

And they did.

They followed her across the overgrown, formerly manicured grounds of Clifftop. To the cliff. To the very edge of the cliff, with the blank, inscrutable FAYZ wall just to their left, the end of their particular world.

Down below on the beach, Orsay sat cross-legged on the rock that had become her pulpit. Some kids had already reached her and gathered, terrified, around her. Others were scrambling down the cliff to her.

The sun set in a blaze of red.

Orsay sat very still on her rock. She seemed not to be moving a muscle. Her eyes were closed.

Below her stood Jill, the Siren, seeming lost, scared, a wobbly silhouette against the light show in the west.

“Are we going down to the beach, Mother Mary?” a little girl asked.

“I didn’t bring my baving suit,” another said.

It was just minutes away now, Mary knew. Her fifteenth birthday. Her Mother’s Day birthday.

She glanced at her watch.

She should be troubled, she knew, afraid. But for the first time in so very, very long Mary was at peace. The children’s questions didn’t reach her. The concerned, anxious, upturned faces were far away. Everything was finally going to be okay.

The Prophetess did not stir. She sat so calmly, unmoved by the madness around her, indifferent to cries and pleas and demands.

The Prophetess has seen that we will all suffer a time of terrible tribulation. This will come very soon. And then, Mary, then will come the demon and the angel. And in a red sunset we will be delivered.

Orsay’s prophecy, as told to Mary by Nerezza.

Yes, Mary thought. She truly is the Prophetess.

“I can climb down to the beach,” Justin said bravely. “I’m not scared.”

“No need,” Mary said. She ruffled his head affectionately. “We’ll fly down.”

FORTY

16 MINUTES

THE CLIMB DOWN to the yacht, the *Fly Boy Too*, had been enough to take a year off Sanjit's life. Twice he'd almost dropped Bowie. Pixie had banged her head and started crying. And Pixie could do some serious howling.

Peace had been peaceful, but fretful. Which was normal enough under the circumstances.

And then had come the part about getting them up onto the yacht. Easier than getting down the cliff, but still not a day at the beach.

Man, wouldn't a day at the beach be great? Sanjit wondered as he and Virtue shepherded the kids aft toward the helicopter.

A day at the beach. That would be so much better than glancing up at that looming cliff and knowing he was getting ready to fly them all straight into it. Assuming he even got the helicopter up off the helipad.

Most likely he wouldn't make it far enough to worry about killing everyone on the cliff. More likely he'd get just enough altitude to plunge into the sea.

No point thinking about it. There was no staying here now. Not even if he set aside his worries about Bowie. He'd seen what Caine could do.

He had to get the kids off the island. Away from Caine. Virtue said there was something deep-down evil about Caine. Sanjit had seen Caine's eyes when he had talked back to him.

Sanjit wondered if Diana was right, that Virtue had some kind of mutant power to judge people. More likely he was just judgmental.

But Virtue had been right talking about evil coming. Caine had been within a heartbeat of smashing Sanjit against a wall. No way a creature like Caine was going to tolerate Pixie and Bowie and Peace, let alone Choo. He wasn't going to share a dwindling food supply with them.

"Like things will be any better on the mainland," Sanjit muttered.

"What?" Virtue asked him distractedly. He was busy trying to strap Bowie into the back seat of the helicopter. There were only four seats altogether, the pilot and three passengers. But they were adult-size seats so the two in the back would be room enough for the three youngsters.

Sanjit climbed into the pilot's seat. The leather was creased and well-worn. In the movie the seat had been fabric. Sanjit remembered that very clearly. It was about all he remembered.

He licked his lips, no longer able to put off the rickety fear that he was about to get them all killed.

"You know how to do this?" Virtue asked him.

"No! No, of course I don't!" Sanjit yelled. Then, for the benefit of the youngsters he twisted half way around and said, "Totally. Of course I know how to fly a helicopter. Duh!"

Virtue was praying. Eyes closed, head bowed, praying.

"Yeah, that'll help," Sanjit said.

Virtue opened one eye and said, "I'm doing what I can."

"Brother, I wasn't being a smart ass," Sanjit said. "I mean I am hoping to God or gods or saints or anything else you got."

Virtue closed his eyes.

"Should we pray?" Peace asked.

"Yeah. Pray. Everyone pray!" Sanjit yelled.

He pushed the ignition.

He didn't know a particular god he should pray to, he was Hindu but only by birth, he hadn't exactly read the holy books or whatever. But Sanjit whispered, "Whoever You are, if You're listening, now would be a good time to help us out."

The engine roared to life.

"Wow!" Sanjit cried, surprised. He'd half expected, half hoped the engine wouldn't even start.

It was shockingly loud. It shook the helicopter amazingly.

"Um . . . I think I pull this," Sanjit yelled.

"You *think*?" Virtue mouthed, the sound of his voice swallowed by the engine noise.

Sanjit reached over and put his hand on Virtue's shoulder. "I love you, man."

Virtue put a hand over his own heart and nodded.

"Great," Sanjit said aloud though only he could hear his own voice. "And now that we've had that touching scene, it's time for our heroes to go out in a flaming ball of glory."

Virtue frowned, trying to hear.

"I said," Sanjit shouted at the top of his lungs, "I'm invincible! Now let's fly!"

Dekka saw Zil's crew split into two groups, to left and right of the road. An ambush.

She hesitated. It would be good right about now to be

Brianna. Breeze wasn't bulletproof, but she was awfully hard to hit when she was going three hundred miles an hour.

If she kept going, they would shoot her down.

Where was Brianna? Still too sick to move, no doubt, other-wise she'd be in the middle of it. Brianna was not one to miss a fight. Dekka simultaneously missed her and hoped she stayed safely at home. If anything ever happened to Brianna, Dekka didn't know how she would go on living.

But where was Sam, that was the big question? Why was it Dekka's job to walk this road? She didn't even know that she had to. Maybe nothing would happen. Maybe Drake, rampaging up from the beach, would take on Zil and the two of them would finish each other off.

Dekka would like to see that. Right about now. Right now before she had to keep walking up the road to Clifftop.

"Yeah, that would be great," Dekka said.

Zil's punks were losing patience. They weren't waiting. They were working their way toward her on both sides of the road. Clubs. Bats. Crowbars.

Shotguns.

She could run. Live. Get away. Find Brianna and say, "Breeze, I know you probably aren't going to feel the same way, and maybe this will just gross you out and

you'll hate me for saying it, but I love you."

Her body tingled with fear. She closed her eyes for a second and felt in that temporary darkness what it would feel like, death. Except that you couldn't really feel death, could you?

She could run away. Be with Brianna.

Except no, that wasn't ever going to happen. She was going to live out her days loving Brianna from a distance. Probably never even tell her how she really felt.

Out of the corner of her eye Dekka saw Edilio running straight at Drake from behind. He was alone, the crazy boy, going after Drake. Farther away, moving much too slowly, Orc.

Edilio could have decided to hang back, wait for Orc. Maybe wait too long as Drake laid into terrified children. But Edilio had not made that decision.

He wasn't waiting for Orc.

"And I'm not waiting for Sam," Dekka decided.

She started walking.

The first gun fired. That creep Turk. It was as loud as the end of the world. Dekka saw the fire spray from the muzzle. Hot lead pellets hit the concrete before her. Some bounced up and embedded themselves in her legs.

Hurt. Hurt more later.

Dekka couldn't reach Turk or Lance or Zil with her powers. Not from this distance. But she could make it really hard for them to aim.

Dekka raised her hands high. Gravity failed.

Dekka walked forward behind a wall of dirt and dust and swirling cacti.

Sam was just at the twisted metal gate of the nuclear plant when he heard a rush of air and saw a blur.

The blur stopped vibrating and became Brianna.

She was holding something. Two somethings.

Sam stared at the objects in her hands. Then he stared at her. Then back at the objects in her hands.

He waited until she was done coughing, bent over.

"No," he said.

"Sam, they need you. And they can't wait for you to snail walk all the way back."

"Who needs me?" Sam asked skeptically.

"Astrid told me to get you. No matter what it took."

Sam could not help but be pleased. "So. Astrid needs me."

Brianna rolled her eyes. "Yeah, Sam, you're still necessary. You're like a god to us mere mortals. We can't live without you. Later we're going to build you a temple. Satisfied?"

Sam nodded, not meaning to agree, just meaning that he understood. "Is it Drake?"

"I think Drake is just part of it," Brianna said. "Astrid was scared. In fact, I think your girlfriend may have had a really bad day."

Brianna dropped the skateboard in front of Sam. "Don't worry: I won't let you fall off."

"Yeah? Then why did you bring the helmet?"

Brianna tossed it to him. "In case you fall off."

Edilio had trouble running in the sand. But maybe that wasn't why he couldn't seem to catch up with Drake.

Maybe he didn't want to catch up with Drake. Maybe he was scared to death of Drake. Orc had fought Drake to a draw once. Sam had fought him and come out on the losing end.

Caine had killed him.

And yet, there was Drake. Alive. As Sam had known he was. As Sam had feared. The psychopath lived.

Edilio stumbled and tripped in the sand. His automatic rifle hit muzzle first and fired, BAM BAM BAM into the sand as Edilio accidentally squeezed the trigger.

Edilio stayed on his knees. Get up, he told himself. Get up, this is what you do. Get up.

He got up. He started running again. Heart pounding like it would tear itself loose.

Drake wasn't far away now, just a hundred feet, maybe, not far. Whipping some poor kid who'd run too slowly.

Edilio had seen the results of that terrible whip. It had broken something in Sam, the pain of that whip.

But Edilio moved closer. The trick would be to get close enough . . . not too close.

Drake still had not seen him. Edilio raised the rifle into firing position. Fifty feet. He could hit Drake from here, but there were a dozen other kids in range just beyond him. Bullets didn't always go exactly where you aimed them. He could kill Drake. He might also kill the fleeing children.

He had to stall until the kids got out of range.

He lined Drake up in the sights. Aiming was hard with the weapon on automatic. The kick would be ferocious. You could aim the first shot, but after that it would be like spraying a fire hose.

Had to get Drake to stop. Had to let the kids get away.

"Drake," Edilio said. But his mouth was as dry as the sand. What came out was a barely audible rasp.

"Drake!" Edilio yelled. "Drake!"

Drake froze. He turned, not in a hurry, slow. Languid.

Drake smiled his feral smile. His eyes were blue and empty of anything but amusement. His dark hair was matted and filthy. His skin seemed to be smeared with mud. There was dirt in his teeth.

"Why, Edilio," Drake said. "Long time, wetback."

"Drake," Edilio said, his voice failing him again.

"Yes, Edilio?" Drake said with exaggerated politeness. "Something you wanted to say?"

Edilio's stomach heaved. Drake was dead. Dead.

"You . . . you're under arrest."

Drake barked a surprised laugh. "Under arrest?"

"That's right," Edilio said.

Drake took a step toward him.

"Stop. Stop right there!" Edilio warned.

Drake kept moving. "But I'm coming to surrender, Edilio.

Slap the cuffs on me, officer."

“Stop! Stop or I’ll shoot!”

Kids beyond Drake were still running. Far enough? Edilio had to give them all the time he could.

Drake nodded, understanding. “I see. You’re such a good boy, Edilio. Making sure the kiddies get out of the way before you gun me down.”

Edilio guessed that Drake’s whip would reach ten, maybe twelve feet. He was no more than twice that distance now. Edilio aimed for the center of Drake’s body, the largest target, that’s what he’d read you were supposed to do.

Another step. Another. Drake advanced.

Edilio stepped backward. Again.

“Oh, no fair,” Drake mocked. “Keeping me out of range like that.”

Drake moved suddenly, with shocking speed.

BAM!

Click!

The first round hit Drake in his chest. But no other bullets flew.

Jammed! The gun was jammed. The sand was in the firing mechanism. Edilio yanked the bolt back, trying to—

Too late.

Drake lashed him, curled his whip around Edilio’s legs and suddenly Edilio was on his back, gasping for breath and Drake was standing over him.

The serpentine hand wound its way around Edilio’s throat. Edilio thrashed. He tried to swing the gun like a club, but

Drake blocked it easily with his free hand.

“I’d whip you, Edilio, but I don’t really have time for fun,” Drake said.

Edilio’s brain swirled, crazy, fading. Through blood-reddened eyes he saw Drake’s smile inches from his face, savoring the close-up joy of watching Edilio die.

Drake grinned. And then, as Edilio lost consciousness, as he fell into a pit of blackness, he saw metal wires growing across Drake’s mud-flecked teeth.

FORTY-ONE

12 MINUTES

SANJIT HAD FORGOTTEN every single thing he thought he had learned about flying a helicopter.

Something about a lever that changed the pitch of the rotor blades.

Something about angle of attack.

A cyclic. Pedals. A collective. Which was which?

He tried the pedals. The tail of the helicopter swung violently to the left. He took his feet off the pedals. The helicopter had almost spun off the deck.

“Well, that works okay!” Sanjit shouted, desperately hoping to reassure the others.

“You should probably go up first, before you try turning!” Virtue yelled.

“You think?”

Now he remembered something. You twisted something to make the rotors give you lift. What was there he could twist?

Left hand. The collective. Or was it the cyclic? Who cared, it was the only thing that twisted.

He twisted it. Gently. Sure enough, the engine noise increased and changed in pitch. And the helicopter lifted off.

Then it began to spin. The helicopter drifted toward the bow, toward the superstructure while the tail spun the helicopter like a top, clockwise.

Like a Tilt-A-Whirl.

Pedals. Had to use them to . . .

The helicopter stopped spinning clockwise. It hesitated. Then it began to spin counterclockwise.

Sanjit was distantly aware that several voices were screaming. Five kids in the chopper. Five screams. Including his own.

Pedals again. And the helicopter stopped spinning. It was still drifting toward the yacht’s superstructure, but now it was doing so backward.

He twisted the collective all the way, all the way, baby, and the helicopter shot upward. Like a ride Sanjit had been on in Las Vegas once. Like the helicopter was on a string and someone was yanking it toward the clouds.

Up and over the superstructure. Sanjit saw it pass beneath his feet.

WHACK! WHACK! WHACK!

The rotors had hit something. Bits of wire and metal poles flew away. The yacht’s radio antenna.

The helicopter was still rising and still drifting backward toward the cliff.

The other thing. The watchamacallit the cyclic the stick the thing near his right hand grab it grab it do something something something push it forward forward forward. Spinning again! He’d forgotten the pedals the stupid pedals and his feet couldn’t find them now and the helicopter had spun 180 degrees and with the cyclic tilted forward was now zooming straight for the cliff wall.

It was maybe a hundred feet away.

Fifty feet.

In a split second they would be dead. And there was nothing he could do to stop it happening.

Diana ran across the overgrown lawn. Caine was ahead of her, faster, she had to catch him.

The sound of the helicopter engine was growing louder, closer.

Caine stopped at the edge of the cliff. Diana reached it, panting, a dozen feet away from Caine.

In a flash Diana understood what Sanjit had been hiding. Far below a white yacht lay crumpled against the rocks. A helicopter struggled aloft, spinning crazily this way and then that.

Caine's face formed a wicked smile.

Penny was just laboring up behind. Bug, well, he might be there, too. No way to know.

Diana rushed to Caine. "Don't do it!" she cried.

He turned a furious face to her. "Shut up, Diana."

As they watched, the helicopter spun again and surged toward the cliff.

Caine raised his hands and the helicopter stopped moving forward. It was so close that the rotor hacked apart a bush that clung to the cliff face.

"Caine, don't do this," Diana pleaded.

"What do you care?" Caine asked, genuinely puzzled.

"Look! Look at them. They have little kids in there. Little children."

The bubble canopy of the helicopter was no more than a rock throw away. Sanjit struggled with the controls. Virtue beside him, gripped his seat cushion. Three smaller kids were huddled in the back seat, screaming, covering their eyes, not so young they didn't know they were a split second from death.

"I guess Sanjit should have thought about that before he lied to me," Caine said.

Diana grabbed his arm, thought better of it, and reached for his face. She pressed one hand against his cheek. "Don't do it, Caine. I'm begging you."

"I'll do it," Penny said, appearing on Caine's other side. "Let's see him fly when the cockpit is full of scorpions!"

The wrong thing to say, Diana knew.

Caine snarled, "You'll do nothing, Penny. I make the decisions here."

"No, you do what she tells you to do," Penny said. She practically spit the words at Diana. "This witch! Pretty girl, here."

"Back off, Penny!" Caine warned.

"I'm not scared of you, Caine," Penny shouted. "She tried to kill you while you were unconscious. She—"

Before she could finish the accusation Penny flew through the air. She floated, screaming, in midair, above the thrashing rotor blades.

"Go ahead, Penny!" Caine bellowed. "Threaten me with your powers! Make me lose focus!"

Penny screamed, hysterical, flailing wildly, staring down in terror at the flashing blades below her.

"Let them go, Caine," Diana pleaded.

"Why, Diana? Why do you betray me?"

“Betray you?” Diana laughed. “Betray you? I’ve been with you every day, every hour, from the start of this nightmare!”

Caine looked at her. “But you hate me, anyway.”

“No, you sick, stupid creep, I love you. I shouldn’t. I shouldn’t. You’re sick inside, Caine, sick! But I love you.”

Caine cocked an eyebrow. “Then you must love what I do. Who I am.”

He smiled and Diana knew she had lost the argument. She could see it in his eyes.

She stepped away from him. She backed toward the cliff. Felt with her feet for the edge as she held his gaze.

“I’ve helped you when I could, Caine. I’ve done all of it. I kept you alive and changed your filthy crap-stained sheets when the Darkness held you. I betrayed Jack for you. I’ve betrayed everyone for you. I ate . . . God forgive me, I ate human flesh to stay with you, Caine!”

Something flickered in Caine’s cold gaze.

“I won’t stay with you for this,” Diana said.

She took another step back. It was meant as a threat, not meant to be final.

But it was one step too many.

Diana felt the sudden horror, knowing she was going to fall. Her arms windmilled. But she could feel that she was too far, too far.

And in the end, Diana thought, wouldn’t it be better?

Wouldn’t it be a relief?

She stopped fighting and toppled backward off the cliff.

Astrid ran, pulling Little Pete behind her.

No way she could have known, she told herself as she panted and yanked and her heart pounded from the fear of what she would see when she reached Clifftop.

No way she could have known that the game was real. That it had become real when the last battery died. And that Little Pete’s opponent in the game was no program on a microchip, but the gaiaphage.

It had reached Little Pete. It wasn’t the first time. Somehow, in some way she might never be able to grasp, the two greatest powers of the FAYZ were linked.

The gaiaphage had tricked Little Pete. It had used Little Pete’s own vast power to give life to its avatar, Nerezza.

Orsay, too, had once touched the mind of the gaiaphage. It was like an infection—once you had touched that restless evil mind, it had some kind of hold over you. A hook buried in your mind.

Sam had said Lana could still feel the gaiaphage inside her. She still wasn’t free of it. But Lana had known it, been aware of it. Maybe that had given her a defense. Or maybe the gaiaphage simply didn’t need her anymore.

They reached the road to Clifftop.

But the way forward was blocked by what looked like a tornado. A tornado named Dekka.

Dekka raised the whirlwind before her and walked steadily.

BLAM!

A stab of fire barely visible through the flying, swirling debris.

“Get her! Get the freak!” Zil bellowed.

Dekka kept moving, ignoring the pain in her legs, ignoring the slosh of blood filling her shoes.

Someone was running up behind her. She yelled back over her shoulder without looking, “Stay back, you idiot!”

“Dekka!” Astrid’s voice.

She came at a run, yanking her weird little brother along behind her.

“Not a good time for you to yell at me, Astrid!” Dekka yelled.

“Dekka. We have to get to the cliff.”

“I’m going wherever Zil is,” Dekka said. “I have a right to defend myself. He started this fight.”

“Listen to me,” Astrid said urgently. “I’m not trying to stop you. I’m telling you to hurry. We have to get through. Now!”

“What? What’s happening?”

“Murder,” Astrid said. “We have to get through. You have to get through!”

Someone came running at them from the side. He stepped too close to the weightless zone and went flying up, head over heels, spinning slowly.

He fired as he rose. Gun banging in random directions.

But now they were circling around behind her. They moved cautiously, far outside her field. She could see them scurrying from bush to hillock to cactus.

A bullet whizzed so close by her ear she thought it might have hit her.

“Get back, Astrid!” Dekka said. “I’m doing all I can.”

“Do whatever it takes,” Astrid said.

“If I take Zil out the rest will run.”

“Then take him out,” Astrid said.

“Yes, ma’am,” Dekka said. “Now get out of here!”

Dekka had last seen Zil off the road to her right, ahead, just out of range.

Dekka dropped her hands.

Thousands of pounds of dirt and debris that had headed skyward fell. Dekka ran straight into the storm, eyes closed, hand over her mouth.

She almost barreled into Zil. She had emerged from the pillar of falling dirt and practically ran him down.

Zil, startled, swung a shotgun barrel toward her, but she was already too close. The barrel hit her like a club, smashing against the side of her head but not hard enough to stun.

Zil tried to back off, the better to take a shot, but Dekka’s hand shot out, grabbed his ear, and yanked him toward her.

Now he managed to jam the barrel up under her chin, hard enough to snap her teeth together. She jerked back and he pulled the trigger. The blast was like a bomb going off in her face.

But she did not lose her grip on him. She yanked him closer still as he whinnied in pain and terror.

Dekka aimed her free hand down at the ground. Gravity simply disappeared.

Locked together now in a frantic, wrestling embrace, Dekka and Zil both floated upward. The dirt and debris came with them. They were the struggling center of a tornado. Zil yanked free at the cost of a ripped, bloody ear.

Dekka punched him. Her knuckles hit him squarely on the nose. She punched again and missed. The first punch had spun her away from Zil. Zil was trying to bring the gun around, but he was having the same problem she was with moving and fighting in zero gravity.

Dekka's eyes were closing, clotted with flying sand. She couldn't see for sure how high they had risen. Couldn't know for sure that it was enough.

Zil twisted and shouted in triumph. The shotgun barrel was inches from her.

Dekka kicked wildly. Her boot connected with Zil's thigh. The two of them flew apart from the impact, floating now ten feet apart. But still Zil kept the shotgun aimed at her. And the distance wasn't enough for Dekka to be able to drop him without dropping herself as well. Not yet.

"Look down, genius," Dekka snarled.

Zil, his own eyes squinting, glanced down.

"Shoot me and you fall," Dekka yelled.

"Filthy freak!" Zil shouted.

He pulled the trigger. The blast was deafening. Dekka felt the wind of buckshot flying past her neck. Something hit her, like a punch.

The recoil of the shotgun blew Zil back five feet through the air.

"Yeah. Far enough," Dekka said.

Zil cried out in terror. A single vowel that went on for the ten seconds it took Zil to fall and smash into the dirt.

Dekka wiped dirt from one eye and squinted down.

"Higher than I thought," she said.

FORTY-TWO

6 MINUTES

MARY TERRAFINO CHECKED her watch. Minutes.

It was coming. Coming so soon.

“I just want you kids to know that I love you,” Mary said. “Alice, back from the cliff. It’s not time yet. We have to wait so that you can go with me.”

“Where are we going?” Justin asked.

“Home,” Mary said. “To our real homes. To our moms and dads.”

“How can we do that?” Justin asked.

“They’re waiting.” Mary pointed. “Just outside the wall. The Prophetess has shown us the way.”

“My mommy?” Alice asked.

“Yes, Alice,” Mary said. “Everybody’s mommy.”

“Can Roger come, too?” Justin asked.

“If he hurries,” Mary said.

“But he’s sick. His lungs are hurt.”

“Then he’ll come another time,” Mary said. Her patience was fraying. How much longer would she have to be this person? How much longer would she have to be Mother Mary?

Other kids were pressing closer now. They’d been driven up the hill, right up against the FAYZ wall by battles going on below. Drake. Zil. Evil people, awful people, ready to hurt and kill. Ready to hurt or kill these very kids unless Mary saved them.

“Soon,” Mary crooned.

“I don’t want to go without Roger,” Justin said.

“You have no choice,” Mary said.

Justin shook his head firmly. “I’m going to get him.”

“No,” Mary said.

“Yes. I am,” Justin said stubbornly.

“Shut up! I said NO!” Mary screamed. She grabbed Justin and yanked him hard by the arm. His eyes filled with tears. She shook him hard and kept screaming, “NO, NO! You’ll do as I say!”

She let him go and he fell to the ground.

Mary drew herself back, stared down in horror. What had she just done?

What had she done?

It would be okay, all of it okay, once the time came. She would be gone from this place. Gone and gone and gone, and all the children would come with her, they always did, and then they would be free.

It was for their own good.

“Mary!” It was John. How he’d made it past the fights down the road and reached her she could not imagine. Yet, here he was.

“Children,” John said. “Come with me.”

“No one is leaving,” Mary said.

“Mary . . .” John’s voice broke. “Mary . . .”

Sanjit was torn between staring in blank horror at the cliff wall just inches away from the tip of the whirling rotors, and the awful sight of a girl, the one named Penny, hanging in midair above those same rotors.

Caine stood at the top of the cliff, unafraid of falling. He wasn’t a guy who *could* fall, Sanjit realized. Caine could step off the edge and like the Road Runner simply hang in midair, beep beep, and zip back to solid ground.

Not so the girl named Penny.

The other one, Diana, was pleading with him. What was she saying? Drop the girl? Crash the helicopter?

Sanjit didn’t think so. He’d seen something very wrong in Diana’s dark eyes, but not murder.

Murder lived in Caine’s eyes.

Sanjit had the cyclic pulled all the way back. The rotors wanted to pull back from the cliff, but Caine would not let it go.

Diana stepped backward. Walked with halting steps to the cliff edge.

“No!” Sanjit cried, but she was falling, falling.

It all happened in a heartbeat. Diana stopped in midair.

The helicopter was released from Caine’s grip. It jerked suddenly backward.

Penny fell. The rotor blades retreated.

She fell past the rotors safely and Diana floated in midair and the helicopter roared backward like it had been on the end of a stretched bungee cord.

Diana was thrown more than lifted back onto the grass. She rolled and sprawled and looked up just in time for Sanjit to meet her eyes for a split second before he had his hands full.

The helicopter was moving backward but falling, like it intended to ram its tail rotor straight into the deck of the yacht below.

The other thing, the other thing, lift it lift it twist it twist it and up the helicopter went. It spun wildly around as Sanjit once more forgot the pedal but it was rising. Spinning and rising and spinning faster and faster and now Sanjit was jerked wildly as he fought to find the pedals.

Clockwise, slower, slower, pause, counterclockwise faster, faster, slower, pause.

The helicopter hovered in midair. But far from the cliff now. Out over the sea. And twice the height of the cliff.

Sanjit was rattling with nerves, teeth chattering. Virtue was still praying, gibberish mostly, and not English gibberish.

The kids were in the back screaming.

But for a few heartbeats at least, the helicopter was not falling and not spinning. It was rising.

“One thing at a time,” Sanjit told himself. “Stop going up.” He loosened his death grip, and the twist grip went back toward neutral. He kept the pedals right where they were. He did not move the cyclic.

The helicopter was pointing toward the mainland. Not toward Perdido Beach, exactly, but toward the mainland.

Virtue stopped praying. He looked at Sanjit with huge eyes. “I think I pooped a

little.”

“Just a little?” Sanjit said. “Then you’ve got nerves of steel, Choo.”

He aimed and pushed the cyclic forward.

The helicopter roared toward the mainland.

Brittney stared down at Edilio. He was facedown in the sand.

He bore the mark of a whip. His neck was raw and bloody, as though he had been lynched.

Tanner was there, too, looking down at him.

“Is he dead?” Brittney asked fearfully.

Tanner did not answer. Brittney knelt beside Edilio. She could see grains of sand move as he exhaled.

Alive. Barely. By the grace of God.

Brittney touched his face. Her fingers left a trace of mud behind.

She stood up.

“The demon,” Brittney said. “The evil one.”

“Yes,” Tanner said.

“What should I do?” Brittney asked.

“Good,” Tanner said. “You must serve God and resist evil.”

She looked at him, eyes blurring with tears. “I don’t know how.”

Tanner looked past her, raising glowing eyes to the hill that rose behind Brittney.

She turned away from Edilio. She saw Zil fall to earth. Saw Dekka sinking slowly in a pillar of dust. Saw Astrid with her little brother. Saw children running up the hill, still panicked.

“Calvary,” Tanner said. “Golgotha.”

“No,” Brittney said.

“You must do as God wills,” Tanner said.

Brittney stood still. Her feet did not feel the warmth of the sand beneath them. Her skin did not feel the slight breeze from the ocean. She did not smell the salt spray.

“Climb the hill, Brittney. Climb to the place of death.”

“I will,” Brittney said.

She began to walk. She was alone, everyone else ahead, she the last to climb the hill.

Dekka was just coming down to earth. Astrid was racing ahead, pulling Nemesis with her.

How did she know to call him that? She had known Little Pete before, back in the old days. She knew his name. But in her mind the name Nemesis had formed when she saw him. And a surge of pure rage.

Is *he* the evil one, Lord? She stopped, momentarily confused as Astrid and Little Pete ran ahead.

Her arm twitched. Stretched. So very strange.

And her braces were turning liquid, leaving only a metallic slick on sharp teeth.

Zil lay groaning, his legs twisted at impossible angles.

Brittney passed him by.

She would meet the evil one when she reached the top. And then would come the battle.

“Everyone hold hands,” Mary said.

The children were slow to react. But then, one by one, their little faces turned to the sunset, they reached out for each other.

Mary’s helpers, carrying the babies, stood in the line with all the others.

“It’s coming, children,” Mary said.

“Hold tight to each other . . .

“Be ready, children. Be ready to jump. You have to jump so high to go to your mommy’s arms . . .”

Mary felt it beginning, just as she had known it would. The time had come.

Fifteen years before, at this very hour, at this very minute, Mary Terrafino was born . . .

Sam could hear nothing but a hurricane wind in his ears. He could feel nothing but the manic gyration of the skateboard under his feet, rattling up through every bone in his body. That and Brianna’s hands on his back, pushing him, and again and again grabbing him, righting him, guiding him on a ride that made the craziest roller coaster Sam had ever experienced look like a quiet stroll.

Up the road from the power plant.

Down the highway, slaloming through abandoned or crashed cars.

Then a blistering few seconds of tearing through town.

A turn so sharp he was airborne and completely off the board, flying through the air.

Brianna raced out in front of him, grabbed his two kicking feet and guided them back onto the board. Like a sack of cement. Sam couldn’t believe he hadn’t broken both legs, he hit so hard. But Brianna’s hands held him steady, pushing and guiding him.

Then a blur and a sudden, shocking, gut-wrenching stop.

He was pretty sure he’d been screaming the whole time.

“We’re there,” Brianna said.

Time stopped for Mary. People froze. The very molecules of air seemed to stop vibrating.

Yes, just as others had described it. The poof. The big one-five.

And there, oh God, her mother.

The mother of Mother Mary, Mary thought. Not beautiful, maybe, not so very beautiful in reality as she had become in memory. But so warm and so inviting.

“Come on, honey,” her mother said. “It’s time to lay down the burden.”

“Mom . . . I’ve missed you so much.”

Her mother held her hands out, a waiting hug. Waiting. Arms open. Face smiling through tears.

“Mom . . . I’m scared . . . ,” Mary said.

“Come to me, baby girl. Hold tight to their hands and come to me.”

“The littles . . . my kids . . .”

“All their mommies are with me. Bring them out of that awful place, Mary. Set them free.”

Mary stepped forward.

FORTY-THREE

0 MINUTES

ASTRID SCREAMED, “GRAB the children! Grab the children!”

She leaped to get a grip on the child nearest to her. Others just stared. Kids gaped, stunned, as Mary stepped, as if in a dream, off the cliff.

Mary dropped from sight. She was still trying to take steps as she fell.

Her grip was tight. Kids fell with her. A chain reaction. One pulling the next, pulling the next.

Dominoes off the cliff.

Justin tried to pull back when Mary pulled him over the edge of the cliff. But he wasn't strong enough to loosen her iron grip.

He fell.

And the little girl who held his other hand fell after him.

Justin didn't cry out. There was no time.

Rocks rushed up at him. Fast as a time when he'd been hit in the face by a dodgeball. But he knew the rocks wouldn't sting and bounce away.

A rock monster opened jaws to receive him. Jagged stone teeth were going to chew him up.

Astrid's grip was too weak.

The child she'd grabbed was torn from her grip.

Disappeared over the side.

She turned away, eyes wide with horror.

Brittney was there, right there, staring at her. But her face was changing, twisting, a horrible mask of melting flesh.

And Sam!

Sam, staring.

Brianna, a sudden blur as she leaped off the cliff.

Mary felt her grip on the children loosen. They weren't falling, they were flying. Flying free.

Her mother held out her arms and Mary, free at last, flew to her.

Justin felt Mother Mary's hand simply disappear. There, firmly gripping his one moment.

Then gone.

Justin fell.

But behind him something fell faster, a wind, a rush, a rocket. He was halfway to the rocks when the something fast hit him and knocked the air out of him.

He flew sideways. Like a baseball that had just been hit for a home run. He was rolling across the sand of the beach now, rolling like he'd probably never stop.

He hit the sand ahead of the others who, without Brianna's speed, simply fell toward the rocks.

“Well, if it isn’t Astrid,” Brittney said with Drake’s voice. “And you brought the Petard with you.”

Brittney, whose arm was now as long as a python, whose braces had been replaced by a shark smile, laughed.

“Surprise!” The thing that was not Brittney said.

“Drake.” Astrid gasped.

“You’re next, pretty girl. You and your idiot brother. Over the side. Jump!”

Drake lashed at her with his whip hand.

Astrid staggered back.

She reached for Little Pete. She grabbed his hand. But it slipped from her grip. Instead, she held the game player. She stared at it, uncomprehending.

Astrid took a step back in midair, tried to recover, windmilled her arms crazily, trying to maintain her balance. But she could feel the truth: she was too far.

And then, as she gave up, as she accepted the fact of death and called on God to save her brother, something hit her hard in the back.

She jerked forward. Both feet on solid ground.

“You’re welcome,” Brianna said.

The impact had thrown the game player from her hand. It spun through the air and hit a rock. Smashed.

Drake drew back his whip arm.

“Oh, I’ve been waiting for this,” Brianna said.

“No, Breeze,” Sam said. “This is my job.”

Drake whirled, seeing Sam for the first time. Drake’s mud-stained grin disappeared.

“Sam!” he said. “You really ready for another round?”

His whip snapped.

Sam raised his hand, palm out. Brilliant green light blazed. But the whip had upset Sam’s aim. Instead of burning a hole through Drake’s middle, he hit Drake’s foot.

Drake bellowed in rage. He tried to take a step forward, but his foot wasn’t just burned—it was gone. He rested his weight on a charred stump.

Sam aimed and fired and Drake fell onto his back. Both his feet were gone now.

But even as Sam watched, the legs were regenerating. Growing.

“See?” Drake said through teeth gritted more in fury and triumph than in pain. “I can’t be killed, Sam. I’ll be with you forever.”

Sam raised both hands.

Beams of green light burned away the new growth. Sam played the light slowly up Drake’s legs. Calves. Knees. The whip hand thrashed and slashed, but Sam was out of range.

Drake screamed.

Thighs burned. Hips. But still Drake lived and screamed and laughed. “You can’t kill me!”

“Yeah, well, let’s just see if that’s true,” Sam said.

But then, a voice cried out. “Sing, Jill! Sing!”

Nerezza, her face no longer covered with flesh but with what seemed to be billions of crawling cells that glowed a green not much different from Sam’s own killing light.

“SIIIIING, Siren!” Nerezza cried. “SIIIIING!”

Jill knew the song she was supposed to sing. The song John had taught her.

She had come to fear Nerezza. She'd feared her almost from the first. But then had come the moment when Orsay told Nerezza to go away.

The last words Orsay had spoken. "I can't go on this way," Orsay had said.

"What do you mean?" Nerezza had asked.

"You . . . you have to go away, Nerezza. I can't go on this way."

That's when Nerezza had done the horrible thing to Orsay. With her hands around Orsay's throat. Squeezing. Orsay had barely seemed to fight back, as though she accepted it.

Nerezza had carried her to the rock and dragged her to the top.

"She'll be fine," Nerezza had lied to Jill. "And if you do exactly what I say, you'll be fine, too."

Now Orsay stared through blank, empty eyes. She hadn't seen Mary lead the children to the cliff.

She hadn't seen Mary pull the children off the edge.

Hadn't seen them fall.

But Jill had.

Jill sang.

*Tho' like the wanderer,
The sun goes down,
Darkness be over me.
My rest a stone;
Yet in my dreams I'd be
Nearer, my God, to thee,
Nearer, my God, to thee,
Nearer to thee!*

Sam's killing light died.

Brianna stood still completely still.

Astrid froze in mid-cry.

The kids of Perdido Beach, all within sound of the Siren's voice, stopped, and turned toward the little girl.

All but three.

Little Pete stumbled toward his game player.

Nerezza laughed and reached down to give a hand to Drake, who was swiftly regrowing what he had lost.

"Sing on, Siren!" Nerezza cried, giddy, triumphant.

Sam knew in a distant, far-off way what was happening. His mind still worked, though at a tenth of its normal speed, gears turning like a windmill in the faintest breeze.

Drake could almost stand. In a moment he would come for Sam. He would finish what he had started.

The memory of pain bubbled slowly up within Sam. But he lacked the power to move, to act, to do. He could only watch helplessly. Just like before. Helpless.

But then, out of a corner of his eye, Sam saw something very strange. Something

was flying very fast over the ocean.

He heard a distant thwap thwap thwap.

The sound grew louder, as the helicopter roared across the ocean.

Loud.

Louder.

Loud enough.

Sam tried to move and found that he could.

“No!” Nerezza cried.

Sam fired once. The beams hit Nerezza in the chest. It was enough to kill anyone. To burn a hole through any living thing.

But Nerezza did not burn. She simply looked at Sam with a look of cold hatred. Her eyes glowed green, a light so bright it almost rivaled Sam’s fire for brightness. And then, she was gone.

Drake watched as his feet grew back. But not quickly enough.

“Now, Drake,” Sam said. “Where were we?”

He felt Astrid at his side. “Do it,” she said grimly.

“Yes, ma’am,” Sam said.

Sanjit had mastered the art of flying straight ahead.

He had almost mastered the art of aiming in one particular direction. You could do it with the pedals. So long as you were very, very gentle and very, very careful.

But he wasn’t exactly sure he knew how to stop.

Now he was rushing toward land at amazing speed. And he supposed he might as well keep going a while longer. Especially since he didn’t quite know how to stop. Exactly.

But then Virtue yelled, “Stop!”

“What?”

Virtue reached over, grabbed the cyclic, and pushed it hard to the left.

The helicopter banked suddenly, wildly, just as Sanjit noticed the fact that the sky directly ahead of them wasn’t exactly sky. In fact, when you looked at it from the right angle it looked an awful lot like a wall.

The helicopter screamed over the heads of a bunch of kids who looked like they were watching the sunset from the cliff.

The helicopter went fully sideways and the skids screeched along something that was very definitely not sky.

Then it was free again but still sideways and sinking fast toward the ground. An empty pool, tennis courts, rooftops flashed by in a split second.

Sanjit eased the cyclic back to the right but completely forgot about the pedals. The helicopter spun a 360 in the air, slowed, fought its way up, and then hovered in midair.

“I think I’m going to land,” Sanjit said.

The helicopter came down with a crash. The plastic of the canopy cracked and starred. Sanjit felt as if his spine had been jackhammered.

He switched off the engine.

Virtue was staring and shaking and maybe mumbling something.

Sanjit twisted in his seat.

“You guys okay? Bowie? Pixie? Peace?”

He got three shaky nods in response.

Sanjit laughed and tried to high-five Virtue but their hands missed. Sanjit laughed again.

“So,” Sanjit said. “You guys want to go up again?”

Drake bellowed in fear and pain as the green light ate its way relentlessly up his body.

Drake was smoke from the waist down when from his mouth came Brittney’s voice.

Drake’s teeth flashed metal.

The lean, cruel face of the psychopath melted from its own internal fire. Brittney’s full, pimpled face emerged.

“Don’t stop, Sam!” Brittney cried. “You have to destroy all of it, every bit.”

“I can’t,” Sam said.

“You must!” Brittney said through her screams. “Kill it! Kill the evil one!”

“Brittney . . .,” Sam said, helpless.

“Kill it! Kill it!” Brittney cried.

Sam shook his head. He looked at Astrid. Her face was a mirror of his own.

“Breeze,” Sam said. “Rope. Chains. A lot of it. Whatever you can find. Now!”

Astrid spotted Little Pete. He was safe. Looking for his game. Searching, but not near the edge of the cliff, thankfully.

She forced herself to go to the cliff. She had to see.

She leaned out over the side.

Dekka lay on her back in a mud of bloody sand. Her arms were both outstretched toward the cliff.

The little boy named Justin was limping up out of the surf, holding his stomach. Brianna had saved him. Dekka had saved the rest.

And where Astrid had expected to see small, crumpled bodies, children huddled together on the rocks.

Astrid, tears in her eyes, gave Dekka a small wave.

Dekka did not notice her and did not wave back. She slowly lowered her arms and lay there, a picture of exhaustion.

Mary was nowhere to be seen. Her fifteenth birthday had come, and she had gone. Astrid made the sign of the cross and prayed wordlessly that somehow Mary was right and that she was in her mother’s arms.

“Petey?” she called.

“He’s over there,” someone answered.

Little Pete had come to a stop near the FAYZ wall. He was just bending down.

“Petey,” Astrid called.

Little Pete stood up with his game player, shattered screen dribbling fragments of glass from his hand.

His eyes found Astrid.

Little Pete howled like an animal. Howled like a mad thing, howled in a voice impossibly large.

“Ahhhhhhhh!” A cry of loss, a mad tragic cry.

He bent into a backward “C” and howled like an animal.

Suddenly, the FAYZ wall was gone.

Astrid gaped in amazement at a landscape of satellite trucks and cars, a motel, a crowd of people, regular people, adults, behind a security rope, staring.

Little Pete fell on his back.

And in a flash it was all gone.

The wall was back.

And Little Pete was silent.

FORTY-FOUR

THREE DAYS LATER

“HOW IS IT going?” Sam asked Howard.

Howard looked at Orc to answer.

Orc shrugged. “Good. I guess.”

Howard and Orc had been relocated, given a new home. It was one of the few houses in Perdido Beach that had a basement. There were no windows in the basement. No electricity of course, so Sam had left a small light of his own burning there.

The only way in or out of the basement was down a flight of steps from the kitchen. There, at the bottom of the steps, they had nailed two-by-fours across and up and down, forming a thick grid work. The spaces between the two-by-fours was just three inches.

At the top of the stairs the door had been strengthened by having Orc shove a massive armoire against it.

Twice a day Orc would shove the armoire aside. Then he would stomp down the stairs and peek inside. Then he would come back up and replace the barricade.

“Was it Brittney or Drake when you went down last?” Sam asked.

“The girl,” Orc said.

“Did she say anything?”

Orc shrugged. “Same thing she always says. Kill it. Kill me.”

“Yeah,” Sam said.

“How long you think we can keep this up?” Howard asked Sam.

It was not a great solution, keeping the undead thing locked in this basement to be guarded by Orc. But the alternative was destroying it. Him. Her. And that felt a little too much like murder for Sam.

Astrid and Edilio had worked for a couple of long days to try and make sense of the disaster that had come to the FAYZ. All the individuals who’d had direct contact with the Darkness, had touched the mind of the gaiaphage, had been used like pawns in a chess match.

Orsay’s power had been subverted. Her empathy and kindness had been turned against her as the gaiaphage filled her dreams with images drawn from her own imagination. She had shown kids a path that seemed to lead to freedom but led instead to death.

Little Pete had been tricked into believing he was playing a game. And it was his own powers that had been used to create Nerezza, the gaiaphage’s main player.

Nerezza had guided Orsay and, when the opportunity arose on that last terrible evening, pushed Zil to attack.

Lana still refused to admit that the gaiaphage had been able to tap her own healing powers to bring Brittney and Drake back to life.

Drake, the Whiphand, was in a sense, Lana’s creation. The Darkness had used her to give Drake his whip. And he had used her to give Drake a second life. It was no wonder, Sam thought, that Lana refused to acknowledge that.

Lana had spent days healing the wounded. And then she and Patrick had walked out of town. No one had seen her since.

Sam and Astrid had talked honestly about their mistakes. Astrid berated herself for being arrogant and dishonest, and too slow to understand what was happening.

Sam knew all too well how he had failed. He had been terrified by his own weakness and had reacted by mistrusting his friends. He had become paranoid and finally, indulging in self-pity, had run away. Abandoned his post.

But the gaiaphage had underestimated Brittney. It had needed her power, her immortality as well as Lana's healing power, to bring Drake back from the grave.

Brittney had fought him every step of the way. Not knowing what she was fighting she had nevertheless resisted Drake's takeover of the body they shared. Even when the gaiaphage had filled her shattered mind with visions of her dead brother, Brittney's faith and willpower had kept the demon she sensed inside her from escaping completely.

The gaiaphage had wanted to break the will of the kids of Perdido Beach. It had wanted them to give up, to abandon hope. Only then would the kids of the FAYZ become its slaves.

It had failed in the end. But it had been a matter of milliseconds. Had Zil managed to delay Dekka just a little longer, or had Drake not been slowed by Edilio's heroism, the children who jumped with Mary would have died.

That would have been the fatal blow for the struggling little society of Perdido Beach.

They had survived, but barely.

And maybe they had done better than just survive: Astrid's laws were in effect. They'd been voted in by all the kids assembled the day after Mary's Big Jump, as Howard had dubbed it.

It was a bitter thing, to Sam, to think that after all she had done, Mother Mary was to be known for her final madness. Sam hoped she really was alive, somehow, on the outside.

There would be no grave in the plaza for Mary. There was one now for Orsay.

They might never know whether that brief glimpse of a world just outside the FAYZ wall was real or just a last trick of the Darkness. The one person who might know was talking even less than usual: Little Pete had fallen into something almost like a coma since he'd held his shattered game player. He would eat. But that was all he would do.

If Little Pete died, God only knew what would happen to this universe that he had created. And if kids ever really guessed how powerful Little Pete was, and yet how vulnerable, how long would he be left to live?

"I asked how long you think we can keep this up?" Howard repeated.

"I don't know, man," Sam said. "I guess we take it day by day."

"Like everything," Howard agreed.

There came the faint sound of Drake's voice. A muffled howl of fury.

"He does that when he gets control," Howard said. "That and a lot of threatening. Mostly, 'I'll kill you all!' That kind of thing. I'm kind of getting used to it."

"It wants us to be afraid. It wants us to give up," Sam said.

Howard formed his sly grin. "Yeah, well, we don't want to do that, do we?"

“No. No, we don’t.”

But that mad, screaming voice, even muffled as it was, still sent a chill up Sam’s spine.

“You guys need anything?” Sam asked.

Howard answered. “You mean, aside from a hamburger, a peach pie, a bucket of ice cream, a DVD, a TV, a phone, a computer, and a one-way ride out of crazy-town?”

Sam almost smiled. “Yeah. Aside from that.”

He went back outside. The street was empty. The unreal sun shone high overhead. He doubled over and coughed. The flu that was still going around had finally caught up with him.

But he was alive. And that was all you could ever ask from the FAYZ.

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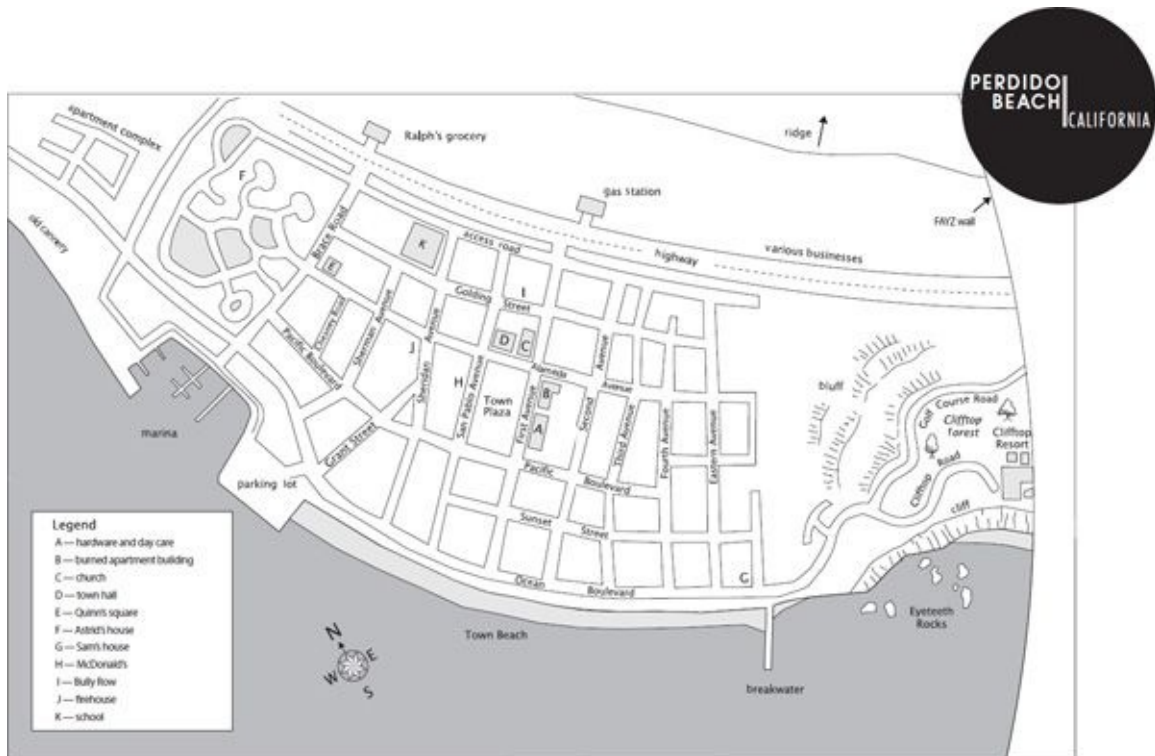
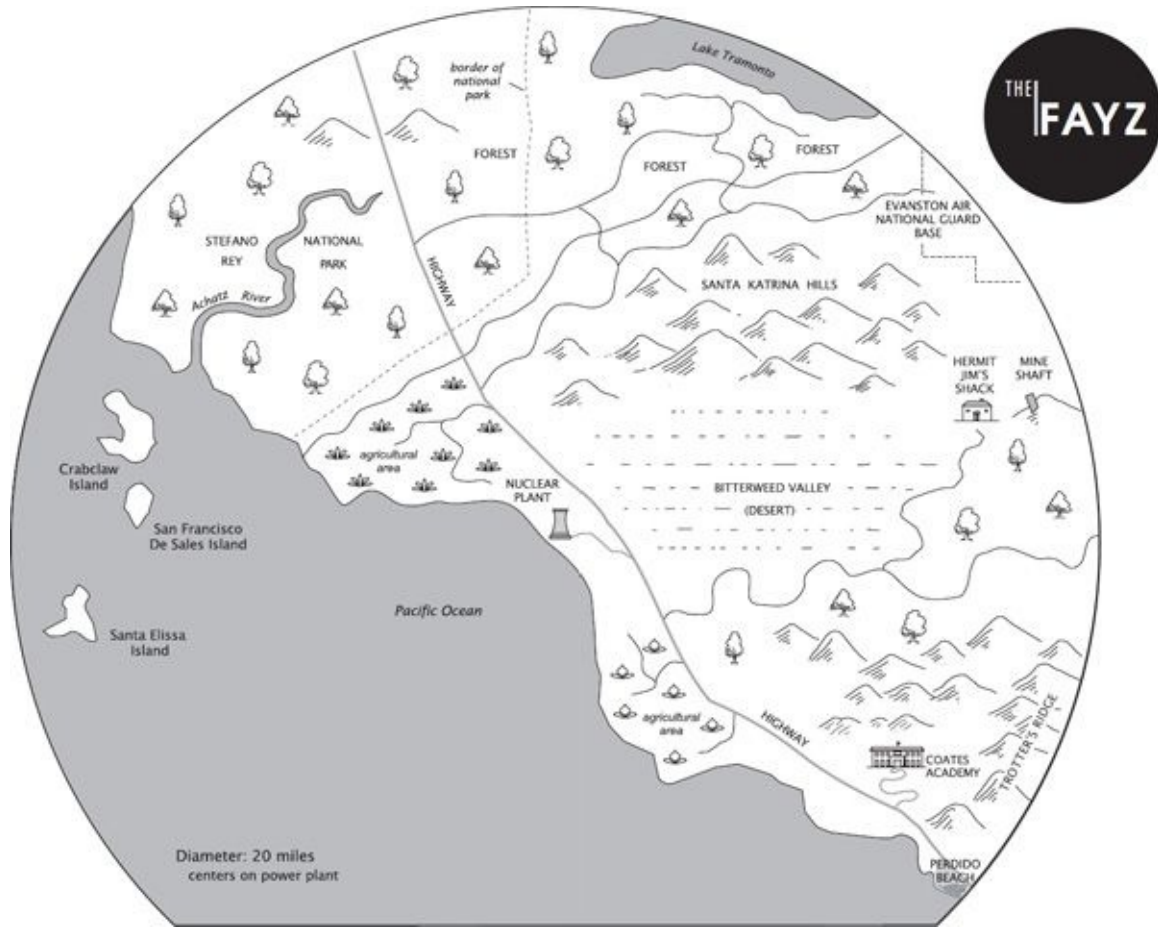
PLAGUE

A GONE NOVEL

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MAPS





PLAGUE

A GONE Novel

 KATHERINE TEGEN BOOKS
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MICHAEL GRANT

DEDICATION

For Katherine, Jake, and Julia

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PETE

HE STOOD POISED on the edge of a sheet of glass. Barefoot. Perfectly balanced. One foot in front of the other. Arms at his side. That was the game now.

The sheet of glass went down and down and down forever. Like a shimmering, translucent curtain.

The top edge of the glass was thin, so thin it might cut him if he slipped or fell or took a too-hasty step. That top edge was a thin ribbon of rainbow reflecting bright reds and greens and yellows.

On one side of the glass, darkness. On the other, jarring, disturbing colors.

He could see things down there on the right side, down below his right hand, beyond the reach of his fingers. Down there were his mom and his dad and his sister. Down there were jagged edges and harsh noises that made him want to clap his hands over his ears. When he looked at those things, those people, the wobbly, insubstantial houses, the sharp-edged furniture, the claw hands and hooked noses and staring, staring, staring eyes and yelling mouths, he wanted to close his eyes.

But it didn't work. Even through his closed eyes he saw them. And he heard them. But he did not understand their wild, pulsating colors. Sometimes their words weren't words at all but brilliant parrot-colored spears shooting from their mouths.

Mother father sister teacher other. Lately only sister and others. Saying things. Some words he got. Pete. Petey. Little Pete. He knew those words. And sometimes there were soft words, soft like kittens or pillows and they would float from his sister and he would feel peace for a while until the next jangling, shrieking noise, the next assault of stabbing color.

On his left, down, down below the endless sheet of glass, a very different world. Quiet, ghostly things drifted silently, shades of gray. No hard edges, no loud sounds. No horrible colors to make him start screaming. It was dark and so very, very quiet.

Down there was a softly glowing orb, like a faint green sun. It would reach out to him sometimes. A tendril. A mist. It would touch him as he stood balanced, one foot in front of the other, hands at his side.

Peace. Quiet. Nothingness. It would whisper these thoughts to him.

Sometimes it would play. A game.

Pete liked games. Only the left side would play his games his way; games had to be his way, the same way, always and unchanging. But the last game Pete had played with the Darkness had turned harsh and overbright. It had suddenly stabbed Pete with arrows in his brain. It had broken the game.

The sheet of glass had shattered. But now it was whole again, and he balanced on top and as if it was sorry the soft green sun said, *Come down here and play*, in its whispery voice.

On the other side—the agitated, jangly, hard side—his sister, her face a stretched mask beneath yellow hair, a mouth of pink and glittery white, loud, was pushing at him with hands like hammers.

“Roll over. I have to get this sheet out from under you. It's soaked.”

Pete understood some of the words. He felt the hardness of them.

But Pete felt something else even more. A strangeness. An alienness. Something wrong, a deep, throbbing musical note, a bow drawn over strings, that pulled his focus away from the left and the right, away even from the sheet of glass on which he balanced.

It came from the place he never looked: inside him.

Now Pete looked down at himself, like he was floating outside himself. He looked down at his body, puzzled by it. Yes: that was the new voice, the insistent note, the demanding voice more compelling even than the soft murmur of the Darkness or the jangly words of his sister. His body was demanding his attention, distracting him from his game of balancing on the sheet of glass.

“You’re sweating,” his sister said. “You’re burning up. I’m going to take your temperature.”

ONE

72 HOURS, 7 MINUTES

SAM TEMPLE WAS drunk.

It was a new experience for him. He was fifteen and had once or twice snuck a sip of his mother's wine. He'd drunk half a beer when he was thirteen. Just to see. He hadn't liked it much, it was bitter.

He'd taken a single hit off a joint back before the FAYZ. He'd practically hacked up a lung and then spent an hour feeling bleary and strange and finally sleepy.

It had never been his thing. He'd never been part of the partying crowd.

But this night he'd gone to check on the caged monster that was both Brittney and Drake and had heard Drake's vile, obscene threats and howling, murderous rage. And then, far worse, he'd heard Brittney's pleas for death.

"Sam, I know you're listening," she'd said through the barricaded door. "I know you're out there, I heard your voice. I can't take it, Sam. Sam, end it. Please, I'm begging you, let me go, let me go to Heaven."

Sam had been to see Astrid earlier in the evening. That hadn't gone too well. Astrid had tried, and he had tried, but there was too much wrong between them. Too much history now.

He had kissed her. For a while she had kissed him back. And then he'd pushed it. His hands went where he wanted them to go. And she'd shoved him away.

"You know I'm going to say no, Sam," she said.

"Yeah, I've kind of gotten that message," he said, angry and frustrated but trying to maintain some semblance of cool.

"If we start, how long do you think it will take before everyone knows?"

"That's not why you won't sleep with me," Sam said. "You won't do it because you think it would mean giving up control. And you are all about control, Astrid."

It was the truth. Sam believed it, anyway.

But if he were being honest instead of just angry, he'd have admitted that Astrid had her own problems. That she was filled with guilt and didn't need one more thing to feel guilty about.

Little Pete was in a coma. Astrid blamed herself, although it was stupid to do so and she was the furthest thing from stupid.

But Little Pete was her brother. Her responsibility.

Her burden.

After that rebuff Sam had stood awkwardly while Astrid spooned artichoke and fish soup into Little Pete's nerveless lips. Little Pete could swallow. He could walk if she guided him. He could use the slit trench in the backyard but Astrid had to wipe him.

That was Astrid's life now. She was a nurse to an autistic boy with all the power in their world locked inside him. Beyond autistic now: Little Pete was gone. No way to know where he was in his strange, strange mind.

Astrid hadn't hugged Sam when he said he was leaving. Hadn't touched him.

So that had been Sam's evening. Astrid and Little Pete. And the twinned undead

creature Orc and Howard kept watch over.

If Drake somehow escaped, there were probably only two people who could take him on: Sam himself, and Orc. Sam needed Orc to act as Drake's jailer. So he had ignored the bottles beside Orc's couch and "confiscated" only the one in plain view on a kitchen counter.

"I'll dump this," Sam had told Howard. "You know it's illegal."

Howard shrugged and smirked a little. Like he'd known. Like he'd seen some gleam of greed and need in Sam's eye. But Sam himself hadn't known. He had intended to smash the bottle or dump it out on the street.

Instead he had carried it with him. Through the dark streets. Past burned-out houses and their ghosts.

Past the graveyard.

Down to the beach. He'd cracked the seal, ready to pour it out on the sand. Instead he'd taken a sip.

It burned like fire.

He took another sip. It burned less this time.

He headed up the beach. He knew in his heart where he was going now. He knew his feet were taking him to the cliff.

Now, many sips later, he stood swaying at the top of the cliff. The effect of the booze was undeniable. He knew he was drunk.

He looked down at the small arc of beach at the base of the cliff. The slight surge painted luminescent curves on the dark sand.

Right here, right where he was standing, Mary had led the preschoolers in a suicide leap. All that kept those kids alive was Dekka's heroic effort.

Now Mary was gone.

"Here's to you, Mary," Sam said. He upended the bottle and drank deep.

He had failed Mary. From the start she'd taken charge of the littles and run the day care. She'd carried that load almost alone.

Sam had seen the effects of her anorexia and bulimia. But he hadn't realized what was happening to her, or hadn't wanted to.

He'd heard nervous gossip that Mary was grabbing whatever meds she could find, anything she thought would ease her depression.

He hadn't wanted to know about that, either.

Most of all he should have seen what Nerezza was up to, should have questioned, should have pushed.

Should have.

Should have.

Should have . . .

Another deep swallow of liquid fire. The burning made him laugh. He laughed down at the beach where Orsay, the false prophet, had died.

"Good-bye, Mary." He slurred, raising his bottle in a mock toast. "Least you got outta here."

For a split second on the day that Mary poofed, the barrier had been clear. They had seen the world outside: the observation platform, the TV satellite truck, the construction underway on fast food places and cheap hotels.

It had seemed very, very real.

But had it been? Astrid said no: just another illusion. But Astrid was not exactly addicted to the truth.

Sam swayed at the edge of the cliff. He ached for Astrid, the booze had not dulled that. He ached for the sound of her voice, the warmth of her breath on his neck, her lips. She was all that had kept him from going crazy. But now she was the source of the crazy because his body was demanding what she wouldn't give. Now being with her was just pain and hollowness and need.

The barrier was there, just a few feet away. Impenetrable. Opaque. Painful to touch. The faintly shimmering gray dome that enclosed twenty miles of Southern California coastline in a giant terrarium. Or zoo. Or universe.

Or prison.

Sam tried to focus on it, but his eyes weren't working very well.

With the exaggerated care of a drunk he set his bottle down.

He straightened up. He looked at the palms of his hands. Then he stretched out his arms, palms facing the barrier.

"I really hate you," he said to the barrier.

Twin beams of searing green light shot from his palms. A torrent of focused light.

"Aaaaahhhh!" Sam shouted as he aimed and fired.

He shouted a loud curse. And again, as he fired again and still fired.

The light hit the barrier and did nothing. Nothing burned. Nothing smoked or charred.

"Burn!" Sam howled. "Burn!"

He played the beams upward, tracing the curve of the barrier. He raged and howled and blazed.

To no effect.

Sam sat down suddenly. The bright fire went out. He fumbled clumsily for the bottle.

"I have it," a voice said.

Sam twisted sideways, looking for the source. He couldn't find her. It was a her, he was pretty sure of that, a female voice.

She stepped around to where he could see her. Taylor.

Taylor was a pretty Asian girl who had never made a secret of her attraction to Sam. She was also a freak, a three bar with the power of teleportation. She could instantly go any place she'd ever seen or been before. She called it "bouncing."

She wore a T-shirt and shorts. Sneakers. Unlaced, no socks. No one dressed well, not anymore. People wore whatever was halfway clean.

And no one traveled unarmed. Taylor had a large knife in a nice leather sheath.

She was not beautiful like Astrid. But not cold and remote and looking at him with defensive, accusing eyes, either. Looking at Taylor did not fill his brain to overflowing with memories of love and rage.

She was not the girl who had been the center of his life for all these months. Not the girl who had left him frustrated, humiliated, feeling like a fool. Feeling more alone than ever.

"Hey, Taylor. Bouncy bouncy Taylor. T'sup?"

"I saw the light," Taylor said.

"Yeah. I am all about light," Sam slurred.

She held out the bottle tentatively, not sure what she should do with it.

“Nah.” He waved it off. “I think I’ve had quite enough. Don’t you?” He spoke with extreme care, trying not to slur. Failing.

“Come sit with me, Taylor, Taylor, bouncy Taylor.”

She hesitated.

“Come on. I won’t bite. Good to talk with someone . . . normal.”

Taylor rewarded him with a brief smile. “I don’t know how normal I am.”

“More normal than some. I was just checking on Brittney,” Sam said. “You have a monster inside of you, Taylor? Do you have to be locked in a basement because inside you is some psycho with a whip arm? No? See? You are so normal, Taylor.”

He glared at the barrier, the untouched, unfazed barrier. “Do you ever beg to be burned into ashes so you can be free to go to Jesus, Taylor? Nah. See, that’s what Brittney does. No, you’re pretty normal, bouncy Taylor.”

Taylor sat beside him. Not too close. Friend close, conversation close.

Sam said nothing. Two different urges were battling in his head.

His body was saying go for it. And his mind . . . well, it was confused and not exactly in control.

He reached over and took Taylor’s hand. She did not pull her hand away.

He moved his hand up her arm. She stiffened a little and glanced around, making sure they weren’t seen. Or, maybe, hoping they were.

His hand reached her neck. He leaned toward her and pulled her to him.

He kissed her.

She kissed him back.

He kissed her harder. And she slid her hand under his shirt, fingers stroking his bare flesh.

Then he pulled away, fast.

“Sorry, I . . .” He hesitated, his wallowing brain arguing against a body that was suddenly aflame.

Sam stood up very suddenly and walked away.

Taylor laughed gaily at his back. “Come see me when you get tired of mooning over the ice princess, Sam.”

He walked into a sudden, stiff breeze. And any other time, in any other condition, he might have noticed that the wind never blew in the FAYZ.

TWO

72 HOURS, 4 MINUTES

IT WAS AMAZING what decent food could do for a starving girl's looks.

Diana looked at herself in the big mirror. She was wearing clean panties and a clean bra. Skinny, very skinny. Her legs were knobby, with knees and feet looking weirdly big. She could count every rib. Her belly was concave. Her periods had stopped and her breasts were smaller than they'd been since she was twelve. Her collarbones looked like clothes hangers. Her face was almost unrecognizable. She looked like a heroin addict.

But her hair was starting to look better, darker. The rusty color and the brittleness that came from starvation, they were disappearing.

Her eyes were no longer dead, empty shadows sunk into her skull.

Now her eyes sparkled in the soft lamplight. She looked alive.

Her gums weren't bleeding as much. They were pink, not red, not so swollen. Maybe her teeth wouldn't fall out after all.

Starvation. It had driven her to eat human flesh. She was a cannibal.

Starvation had deprived her of her humanity.

"Not quite," Diana said to her reflection. "Not quite."

When she had seen that Caine would destroy the helicopter with Sanjit and his brothers and sisters she had sacrificed her own life. She had toppled from the cliff to force Caine to make the choice: save Diana or kill the children.

Surely that act of self-sacrifice balanced out the fact that she had bitten and chewed and swallowed a cooked chunk of Panda's chest.

Surely she was redeemed? At least a little?

Please? Please, if there is a God watching, please see that I have redeemed myself.

But it wasn't enough. It would never be enough. She had to do more. For as long as she lived she would have to do more.

Starting with Caine.

He had shown just a glimmer of humanity, saving her and letting his intended victims go free. It wasn't much. But it was something. And if she could find a way to change him . . .

A sound. Very slight. Just a scrape of foot on rug.

"I know you're there, Bug," Diana said calmly, not looking back. Not giving the little creep the satisfaction. "What do you think Caine would do to you if I told him you were spying on me in my underwear?"

No answer from Bug.

"Aren't you a little young to be a pervert?"

"Caine won't kill me," a disembodied voice said. "He needs me."

Diana crossed to the California king-sized bed. She slipped on the robe she'd chosen from among the many in the closet. They belonged to the woman whose bedroom this had been. A famous actress with very expensive taste who was only one size bigger than Diana.

And her shoes fit almost perfectly. Close to seventy pairs of designer shoes. Diana

slipped her feet into a pair of fleece-lined slippers.

“All I have to do to get rid of you, Bug, is to tell Caine your powers are increasing. I’ll tell him you’re becoming a four bar. How do you think he’ll react to having a four bar sharing this island with him?”

Bug faded slowly into view. He was a snotty little brat of a kid. He’d just turned ten.

For a moment Diana felt something like compassion for him: Bug was a damaged, messed-up little creep. Like all of them, he was scared and lonely and maybe even haunted by some of the things he’d done.

Or not. Bug had never shown any evidence of a conscience.

“If you want to see naked girls, Bug, why don’t you creep up on Penny?”

“She’s not pretty,” Bug said. “Her legs are all . . .” He twisted his fingers around to demonstrate. “And she smells bad.”

Penny was eating better, like Diana. But she was getting worse. She had fallen from one hundred feet onto water and rocks. Caine had levitated her back up the cliff. But her legs were broken in a dozen places.

Diana had done what she could to set the breaks, made splints out of duct tape and boards, but Penny was in constant agony. She would never walk again. Her legs would never heal.

She lived now in one of the bathrooms so that she could drag herself to the toilet when she needed to. Diana brought her food twice a day. Books. A TV with a DVD player.

There was still electricity in the house on San Francisco de Sales Island. The generator supplied a weak and faltering current. When Sanjit had lived here, he’d been worried that fuel for the generator was running out. But Caine could do things Sanjit couldn’t. Like levitate barrels of fuel from the wrecked yacht rusting at the bottom of the cliff.

Life here was very good for Diana and Caine and Bug. But life would never be good for Penny. Her power—the ability to make others see terrifying visions of monsters and flesh-eating insects and death—was of no help to her now.

“She scares you, doesn’t she, Bug?” Diana asked. She laughed. “You tried, didn’t you? You snuck in on her and she caught you.”

She saw the answer on Bug’s face. The shadow of a terrifying memory.

“Best not to make Penny mad,” she said. She pulled on slacks. Then she patted Bug on his freckled cheek. “Best not to make me mad, either, Bug. I can’t make you see monsters. But if I catch you spying on me again, I’ll tell Caine it’s either me or you. And you know who he’ll choose.”

Diana left the room.

She’d resolved to be a better person. And she would be. Unless Bug kept bothering her.

The three Jennifers. That’s what they called themselves. Jennifer B was a redhead, Jennifer H was blond, and Jennifer L had her hair in black dreadlocks. They hadn’t even known one another before the FAYZ.

Jennifer B had been a Coates kid. Jennifer H was homeschooled. Jennifer L was the only one who’d attended the regular school.

They were twelve, twelve, and thirteen, respectively. And for the last couple of months they had shared a house on a cul-de-sac away from the center of town.

It was a good choice: the big fire had come nowhere near the development.

Now, though, it seemed like a bad choice. The so-called hospital was blocks away and the three of them could all have used a Tylenol or something because they all had the same headache, the same sore muscles, and the same hacking cough.

It had started twenty-four hours ago, and they had just figured it was the flu coming back around. There'd been a mini-epidemic of flu that had left a lot of kids feeling bad. But it hadn't been very dangerous except that it kept some kids immobilized who could have been working.

Jennifer B—Jennifer Boyles—had been asleep for no more than an hour when she was awakened by a loud, percussive sound close by, not from outside, from the room next to hers.

She sat up in bed and fought down the woozy, head-swimming feeling. She felt her forehead. Yeah, still hot. Definitely hot.

Whatever the noise was, forget it, she told herself. Too sick to get up. If something was breaking into the house to kill her, so much the better: she felt rotten.

Kkkrrraaafff!

This time the walls seemed to shake. Jennifer B was up and out of her bed before she could think about it. She coughed, paused, then veered toward the door, eyes not quite focused, head pounding.

In the hallway she found Jennifer L. Jennifer L was coughing, too, and looking as scared as Jennifer B. They were both in sweatpants and T-shirts, both miserable.

"It's in Jennifer's room," Jennifer L said. She had her weapon, a lead pipe with a grip bound with black electrical tape.

Jennifer B was annoyed with herself for having forgotten her own weapon. You didn't jump out of bed at night in the FAYZ without going armed. She staggered back to her bed and fished out the machete. It was stuck into a canvas scabbard between her mattress and box spring, handle protruding.

It wasn't all that sharp, but it looked crazy dangerous and it was. A two-foot-long blade with a cracked wooden grip.

"Jennifer?" Jennifer B called at Jennifer H's room.

Kkkrrraaafff!

The door rattled on its hinges. Jennifer B opened the door and stood with her machete at the ready. Jennifer L was right behind her, pipe clenched in nervous hand.

Jennifer H had always had a fear of the dark so she had a very small Sammy sun in one corner of the room, hovering beneath what had once been a hanging light fixture. The light was green and eerie, more creepy than illuminating. It showed Jennifer H. She wore a flower-print nightgown.

She was standing up in her bed. She clutched her throat with one hand and held her stomach with the other.

She looked like she'd seen death.

"Jen, you okay?" Jennifer L asked.

Jennifer H's eyes bulged. She stared at her two roommates.

Her stomach convulsed. Her chest heaved. She squeezed her own throat like she was trying to choke herself. Her long, blond hair was wet, sweat-matted, plastered to

her face and neck.

The cough was shockingly loud.

Kkkrrraaafff!

Jennifer B felt the explosion of air. And something wet slapped her face.

She reached her free hand and peeled a small shred of something wet from her cheek. She looked at it, unable to make sense of it. It looked like a piece of raw meat. It felt like chicken skin.

Kkkrrraaafff!

The power of the cough threw Jennifer back against the wall.

“Oh, God!” she moaned. “Oh . . .”

Kkkrrraaafff!

And this time Jennifer B saw it. Pieces of something wet and raw had flown from Jennifer H’s mouth. She was coughing up parts of her insides.

KKKRRRAAAFFF!

Jennifer H’s entire body convulsed, twisted backward into a crazy C. She crashed into the windowpane. It shattered.

KKKRRRAAAFFF!

The next spasm threw Jennifer H into the wall headfirst. There was a sickening crunch.

The other two stared at her in horror. She wasn’t moving.

“Jen?” Jennifer B called timidly.

“Jen? Jen? Are you okay?” Jennifer L asked.

They crept closer, now holding hands, weapons still at the ready.

Jennifer H did not answer. Her neck was twisted at a comic angle. Her eyes were open and staring. Seeing nothing. Liquid, black in the eerie light, ran from her mouth and ears.

The two Jennifers fell back. Jennifer B sank to her knees. Her strength was gone. She let the machete fall from her hand.

“I . . .,” she said, but had no second word. She tried to stand but couldn’t.

“We have to get help,” Jennifer L said. But she too had sunk to her knees.

Jennifer L tried to stand but sat down again. Jennifer B crawled back to her room. She wanted to help Jennifer L, she did. But she couldn’t even help herself.

Jennifer B struggled to push herself up and into her bed. Need help, she thought. Hospital. Lana.

Some still-functioning part of her delirious mind understood that the best she could hope to accomplish for now was to reach the sanctuary of her bed.

But finally even that was too much. She lay on the cold wood floor staring up at her bed, at the motionless ceiling fan. With the last of her strength she pulled the mess of dirty sheets and blankets down on top of herself.

She coughed into the once-soft quilt she’d taken from her mother’s room long ago.

The thing on Hunter’s shoulder didn’t hurt. But it did distract him. And he couldn’t be distracted when he was hunting Old Lion.

The mountain lion never bothered Hunter. The mountain lion didn’t want to eat Hunter. Or maybe it did, but it had never tried.

But Hunter had to kill the mountain lion because Old Lion had stolen too many of

Hunter's own kills. Old Lion crept around behind Hunter after he had taken a deer. Hunter was off chasing other prey and Old Lion had snuck around and dragged off Hunter's deer.

Old Lion was just doing what he had to do. It wasn't personal. Hunter didn't hate Old Lion. But just the same he couldn't have the mountain lion running off with the food for the kids.

Hunter hunted for the kids. That's what he did. That's who he was. He was Hunter the hunter. For the kids.

Old Lion was out of the woods now, over the hill, over where the dry lands started and the rocks grew big. Old Lion was heading home for the night. He had eaten well. Now he was heading back to his lair. He would spend the day lying out on the sun-baked rocks and toasting his bones.

Hunter walked carefully, weight balanced, light on his feet, quick but not rushing. Dangerous to rush about with nothing but moonlight to show the way.

He had learned a lot about hunting. The killing power from his hands didn't reach very far. He had to get close to make it work. That meant he had to really concentrate, which was hard ever since his brain had gotten hurt. He couldn't concentrate enough to read or remember lots of words. And words still came out of his mouth all messed up. But he could concentrate on this: on swift and quiet walking, on weaving through the red rocks while keeping his eyes peeled for the cat's faint star-silvered tracks in the little deposits of sand.

And he had to look out for Old Lion changing his mind and deciding he would like him a tasty boy after all. Old Lion didn't just steal food, he killed it, too. Hunter had seen him once, his tail flicking, his whiskered jaw juddering, quivering with anticipation as Old Lion watched a stray dog.

Old Lion had exploded out of cover and crossed one hundred feet in about one second. Like a bullet out of a gun. His big paws had caught the dog before the dog could even flinch. Long, curved claws, fur, blood, a desperate whine from the dog and then, almost leisurely, taking his time, Old Lion had delivered the killing bite to the back of the dog's neck.

Old Lion was already a hunter back when Hunter was just a regular kid sitting in class, raising his hand to answer questions and reading and understanding and being smart.

Old Lion knew all about hunting. But he didn't know that Hunter was coming after him.

Hunter smelled the cat. He was close. He smelled of dead meat. Dried blood.

Hunter was below a tall boulder. He froze, realizing suddenly that Old Lion was right above him. He wanted to run, but he knew that if he backed up, the cat would drop on him. He was safer closer to the rock. Old Lion couldn't drop straight down.

Hunter pressed his back against the rock. He stilled his own breathing and heard the big cat's instead. But Old Lion wasn't fooled. Old Lion could probably hear the heart pounding in Hunter's chest.

The thing on Hunter's shoulder squirmed. It was growing. Moving. Hunter glanced and could see it move beneath the fabric of his shirt. It seemed almost to be trying to chew a hole through Hunter's shirt.

Hunter had no word for the thing. It had grown over the last day. It had started out

as a bump, a swelling. But then the skin had split apart and gnashing insect mouthparts had been revealed. Like a spider. Or a bug. Like the bugs that crawled on Hunter as he slept.

But this thing on his shoulder wasn't a regular bug. It was too big for that. And it had grown right where the flying snake, the greenie, had dropped its goo on him.

Hunter strained to think of the word for the thing. It was a word he used to know. Like worms on a dead animal. What was the word? He leaned forward, hands to his head, so mad at himself for not being able to find the word.

He had lost focus for just a few seconds but it was enough for Old Lion.

The cat dropped like mercury, liquid.

Hunter was knocked to the ground. His head banged against the rock. Old Lion had missed his grip, though, and he had to scramble in the narrow space. The cat spun, bared his yellow teeth and leaped, claws outstretched.

Hunter dodged, but not fast enough. One big paw hit him in the chest and knocked him back against the rock, knocked the wind from him.

Old Lion was on him, claws on his shoulders, snarling face just inches from Hunter's vulnerable neck.

Then, suddenly, the mountain lion hissed and leaped back, like it had landed on a hot stove.

The lion shook its paw and flung droplets of blood. One claw toe had been badly bitten. It hung by a thread.

The thing on Hunter's shoulder had bitten Old Lion.

Hunter didn't hesitate. He raised his hands and aimed.

There was no light. The heat that came from Hunter's hands was invisible. But instantly the temperature in Old Lion's head doubled, tripled, and Old Lion, his brain cooked in his skull, fell dead.

Hunter pulled his shirt back from the shoulder. The insect mouthparts gnashed, chewing on a bloody chunk of the lion.

THREE

72 HOURS, 3 MINUTES

ASTRID HAD FED Little Pete.

She read a little, perched beside the window, book held at an uncomfortable angle to try and take advantage of the faint moonlight.

It was slow going.

It wasn't a book she'd ever have read back in the old days. She wouldn't have been caught dead reading some silly teen romance. Back then she'd have read a classic, or some work of great literary merit. Or history.

Now she needed escape. Now she needed not to be in this world, this terrible world of the FAYZ. Books were the only way out.

After just a few minutes Astrid set the book aside. Her hands were trembling. Attempt to escape into the book: failed. Attempt to forget her fear: failed. It was all right there, still, right there in front of every other thought.

Outside, a breeze caused tree branches to scrape the side of the house. A corner of Astrid's mind noticed, and wondered, but set it aside for more pressing concerns.

She wondered where Sam was. What he was doing. Whether he was longing for her as she longed for him.

Yes, yes, she wanted him. She wanted to be in his arms. She wanted to kiss him. And maybe more. Maybe a lot more.

All of it, all the things he wanted she wanted, too.

Stupid jerk, didn't he get that? Was he so clueless he didn't know that she wanted it all, too?

But she wasn't Sam. Astrid didn't act on impulse. Astrid thought things through. Astrid the Genius, always so irritatingly in control. That was the word he'd thrown at her: control.

How could Sam not realize that if they crossed that line it would be one more sin? One more abandonment of her faith. One more surrender to weakness.

There had been too many of those. It was like little pieces of Astrid's soul were flaking off, falling away. Some pieces not so small.

Her self-control had crumbled so swiftly it was almost comic. After all the temptations and provocations, the calm, civilized, rational girl had evaporated like a bead of water on a hot skillet, sizzle, sizzle, all gone. And what had emerged then had been pure violence.

She had tried to kill Nerezza. In screaming, out-of-control rage. The memory of it made her sick.

And that wasn't all of it. She had wanted Sam to burn Drake to ashes even if it meant murdering Brittney as well.

Astrid couldn't be that person. She had to put herself back together. She had to take time to rebuild herself. She was afraid she would shatter. Like a glass sculpture, chip chip chip away and all at once it would shatter into a thousand pieces.

And yet, a cool, calculating part of her knew she could not alienate Sam too much. Because it was only a matter of time before everyone else figured out that there was a

way out of the FAYZ.

The exit door was right in front of them. Lying just a few feet from Astrid.

A simple act of murder . . .

Others had seen what Astrid had seen on that cliff, when Little Pete's mind had blanked out, overwhelmed by the loss of his stupid toy game.

A simple act of murder . . .

She sat beside her motionless brother. She ought to brush his teeth. Ought to change his pajamas. Ought to . . .

His forehead was damp.

Astrid put her hand to his head. He'd been hot all night, but this was worse. She pushed the button on the thermometer by the bed, waited for it to zero out, and stuck it under Little Pete's tongue.

She felt a cool breeze in the room. Her eyes went instantly to the window. It was open wide. Pushed all the way up.

There was no question: it had been closed. She'd been sitting beside it. It had been locked. And now it was open.

And for the first time since the coming of the FAYZ, a cool breeze blew into the room and wafted over the damp forehead of the most powerful person in this little universe.

Drake felt the Darkness touch his mind. He shivered with pleasure.

It was still out there, Drake was sure of it. Still calling to him, to Drake, the faithful one, the one who would never turn against the Darkness.

Drake cracked his whip hand just to hear the sonic-boom snap of it. And to let Orc hear it, too.

"Hey, Orc! Come down here so I can whip that little patch of skin off you!" Drake demanded.

Drake Merwin could see a little by the light of the tiny, dim Sammy sun. He hated that light—he knew where it had come from, and what it represented: Sam's power, that dangerous light of his.

Drake remembered the pain of that light. He'd been on his back, helpless. And Sam, his face a mask of rage, glorying in his moment of revenge, had burned off Drake's legs and was working his way methodically up Drake's torso.

Then that stupid little pig Brittney had emerged.

Drake didn't know what happened next, he couldn't see or hear when Brittney was in control. All he knew was that Sam hadn't vaporized him. And here he was, trapped. Locked in this basement listening to Orc's heavy tread upstairs.

Drake didn't know what had happened to make him this way, to cause him to share a body with Brittney. Much of recent life was a mystery. He remembered Caine turning on him. He remembered the massive uranium rod flying straight toward him.

And the next thing he knew, he was in a nightmare that went on and on and on forever. There was a girl in the nightmare, the little piggy, the stupid little metal-mouth moron, Brittney.

Hadn't they killed her? Long ago? He remembered a crumpled, bleeding form on a polished floor.

Brittney had died. Drake had died. And then, neither of them was dead, and both

somehow were connected in a nightmare world where dirt filled their mouths and ears and held them pinned.

Digging like worms. That was the nightmare reality. Drake and the piggy digging in a nightmare, digging dirt, pushing it aside, compressing it to buy half an inch of clearance.

Dark, that dream. Utterly dark. No Sammy sun. No light.

He remembered thinking in the nightmare, thinking, "There's no air."

Buried alive, there couldn't be any air. No light and no air, no water, no food, forever and forever.

It had taken a long time before his mind had cleared enough for him to realize the wonderful truth: he was dead . . . but alive.

Unkillable. Buried in the damp earth and yet somehow alive.

And then, hard-won freedom of a sort. The nightmare was no longer one of being buried in the earth but of walking the earth. He would be in one place, and then quite suddenly, in another. It took him a while to realize what had happened. The piggy was a part of him. They were joined, connected. Melded into one creature with two minds and two bodies.

Sometimes Drake and sometimes Brittney Pig.

Sometimes himself, and other times that little idiot with her lunatic visions of her dead brother.

Then the fight with Sam, the burning, and yet he had survived.

Unkillable.

"You're a monster, Orc! You know that, right?" Drake shouted the taunt. "People look at you and they throw up. You make them all sick."

Trapped. For now. In this dank, gloomy basement. Nothing down here but a wooden work table. They had cleaned the place out, Sam and Edilio and the rest. Barely a nail left behind on the concrete floor.

A roomier grave than the one he'd shared with Brittney Pig before. Here there was air. But Drake no longer needed air.

They shoved food in, and Drake ate it but he didn't need it.

Unkillable.

What could not be killed could not be imprisoned forever. Just a matter of time. Orc was a stupid drunk. Howard was a clown. Drake would have already dug his way out—he had loosened a section of cinderblock wall, working at the mortar with a piece of broken glass.

But he had to be careful not to leave any clues for Brittney to find when she emerged.

That meant working slowly. Putting the piece of glass back in the sweepings right where she would expect to see it.

In the meantime as he worked and waited he howled threats up at Orc. There were two ways out of this trap: working on the wall, and working on Orc's mind.

"Hey!" Drake shouted. "Orc! If I whip that last bit of skin off you, what do you think will happen? Might as well get rid of it and be all gravel. Why pretend you're still human?"

Orc stomped the floor, which was Drake's ceiling. But he did not come down to do battle.

Not yet. But he would eventually. Orc would snap. Then Drake would have his chance.

Through the wall or through Orc: one way or the other, Drake would escape.

He would go then to the Darkness. The gaiaphage would know how to kill the Brittney Pig and let Drake live free.

“I’m going to kill you!” Drake screamed.

He whipped at the walls, whipped at the ceiling, screamed and kicked and whipped in a lunatic frenzy.

Until at last, exhausted, his whip hand bleeding, he fell to his knees and became Brittney.

“Brittney Pig,” Drake slurred as his cruel mouth melted and twisted and became the braces-toothed mouth of his most intimate enemy.

Lana, too, felt the dark distant mind of the gaiaphage reach out for her.

She woke, eyes open quite suddenly. Patrick was beside the bed, panting, worried, wagging his tail uncertainly. He could tell, somehow.

“It’s okay, boy, go back to sleep,” Lana said.

Patrick whimpered, but then went back to his bed, turning around a couple of times before settling himself in.

The gaiaphage could no longer trick her into believing it had a voice. Those days were gone. But it could still touch her with a tendril of consciousness. It could still remind her of its presence, and of her connection to it.

This must be what it was like to be a victim of some awful crime, and to know that the person who did it to you was still alive, still looking for a way to do it again.

The gaiaphage lusted after Lana’s power. Using her power it could do miraculous things. Like replace an amputated arm with a snakelike whip.

But she was no longer quite so weak.

“Anxious, are you?” she asked the cool night air. “Down under the ground nibbling on your uranium snack?”

The Darkness did not answer. But Lana felt her instinct was right: the creature was anxious.

But not afraid.

Lana frowned, thinking about the distinction. Anxious but not afraid. Anticipating? Waiting for something?

She was torn between getting up and smoking a cigarette—she was hooked, she accepted that now—and lying there with her eyes closed and failing to fall asleep. Sleep, even if it came, would now be invaded by nightmares.

So she sat up, fumbled for and found the pack of Lucky Strikes and her lighter. The lighter sparked, the cigarette glowed, and the smell of smoke filled her nostrils.

“What are you up to?” she asked. “What do you want?”

But of course there was no answer. And she could sense the Darkness turning its attention away.

Lana got up and padded over to her balcony. The moon was high overhead. It was either very late or very early.

The barrier was so close, she felt as if she could almost touch it.

Was it true that the world was just on the other side of that barrier? Was it really so

close that she'd have been able to smell the french fries at the Carl's Jr. they built for gawkers who came to see the dome?

Or was that just another lie in this small universe of deceptions?

What if it came down? Right now, just pop: no more barrier? Or what if it cracked, like a gigantic egg?

Her mom and dad . . .

She closed her eyes and bit her lip. The pain of memory had snuck up on her, hit her when she wasn't ready.

Tears filled her eyes. She wiped them away impatiently.

Suddenly, just down on the cliff above the beach, an eruption of blazing green-white light. Sam stood silhouetted by his own light show. She heard him yelling, roaring in frustration.

He was trying to burn his way out of the FAYZ.

It went on for a while and then stopped. Darkness returned. Sam was invisible to her now.

Lana turned away.

So, she was not the only one fantasizing about cracking the shell and emerging like a newborn chick.

Strange, Lana thought as she stubbed out the end of her cigarette, I've never thought of it as an egg before.

A gust of breeze blew her smoke before her.

FOUR

63 HOURS, 41 MINUTES

SAM WOKE UP in the last place he'd have expected: his bedroom.

He hadn't been to his former house in ages.

He'd hated it when he lived here with his mother. Connie Temple. Nurse Temple.

He barely remembered her. She was from another world.

He sat up on the bed and smelled the sick. He'd thrown up on the bed. "Nice," he said with thick tongue.

His head exploded in supernovas of pain.

He wiped his mouth on the blanket. This was one house no one had raided or vandalized or moved into. It was still his, he supposed. There might still be drugs in the bathroom.

He staggered there. Leaned against the sink and threw up again. Not much came up.

In the medicine cabinet nothing but a small bottle of generic ibuprofen.

"Oh," Sam moaned. "Why do people drink?"

Then he remembered. Taylor.

"Oh, no. Oh, no."

No, no, he hadn't made a grab for Taylor, had he? He hadn't kissed her, surely? The memory was so hazy it could almost have been a dream. But pieces of it were too immediate and real. Especially the memory of her fingertips on his chest.

"Oh, no," he moaned.

He swallowed two ibuprofen dry. They didn't go down easily.

Holding his head, he went to the kitchen. Sat down at the little table. He'd had meals here with his mom. Not a lot of days, because she'd be up at Coates, working.

And keeping a worried eye on her other son.

Caine.

Caine Soren, not Temple. She had given him up for adoption. They had been born just a few minutes apart, fraternal twins, him and Caine. And their mother had given Caine away and kept Sam.

No explanation. She'd never told either of them. That truth hadn't come out until after the coming of the FAYZ.

And no real explanation for what had become of their father. He was out of the picture before Sam and Caine were born.

Had it just been too much for their mother? Had she decided she could handle one fatherless boy but not two? Eeny meeny miny moe?

He had a new family now. Astrid and Little Pete. Only now he didn't have them, either. And now he had to ask himself what he had done to deserve it, his father's disappearance, his mother's lies, Astrid's rejection.

"Yeah," he muttered. "Time for self-pity. Poor me. Poor Sam."

He meant it to sound ironic, but it came out bitter.

Caine probably had a pretty good case of resentment, too. He'd been rejected by both birth parents: two for two.

And yet, Caine still had Diana, didn't he?

How was it fair? Caine was a liar, a manipulator, a murderer. And Caine was probably lying in satin sheets with Diana eating actual food and watching a DVD. Clean sheets, candy bars, and a beautiful, willing girl.

Caine who had never done a single good or decent thing was living in luxury.

Sam, who had tried and tried and done everything he could, was sitting in his house with a raging headache, smelling vomit with a pair of ibuprofen burning a hole in his stomach lining.

Alone.

Hunter brought his kills to the gas station any day he had some. Today, bright and early, with the sun just warming the hills behind him, he had walked down from his hillside camp carrying four birds and a badger and two raccoons and a bag of squirrels. He forgot how many squirrels. The bag felt heavy, though.

It was a lot to carry. If you added it up it was probably about as heavy as carrying a kid. Not as heavy as a deer though—those he had to butcher and carry down in pieces.

No deer today. And he had not yet butchered Old Lion. That was a big job. He wanted to keep the skin in one piece, so he had to take his time.

He would wear the lion's skin over him when he had dried it out. It would be warm and remind him of Old Lion.

Hunter carried the squirrel bag slung over one shoulder. He roped the other animals together and draped the rope over his other shoulder. He had to be careful about that, though, because of the thing on his shoulder.

That kid named Roscoe was coming. He was pushing a wheelbarrow. He didn't look very happy. Every day Hunter came it was either Roscoe or this girl named Marcie. Marcie was nice. But Hunter knew she was scared of him. Probably because he couldn't talk well.

"Hey, Hunter," Roscoe said. "Dude, are you okay?"

"Yes."

"You're all clawed up, man. I mean, jeez, that has to hurt."

Hunter followed the direction of Roscoe's gaze. His shirt was ripped exposing his stomach. Two claw marks, deep, bloody, just beginning to scab a little, were plowed right across his stomach.

He touched the wound gingerly. But it didn't hurt. In fact he couldn't feel it at all.

"You're a tough dude, Hunter," Roscoe said. "Anyway, looks like you have a good haul today."

"I do, Roscoe," Hunter said. He spoke as carefully as he could. But still the words didn't sound like how he made words back before. He sounded as if his tongue was covered with glue.

Hunter carefully lifted the rope off his shoulder. He was careful not to scrape the thing on his shoulder. He set the animals in the wheelbarrow. Then he upended the squirrel bag and dumped the squirrels on top. They all looked the same. Gray and bushy-tailed. Each cooked inside a little. Enough. Sometimes he cooked their heads and sometimes their body. It wasn't that easy to aim the invisible stuff that radiated out of his hands.

He forgot what it was called. Astrid had some name for it. But it was a long word.

“You doing okay, Hunter?” Roscoe asked again.

“Yes. I have food. And my sleeping bag is dry after I cleaned it in a stream.”

“You got fresh water to wash in, huh?” Roscoe asked. “I’m jealous. Feel this shirt.” He invited Hunter to feel the stiff saltwater-washed cotton.

“It feels okay,” Hunter said warily.

Roscoe made a rude noise. “Yeah, right. Salt water. Feel your shirt.” And Roscoe reached out to touch Hunter’s shirt. He touched the shoulder of Hunter’s shirt.

The wrong shoulder.

“Aaahh!” Roscoe cried in shock and pain. “What the—”

“I didn’t mean to!” Hunter yelled.

“Something bit me!” He held out his finger for Hunter to examine. There were teeth marks. Blood.

Roscoe stared hard at him. And at his shoulder. “What’s on your shoulder, man? What is that? What’s under there? Is that some kind of animal?”

Hunter swallowed. No one had seen his shoulder. He didn’t know what would happen if anyone did.

“Yes, Roscoe, it’s an animal,” Hunter said, seizing gratefully on the explanation.

“Well, it bit me!”

“Sorry,” Hunter said.

Roscoe grabbed the wheelbarrow handles and hefted it. “I’m not doing this job anymore. Marcie can do it every day, I’m not dealing with this.”

“Okay,” Hunter said. “Bye.”

Jennifer B set out sometime around dawn.

If she stayed in the house she was sure she would die. She’d slept for an unknown period of time—hours? days?—on the floor, with her blankets gathered around her.

The chills came in waves. She would be too hot and would kick off her blankets. Then the fever would start to spike again and she would feel cold, cold all the way down to her bones.

Jennifer H was dead. Jennifer L didn’t answer when Jennifer B moaned to her to join her.

“Jen . . . I’m going to . . . hospital.”

No answer.

“Are you alive?”

Jennifer L coughed, she wasn’t dead, and she coughed normally, not the crazy spasms that had killed Jennifer H. But she didn’t answer.

So Jennifer Boyles set off, on her own. She slid on her butt down the stairs, blankets gathered around her. Shivering, teeth chattering.

She managed to stand long enough to reach the front door and open it. But she sat down again very unexpectedly on the porch. Hard on her butt. She sat there shaking until the chills passed.

She tripped walking down the porch stairs. The fall bruised her left knee badly. This destroyed the last of her will to stand up. But not the last of her will to live.

Jennifer began to crawl. Hands and knees. Down the sidewalk. Impeded by her blankets. Delayed by coughing fits. Pausing whenever the chills rattled her so hard she could only moan and hack and roll onto her side.

“Keep going,” she muttered. “Gotta keep going.”

It took her two hours to crawl as far as Brace Road.

She lay there, facedown. Coughing wracked her chest. But it was not yet the superhuman coughs that had killed Jennifer H.

Not yet.

FIVE

62 HOURS, 18 MINUTES

“LESLIE-ANN, TRY TO do a little better on cleaning my night pot, okay?” Albert told the cleaning girl. “I know it’s not a fun job, but I like it clean.”

Leslie-Ann nodded and kept her eyes down. She was a little afraid of him, Albert knew. But at least she didn’t seem to hate him.

“There’s not much water,” Leslie-Ann mumbled.

“Use sand,” Albert said patiently—he’d already told her this. “Use sand to scrub it clean.”

She nodded and fled the room.

Not everyone liked Albert. Not everyone was happy that he had become the most important person around. Lots of people were jealous that Albert had a girl to clean his house and the porcelain basin where he did his business at night when he didn’t want to go outside to the only actual outhouse in Perdido Beach. And that he could afford to send his clothes to be washed in the fresh water of the ironically named Lake Evian.

And there were definitely people who didn’t like working for Albert, having to do what he said or go hungry.

Albert traveled with a bodyguard now. The bodyguard’s name was Jamal. Jamal carried an automatic rifle over his shoulder. He had a massive hunting knife in his belt. And a club that was an oak chair leg with spikes driven through it to make a sort of mace.

Unlike everyone else Albert carried no weapon himself. Jamal was weapon enough.

“Let’s go, Jamal.”

Albert led the way toward the beach. Jamal as usual kept a few paces back, head swiveling left and right, glowering, ready for trouble.

Albert bypassed the plaza—there were always kids there and they always wanted something from Albert: a job, a different job, credit, something.

It didn’t work. Two littles, Harley and Janice, moved right in front of him as he walked briskly.

“Mr. Albert? Mr. Albert?” Harley said.

“Just Albert’s fine,” Albert said tersely.

“Me and Janice are thirsty.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t have any water on me.” He managed a tight smile and moved on. But now Janice was crying and Harley was pleading.

“We used to live with Mary and she gave us water. But now we have to live with Summer and BeeBee and they said we have to have money.”

“Then I guess you’d better earn some money,” Albert said. He tried to soften it, tried not to sound harsh, but he had a lot on his mind and it came out sounding mean. Now Harley started to cry, too.

“If you’re thirsty, stop crying,” Albert snapped. “What do you think tears are made of?”

Reaching the beach Albert scanned the work site. It looked like a salvage yard. A

five-hundred-gallon oval propane tank lay abandoned on the sand. A scorched hole in one side.

A second, slightly smaller tank should have been resting on steel legs right at the water's edge. Instead it was tipped over. A copper pipe stuck out of the top. This pipe was crimped tightly over a slightly smaller pipe that bent back toward the ground. A third, still narrower pipe was duct-taped heavily in place and this pipe reached the wet sand.

In theory at least, this crude, jury-rigged contraption was a still. The principle was simple enough: boil salt water, let the steam rise into a pipe, then cool the steam. What dribbled out of the end would be drinkable water.

Easy in theory. Almost impossible to do practically. Especially now that some fool had knocked it over.

Albert's heart sank. Soon Harley and Janice wouldn't be the only ones begging for water. The gasoline supply was down to a few hundred gallons at the station. No gas: no water truck. No water truck: no water.

Even worse, the tiny Lake Evian in the hills was drying up. There had been no rain since the coming of the FAYZ. Kids knew there was a plan to relocate everyone to Lake Evian when the last of the gas was gone; what they didn't realize was that things were far worse than that.

The first tank, the burned one, had been an earlier effort to create a still. Albert had tried to get Sam to boil the water using his powers. Unfortunately Sam couldn't dial it down enough to heat without destroying.

This new effort would require a fire beneath the tank. Which would mean crews of kids to rip lumber from unused houses. Which might make the whole thing more trouble than it was worth.

The crew was lounging. Tossing pebbles at the surf, trying to get them to skip.

Albert marched over to them, his loafers filling with sand. "Hey," he snapped. "What happened here?"

The four kids—none older than eleven—looked guilty.

"It was like this when we got here. I think the wind knocked it over."

"There is no wind in the FAYZ, you . . ." He stopped himself from saying, "moron." Albert had a certain reputation for being in control of himself. He was the closest thing they had to an adult.

"I hired you to dig a hole, not play around," Albert said.

"It's hard," one said. "It keeps filling up."

"I know it's hard. It won't get any easier. And if you want to eat, you work."

"We were just taking a break."

"Break's over. Get on those shovels."

Albert turned and walked away with Jamal in his wake.

"Those kids are flipping you off, boss," Jamal reported.

"Are they digging?"

Jamal glanced back and reported that they were.

"As long as they do their work they can flip me off all they like," Albert said.

It was then that Roscoe came up to report his haul from Hunter. And to tell Albert a crazy story about Hunter's shoulder biting him.

"Look," Roscoe said and held out his hand for Albert's inspection.

Albert sighed. "Save the crazy stories, Roscoe," he said.

"It's like, like, green, kind of," Roscoe said.

"I'm not the Healer or Dahra," Albert said.

But as he walked away something nagged at the edges of Albert's thoughts: the wound really had looked a bit green.

Someone else's problem. He had plenty of his own.

It was then that he spotted someone lying on the sand, just lying there like he might be dead. Far down the beach.

He felt in his pocket for the map.

Was it time? He glanced back at the still. The hopeless still.

His insides squirmed a little at what he was about to do. Panic would not be good. Everyone was on edge, weird, freaked since Mary's dramatic suicide and attempted mass murder.

The people could not take another disaster. But disaster was coming. And when it hit, if there was panic, then Sam would be needed here in town.

But there was no one else Albert could trust with the mission he had in mind. Sam would have to go. And Albert would have to hope that no new disaster arose while he was gone.

Sam felt a shadow.

He squinted one eye open. Someone was standing over him, face blanked by the sun behind him.

"Is that you, Albert?" Sam asked.

"It's me."

"I recognize the shoes. I don't feel good," Sam said.

"Would you mind sitting up? I have something important to talk to you about."

"If it's important, go talk to Edilio. He's in charge."

Albert waited, refusing to speak. Finally, with a sigh that became a groan, Sam rolled over and sat up.

"This is just between us, Sam," Albert said.

"Yeah, that always works out so well when I keep secrets from the council," Sam said sarcastically. He rubbed his hair vigorously to knock some of the sand out.

"You're not on the council anymore," Albert said reasonably. "And this is about a job. I want to hire you."

Sam rolled his eyes. "Everyone already works for you, Albert. What's the problem? Does it bother you that I don't?"

"You liked it better when no one was working and everyone was starving?"

Sam stared up at him. Then he made an ironic two-finger salute. "Sorry. I'm in a lousy mood. Bad night followed by bad morning. What's up, Albert?"

"There's a big problem with the water supply."

Sam nodded. "I know. As soon as the gas runs out we're going to have to relocate the whole town up to Evian."

Albert tugged at his pants, then sat down carefully on the sand. "No. First of all, the water level in Lake Evian is dropping faster than ever. There's no rain here. And it's a small lake. You can see where it's dropped from, like, ten feet deep to half that."

Albert pulled a folded map from his pocket and opened it. Sam scooted closer to

see.

“This isn’t a very good map. It’s too big to show much detail. But see this?” He pointed. “Lake Tramonto. It’s like a hundred times bigger than Evian.”

“Is it inside the FAYZ?”

“I drew this circle with a compass. I think at least part of Lake Tramonto is inside the barrier.”

Sam nodded thoughtfully. “Dude, it’s, like, what, ten miles from here?”

“More like fifteen.”

“Even if it’s there and even if the water is drinkable, how are we going to bring it down to Perdido Beach? I mean, look.” Sam traced lines with his finger. “Going or coming back it’s right through coyote country. And that would take a lot more gas, that drive. I mean, a lot more.”

“I don’t think my saltwater still is going to work,” Albert admitted. He gazed moodily down the beach toward his work crew. “Even if it does, it may not produce enough.”

Sam took the map from him and studied it intently. “You know, it’s weird. I kind of forgot there were such things as paper maps. I always used to use Google maps. Maps dot Google dot com. Remember those days? What’s this?”

Albert peered over the edge of the map. “Oh, that’s the air force base. But look, it’s pretty much all on the other side. The runway, the buildings and all. Why? Were you hoping to find a jet fighter?”

Sam smiled. “That might be useful if it came with a pilot. It’s one thing for Sanjit to crash-land a helicopter. It’s a whole different thing flying a Mach two jet around inside a twenty-mile-wide fishbowl. No. I don’t know what I was hoping for. Maybe a magic ray gun that could blow holes through the barrier.”

“You know,” Albert said, trying to sound casual, but sounding instead like he was delivering a well-rehearsed speech. “I read in a book where in the old days—I mean, really old days—businessmen would hire explorers to go search out new territory. You know, to find gold or oil or spices. Of course these explorers would have to be tough and be able to deal with all kinds of problems.”

Sam had no trouble grasping Albert’s meaning. “You want to hire me to explore this lake.”

“Yes.”

Sam looked around at the sand. “Well, as you can see, I’m very busy.”

Albert said nothing. Just waited and watched Sam like a lizard watching a fly.

“You don’t want the council to know about this. Why?”

Albert shrugged. “Anything the council hears about, the whole town knows ten seconds later. You want panic? Anyway, it’s not about them. It’s me doing it. Me and you. And a couple of other kids to back you up.”

“Why not just send Brianna? She’d get there fast.”

“I don’t trust her. Not for something like this. I mean, Sam, we could be in trouble on water really soon. I mean, soon. I’ve got a truck going later, after that, maybe half a dozen more runs.”

Sam fell silent. He drew little abstract shapes in the sand, thinking.

“I’ll do it,” Sam said. “I’m not happy about keeping it secret from Edilio.”

Albert pressed his lips into a line. Like he was thinking. But Sam could see Albert

had an answer ready. "Look, secrets don't last long in this place. For example, Taylor's been telling an interesting story all over town."

Sam groaned. Had to be Taylor, he reproached himself. What was he going to tell Astrid? Not that it was really her business. They'd never said he couldn't see anyone else, make out with anyone else. In fact once, in a flash of anger, Astrid had told him to do just that. Only she hadn't said "make out." She'd used a phrase he'd been a little shocked to hear coming from Astrid.

"Sam, Edilio's a good guy," Albert said, breaking in on Sam's gloomy thoughts. "But like I said, he'll tell the rest of them. Once the council knows, everyone knows. If everyone knows how desperate things are, what do you think will happen?"

Sam smiled without humor. "About half the people will be great. The other half will freak."

"And people will end up getting killed," Albert said. He cocked his head sideways, trying his best to look like the idea had just occurred to him. "And who is going to end up kicking butts? Who will end up playing Daddy and then be resented and blamed and finally told to go away?"

"You've gained new skills," Sam said bitterly. "You used to just be about working harder than anyone else and being ambitious. You're learning how to manipulate people."

Albert's mouth twitched and his eyes flashed angrily. "You're not the only one walking around with a big load of responsibility on your shoulders, Sam. You play the big mean daddy who won't let anyone have any fun, and I play the greedy businessman who is just looking out for himself. But don't be stupid: maybe I am greedy, but without me no one eats. Or drinks. We need water. You see anyone else in this town that's going to make that happen?"

Sam laughed softly. "Yeah, you've gotten good at using people, Albert. I mean you offer me a chance to go off and save everyone's butt, right? Be important and necessary again. You have me all figured out."

"We need water, Sam," Albert said simply. "If you find water up at this Lake Tramonto and come back and tell people they have to move up there, they'll do it. You tell them it's going to be okay and they'll believe you."

"Because I'm so widely loved and admired," Sam said sarcastically.

"It's not a popularity contest, Sam. People love you when they need you, and then ten minutes later they're tired of you. In a very short while they're going to realize we're very close to all dying of thirst. And there you'll be with the solution."

"And they'll love me. For ten minutes, until they've had enough to drink."

"Exactly," Albert said. He stood up. "We have a deal?" He extended his hand down for Sam to shake.

Sam stood up. "And the lake? I mean, if it's there?"

"If it's there, it's my lake," Albert said coolly. "I'll sell the water and control access. Maybe then we won't end up in the same bind all over again."

Sam shook his hand and laughed out loud. "You are less full of crap than anyone around, Albert. If it's there, I'll find it. I'll leave tonight."

He took the map.

"You want someone to go with you?"

"Dekka." Sam thought a moment longer. "And Jack."

“You want Computer Jack? Why?”

“It’s a good idea to have someone around who’s smarter than you are.”

“I suppose so,” Albert said. “You need someone to communicate, too. Take Taylor.”

“Not Taylor. I’ll take Brianna.”

Albert shook his head. “You kissed her, get past it. We need someone in this town who can fight if necessary. I mean at the freak level, no diss on Edilio. Taylor’s useless in a battle of any kind, while Brianna can take on just about anyone.”

Sam nodded. It made sense. If he wanted Dekka along he’d have to leave Brianna behind. But Taylor?

Suddenly the trip, which he had started to anticipate just a little, seemed much less like fun.

Lana disliked going into town. In town people asked her for things. But she needed a gallon of water to take back up to Clifftop anyway, so she figured she might as well stop by the so-called hospital and clear up the usual backlog of kids with broken arms, burned hands, and a rumored cut wrist.

She wasn’t that sure she should be fixing anyone dumb enough to try and slit his wrist. After all, the FAYZ would kill you soon enough, why be in a hurry? And if you wanted a quick trip out of the FAYZ there was always Mary’s way: the cliff.

Dahra Baidoo was reading her medical book and telling some kid with a sore tooth to be quiet. “It’s just loose, it will come out when it wants to come out,” she said irritably.

She looked up with a weary smile when she noticed Lana.

“Hey, Lana.”

“Hey, DB,” Lana said. “How’s medical school?”

It was an old joke between them. They had worked together closely in times of crisis. The flu that had gone around a couple of weeks ago, the various battles and fires and fights and poisonings and accidents.

Dahra would hold the injured kids’ hands and feed them Tylenol while waiting for Lana to come around. The fire had been the worst. The two of them had been down here together for days, barely seeing the sun.

Bad, bad days.

Dahra laughed and tapped the book. “I’m ready to perform heart transplants.”

“What do we have?” Lana asked. “I heard you had an uncommitted suicide.”

“No suicides. Broken ribs. And a burn. Not too bad, and I should probably let her suffer since she got it from trying to light a bag of poop and throw it.”

Lana heard a hacking cough from a very sick-looking girl. “What’s that?”

Dahra gave her a significant look. “I think our flu is back. Or never went away.” She pulled Lana off to the side, to where the patients couldn’t hear. “I think this may be worse, though. This girl is hallucinating. Her name is Jennifer. She came crawling in here this morning. She keeps talking about some other girl named Jennifer who coughed so hard there were pieces of her lungs coming up. And then she supposedly coughed so hard she broke her own neck.”

“Fever brings on the crazy sometimes,” Lana said.

“Yeah. Still, I wish I had someone to go check on her house. See if there’s anything

going on.”

“Where’s Elwood?”

Dahra sighed. “That’s over.”

Lana had never liked Elwood much and she kind of wanted to know what had happened—Dahra and Elwood had been going out for a long time. But Dahra didn’t look like she was interested in spilling her guts.

Lana healed the broken ribs, then checked out the girl with burned fingers. “Don’t do stupid things like this,” Lana snapped at the girl. “I don’t want to be wasting my time on stupidity. Next time I’ll let you suffer.”

But she healed the burn as well and did a quick touch-and-go with the coughing girl.

“Can I fill a jug before I head out?” Lana asked.

Dahra winced. She had an old water cooler in one corner with a clear glass five-gallon jug on top. But there was nowhere near five gallons in there.

“How about half a gallon?” Dahra said.

“Deal,” Lana said. “Albert needs to keep you better supplied. Me, too, while we’re at it. He’s supposed to send one of his people up with a gallon a day. It’s been two days. It’s not smart for a hypochondriac like Albert to grind my nerves.”

Then, with a nod to Dahra, Lana headed off again, back toward her lonely eyrie.

She took a shortcut that took her up the hill to Clifftop. It was a bare trail through the brush, a place where a hungry coyote might be. But Patrick would warn her long before she walked into a coyote. And in any case Lana carried an automatic pistol she had no compunction about using.

Suddenly Patrick growled and Lana had the automatic out and aimed with both hands in a split second.

“Step out where I can see you,” she said.

There was no coyote. Instead there was Hunter. Lurking. Looking ashamed to be here. He had been banished from town, although he was allowed to come see her anytime. Still he preferred to stay out of sight.

Lana liked Hunter. First because he often saved her some tasty morsel, a rabbit or a couple of plump frogs. And he brought stomachs and intestines for Patrick to eat.

Second because even though he was brain damaged he at least had the sense not to waste her time. If he was looking for her there was a reason.

“T’sup, Hunter?” she asked. She stuck the gun back in her waistband. “Whoa. I see: bad scratches there.”

“No,” he said. “It’s something else.”

He pulled on his T-shirt neck.

Lana didn’t breathe for a few seconds. “Yeah,” she said. “That is something else.”

SIX

61 HOURS, 26 MINUTES

NO ONE KNEW quite how to deal with Hunter. He wasn't supposed to come into town. So the council had to go to him.

They met on the highway.

No one had ever cleaned up the crashed and abandoned cars on the highway. They were all just where they'd been since the coming of the **FAYZ**.

The big FedEx truck was still on its side. Kids had long since broken into the back and rifled through the packages. The wrapping, torn paper, plastic packing peanuts, curls of tape, and packing slips had mostly drifted into a section of construction barrier on the side of the road.

Funny, Lana noticed: it looked almost cleaned up today. As if someone had come along with a leaf blower and scooted all the garbage off the road.

The town council was now Dekka, Howard, Albert, Ellen, and Edilio. Sam was entitled to attend but he usually didn't. Astrid had made it clear she wanted no part of it anymore, but Lana had sent Brianna to tell her to be there. She wanted Astrid's eyes on this.

So Astrid was there. Sort of. Lana had seen Astrid in a lot of different situations and moods, but this was a new Astrid: withdrawn, preoccupied. Like she was somewhere else entirely. She was biting her lip, twisting her fingers together, then catching herself and wiping her hands on her jeans.

Lana was sure she saw Astrid start guiltily when she noticed the trash blown against the barrier. But maybe she was just feeling touchy because of the story going around about Sam and Taylor.

Edilio was in charge. Which was fine with Lana. Almost everyone else had shown some weakness, some bit of crazy. Very much including herself, she acknowledged wryly.

Edilio seemed like the last sane, decent person left in the **FAYZ**. The undocumented kid from Honduras was the single most trusted person around. And yet, if the barrier ever came down, Edilio and his family—if they were still alive out there—would be kicked out of the country.

Of course, Lana thought, if the barrier ever came down, half the kids would be shipped off to juvie and the rest would be sent to mental institutions or rehab. So maybe getting kicked out wasn't so bad.

Hunter looked like he was meeting the president. He stood tall and tried to smooth his hair down—a hopeless effort. Lana hid a smile as he picked a tick off his arm and flicked it away.

"Hi, Hunter," Edilio said. "First up, man, thanks for all the good work you do, right? You're helping to keep everyone fed and healthy, so thanks."

Hunter searched for something to say, eyes shifting left, right, and finally down. "I am the hunter."

"Well, you're a good hunter," Edilio said. "Lana says you have a little medical problem."

Hunter nodded. "Mouths."

"Yeah. Well, do you mind letting us look? We don't want to embarrass you or anything."

"Just take off your shirt," Albert said a bit abruptly. He considered Hunter an employee. But then Albert considered almost everyone an employee.

"He can take it off or not, it's up to him," Dekka said in her low growl.

Hunter was confused by the back-and-forth. So Lana said, "Would you mind taking your shirt off, Hunter, so we can see? Might as well take off your jeans, too."

Hunter pulled his T-shirt over his head. He dropped his jeans to his ankles.

There was a collective gasp.

Lana stepped up beside Hunter. She pointed to the protruding mouthparts on Hunter's shoulder. It looked exactly like a very large ant's head, or maybe a wasp's head, but with oversized, gnashing mouthparts. "This was the first one. I tried to cure it. You'll notice it didn't work."

She pointed to a smaller silvery, almost metallic, mouth on his calf. "Do us a favor and raise your arms up, Hunter."

He did. Albert looked away.

There was a third mouth gnashing its teeth in Hunter's armpit.

Lana watched Astrid watching Hunter. Her ice blue eyes flickered.

"You have a question, Astrid?" Lana asked.

Astrid pursed her lips like she didn't, but her curiosity got the better of her. "Hunter, has anything bitten you?"

"Yes. Fleas bite me. And ticks."

"How about a wasp?" Astrid asked.

"No," Hunter said.

"Why a wasp?" Edilio asked Astrid.

Astrid shrugged. "I'm just trying to get information." She was lying, Lana thought. That scary smart brain of hers was already onto something. Something she didn't want to talk about in front of Hunter.

"Anything else strange happen?" Edilio asked.

"Just the greenie," Hunter said.

"The what?" Edilio asked.

"They're no good for hunting. I caught one and cooked it but it shriveled all up and there wasn't any meat on it."

"What's a greenie?" Albert demanded.

Hunter frowned, looking for a way to describe it. "It flies. It's like a snake that flies."

Howard said, "Oh, good, I was worried we didn't have enough weirdness to deal with. Flying snakes. That's excellent."

"They squirt," Hunter said helpfully. Then his eyes widened. "It squirted me once. Right here." He pointed to his shoulder. To the slowly gnashing insect mouth.

"Does anyone have anything sharp?" Astrid asked.

Three knives flashed out.

"I was kind of thinking of a pin," Astrid said. But she took a knife from Howard. "Don't worry, Hunter," she said. She poked very gently with the point of the knife just beside the largest mouth. "Did you feel that?"

Hunter shook his head.

Astrid poked again, farther from the first spot. And again on Hunter's upper arm.

"I guess I don't feel stuff much." Hunter seemed baffled.

"Something's anesthetizing him," Astrid said. A spasm, a look of nausea, quickly suppressed, twisted her lips.

"It doesn't hurt," Hunter said.

"You can get dressed," Edilio said kindly. "Thanks for showing us."

Hunter obediently pulled his clothes back on.

"Back to work, huh, Hunter?" Edilio said with a wretched, forced smile.

Hunter nodded. "Yes. I have to get Albert some meat or he gets mad."

"No I don't," Albert protested weakly.

Hunter started to walk away. Albert called after him. "Where did you see this flying snake of yours?"

Hunter, eager to answer Albert's question, smiled because he knew the answer. "They're all over on the morning side."

"The what?"

"That's what I call it. On the other side of the hills. There's a cave. By the road."

"The road to Lake Evian . . . the lake where we get water?" Albert asked in a quiet voice.

Hunter nodded. "Yes. By the dirt road that goes there."

"Thanks," Edilio said, dismissing Hunter, who looked relieved and walked quickly away without looking back. Edilio turned to Astrid. "Okay, Astrid. What are you thinking?"

"I think the reason Lana couldn't heal him is that it's not a disease."

"It sure looks like a disease," Howard said. "Like a disease I don't want to get."

"It's a parasite," Astrid said.

"Like when a dog gets worms?" Edilio asked.

"Yes."

"But they're coming out through his skin," Edilio said.

Astrid nodded. "He should be in excruciating pain. They're probably secreting something that deadens the pain."

"What's going to happen to him?" Dekka asked.

"There's a type of wasp," Astrid said. "That's why I asked him about wasps. It lays its eggs inside a caterpillar. The eggs hatch. The larvae then eat the living caterpillar from the inside out."

Lana felt sick herself. She had long since learned to protect herself by affecting a certain indifference to the pains and wounds she healed. But this was awful beyond anything she had ever seen. And she had been powerless to help.

"Everyone keep this quiet till we figure out what it is," Edilio said. "No one talk to Taylor, that girl can't keep quiet for . . ." He trailed off, noticing a stony glare from Astrid. "Council meeting tonight," he finished lamely.

Lana called to Patrick, who was sniffing around in the weeds beside the road, and headed toward home.

Astrid caught up to her.

"Lana."

"Yeah?" Lana had never been Astrid's biggest fan. She admired Astrid's smarts

and looks. But they were very different people.

“It’s Little Pete. He . . .”

“He what?” Lana demanded impatiently.

“He has a fever. I think he has flu or something.”

Lana shrugged. “Yeah, one of the Jennifers has it, too. I don’t think it’s any big deal. Take him to see Dahra, I’ll stop by there later.”

Lana expected Astrid to nod her head and take off. But Astrid glanced down the road to make sure no one was coming toward them. This got Lana’s attention.

“I need you to come to my house,” Astrid said firmly.

“Look, I get that you’re more important than, you know, normal people,” Lana snarked. “But I’ll take care of him later. Okay? Bye.”

Astrid grabbed her shoulder. Lana turned back, angry now. She didn’t like being touched, let alone grabbed.

“It’s not about me,” Astrid said. “Lana . . . I have to ask you. The gaiaphage . . .”

Lana’s face darkened.

“Can it see what you see?” Astrid asked quietly. “Can it know what you know?”

Lana felt a chill. “What is going on, Astrid?”

“Maybe nothing. But come with me. Come see Petey. Help me out, and I will owe you one.”

Lana laughed derisively. She was the Healer: everyone owed her one. But she followed Astrid just the same.

SEVEN

60 HOURS, 30 MINUTES

CAINE HAD FOUND a telescope in the house. He carried it out to the cliff on the eastern edge of the island. It was afternoon. The light was pretty good, low, slanting rays that lit up the far shore. Sunlight glinted off windows and car windshields in Perdido Beach. Bright red tile roofs and tall palm trees made it seem so normal. As if it really was just another California beach town.

The nuclear power plant was closer. It, too, looked normal. The hole in the containment tower was on the far side, not visible from here. The hole he'd made.

He was startled by the sound behind him but didn't show it. Much.

"What are you looking at, Napoleon?" Diana asked.

"Napoleon?"

"You know, because he was exiled to an island after he almost took over the world," Diana said. "Although he was short. You're much taller."

Caine wasn't sure he minded Diana tweaking him. It was better than the way she'd been lately, all depressed and giving up on life. Hating herself.

He didn't mind if she hated him. They were never going to be a cute romantic couple like Sam and Astrid. Clean-cut, righteous, all that. The perfect couple. He and Diana were the imperfect couple.

"How did it work out for Napoleon?" he asked her.

He caught the slight hesitation as she searched for a glib answer.

"He lived happily ever after on his island," Diana said. "He had a beautiful girlfriend who was far better than he deserved."

"Stop worrying," he said harshly. "I'm not planning on leaving the island. How could I, even if I wanted to?"

"You would find a way," Diana said bleakly.

"Yeah. But here I am anyway," Caine said. He aimed the telescope back at the town. He could see the blackened hulks of burned-out homes just to the west of downtown.

"Don't do it," Diana said.

Caine didn't ask what she meant. He knew.

"Just let it go," Diana said. She put her hand on his shoulder. She caressed the side of his neck, his cheek.

He lowered the telescope and tossed it onto the overgrown sea grass. He turned, took her in his arms, and kissed her.

It had been a long time since he'd done that.

She felt different in his arms. Thinner. Smaller. More frail. But his body responded to her as it always had.

She did not pull away.

His own response surprised him. It had been a long time for that, too. A long time since he'd felt desire. Starving boys lusted after food, not after girls.

And now that it was happening, it was overwhelming. Like a roar in his ears. A pounding in his chest. He ached all the way through.

At the last second, the second when he would have lost the last of his self-control, Diana gently but firmly pushed him away.

“Not here,” she said.

“Where?” he gasped. He hated the neediness in his voice. He hated needing anyone or anything that badly. Need was weakness.

She detached his hands from her body. She took one step back. She was wearing an actual dress. A dress, with her legs showing and her shoulders bare and it was like she was a visitor from another planet.

He blinked, thinking maybe it was all a dream. She was clean and wearing a yellow summer dress. Her teeth had been brushed. Her hair was brushed, too, still a mess from cutting it all off and having it grow back while too hungry, but a shadow at least of its former dark, tumbling sensuality.

She bent down demurely and picked up the telescope. She handed it to him.

“Your choice, Caine. You can have me. Or you can try to take over the world. Not both. Because I’m not going to be part of that anymore. I can’t. So it’s up to you.”

His jaw dropped. Literally.

“You witch,” he said.

Diana laughed.

“You know I have the power . . . ,” he threatened.

“Of course. I would be helpless. But that’s not what you want.”

Caine spotted a boulder, not far away. Impressively big. He raised one hand, palm out, and with a scraping sound the boulder lifted into the air.

“Sometimes I hate you!” he yelled and with a flick of his wrist sent the boulder flying off the cliff and falling toward the water below.

“Just sometimes?” Diana raised one skeptical brow. “I hate you almost all the time.”

They glared at each other with a look that was hate but also something else, something so much more helpless than hatred.

“We’re damaged people,” Diana said, suddenly sad and serious. “Horrible, messed-up, evil people. But I want to change. I want us both to change.”

“Change? To what?” Caine asked, mystified.

“To people who no longer have dreams of being Napoleon.”

She was her usual smirking self again as she looked him slowly up and down. Slowly enough that he actually felt embarrassed and had to overcome a modest urge to cover himself. “Don’t decide right now,” she said. “You’re in no condition to think clearly.”

And she turned and walked back toward the house.

Caine threw many more large boulders into the sea.

It didn’t help.

Sam stood on the street corner watching Lana and Astrid enter the house he had shared with Astrid. Lana was carrying a water jug. Patrick stopped and stared in Sam’s direction, but the girls didn’t notice him and Patrick quickly lost interest.

He had come to tell Astrid he was going out of town. Astrid would keep the secret. And he wanted at least one person other than Albert to know where he was and what he was doing.

Anyway, that was what he told himself. Because admitting that he still, even now, even after everything that had happened, and everything that hadn't happened, couldn't just walk away from Astrid . . . that would be too big an admission of weakness.

He couldn't not tell her he was leaving. She had to know that he was still . . . whatever he was. He kicked at a crumpled soda can and sent it skittering down the trash-strewn street.

Why was Lana going over to see Astrid? Little Pete must not be feeling well. But how could anyone tell what Little Pete was feeling?

Sam frowned. He didn't want to have some scene with Astrid in front of Lana.

The sky was getting dark. He would be leaving soon. Dekka, Taylor, and Jack would be meeting him across the highway. Each was supposed to keep the whole thing secret.

In reality, of course, Jack would tell Brianna. Taylor would keep it quiet only because she didn't know what was going on, and by the time she did they'd be out of town. Dekka would tell no one. And Sam? He would tell Astrid.

Sam knocked at Astrid's door.

No answer.

Feeling strange and wrong he opened the door to what had until very recently been his own home and went inside.

Astrid and Lana were upstairs; he could hear the murmur of voices.

He took the stairs two at a time and called out, "Astrid, it's me."

They were in Little Pete's room. Astrid and Lana stood a few feet apart with their backs to Sam.

A woman—a grown, adult woman—was sitting on the bed with Little Pete's head in her lap.

"Mom?" Astrid said.

The woman was in her late thirties. She had streaked blond hair and Astrid's translucent pale skin, somewhat aged by sun. Her eyes were brown. She smiled sadly and cradled Little Pete's head. She stroked his hair.

"Mom?" Astrid said again, and this time her voice broke.

The woman did not speak. She did not look up at Astrid. She kept all her attention focused on Little Pete.

"She's not real," Astrid said, and took a step back.

Lana glared at Astrid. Then she noticed Sam, standing there.

Lana's eyes narrowed. "You knew about this, didn't you?" she accused.

"She's not real," Astrid said again. "That's not my mother. That's . . . it's an illusion. He's sick. I was out so . . . so he made her appear. To comfort him."

"He made her appear." Lana practically spit the words. "He made her appear. Because that's something just anyone can do, any of us can just make a three-dimensional real-life mommy appear to cuddle us when we feel bad."

"Stop it, Petey," Astrid said.

The woman—the illusion of a woman—did not react but kept stroking Little Pete's head.

"Cure him, Lana. Cure him and it will stop." Astrid was pleading. "He has a fever. He's coughing."

As if demonstrating, Little Pete coughed several times.

It was weird. He didn't cover his mouth or change his expression. He just coughed.

"Give it a try, Lana," Sam urged. "Please."

Lana rounded on him. "Interesting power for an autistic to have, isn't it?" she demanded. "Especially when you think about all the stories going around about how the dome went clear for a few seconds when Little Pete blacked out."

"There are a lot of mutants," Sam said as blandly as he could.

"Wasn't he at the power plant when the FAYZ came?" Lana asked.

Astrid and Sam exchanged a glance. Neither spoke.

"He was at the plant," Lana said. "The plant is the center of the FAYZ. The very center."

"Please try to heal him," Astrid urged.

"He's got a fever and a cough, big deal," Lana said. "Why is it so urgent that he be healed?"

Again, Sam had no answer.

Lana moved closer. The woman's hand was still on Pete's forehead. But she didn't react when Lana laid her own hand on Little Pete's chest.

"So, that's your mother," Lana said more calmly.

"No," Astrid said.

"Weird seeing an adult, isn't it?"

"It's an illusion," Astrid said weakly. "Little Pete has the power to . . . to make his visions seem real."

"Yeah," Lana said dryly. "That's all it is. The blink, when everyone saw the outside, that was just an illusion. And your mom, here, that's an illusion."

The woman disappeared suddenly. Little Pete's head fell back against his pillow.

"You're helping him," Sam said. "He's getting better."

"You know what's interesting?" Lana said in a mockery of casual chitchat. "The sun and the moon and the stars here are all illusions, too. So many illusions. So many coincidences. So many secrets."

Sam didn't look at Astrid. He wished he hadn't come. More, he wished Astrid hadn't brought Lana here, although he understood it.

After a while Lana stepped back from Little Pete. "I don't know if that fixed him or not."

"Thanks," Astrid said.

"I can feel it, you know," Lana said softly.

"The healing?"

Lana shook her head. "No. It. I can feel it. It touches him. It watches him. I can feel it. It reaches him." Her brow creased and she seemed almost to be wincing in pain. "Just like it reaches me."

Without looking at either of them, Lana rushed from the room.

They stood silent, neither knowing what to say.

"I'm going to be away for a couple of days," Sam said finally. "The water situation . . . I'm going to search out another lake."

A tear spilled down Astrid's cheek.

"That must have been hard," Sam said. "Even knowing it wasn't real."

Astrid used one finger to brush away the tear. "Lana's smart. She'll put it all

together.” She sighed. “If things get bad they’ll come after him. The kids will come after Petey.”

“Before I go I’ll ask Breeze to keep an eye on you,” Sam said.

Astrid stared gloomily at her brother. He coughed twice and then lay quiet. “The thing is, I don’t know what would happen.”

“If he got sick?”

“If he died. I don’t know. I do not know.”

PETE

THE DARKNESS WAS watching him, touching him with its wispy tendril, listening for him to speak.

He would not speak. The Darkness could not help him. The Darkness only wanted to play, and it was so jealous when Pete played with anyone else.

Come to me, it said over and over again.

Pete's legs were weak. He stood poised atop the glass but his legs hurt and his feet, too, like the glass sheet was slicing into him.

He had felt better when his mother was there. She was quiet, the way he liked. She had not tried to touch him except to let him lie there against her breast and feel the soft rise and fall of her breathing.

But then the breathing had begun to wear on him, making him distracted. If it didn't stop . . .

But then it did stop when he made her go away. He could remember the good part, before the sound of breathing got to be too much, and not have to hear it anymore.

Loud sister was talking and then another. The other touched him with her hand. He looked at her and was puzzled. A faint green tendril spiraled up to touch her. She seemed to be on both sides of the glass at once.

He felt her touch and it made him tense. He endured it, but inside he was feeling worse and worse.

Hot. Like fire was inside him.

He didn't want to hear any more from his body.

The other left. She took her hand away and left. But he could feel an echo of her inside him. She had touched the Darkness, but she refused its pleas to come and play.

He wondered . . . but now his body was drawing his attention again. Hot and cold, hungry and thirsty.

It bothered him.

EIGHT

54 HOURS, 21 MINUTES

“KILL IT! KILL me!”

It was muffled, but you could still hear it. They’d closed the air-conditioning vents—wasn’t like there was air-conditioning anymore—but still the desperate wail came up from the basement.

Howard was out at some kind of stupid meeting. Some big deal. Howard always had big deals.

Charles Merriman, who everyone called Orc, rummaged in the mess beside his couch. There had to be something left in one of these bottles. He didn’t want to have to go into the back room closet and get another bottle.

“It’s the only way. Sam! Sam! Tell Sam to do it!”

Orc wasn’t drunk. Not drunk enough to ignore the sound of that stupid girl’s voice. That took a pretty good drunk and right now he was only drunk enough that he didn’t want to get up off the couch.

His stony fingers lifted a bottle. Wild Turkey. Only about half an inch of brown liquid left in the bottom. He twisted the cork. The glass neck of the bottle shattered in his grip. That happened fairly often. Orc had a hard time gauging his strength when he was a little drunk.

He blew slivers of glass away. He raised the bottle high, careful to keep the sharp points away from his still-human mouth.

The one part of him that could be cut: his mouth.

Well, his mouth and his eyes.

He drained the fiery liquid into his mouth and swallowed. Oh, yeah. Yeah. But not enough.

Orc levered himself up. He was heavy, like you’d expect of a boy made of wet gravel. Like a walking creature of wet cement. He couldn’t fit on a scale although Howard had tried once to weigh him.

He had crushed the scales.

He stomped toward the booze closet where Howard kept his stash. With the exaggerated care of a person not in control of his body, Orc opened the closet door.

A few bottles of clear booze. A few bottles of brown booze. A couple bottles of Cabka, the liquor Howard made by distilling cabbage and rotten oranges. It was nasty stuff. Orc preferred the brown booze.

He snagged a bottle and after a few seconds of clumsy fumbling he gave up and twisted the glass neck off.

“Is that you up there, Orc? I hear you stomping around.” Drake. The girl Brittney was gone now, replaced by Drake.

“You still alive, you stupid, alcoholic pile of rock?” Drake taunted. “Still following Sam’s orders? Doing what you’re told, Orc?”

Orc stomped angrily on the floor. “Shut up or I’ll come down there and smash you like a bug!” Orc roared.

Drake laughed. “Sure you will, Orc. You don’t have the stones. Wait, that was a

funny! The stone monster who doesn't have any stones."

Orc stomped again. The entire house shook when he did it.

Drake called him various names, but now Orc had about a quarter of the bottle inside him. The warmth spread throughout his body.

He yelled something equally rude back at Drake. Then he staggered back to his couch and sagged heavily into it.

He didn't mind Drake so much. Drake was a creep.

It was the girl who made Orc want to cry.

She was a monster. Like Orc. Begging for death. Begging for someone to let her go to her Jesus.

Kill me, kill me, kill me, she begged every day and every night.

Orc took a deep swig.

Tears seeped from his human eyes and fell into the rocky crevices of his face.

Someone was knocking at the front door. Normally Howard would answer. But then Orc heard Jamal's voice yelling, "Hey, Orc! Open up, man."

Jamal was one of the very few people besides Howard who ever came to see Orc. Of course it was just so he could get a drink. But still, any company was better than listening to Drake or Brittney.

"Want a drink, Jamal?"

"You know it," Jamal said. "Albert's busting on me all day."

"Yeah," Orc said. He didn't care. He snagged a bottle and handed it to Jamal, who took a deep swig.

Orc flopped onto his mattresses, the floor groaning beneath him. Jamal took a chair and kept the bottle.

"Who is that up there?" Drake's voice floated up. "Is that Jamal or Turk? Too heavy to be Howard."

"It's Jamal," Jamal yelled.

"Don't talk to him," Orc said, but without much conviction.

"Hey, Jamal, how about letting me out of here?" Drake asked, almost playful.

Orc yelled something obscene back at him.

"Only if you kill Albert first," Jamal shouted, then laughed and took another drink.

"How come you work for Albert if you hate him?" Orc asked.

Jamal shrugged. "I'm tough, he needs someone tough."

"Yeah," Orc said.

"But he treats me like crap."

"Yeah?"

"Should see how he's living, man. You think he's living like the rest of us? Get this: at night he doesn't even go out to take a leak. He's got, like, a jar he pees in."

"I got a jar I pee in."

"Yeah, well, he's got a maid to take it out and dump it for him."

Orc's head was buzzing, not really paying attention, but Jamal was getting fired up, listing complaints about Albert, starting with the fact that Albert had meat every day and kids to clean up after him.

"See, man, he loves it like this, right?" Jamal said, already slurring his words. "Back in the world Albert was just some shrimpy little nothing. In here he's a big man and I'm, like, his, you know . . ."

“Servant,” Orc supplied.

Jamal’s eyes flared angrily. “Yeah. Yeah. Like you, Orc, you’re Sam’s servant.”

“I ain’t anyone’s servant.”

“You’re babysitting Drake all day and night, man, what is it you think you are? You’re doing what the Sam Boss tells you.”

Orc didn’t have a ready answer. He wished Howard was home because Howard was smarter at talking.

Jamal pushed it. “Guys like you and me and Turk and Drake, right? We used to be in charge. Because we were tough and we weren’t afraid and didn’t take anyone’s crap, right?”

Orc shrugged. He was feeling very uncomfortable. “Where’s Howard?” he muttered.

Jamal made a rude noise. “Howard’s not the one stuck being a jailer, you are, Orc. Sam’s prison guard. Keeps you busy, right, and trapped here all the time. So it’s like Turk said.”

“What’d Turk say?”

“Said Sam got you and Drake locked up at the same time.”

“It’s not like that.”

Jamal laughed derisively. “Man, all you have to do is see who is top dog and who is bottom dog. See, that’s where Zil was wrong: it’s not about moofs and normals, freaks and non-freaks, it’s about top dog, bottom dog. You and me, Orc, we’re bottom dogs. Should be top dogs.”

Just then Brittney’s voice came up from below. “Is Sam there? Get Sam! You have to call Sam!”

Orc levered himself up off his bed and yelled, “Hey shut up. I already gotta listen to Drake all day and night.”

He swayed, tried to catch himself and couldn’t. He slipped and fell back on his rear. Jamal exploded in derisive laughter.

This time Orc leaped to his feet. “Stop laughing!”

“Orc, get Sam!”

“It was funny, man,” Jamal said through his own braying laughter.

“Orc, Drake is trying—”

Orc cursed loudly. He stomped on the floor. “Shut up, shut up!”

And suddenly, with a rending, ripping sound, the floor beneath Orc gave way.

He fell through wood and plaster. He landed hard and lay flat on his back, winded. Splinters and dust settled on him.

He blinked, too stunned to make sense of what had just happened. His first thought was that Howard would be pissed. His second thought was that Sam would be even more pissed.

Brittney was standing over him, looking down at him.

Flat on his back. Drunk and foolish. A monster. And from above came Jamal’s donkey laughter.

Orc reached to touch the skin that still stretched over a part of his face. He was bleeding. Not bad, not a lot, but bleeding.

In blind rage Orc got to his feet. He punched Brittney with all his strength. The girl went flying into the wall. Her head snapped against cinderblock, a hit that would have

killed any real, living girl.

But Brittney couldn't die.

Which was the final straw. Something in Orc's brain snapped. He leaped, trying to grab the floor above and pull himself through, but he slipped and fell again and Jamal was pointing and laughing and Orc ran for the door, the barricaded door that had kept the Drake/Brittney thing locked up. He body-slammed the door. It held, but barely. He reared back and kicked and kicked and splinters flew.

"No! No!" Brittney screamed. "He'll escape!"

Orc stepped back, raised both his gravel-skinned arms and ran straight at the door.

It didn't fly open, it simply came apart. The frame shattered and splintered. The door itself split. And Orc tore through.

"Want to laugh at me?" he roared as he pounded up the stairs and emerged in the kitchen.

Jamal was still standing next to the hole, laughing.

"You wanna laugh?" Orc roared.

Jamal spun around, realizing too late the danger he was in. Orc was over six feet tall and almost as wide as he was tall. His legs were like tree trunks, his arms like bridge cable.

Jamal fumbled for his gun, but Orc wasn't having any of that. He grabbed Jamal by the neck, lifted him off the floor, and threw him down the hole.

Jamal hit hard. The gun flew, scraping across the floor.

Orc was panting, sweating, heart pounding in his chest. Now reality was starting to penetrate the alcohol-fueled rage and he saw what he had done.

Howard. He should . . . Or Sam . . . Someone, he should tell someone, get someone . . .

It was all over now for Charles Merriman. He had redeemed himself, he had been given something important to do. But now all that was gone. And he was just Orc again.

He wanted to cry. He couldn't face it. He couldn't face Howard's disappointment and pity. Sam's cold anger.

Down in the dark basement a long, reddish tentacle reached for the gun.

Orc turned and ran.

Sanjit Brattle-Chance had not enjoyed his first week in Perdido Beach. Virtue Brattle-Chance had enjoyed it even less.

"It's like a giant lunatic asylum," Virtue said.

"Yeah. It is, kind of," Sanjit said. They had spent the afternoon inspecting the helicopter. Edilio had assigned them the job of reporting back on whether it was totally broken or just mostly broken.

So far it was looking totally broken. Both skids—the ski-like things it landed on—were crumpled. Part of the glass bubble canopy was shattered, just gone, and the rest of it was starred and cracked.

Night had fallen and that was the end of inspecting anything. Virtue had wanted to go straight home. Sanjit had stalled.

"Let's just hang out and talk, Choo," Sanjit said. "I mean, look, we've had all this stress, right? But now Bowie's getting well—"

Virtue made a rude noise. “If you believe that so-called Healer.”

“I believe her completely,” Sanjit said.

The girl named Lana had come and laid her hand on Bowie. She’d barely spoken, had replied to polite inquiries with single-syllable answers or grunts. Or annoyed silence.

But Sanjit had been fascinated. He’d thought about little else ever since. After all, how could he not be attracted to a girl who could heal with a touch and yet walked around with a massive automatic pistol stuck in her belt?

His kind of girl.

He had learned that she lived up here at Clifftop. In fact Edilio had carefully and repeatedly warned Sanjit not to irritate her while he was checking out the helicopter.

His exact words had been, “For God’s sake, don’t get in Lana’s way.”

To which Sanjit had said, “Is she dangerous?”

Edilio had given him a strange look. “Well, she shot me once. But it was under the influence of the Darkness. Which she had tried to kill all by herself with a truckload of gas. And then she healed me. So I don’t know if that makes her dangerous. But if it was me, I would definitely not make her mad.”

So Sanjit and Virtue sat on the grass and watched the sun go down and the stars appear. And Sanjit secretly watched the hotel.

“Did you hear about the talking coyotes?” Virtue demanded. Like if there were such a thing, it was Sanjit’s fault.

“Yeah. Creepy, huh?”

“And the thing they call the Darkness?” Virtue shook his head dolefully. He’d always been gloomy. The cloud to Sanjit’s sunshine, the pessimist to Sanjit’s optimist. They were adopted brothers, from Congo and Thailand, respectively. From a desperate refugee camp, and from the tough streets of Bangkok.

“Yeah. I wonder what it is?”

“The gaiaphage. That’s the other word they use. ‘Gaia,’ as in world. ‘Phage,’ as in a worm or something that eats something up. I’m going to go way out on a limb here and say I don’t think something that calls itself a ‘world eater’ is a good thing.”

“No?” Sanjit made an innocent face, deliberately provoking his brother.

“Fine.” Virtue pouted. “But have you seen the graveyard they put in the plaza? There’s, like, two dozen graves there.”

Sanjit twisted around to look back at the helicopter. It had saved them. It seemed a shame just to let it lie there dead. “I’d need some big wrenches. A ladder. Hammer. And then, you know, someone who actually knew what to do with all of it.”

“Fine, you don’t really want to talk.”

They had landed the helicopter—well, crashed it, anyway—behind Clifftop hotel. In some scruffy trees and bushes just past the parking area.

The barrier was close at hand. So even if the helicopter could ever be flown—and Sanjit couldn’t imagine what the point would be—it would take a lot of luck not just to fly it straight into the barrier.

The barrier was a trickster. At ground level it was opaque, while suggesting translucence.

Higher up it was sky. But when you were up there it wasn’t like you could see beyond the barrier. If you tried, the barrier was just opaque again.

Tricky tricky. Like a street magician's sleight of hand, Sanjit thought.

He realized Virtue was talking again.

". . . once Bowie's completely better. Maybe Caine isn't totally unreasonable. I mean, he was starving before and that would make anyone unreasonable."

"Choo," Sanjit said. "Caine is pure, distilled essence of evil. What are you even talking about?"

"Okay, even if he's evil, maybe we can work out some kind of deal."

"You don't even believe that," Sanjit said.

Virtue slumped back, deflated. "Yeah."

"We are not going back to the island, my brother. We've been voted off. This is our home now."

Virtue nodded. He looked like a kid who had just gotten the news that he would be shot at dawn.

"Cheer up, Choo," Sanjit said. "There are a lot of good things about this place."

"You heard about the zombie, right? The one they've got locked in a basement? Half the time it's this nice Christian girl. And the rest of the time it's a psychopath with a whip for an arm?"

Sanjit made a thoughtful face. "I do believe I heard something about that. But really, Choo, it's not like a basement-dwelling Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde zombie is all that unusual."

Despite himself Virtue very nearly smiled. "Fine. Be that way, Wisdom."

"Don't use my slave name." It was an old joke between them. Sanjit had been born Sanjit, a homeless Hindu street kid in Buddhist Bangkok. When the actors Jennifer Brattle and Todd Chance had adopted him, they'd given him an aspirational name: Wisdom.

It never had fit. Wisdom meant . . . well, wisdom.

"You're not looking at the bright side, Choo," Sanjit said. He had in fact just spotted the bright side.

"Bright side? There's no bright side. What bright side?"

"Girls, Choo," Sanjit said, smiling hugely. "You'll understand in a few years."

Lana had come around the back of the hotel and was throwing a tennis ball to her dog. They were outlined against the faint glow of western horizon, and illuminated by the light of the moon just coming from behind the hills.

"I'm going to refuse to do puberty," Virtue grumbled. "It makes you stupid."

Sanjit barely heard him. He was walking toward Lana.

"Hi."

"What are you doing here?" Lana snapped. "No one comes to Clifftop without me saying so."

Sanjit said, "You missed a beautiful sunset."

"It's an illusion," Lana said. "It's not the real sun. None of it's real. The moon, the stars, all of it."

"Still beautiful, though."

"Fake."

"But beautiful."

Lana glared at him. And Sanjit had to admit: the girl could glare. The pistol in her waistband definitely added to the tough-girl look. But more it was that hurt-but-defiant

expression.

“So asking you to take a moonlit walk with me, that would totally not work?”

“What?” Again that glare. “Go away. Stop being an idiot. I don’t even know you.”

“You’re healing my little brother Bowie.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t make us friends, kid.”

“So no moonlight.”

“Are you retarded?”

“Sunrise? I could get up early.”

“Go away.”

“Sunset tomorrow?”

“Just what is your problem, kid? Do you know who I am? No one messes with me.”

“Do you know my name?”

“Which part of ‘go away’ do you not get? I could shoot you and no one would even say anything.”

“It’s Sanjit. It’s a Hindu name.”

“One word to Orc and he’d play basketball with your head.”

“It means ‘invincible.’”

“That’s great,” Lana said.

“Invincible. I can’t be vinned.”

“That’s not even a word,” Lana said. Then she ground her teeth, obviously annoyed with herself for having been baited.

“Go ahead: try to vince me,” Sanjit said.

Just then Patrick came rushing over. He dropped the ball at Sanjit’s feet, grinned his delirious dog grin, and waited.

“Don’t play with my dog,” Lana said.

Sanjit snatched up the ball and threw it. Patrick went tearing after it.

“You don’t scare me,” Sanjit said. He held up a hand, cutting Lana off before she could answer. “I’m not saying I shouldn’t be scared. I’ve heard some of the stories about you. About what happened. You went up against this gaiaphage thing all by yourself. Which means you are the second bravest girl I ever met. So I probably should be scared. I’m just not.”

He watched her struggle to resist asking. She lost. “Second bravest?”

“I’ll tell you the story when we go for that walk,” Sanjit said. He jerked a thumb toward the helicopter. “I better get back to town. Edilio wants a report from me.”

He turned and walked away.

NINE

54 HOURS, 9 MINUTES

SAM FOUND HIS little crew where they were supposed to be.

Dekka was almost smiling. Almost smiling was giddy for Dekka.

Taylor was checking her fingernails, being elaborately bored. Sam wondered if he should say something about the kiss. Something like, “I’m really sorry I groped you.”

Yeah: that would be really helpful.

Better to pretend it all never happened. Unfortunately Taylor was not known for letting things just drop.

Furthermore, she irritated Dekka. Dekka was Sam’s friend and his ally. The three people Sam knew he could always count on were Edilio, Brianna, and Dekka. Strange, because it wasn’t like they hung out together. Sam spent his time alone or with Astrid. He barely saw Edilio lately. He had nothing at all in common with Brianna—she was too young, too crazy, too . . . too Brianna to be someone Sam would hang with.

Quinn had been his best friend back before. But Quinn had a big job, a job he loved. Quinn’s friends were all his fishing crews. They were as tight as a very close family, the fishermen.

The fourth member of the expedition was Jack. Formerly Computer Jack—there were no longer any functioning computers around. Jack was wasting his days reading comic books and pouting.

Jack’s superhuman strength might come in handy, but Jack had never been much use. Although, Sam noted thoughtfully, Jack had stepped up during the big fire. Maybe he was growing up a bit. Maybe getting his head out of a computer was actually a good thing.

“You guys up for this?” Sam asked.

“Do I have to go?” Jack whined.

Sam shrugged. “Albert’s paying you, right? It’s better than playing strong man for him all day, isn’t it?”

Jack’s eyes flashed. Albert had started using Jack’s physical strength—to carry loads to the market, to move furniture—and Jack resented it. In Jack’s mind he was still the tech genius, the supergeek, not the freak strong man.

“Why do we have to do this in the middle of the night?” Taylor asked.

“Because we don’t want the whole town knowing why we’re going and where we’re going.”

“How can I tell anyone if I don’t even know myself?” Taylor stuck out her lower lip.

“Water. We’re going to look for water,” Sam said.

He could almost hear the wheels in Taylor’s head spinning. Then, “OMG, we’re out of water?” She bit her lip, took a couple of dramatic breaths, and wailed, “Do you mean we’re all going to die?”

“That would be a pretty good example of why we’re keeping this secret,” Sam said dryly.

“I just need to go—”

“Uh-uh!” Sam said. “No you don’t, Taylor. You don’t bounce anywhere or talk to anyone without me agreeing. Are we clear?”

“You know, Sam, you’re nice. And so very, very hot,” Taylor said. “But you’re not really much fun.”

“Let’s get out of here while we can,” Dekka said. “I brought a gun, by the way.”

“Are we going to be in danger?” Taylor cried.

“The gun’s in case you get on my nerves, Taylor,” Dekka warned.

“Oh, so funny,” Taylor said.

Sam grinned. For the first time in a while he was actually looking forward to something. A mission. And at least a temporary escape from Perdido Beach.

“Dekka’s right. Let’s get out of here before something happens I have to deal with,” Sam said.

Just at that moment he heard a sound like something large breaking. It was some distance away. A noise like twigs snapping. Probably some drunk idiot.

Sam chose to ignore it. Edilio’s worry, not his.

He headed toward the dark hills above town.

After a while Dekka took Sam’s arm and slowed him down. She let Jack and Taylor move out in front.

“Did Edilio or Astrid tell you?”

“I haven’t talked to Edilio. I steered clear. He’s going to be mightily annoyed with me when he realizes I skipped town and didn’t even tell him.”

Dekka waited.

“Okay,” Sam said with a sigh. “Tell me what?”

“It’s Hunter. He’s got some kind of . . . Well, it’s like these bugs all inside him. Astrid says they’re parasites.”

“Astrid says?” Sam snapped.

“So I guess you did see her before you left. And she didn’t tell you?”

“We had other things going on.”

“Oh?”

“No,” Sam said. “Not like that. Unfortunately. Tell me about Hunter.”

Dekka told him.

Sam’s face grew darker as he listened. So much for getting out of town before anything went wrong. This had “wrong” written all over it.

It sounded as if Hunter wasn’t going to be hunting much longer. Which meant the town would be running out of meat as well as water. They could probably survive without Hunter’s kills, but it sure would increase the sense of panic.

This mission had just gotten more important, not less.

“He said the greenies are on the morning side? Off the lake road? That’s what he said?”

Dekka nodded.

Sam called up to the other two who were arguing over something stupid. “Taylor! Jack! Veer right up there. We’re stopping off to see Hunter.”

Hunter woke suddenly. A noise.

It was a noise unlike anything he’d ever heard before. Close! Very close.

Like it was on him. Like it was . . .

Just in one ear.

He twisted his head. It was full night. Black as black in the woods far from the starlight.

He couldn't see anything.

But with his hands he could feel. The thing on his shoulder.

His ear . . . gone!

A terrible fear wrung a cry of horror from Hunter.

He couldn't feel it, his ear, or his shoulder, couldn't feel with anything but his fingers and he felt, reached beneath his shirt, felt the flesh of his belly pulse and heave.

Like something inside him.

No, no, no, it wasn't fair. It wasn't fair!

He was Hunter. The hunter. He was doing his best.

He cried. Tears rolled down his cheeks.

Who would bring meat for all the kids?

It wasn't fair.

The sound of munching, crunching started again. Just in one ear.

Hunter had only one weapon: the heat-causing power in his hands. He had used it many, many times to take the life of prey.

He had fed the kids with that power. And in a moment of fear and rage he had accidentally taken the life of his friend, Harry.

Maybe he could kill the thing that was eating his ear.

But it was too late for that to help.

Could he kill himself?

He saw Old Lion's head, eyes closed, hanging where he'd hung him for skinning. If Old Lion could die, so could Hunter.

Maybe they would meet again, up in the sky.

Hunter pressed both palms against his head.

Drake was free! Before him the shattered door. Above him a collapsed ceiling. His jail cell had been torn apart by his own jailer.

Now Drake was worried. At any minute the Brittney Pig might emerge. She could call for help, run to Sam, something, anything.

Drake had Jamal's gun. He ran his whip hand over it, loving the feel of it, loving the weight of it in his hand. With this gun and his whip he was unstoppable.

Except that he wasn't just himself, he was Brittney, too.

His mind raced feverishly. What could he do?

Jamal groaned. He started to get up but leaned on an arm that gave way with a sickening crunch.

Jamal shrieked in pain. His left arm hung limp, the shoulder dislocated. There was blood running freely from his nose. Blood seeping out of his ears. Oh yeah, Drake thought, the boy had taken a hard fall.

Drake straddled Jamal. He wrapped his whip arm around Jamal's throat, cutting off his cries of pain. He pressed the gun barrel against Jamal's forehead.

"You have three seconds to make a decision," Drake said, his voice silky. "Are you with me or against me?"

It didn't take Jamal three seconds. "I'll help you, I'll help you!" he blurted as soon

as Drake relaxed the pressure on his throat.

“Yeah? Well, listen good, jerkwad, because I don’t give second chances. Mess with me, disobey me, even hesitate, and I won’t kill you.”

Jamal’s brow creased in confusion.

“No, see, death, that’s the end of pain,” Drake said. “No, no killing. But I will whip you.”

With sudden gleeful ferocity Drake reared back and struck with his whip hand. It cut through Jamal’s pants and cut a stripe on his thigh.

Jamal bellowed.

Drake struck again, twice more while Jamal writhed and tried to cover himself with his one good arm.

“I wanted you to know what it will feel like,” Drake said. “Hurts, doesn’t it?”

Jamal was crying now, crying and too terrified to answer.

“I said: it hurts, doesn’t it?”

“Yes! Yes!” Jamal sobbed.

“No matter what you do, Jamal, no matter how smart or how tough you think you are, if you betray me, if you even look like you might betray me, I’ll whip you. And I’ll make it last. For hours. And I’ll leave you where the Healer can’t find you. Do you believe I’ll do that, Jamal?”

Jamal nodded frantically. “Yes! I believe it!”

“I can’t be killed, Jamal,” Drake said.

“I know!”

Drake handed him the gun. He watched closely to see whether Jamal truly did understand. He could see the moment when Jamal thought, “I can shoot him and run away.”

But he also saw the wheels spin in Jamal’s head as the boy worked it through to the inevitable conclusion.

He saw Jamal’s resistance evaporate.

“Smart boy,” Drake said. “Now, here’s what you do.”

TEN

52 HOURS, 37 MINUTES

“**WHY DID WE** have to sneak out of town in the nighttime?” Jack grumbled. “I’m tripping over everything.”

Jack, Sam, Dekka, and Taylor were across the highway, past the gas station, and climbing uphill. Moonlight touched the tall, dry grass with silver. But it didn’t reveal the smaller rocks that poked up through the dust-dry ground and stubbed toes or tripped you so you landed on your hands and knees and looked like an idiot.

Jack was not interested in going on some long, dangerous walk. Especially at night. Or in the daytime, for that matter. What he wanted to do was just lie in his bed. Just lie in his bed and read.

He had a pile of books. They were the only thing to do. No internet. No computers. Not even electricity.

Of course that was his fault. His fault for being tricked by Caine and especially that witch, Diana.

He had a hard time saying no to girls. Especially Brianna, who seemed to be able to get him to do anything she wanted.

Brianna kind of lived with him. They were kind of going together, he guessed. Although they didn’t actually do anything. Like make out or anything. That didn’t happen.

Jack had thought seriously about asking Brianna if she would make out with him. She was cute. He liked her. He guessed she liked him. They had taken care of each other when the flu was going around.

But . . . It occurred to Jack that Sam had not answered.

“Why are we sneaking out in the night?” Jack repeated.

“I already explained,” Sam snapped. “If you don’t listen—”

Taylor jumped in to say, “Because otherwise Astrid would find some way to stop him.” She mimicked Astrid’s voice, injecting it with steel and a tense, condescending tone. “Sam. I am the smartest, hottest girl in the world. So do what I tell you. Good boy. Down, boy. Down!”

Sam remained silent, walking steadily just a few feet ahead.

Taylor continued, “Oh, Sam, if only you could be as smart plus as totally goody-goody as I am. If only you could realize that you will never be good enough to have me, me, wonderful me, Astrid the Blond Genius.”

“Sam, can I shoot her now?” Dekka asked. “Or is it too soon?”

“Wait until we’re over the ridge,” Sam said. “It’ll muffle the sound.”

“Sorry, Dekka,” Taylor said. “I know you don’t like talking about boy-girl things.”

“Taylor,” Sam warned.

“Yes, Sam?”

“You might want to think about how hard it would be to walk if someone were to turn off gravity under your feet every now and then.”

“I wonder who would do that?” Dekka said.

Suddenly Taylor fell flat on her face.

“You tripped me!” Taylor said, more shocked than angry.

“Me?” Dekka spread her hands in a completely unconvincing gesture of innocence. “Hey, I’m all the way over here.”

“I’m just saying: you can see where that could make a long walk just a lot longer,” Sam said.

“You guys are so not fun,” Taylor grumped. She bounced instantaneously to just behind Sam. She grabbed his butt, he yelled, “Hey!” and she bounced away innocently.

“To answer your question, Jack,” Sam said, “we are sneaking out at night so that everyone doesn’t know we’re gone and why. They’ll figure it out soon enough, but Edilio will have to have more of his guys on the streets if I’m not there playing the big, bad wolf. More stress for everyone.”

“Oh,” Jack said.

“The big, bad wolf,” Taylor said. She laughed. “So, when you play that fantasy in your head is Astrid Little Red Riding Hood or one of the Three Little Pigs?”

“Dekka,” Sam said.

“Hah! Too slow!” Taylor said. She was suddenly twenty feet away and behind Dekka.

They had reached the ridge. The trees started in the valley beyond and spread up the next hill. The small valley tended to capture damp breezes off the ocean—back when there were breezes. And a small stream—now almost dry since it was cut off from the high, snow-capped peaks beyond the barrier—ran along the floor of the valley.

“Try not to make too much noise, huh, guys? Hunter may be out hunting. We don’t want to stomp around and scare off his prey.”

“So no more falling on your face, Jack,” Taylor teased.

A sound, a wail, rose from the trees downhill.

“What was that?” Jack asked.

It came again. A cry of utter despair.

Jack expected Sam to take off running. Instead he took a deep breath and in a low voice said, “I don’t think you guys need to see this.”

“See what?” Taylor asked.

Sam set off downhill. He didn’t ask them to come with him. But he didn’t order them not to. So they followed.

Once in the pitch-blackness under the trees Sam used his powers to turn one hand into a sort of dull, glowing green light. It made it easier to see the trees, but it turned everything into a nightmare scene.

“Hunter?” Sam called out.

“Don’t come here!” Hunter’s voice, wracked with sadness, was closer than Jack expected.

They followed the sound of his voice. Closer, and now they could hear him crying. It wasn’t a big kid’s cry, it was like a toddler’s. Big, heaving sobs.

Again Sam said, “Guys, stay back. You don’t have to see this.”

But again they ignored him. Not Jack at first but Dekka, who went because she was brave and wanted to help, even though she guessed what she would find; Taylor because she was curious and wanted to see; Jack because he didn’t want to be left

behind alone in total darkness.

Hunter was sitting up. He was in the middle of a neat camp: glowing embers from a dying fire, a small tent, a makeshift shelf of sticks and vines where Hunter had a pan and a pot and a plate. A mountain lion hung from a rope looped over a high branch.

Hunter's entire body writhed and squirmed.

The side of his head was partly gone. A creature, like some monstrous melding of insect and eel, protruded from Hunter's shoulder and as they stood there rooted in horror it took a vicious bite of Hunter's flesh.

Taylor was suddenly gone.

Dekka's face was grim, her eyes wet.

"I tried . . .," Hunter said. He held up his hands, mimicked pressing them against his head. "It didn't work."

"I can do it," Sam said softly.

"I'm scared," Hunter said.

"I know."

"It's 'cause I killed Harry. God has to punish me. I tried to be good but I'm bad."

"No, Hunter," Sam said gently. "You paid your dues. You fed the kids. You're a good guy."

"I'm a good hunter."

"The best."

"I don't know what's happening. What's happening, Sam?"

"It's just the FAYZ, Hunter," Sam said.

"Can the angels find me here so I can go to heaven?"

Sam didn't answer. It was Dekka who spoke. "Do you still remember any prayers, Hunter?"

The insectlike creature was almost completely emerged from Hunter's shoulder. Legs were becoming visible. It had wings folded against its body. It looked like a gigantic ant, or wasp, but silver and brass and covered with a sheen of slime.

It was emerging like a chicken breaking out of an egg. Being born. And as the creature was born, it fed on Hunter's numbed body.

Jerky movements beneath Hunter's shirt testified to more of the larvae emerging.

"Do you remember 'now I lay me down to sleep'?" Dekka asked.

"Now I lay me down to sleep," Hunter said. "I pray the Lord my soul to keep."

Sam raised his hands, palms out.

"If I should die—"

Twin beams of light hit Hunter's chest and face. His shirt caught fire. Flesh melted. He was dead before he could feel anything.

Sam played the light up and down Hunter's body. The smell was sickening. Jack wanted to look away, but how could he?

Sudden darkness as Sam terminated the light.

Sam lowered his hands to his side.

They stood there in the darkness. Jack breathed through his mouth, trying not to smell the burned flesh.

Then they heard a sound. Many sounds.

Sam raised his hands and pale light glowed.

Hunter was all but gone.

The things that had been inside him were still there.

His knock at her door was soft. Diana almost didn't hear it.

She took a shaky breath. He had come. She'd figured he would.

"Who is it?" Diana asked.

"Sam," Caine said.

Diana opened the door. He was leaning against the frame. His body language and expression were not those of someone who was happy.

"Funny," Diana said.

Caine pushed past her into the room. "Close the door and lock it," Caine ordered. "Bug: if you're in here and I catch you I will kill you. You have till I count to ten to get out."

Caine and Diana both waited and watched the door. It did not open.

"I don't think he's here," Diana said. "I can usually smell him."

They stood awkwardly apart. Like strangers. Diana noticed that Caine had bathed and combed his hair. He was usually as well put-together as circumstances would allow. But this was a special effort.

Diana had decided against any special outfit. It wasn't about lingerie or whatever. She was dressed in jeans and a blouse. Barefoot. She had avoided makeup.

"You want me to be Sam," Caine said. "I'm not Sam. I'm me."

"I don't want you to be Sam," Diana said.

"You don't want me to be me," Caine said.

Diana considered him. Handsome, no question. Cruel. Intelligent.

"There's more than one you, Caine," Diana said.

He blinked. "What's that mean?"

"You're not Drake."

Caine waved off the suggestion and his face registered disgust. "Drake's a sick creep. I just do what I have to do. I don't get off on it. He's a psycho. I'm . . ." He searched for the right word. ". . . ambitious."

Diana laughed. Not a derisive laugh, a genuine laugh of astonishment.

"What? I *am* ambitious," Caine said.

"That's one word for it," Diana said. "Power hungry. Domineering. A bully."

"I'm not good at taking orders," Caine said.

Diana grinned. "No. You're not."

They both fell silent. Diana looked at him. He looked down at the floor.

"But you did take orders. From the Darkness, Caine."

Caine flushed angrily. He turned away. He walked quickly back to the door. But he stopped before touching the handle.

"The lights are off in Perdido Beach because you took orders," Diana said.

"Who was it that buried that thing in its mine shaft?" Caine demanded, his voice ragged.

"You."

"Yeah," Caine said. "And saved Sam in the process."

"Yes. And soon after that we became cannibals."

"We have food now," Caine said. "Lots of food."

He walked back to Diana, reached to touch her, but this time she walked away. She

stood at the window. The false moon was setting. It dabbled the distant hilltops with silver.

“It was too much,” Diana said, almost to herself. “Everything else I could kind of accept. The violence. The battles. What we did to Andrew and what you did to Chunk. And all the rest. I mean, it all sort of left a bruise on me, you know?”

Caine did not answer.

“Inside. In my heart. In my soul.” She laughed at herself. “Diana Ladris’s soul. Right.”

“It was a low point,” Caine admitted.

“You think?” Diana snapped, looking over her shoulder at him with a trace of her usual mockery. “Eating human flesh, that was a low point?”

“We had no—”

“Oh, shut up,” Diana said. She turned away from the window. There were tears in her eyes and she hadn’t wanted him to see. The last thing she wanted was to seem weak.

But he did see now. The shock on his face almost made her laugh again.

“All my life I’ve been a tough girl,” Diana said. “I was cool with that. People would say, *Diana’s a bitch. Diana’s a slut. Diana’s mean.* All that I could deal with because I guess it was basically true. Now they’re going to look at me and say, *Diana’s a cannibal?* How do I live with that?” She was shouting suddenly.

“Who are these people you’re worried about? Penny? Bug?”

“What if we get out? People! People!” She hesitated. “And God.” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “And my kids. Someday.”

“Kids?” Caine’s look of confusion and consternation finally did force a laugh from Diana.

“Yes. Someday. Could happen. That’s right: the day may come when I have a baby. Maybe even more than one.”

Caine said, “Um . . .” He made a vague gesture with his hands. He made several attempts to say something. None were successful.

“Do you love me?” Diana asked.

Caine’s eyes widened. She could actually see him twitch. Like a startled animal. Like a rabbit who had just heard a fox.

“It’s a yes or no question,” Diana said acidly. “But I’ll accept a nod or a shake of the head or an incoherent grunt.”

“I . . . I don’t know what you mean by that,” Caine said lamely.

“When I jumped off the cliff, you saved me even though it meant letting Sanjit and the others escape.”

“You didn’t give me much choice,” Caine said peevishly.

“You had a choice. You wanted to destroy them.”

“Okay.”

“Why did you make that choice?”

Caine swallowed and seemed to find his palms sweaty since he rubbed them on his sides.

Diana walked to the door. She unlocked it and held it open. “Go away,” she said. “Come back when you figure out your answer.”

“But . . .”

“Yeah: not happening. Not tonight.”

Caine escaped into the hallway.

Diana undressed and crawled under the sheets. Then she beat the pillows with her fists until feathers flew.

ELEVEN

50 HOURS, 21 MINUTES

“EDILIO. WAKE UP!”

Edilio blinked. Rubbed his eyes. Saw Brianna standing there next to his bed.

“What?” he mumbled.

“Albert told me to get you,” Brianna said.

Brianna always looked determined, pugnacious, and tough. Just sitting around, she looked all of those things. But now she was armed for battle.

She had a small runner’s backpack converted to a sort of holster. She’d cut a hole in the bottom so the barrel of a sawed-off shotgun could stick through. The stock was just where she could reach over her shoulder and grab it.

She had a long knife, a bowie knife, in a scabbard hanging from a camouflage belt. The scabbard was tied to her leg so it wouldn’t flap when she ran. A dozen red plastic shotgun shells rode snugly in slots on the belt.

A summons in the middle of the night was bad. A summons in the middle of the night from a heavily armed Brianna was worse.

Much worse.

“What happened?”

“Drake,” Brianna said. Then she grinned. Because that was Brianna.

Edilio sat up. “Okay. You got Sam?”

“Can’t find Sam,” Brianna said.

Edilio felt an overpowering desire to go back to sleep. Drake on the loose? And no Sam? “Where’s Albert?”

“He said he’d meet you at town hall,” Brianna said. “He’s rounding up the others. The council.” She said that last word with a sneer.

Edilio stabbed a finger at her. “You do not go after Drake on your own.”

“Yeah? Who else you got?” Brianna said.

Edilio didn’t have a good answer to that. “Get Dekka. And get Astrid. I don’t care if you have to drag her by her hair, you get Astrid to town hall.”

Brianna was way too happy at that prospect. She spun, blurred, and was gone.

Edilio dressed quickly, grabbed his weapons, and ran the few blocks to town hall, hoping he could make it that far without running into Drake. He would fight if he had to, but it was hard to win a fight against someone who couldn’t be killed.

He was the first to arrive at town hall. Albert was next, dressed in spotless business casual as always. Howard came in, looking shell-shocked.

“I can’t find him. I can’t find him.” Howard was weeping. “I think he fell through the floor, I mean, you know how big Orc is. Then Drake, he busted out and . . . Orc’s most likely drunk.”

“Most likely,” Edilio snapped. “Since you make sure he stays that way, Howard.”

“We didn’t ask to be running some prison for zombies,” Howard shot back.

“Where were you when this went down?” Edilio accused.

“I was . . . I had to see a dude.”

Delivering bottles of booze, Edilio knew. When would the alcohol supply run out?

Everything else had run out. “Have either of you seen Sam? Brianna can’t find him.”

Albert sighed. “He’s out of town.”

Edilio felt the blood drain out of his face. “He’s what?”

Astrid arrived, coldly furious. “I’m not on the council anymore. You have no right —”

“Shut up, Astrid,” Edilio said.

Astrid, Albert, and Howard all stared. Edilio was as amazed as any of them. He considered apologizing—he had never spoken to Astrid that way. He’d never spoken to anyone that way.

The truth was he was scared. Sam was out of town? With Drake running loose?

“What makes you think Sam is out of town?” Edilio asked Albert.

“I sent him,” Albert said. “Him and Dekka. Taylor and Jack, too. They’re looking for water.”

“They’re what?”

“Looking for water.”

Edilio shot a glance at Astrid. She looked down. So: she knew it, too.

Edilio swallowed hard. He was finding it hard to breathe. And at the same time he was finding it hard not to scream at Albert and Astrid both. Both of them so smart, so superior. Dumping this on him now.

Howard said, “Orc must have gone after Drake. Oh, man, I don’t know if he can beat Drake, not like Drake is now. Oh, man.”

Edilio hoped Howard was right that Orc was chasing Drake. He hoped it mightily because the alternative was that he had not one but two monsters running around town. Mostly when Orc was drunk he just sat. But sometimes he got himself worked into an angry drunk, and then things got crazy.

Edilio glanced at the door. One or both could come busting in here at any second.

His gun was at his side. For all the good it would do.

“Brianna’s looking for Drake,” Edilio said, thinking out loud.

“You sent her out against Drake?” Albert demanded.

“Sent her? Who sends Brianna out to get into a fight? She goes on her own. Anyway, it’s not like you’ve left us with anyone else.”

Albert had the decency not to say anything to that.

“You know, you guys put me in charge. I didn’t ask to be in charge. I didn’t want to be in charge. Sam was in charge and all you guys ever did was give him grief,” Edilio said. “You two, especially.” He pointed at Albert and Astrid. “So, okay, Astrid takes over. And then Astrid finds out it’s not so much fun being in charge. So it’s like, okay, let’s get the dumb wetback to do the job.”

“No one ever—,” Astrid protested.

“And me, like a fool, I’m thinking, okay, that must mean people trust me. They asked me to be in charge, be the mayor. Come to find out, I’m not making decisions; Albert’s making decisions. Albert’s deciding we need to find more water and sending our two best fighters off into the countryside. Now I’m supposed to fix everything? It’s like you go, ‘Fight a war,’ but you sent my army off on a wild goose chase.”

“The water situation’s worse than you realize,” Albert said.

“Listen to yourself, man!” Edilio exploded. “Why don’t I know what the water situation is? Because you run all that and you don’t tell me. You don’t tell me what’s

going on and then you send Sam off on a nice walk. You know, Albert, you want so bad to be the big man, the Donald Trump of Perdido Beach, why don't you go deal with Drake? Why are you coming to me?"

He was starting to fantasize about using his gun on Albert when Taylor suddenly appeared in the room. Everyone jumped about six inches.

"Jeez, would you stop that?" Howard yelled. "Give me a heart attack."

"Hunter's dead," Taylor said without preamble. "It was these . . . these things. They came crawling up out of him and were eating him, oh God, I mean, it was like . . . I mean he was crying and Dekka prayed with him and he tried to fry his own brain just like he did with Harry only I guess it didn't work, I guess he couldn't do it, so Sam . . ." She swallowed. "Anyone have some water?"

"What about Sam?" Astrid demanded.

"He did it for him. Sam. I mean, he . . . Hunter was, you know . . . so Sam." She pantomimed raising her hands, like Sam, like he would do when using his power.

Astrid closed her eyes and crossed herself.

"Rest in peace," Edilio said and crossed himself as well.

"Sam burned the boy?" Howard asked. Then, bitterly sarcastic said, "Yeah, you all pray to Jesus. Because Jesus is really providing a lot of help here. Sounds to me like Sam was the one doing what had to be done."

"Look, I need a glass of water or something," Taylor pleaded. She sat down on the floor, leaned back against the wall, and started crying.

Edilio pulled open a drawer in the big desk. He had a water bottle, but just an inch was left in it. Reluctantly he handed it to Astrid, who passed it to Taylor.

Taylor drained the water. "That's not all. Sam sent me to give you a message, Edilio. He said, 'Tell Edilio I couldn't kill the bugs.'"

"The things that came out of Hunter?" Howard asked.

Taylor closed her eyes. Tears squeezed out and rolled down her cheeks. "Yes. The things that came out of Hunter. Sam shot them, you know, with his light. But they're like, reflective or whatever. Anyway, it didn't kill them."

"Sam can burn through a brick wall," Howard said. "What kind of thing is it he can't kill?" Then he answered his own question. "Something very nasty."

"Taylor, bounce back and tell Sam to come back to town," Albert said.

"I'm not going back there!" Taylor cried.

"Whoa," Edilio said, holding up both hands. "Hey, you don't decide this, Albert. You don't give orders. I'm the mayor, and there are four council members here. You, me, Ellen, and Howard."

Albert looked like he might argue, but Astrid stepped in. "Taylor, what did Sam say he was going to do next?"

"He said something about going to take out the cave where the greenies live. Where Hunter told them they are. That's why I'm not going back. You didn't see those things crawling out of Hunter, eating him alive."

Suddenly Albert jerked. Like someone had stuck a pin in him. "I forgot. I was busy . . . I was . . ." His eyes were fearful. "Roscoe. Roscoe was bitten by one of those things in Hunter. He told me, I didn't think that . . ." He looked at Astrid. "When Hunter was delivering his kills. Roscoe said something under Hunter's shirt bit him. I just forgot."

From outside there came the sound of a bellowing, anguished roar. Then the sound of smashing glass.

“Orc,” Howard said.

“See if you can find him, talk to him,” Edilio said. But Howard was already on his way out the door.

No one spoke for a few minutes. They heard another smash, more like metal this time.

Edilio used the silence to think. Orc drunk and on a rampage. Well, it wasn’t the first time, but it was bad. Orc had become an asset lately. If he was back to being a danger again then that was very bad news. More likely it was just temporary and Howard would get him under control.

The Roscoe thing was bad. Very bad. Edilio knew what he should do. And he didn’t like it.

As for Drake, well, that was the real problem, that and the water.

Edilio had some help, some soldiers, some pretty good, some pretty useless. He had Brianna.

Could Brianna take on Drake?

“What will Drake do?” Edilio asked.

“He’s not just Drake,” Astrid said. “Remember, he’s Brittney, too. That makes it hard for him. If he makes some plan, she can unmake it when she takes over. If he tries to sneak up on anyone, he has to worry that she’ll emerge and screw it up.”

“Yeah,” Albert said, brightening. “Yeah, that’s right. It’s not Drake, it’s Drake slash Brittney.”

“If we get a chance at Brittney, we could tie her up, lock her up,” Edilio said. “Yeah. If Brianna finds him we have her follow him, watch, and let us know when Brittney comes out.”

“That’s a plan,” Albert said, obviously relieved. “So we let Sam keep going.”

Edilio nodded. “For now. But Taylor, we may still need—”

Taylor was no longer in the room.

TWELVE

48 HOURS, 54 MINUTES

SO VERY, VERY sweet to be out of that basement. To be breathing fresh air.

Drake stuck close to the shadows of burned-out houses so the fresh air smelled of ash and charcoal and melted plastic. But it was better than the mildew and dust in the basement.

Drake had a list in his head. Sam. Caine. Dekka. Brianna. They would die first. As quickly as Drake could kill them.

That had been his big mistake with Sam at the power plant. He had taken his time to enjoy whipping him. Even now the memory of it sent a shudder of sheer pleasure through Drake's body.

But he had taken too long killing Sam and then Brianna had showed up.

Not this time. This time he would start by killing Sam. Then, if he could find him, Caine.

That was the thing with the powerful freaks, you had to kill them quick. You had to strike with speed and surprise.

Sam. Caine. Dekka. Brianna. Orc and Taylor, too.

And then, with them gone, he could take his sweet time with Astrid. And even longer with Diana.

Drake laughed out loud.

Jamal said, "What's so funny?"

"I'm Santa Claus, Jamal. Making a list, checking it twice."

Jamal stayed a few steps behind him. Toting his big automatic rifle in his one good arm. The other arm in a makeshift sling. Scared out of his mind, no doubt. Still feeling the burn of Drake's whip. Oh, yes, he would feel that for quite some time.

"Where is Sam staying?" Drake asked Jamal.

"Albert sent him off to look for something out in the woods or whatever. Out there." Jamal gestured vaguely. "I wasn't supposed to know, but I heard."

Drake turned on Jamal. "What? Sam's not here?" He'd missed out on a lot, being trapped like an animal.

"He'll be back in a couple days, I guess."

Drake cursed. "Where's Caine, then?"

"He's on some island, like, where these rich dudes lived in the old days."

Worse and worse.

No. No . . . Better and better.

Drake grinned. Neither of the big powers was around to stop him. Change of plans.

"Dekka?"

Jamal shrugged. "I don't know, man, I don't follow that scary dyke around town."

"Now, now," Drake chided mockingly. "We mustn't diss people because of what they are." He took Jamal's face in his hand and squeezed. "I'm going to kill her but not because of what she is, right? I'm going to murder her because she has to be murdered. You good with that, Jamal?"

Jamal was as tense and stiff as a board. He made an affirmative grunt.

“You down with murder?” Drake pressed, sticking his face right in Jamal’s. “I want to hear it from you.”

He watched as a curtain dropped behind Jamal’s eyes. Jamal said, “Yeah. Yeah, Drake.”

“Then let’s go murder some people,” Drake said cheerfully and released Jamal’s face.

Drake walked half a block and stopped.

“Not now,” he groaned. He cursed extravagantly, but already he was changing. Metal braces formed on his teeth. His lean body grew flabbier.

“Brittney’s coming,” Drake snarled. “But I’ll be back, Jamal. Don’t for—”

Sam, Dekka, and Jack had stopped for a meal a half mile from Hunter’s camp. Some cooked fish that smelled none too fresh, boiled artichokes, and some pigeon jerky.

They’d thought about just going to sleep, but no one had wanted to. The horror was far too fresh. Sleep would only mean nightmares. And Sam did not want to see Hunter again.

In the dark they could only make slow progress, but everyone wanted some distance and to get the expedition done. The high spirits were gone. Fear and loathing tracked them in the dark.

Jack was trailing well behind when Sam and Dekka had started talking, killing time as they walked slowly, cautiously, through waist-high brush. Talking, talking about anything but Hunter’s sad cries.

It had started with Sam admitting that yes, he had made a play for Taylor but noting that he had been very, very drunk. From there it had gone to his relationship with Astrid, which he did not want to talk about. Any thought of Astrid was laced with pain and loneliness. What he had done to Hunter, what he had seen happening to Hunter, filled him with a powerful longing to be with Astrid. They had been through so much already. How many times had he held her and reassured her everything would be all right? How many times had she kissed him and put her arms around him when she knew he was spiraling down into depression?

From the start, from the first day, they had been each other’s strength.

Not that they’d never fought. They were both strong willed and they had fought many times over things large and small. But the fights had always gone somewhere, they’d been worked through and resolved.

But now this cold distance between them. Something inside Astrid had broken after Mary’s death. That day had killed some part of Astrid and now it was like she didn’t even care enough to fight.

Sam said some of that to Dekka, talking out of sheer loneliness and need. But it made him uncomfortable, like he was betraying Astrid even talking about her.

And the truth was, so much of the problem between him and Astrid wasn’t about anything earth-shattering, it was just about sex. And Sam couldn’t really talk about that without sounding more like a jerk than he could stand.

So he diverted the conversation to Dekka. Which led to talking about Brianna. And Sam found himself quickly trapped in a conversation that was every bit as uncomfortable as talking about Astrid.

“I know you mean well, Sam,” Dekka was saying.

“The worst that happens is Brianna says, ‘No way, I’m not gay.’” He glanced back at Jack to make sure he was out of earshot.

Dekka sighed. “You don’t understand, Sam. You think that’s all there is to it, just be honest. But see, right now I have this little, tiny like, like flower of hope, right? It’s not much, but it’s what I am holding on to. I just . . . I can’t have her look at me and laugh. Or make a face and be grossed out. Because then I have nothing.”

It was the longest speech Sam had ever heard Dekka deliver.

“Yeah,” he said. “I get that.” He fervently wished he’d never opened his mouth.

There was a noise in the bushes off to one side. “Is that you, Jack?” Sam called in a loud voice.

“I’m over here,” Jack said, from the completely opposite direction. “I’m . . . I’m peeing.”

Sam stopped. He made a gesture to Dekka, indicating she should shield her eyes. Then he launched a fireball into the air, a Sammy sun. The bushes immediately became a green-tinged ghost space.

Just off the trail a coyote flinched at the light but did not run away. It snarled, bared its teeth, and crouched for a leap.

Dekka was faster than Sam. The coyote found itself floating a few feet off the ground, unable to kick, unable to leap.

It was a bizarre sight, the mangy, dirt-yellow coyote squirming and yowling in midair. But at last it let itself go limp.

“Why are you attacking us?” Sam asked. “Does Pack Leader know you’re trying to kill humans?”

“I Pack Leader,” the coyote said in its strangled, weird voice.

Sam stepped closer. Humans were not the only creatures to have evolved in the lawless universe of the FAYZ. One of the earliest had been the coyotes who served the gaiaphage. Some had mutated to develop the shorter tongues and flattened muzzles that allowed them a mangled sort of speech.

“Look,” Jack said. He was coming closer, pointing. “He has them, too.”

Sam walked cautiously around Pack Leader to see the other side. There were the insect jaws protruding from the matted fur. Two, maybe three of them.

“I came for hunter kill me,” Pack Leader said.

Sam knew this was not the original Pack Leader. Lana had killed that Pack Leader. But whether this was the second coyote to hold the title or some other coyote, he didn’t know. This one had slightly better powers of speech than the first.

“Hunter’s dead,” Sam said.

“You kill.”

“Yes.”

“Kill me, Bright Hands.”

Sam had no sympathy for the coyote. The coyotes had participated in the town plaza massacre. There were bodies buried in the cemetery that had been so badly ripped by coyote teeth that they were unrecognizable.

“The flying snakes cause this?” Sam asked, pointing at the awful parasites.

“Yes.”

“Where are they?”

Pack Leader made a purely coyote growl deep in his throat. “No words.”

“Then show us,” Sam said. “Take us to them.”

“Then you burn me?”

“Then I’ll burn you.”

At first Brittney was confused. She wondered if she was dreaming. Dreaming of fresh, cool air and a sky overhead.

But no, she was not in the basement.

Drake had escaped!

She had to do something. Had to warn someone. Even if it meant being returned to the basement. If Drake was loose in the world, he would do evil.

But to be locked away again . . . Surely she could take just a moment to be free. Just a moment . . .

She realized she was not alone.

“Who are you?”

“Jamal. I . . . I work for Albert, kind of. A bodyguard, like.”

The boy stood stiff, rigid, hand gripping the stock of his rifle too tightly. His other arm had been hurt.

“Why are you here, Jamal? Are you here to catch Drake?” She noticed a few feet of rope coiled and hung from Jamal’s belt. “I don’t think you can tie him up. He’s very dangerous.”

“I know that,” Jamal said. He was tugging the rope free.

Brittney suddenly understood why Jamal was there. She bolted.

Jamal ran after her.

“Don’t run or I have to shoot you,” Jamal cried.

He was faster than she was. Everyone was faster than Brittney. But he was fumbling one-handed with the rope and had to sling the gun over his shoulder. All Brittney had to do was run.

She burst into the town plaza. Not knowing what she was looking for, not consciously. But she found herself running up the stone steps toward the ruined church.

Jamal caught her on the steps, grabbed her hair, and yanked back. Her legs went out from under her and she fell hard on her back, slamming onto sharp-edged granite.

But Brittney no longer felt real pain. She had long since gone beyond pain.

Jamal tried to straddle her, but he tripped on the rope and she pushed away from him.

“Stop it!” Jamal yelled.

Brittney rolled down a couple of steps, climbed to her feet, and plowed straight back into Jamal. She knocked him aside and dashed past him.

The church roof had collapsed long ago. But a path had been cleared to the inside. The cross had been propped back upright, leaning a bit but still there, silver in the moonlight.

Brittney ran toward the cross, tripped on debris, and slammed into a pew.

Jamal was on her in a flash, cursing, fumbling, trying to grab her, swat away her punching hands, trying to get the rope around her.

“No! No! No!” Brittney shouted.

Jamal punched her in the side of the head.

Brittney blinked and punched back. She kicked and flailed and punched as well as she could from her position half beneath a pew. And Jamal kicked her back viciously.

But Jamal could still feel pain. He backed away suddenly, eyes wild and dripping sweat. He leveled the rifle at her.

“I don’t want to shoot you,” Jamal pleaded.

“You can’t kill me,” Brittney said and got heavily to her feet.

“I know. Drake told me you’d say that. But I can blow up your face and then you won’t be better right away. That’s what he said. He told me to shoot you right in the face and tie you up.”

“I wish you could kill me,” Brittney said. And then, in a loud voice, trying to shout at heaven, she cried, “Jesus, I am in your house. I am in the house of the Lord begging you for death!”

“Just let me tie you up,” Jamal pleaded. “He’ll whip me if I don’t.” There were tears running down his face and Brittney felt sorry for him. They were both bound to Drake, unable to get away from him.

Jamal aimed the gun at her face.

“Don’t,” Brittney said. “We have to fight Drake, we have to get help. Sam. He has to burn Drake to ashes and scatter the ashes in the ocean.”

“Please don’t make me do this,” Jamal pleaded.

Brittney yelled, “Help! Some—”

Orc had run until he was tired. That didn’t take long. He was drunk and dehydrated. Weaker than he should have been. More easily tired.

But despair drove him on, staggering and weeping and bellowing in rage through the night.

“Never wanted to be no guard,” he yelled at the closed and darkened houses. “Everybody hear that? I didn’t ask to be no prison guard!”

He stood swaying back and forth, big stone-fingered fists clenched.

“No one wants to talk to me, huh?”

He smashed one arm down on the roof of a car. The driver’s-side window had long since been beaten in so the door could be opened and the car could be searched. The trunk was open, too, and the recoil from Orc’s blow made it bounce.

“Need another bottle,” he muttered. Then louder, yelling at the darkened windows and locked doors, “I want a bottle. Someone give me a bottle so I won’t hurt anyone.”

No answer. The streets were silent.

He started crying again and brushed angrily at the tears. He started running once more, ran for a block and stopped, wheezing and threatening to topple over.

Then he spotted the boy. A kid. Maybe eight, maybe nine or ten, hard to say. The boy was walking bent over, holding his stomach. Every few feet he would stop and cough and then groan from the pain of coughing.

“Hey-ey!” Orc yelled. “You! Go get me a bottle.” The word “bottle” came out “bah-hull.”

The sick boy blinked and seemed only then to notice the monster in the street ahead of him. He clutched a stop sign to keep himself from collapsing.

“Hey. You, kid. I’m talking to you!”

The boy started to answer, then started coughing. He coughed and groaned and sat

down.

Orc stomped over to him. “You ig, um, ig . . . ignoring me?”

The boy shook his head weakly. He made a gesture toward his throat, tried to speak, couldn’t.

“I don’t want to . . . ,” Orc began, but lost the thread of his speech. “Just go get me a bah-hull.”

The boy coughed in Orc’s face.

Orc swatted him with the back of his hand.

The boy hit the signpost so hard it rang. Then fell onto his back on the sidewalk.

Orc stared stupidly, expecting the boy to start crying. But the kid wasn’t moving. Wasn’t coughing.

Orc felt ice water flood his veins.

“I didn’t . . . ,” Orc started to say.

He looked around, feeling sudden, overwhelming shame. No one had seen him.

He tried to lean down and prod the boy with his finger, but the blood rushed to his head and he almost passed out.

“Whatever,” Orc said sullenly, and headed off again into the night.

But quieter now.

THIRTEEN

48 HOURS, 29 MINUTES

BRIANNA TOOK A deep breath of chilly night air. Was that a breeze? Excellent: a breeze for the Breeze.

“Here, Drake-y, Drake-y,” she said.

She was in the middle of the street. As long as Drake hadn’t found a gun, she would be safe. Drake was quick with that whip hand of his, but not Breeze quick. No one was Breeze quick.

“Oh, Dra-ake,” she sang in a loud voice. “Oh, Dra-ake. Come out, come out wherever you are.”

She ran down Pacific Boulevard, turned onto Brace, and shot back up Golding.

She heard Orc bellowing drunkenly in the distance. It would be easy to locate him. But Orc wasn’t the problem.

No sign of Drake. She paused at the corner. Either she could just zoom randomly around or she could go methodically, street by street.

Methodical was not Brianna’s thing.

Better to taunt him, tease him into showing himself. “Here, Drake-y, Drake-y.”

She zoomed to Astrid’s house. No sign of him there.

She zoomed to the firehouse. To the school. To Clifftop and down the beach, kicking a tail of sand behind her as she ran.

Where would he go? What would he do?

It dawned on her then: Brittney. What was Drake going to do about Brittney?

As far as Brianna knew, Drake had no power to stop Brittney from emerging.

Where would Brittney go if she were free?

Brianna turned her gaze to the ruined church. And just then, she heard the sound of voices from within.

She zoomed up the stairs and into the church as . . .

BLAM!

The explosion, a stab of yellow, blinded her. She stopped as fast as she could, but not fast enough. She slammed into a pew and flew headfirst through the air, unable to see.

Anyone else would have smashed face-first into the marble altar, but Brianna was not anyone else. As she was flying she tucked, spun, and landed on her feet on the altar. Like a cat.

The wave of pain from the impact with the pew made her gasp. But she fought down the urge to scream.

Then she saw.

And then she did scream.

The rifle blast had hit Brittney in the face and neck. The entire left side of her face was gone. Her neck was torn open. She should be spouting blood. But although the shattered flesh was red and raw as uncooked hamburger, no arteries sprayed.

And Brittney was still standing.

Jamal made a sound like a tortured animal, a howl of fear.

He leveled the gun at Brittney's chest but in the half second it took him to find the trigger with his finger Brianna was on him.

She hit the barrel and knocked it away just as *BLAM!*

She grabbed Jamal by the neck, yanked him forward so fast his head snapped back. She punched him six times in less than a second and Jamal crumpled, blood gushing from his nose and lips.

"Don't hurt me, it's not my fault!" Jamal wailed as he dropped and curled into a ball protecting both the gun and his face.

Brianna did not want to look at Brittney, really really didn't.

"Are you okay?" she asked over her shoulder. No answer from Brittney. Not surprising since her mouth was smeared all around the back of her head.

Brianna steeled herself and shot a glance at Brittney, but the whip hand was already reaching, yanking Jamal's rifle away.

Brianna pulled her knife free and leaped at Drake.

She buried the knife in Drake's chest. It was a huge blade, a bowie knife, as big as a chef's knife and a lot thicker. The blade was in all the way, up to the hilt.

Drake grinned. "This should be fun."

Brianna expected him to try to turn the gun toward her but instead he tossed it aside. Then, with his real hand, he drew the knife out of his chest, slowly, as if relishing every inch of steel.

Brianna stared, mesmerized. And almost missed the sudden flick of Drake's tentacle arm as it swept behind her.

Almost missed.

Not quite.

Brianna dropped and the whip went over her head. Drake threw Brianna's own knife at her, but it wasn't even close. The knife stuck into the back of a pew.

Brianna pulled her sawed-off shotgun from her runner's pack, leveled, aimed, and fired.

The blast caught Drake in the mouth. It turned his thin-lipped smirk into a gaping hole, like a sinkhole.

Drake reached with his tentacle to feel the hole. He stuck the end of his whip hand into his own destroyed mouth. The pink-red tip came out through the back of his head and waved at Brianna.

Drake made a grunting sound that might have been a laugh if he'd had tongue and teeth and lips.

Brianna dropped back a few feet.

Drake's face seemed to melt and re-form. She could see individual teeth, white pearls in the starlight, moving like insects, crawling out of the shredded flesh to find places in newly reshaped gums.

Brianna felt for the wire she hung from her belt. It was an E string from a cello she'd found. She'd wrapped the ends around short pieces of wood to form a four-foot-long garrote.

"This is what you were going to do to me at the power plant, remember, Drake?" Brianna winced as Drake's tongue grew inside the still-gaping hole of his mouth.

"Oh, sorry, you can't really chitchat, can you?" Brianna taunted. "Well, the thing is, whether it's me running into a wire at two hundred miles an hour, or the wire

running into you at two hundred miles an hour, it works just the same.”

She grabbed the garrote and was behind Drake before he could blink. The wire went around Drake’s neck as she was still running. The wire bit and sliced, and she felt a powerful jerk in her hands that tore one handle from her grip as the wire sliced through neck bone.

Drake’s head fell. It hit the stone floor hard, and rolled onto its side, rocked a few times, and lay still.

Not enough, Brianna thought, turned, raced back, threw the loose end of the wire around Drake’s waist, caught the handle, and gripped with all her strength as she backpedaled at super speed.

The wire cut through Drake’s still-standing torso just below his ribs. It stopped at the spine.

Brianna yanked, but the wire would not cut the spine. She yanked and yanked and the meat of Drake’s body twisted sideways so she could see the insides, see the organs, the sliced raw flesh like steak, the pale intestine, and all of it clinical, like a drawing, like some hideous display.

And suddenly her frenzied yanking, legs pummeling the slippery marble for purchase, succeeded, and with a grinding, grisly sound the spine parted and Drake fell in two pieces to the floor.

Brianna was aware of screaming. Jamal, hand over his face but eyes staring in horror. Screaming and screaming like he would never stop.

Brianna wanted to scream, too. But not in horror. In sheer, vicious triumph. She wanted to dance and smear herself with the blood of her beaten enemy. She wanted to leap atop the body chunks and kick them in contempt.

Brianna threw back her head and howled at the broken rafters and the sky beyond. “Yaaaaah! Yaaaaah! The Breeze!”

Jamal stopped screaming. He was gibbering, making word-like sounds, like a crazy street person. He was crawling away across the floor.

Brianna laughed. “What’s the matter, tough guy? Did you figure out you picked the wrong side?”

The tentacle was around her legs before she knew what had happened.

She looked down and stared, unable to believe what she was seeing. Drake’s whip hand was coiled twice around her ankles, squeezing hard, crushing the bones together.

Brianna tried to kick but couldn’t even budge.

Drake’s head was four feet away from his upper torso, but now the cruel mouth was back, and grinning. The cold eyes were watching.

Alive!

The upper torso used its good hand to shove itself toward the head while the tentacle held her tight with a python’s strength. The lower torso—stomach, hips, legs—was kicking and flailing, trying to move toward the upper torso.

Drake was putting himself back together.

Brianna fell on her butt. She reached reflexively for her knife, but it was too far away.

Her sawed-off shotgun. She had re-holstered it. Her hand found it, yanked it free. She took aim at the tentacle that held her fast, aimed at the part just beyond her feet, pulled the trigger.

BLAM!

The blast came from Jamal's gun. He had found it. She saw smoke curling from the muzzle.

Brianna fumbled with her shotgun, but her fingers wouldn't work right and her ears were ringing and somehow there was blood all over her chest.

Drake's head made a silent laugh.

Brianna lay helpless, watching as the legs, the lower third of the creature began to change. Not Drake's legs. A girl's chubby limbs.

Drake's head cried out without sound.

The tentacle was already sliding away.

Jamal walking as if in a dream, his smoking rifle held at his side.

Brianna could see Drake's lips form the words, "Kill her. Kill her."

But without lungs, no sound came out.

The body parts moved together. The arms of a girl fumbled for and found what was now Brittney's head and dragged it to its perch on her shoulders.

The legs kicked and scabbled until the lower third melded back. Brianna watched it all, unable to move, unable to think clearly.

The last thing she saw was Jamal using Brianna's wire to wrap Brittney's hands tightly behind her. He tore a sleeve from his own shirt and made a gag of it and stuffed it in Brittney's mouth.

Then he stepped back to Brianna. She could barely hear his words through the ringing sound and could barely understand what she did hear.

"I could kill you," Jamal said. He pointed the automatic rifle down at her, the barrel an inch from her face. "Most likely Drake comes out on top. But if not, you remember that I coulda killed you." He shouldered the gun. "But I didn't."

It was only a few minutes before Edilio, accompanied by Ellen, both armed with automatic rifles of their own, came rushing in. Jamal and Brittney were long gone.

Edilio knelt beside Brianna. She saw worry and compassion in his dark eyes and in her delirium really liked him for that.

"Ellen, get Lana. Now!" Edilio ordered.

To Brianna, he said, "Is he gone?"

Brianna found it hard to get her voice to do what she wanted. But she managed after a few tries to say, "Have to . . . get Sam. Sam. I . . . I can't beat Drake."

Edilio looked grim. "Yeah, that's a good idea," he said as he examined the bloody wounds in her shoulder. "Unfortunately Taylor took off. And no one exactly knows how to find Sam."

"Jamal . . .," Brianna whispered. But before she could complete the thought, the marble floor seemed to open wide and drag her swirling down into darkness.

Lance came bursting in the door.

"Drake is out!" he yelled.

Turk—formerly Zil's number one guy, at least he thought so, and boss of what was left of Human Crew—said, "Yeah, whatever."

Human Crew had been a group formed to defend the rights of normals against freaks. At least that was the Human Crew line. Most people now saw Human Crew as a straight-up hate group.

Lance grabbed Turk's shoulder and practically yanked him up off the stinking couch where he lay. "Turk, listen, man, listen to me: don't you see what this means?"

Turk did not see what it meant, or at least not whatever Lance thought he should see. Turk mostly disliked Lance. They were friends, kind of, but only because they'd both been with Zil and riding high. And now they were reduced to doing the worst work Albert could find for them: digging slit trenches for kids to go in, and then covering them up when they were full.

Cesspool diggers. The Crap Crew, kids called them.

And they had to kiss Albert's butt because otherwise they didn't eat. They'd been lucky they weren't exiled. Turk had talked the council out of sending them off to live in the wild. He'd begged, that was the truth of it. He'd convinced them that it was better to find a place for him and the others from Human Crew.

He'd put all the blame for the fire on anyone but themselves. Kept saying, "It's not our fault, guys, not me and Lance and all, we were forced by Zil and Hank. Hank was scary, man, you know that. You know he was a creep and he would have shot us or messed us up."

Turk had whined like a baby. And wept. And in the end convinced that smug wetback Edilio, and especially Albert, that they wouldn't make trouble anymore, ever again, lessons learned, their lives all turned around now.

The Human Crew became the Crap Crew. And harsher names as well. A laughingstock.

Turk hated Albert with a burning, undying passion. Albert had everything and tossed the worst crumbs to Turk and Lance and the former Human Crew.

Lance wasn't going away. His handsome face was lit up with excitement. "Dude, don't you get it? If we hit Albert now, everyone will blame Drake."

That got Turk's attention. "We tried to pin the fire on Caine and no one believed us."

"This is different. Look, do you like living like this?" He looked wildly around the room, stabbing his hand finally toward the reeking stew pot they used as an inside toilet. "Eating the worst food, doing the worst job, and being in this dump?"

"Yeah, I love it," Turk said with savage sarcasm. "I just love being the biggest loser in town."

"Then listen to me." Lance rested his hands on Turk's shoulders. Turk shrugged them off. "Because I'm telling you: Drake can't be killed or stopped. So everyone's scared. Maybe we find a way to hook up with Drake, right? Or maybe we just wait until everyone's freaking out over him, and we make our move."

Turk didn't dismiss it out of hand. Maybe Lance was right. Everyone knew Albert had tons of gold and 'Bertos and all kinds of food—even cans of stuff from before, good food.

"I don't know, man," Turk said. "Human Crew is supposed to stand for something. I mean, we're the defenders of humans against freaks, right? We stand up for normal people. We don't just steal stuff. We're not, like, a gang."

Lance laughed derisively. "Man, sometimes you are clueless. You don't even see what's happening." He perched himself on the arm of the couch so he could look down at Turk. "It's not just about freaks. I mean, you're the guy who thinks of ideas and all, but you're missing it. You don't even notice that the whole council is either black or

Mexican. See, that's what's happening: it's all these minorities hooked up with freaks."

The wheels in Turk's mind began to turn slowly. But they were picking up speed. "Jamal's with us and he's black."

"So? We use Jamal. He gets us into Albert's. You do what you gotta do. All I'm saying is, you and me, we're normal people. We're not black or queer or Mexican. And we're the ones digging toilets. How come?"

Turk knew the answer: because they had failed in their attempt to take over. But he'd never thought about this new angle.

"Astrid's a normal white person," Turk argued halfheartedly. "So's Sam."

"Sam's a freak, and I think he might even be a Jew," Lance said. His eyes were glittering. He was showing his teeth, grinning as he talked. It wasn't a good look for him. "And Astrid? She's not even on the council anymore."

Turk was buying it. He felt the new ideas settle into the dark places in his aggrieved mind. "Drake's white. So is Orc, you know, underneath it all. But they're kind of like freaks. Only . . . only not really. Because they didn't like, turn into freaks, they had accidents or whatever that made them what they are now."

"Exactly," Lance said.

Yes, Turk thought. This could be good. This could be very good. Taking out Albert would cause more problems than burning a bunch of houses. Albert was the one who was really in charge. He had the money and the food. That made him even more important than Sam.

Lisa came in then with cabbages she'd picked from the fields, and a fat rat she'd bought. Turk's mouth watered: dinner was late.

"Let's eat," he said. "Then we think about what comes next."

FOURTEEN

37 HOURS, 48 MINUTES

EDILIO WAITED UNTIL the sun was up to go for Roscoe.

It was all very peaceful. Roscoe wasn't the kind of guy to make much trouble.

"We just have to put you somewhere safe," Edilio explained.

"So I don't give it to anyone else," Roscoe said.

"Yeah. While we figure out how to cure you."

"I want to say good-bye to Sinder," Roscoe said softly. He jerked his head indicating that she was in the house.

"Of course, man. But listen. Don't let her touch you, okay? Just in case."

Roscoe struggled a little then, not against Edilio but against himself. He fought to stop a quiver in his lip. Fought to keep the tears from filling his eyes.

Edilio took him to town hall. There was an unused office with a cot. Edilio had made sure there were books for Roscoe to read. And a covered pot for Roscoe to do his business. A jug of water was on the shelf next to the window. A cabbage and a cooked rabbit were there, too.

The rabbit was a delicacy.

Roscoe thanked Edilio for being decent.

Edilio closed the door. Then he turned the key in the deadbolt.

Quinn's fishermen had had a good day. The boats were reasonably full of fish, squid, octopi, and the weird things they called blue bats. Those they fed to the zekes—the worms in the fields—to buy safe passage for the vegetable pickers.

The prize of the morning's work was a five-foot-long shark. Quinn's boat was actually cramped because of the thing. He was sitting on the tail as he rowed, which was awkward and would give him a backache later. But no one in the boat was complaining. A shark was a twofer: not only was it great eating, it was a competitor for the limited supply of fish.

"Here's what we ought to do," Cigar was saying as he pulled at his oar. "We ought to sell the teeth at the mall. I mean, did you see all those teeth? Kids would pay a 'Berto for, like, a necklace of teeth."

"Or they might, like, glue them onto a stick and make a gnarly weapon," Elise suggested.

"What do you think it weighs?" Ben wondered.

"Ah, not much," Quinn said.

That got a laugh. It had taken eight kids just to haul the fish over the side into Quinn's boat, and then they'd practically swamped the boat.

"Weighs more than Cigar," Ben said.

Cigar plucked at his ragged T-shirt and revealed a hard, almost concave, stomach. "Everything weighs more than me nowadays. When this all ends and we get out, I'm writing a diet book. The FAYZ diet. First, you eat all the junk food you can. Then you starve. Then you eat artichokes. Then you starve a little more. Then you eat someone's hamster. Then you go on the all-fish diet."

“You left out the part where you fry up some ants,” Elise said.

“Ants? I ate beetles,” Ben bragged.

They went on like this for a while, rowing their heavy-laden boat and bragging about the awful things they had eaten.

Quinn noticed something he hadn’t seen in a long time.

“Hold up,” he said.

“Aw, is Captain Ahab tired of rowing?”

“You’ve got good eyes, Elise, look over there.” Quinn pointed toward the barrier across a half mile of water.

“What? It’s still there.”

“Not the barrier. The water. Look at the water.”

The four of them shielded their eyes from the sun and stared. “Huh,” Quinn said at last. “Does that or does that not look like there’s a breeze blowing over there? It’s a little choppy.”

“Yeah,” Cigar agreed. “Weird, huh?”

Quinn nodded thoughtfully. It was something new. Something very strange. He would tell Albert about it when they got into town.

“Okay, enough with that. Let’s get back on those oars.” The other boats were catching up to them. Quinn could see each of them in turn stop and stare at the clear evidence of wind.

“What’s it mean?” Ben asked.

Quinn shrugged. “That’s above my pay grade, as my dad used to say. I’ll let Albert and Astrid figure that out. Me, I’m just a dumb fisherman,” he said.

“Oh, look,” Elise teased. “I see an oar with no one pulling it.”

Quinn laughed. He seated himself properly, braced his feet, and grabbed the available oar. His back, like those of all the fishing fleet, was thick with muscle.

He was happy. This life made him happy. The sun, the salt water, the smell of fish. The backbreaking work. It all made him happy.

It was simple. It was important.

Quinn thought about the breeze blowing across the water. There was nothing sinister about a nice breeze. And yet he had the feeling it spelled trouble.

Dahra Baidoo had seven new cases of flu. That made thirteen in all. The so-called hospital rang with the percussion of coughing.

No one had died in the night.

But no one had gotten well yet, either. Lana’s touch did not heal this illness. Which meant Dahra was no longer in the business of keeping kids comfortable until Lana came around and made everything better: she was now in the business of trying to understand this sickness.

She took temperatures. She kept more-or-less careful charts showing the progression of the sickness.

She tried not to think about Jennifer’s story. Jennifer wasn’t backing off her tale: she had seen the other Jennifer cough herself to death.

Dahra also tried not to think about what it meant if illness could develop an immunity to Lana.

A kid named Pookie was her worst case right at the moment. She stared at the

thermometer in her hand, not quite believing it—106 degrees. She had never seen a number that high.

Pookie was shaking like he was freezing. He was no longer able to answer questions sensibly. He had started talking to someone who was not exactly there, talking about how he didn't want to go to school because he hadn't finished his report.

And his cough was getting louder and more violent.

The flu had laughed at the Tylenol she gave Pookie. His fever had burned right through it. Whether or not he developed some kind of killing cough, he would die of fever if it rose much higher. She had to bring it down.

The book suggested an ice bath. The odds of that were precisely zero. No water, let alone ice. If Albert didn't arrange a water delivery soon, kids would be falling out from thirst, not even waiting to die of fever or cough.

Dahra made a decision. Ellen was there helping out, along with one of the new kids from the island, Virtue. She wished she had time to talk to Virtue: Dahra's parents were from Africa. And so was Virtue himself.

"We have to cool him down," Dahra said. "Virtue? Hold down the fort here, okay? We're going to the beach."

Ellen and Dahra maneuvered Pookie into a wheelbarrow. The three of them made an odd procession down San Pablo Avenue to the beach.

Crossing the sand was the hard part. But finally they made it to the lacy surf and set the sick kid down. Water surged around him.

Not an ice bath, maybe, but close enough. She figured the cold salt water should drain away some of the heat inside Pookie's body.

"There," Ellen said. "Hopefully he can walk back on his own."

Dahra flopped onto the sand beside Ellen. Ellen said, "You heard about Drake, right?"

"Him escaping? Yeah. Don't worry, Sam will get him."

Ellen shook her head. "Sam's out of town. Albert got him to go off for water. Or something like that."

"Sam's gone?" Dahra looked nervously over her shoulder. No reason Drake would come after her. But Drake didn't need a reason. "It'll be okay. Dekka and Brianna and ___"

Pookie coughed, coughed, doubled over, choked on seawater, and then coughed so powerfully that it made a clear indent in the water.

"Whoa," Ellen said.

Pookie sat up. His head lolled back and forth like a marionette with a loose string.

He coughed and the force of it threw him backward into the water with a splash.

Dahra ran to pull him up, but he'd done it on his own. He got to his feet, staggering.

He coughed and it was like an explosion. He flew backward. Like he'd been hit by a car.

"Oh, my God," Dahra cried.

Pookie rolled over, on hands and knees, and coughed again so powerfully that sand flew. Something pink and raw was sprayed across the sand crater.

"No, no, no," Dahra moaned and backed away.

Pookie coughed again and the force of it lifted him up onto his toes, bent him back

in a C. Blood sprayed from his mouth and drained out of his ears.

With blank, uncomprehending eyes he stared at Dahra.

And fell dead, facedown in the surf.

No one spoke.

Dahra barely breathed.

For several very long seconds Dahra stood paralyzed.

She blinked. "Ellen, quick, into the water. Get wet all over. Scrub off with your hands!" Dahra followed her own advice. She plunged in and submerged.

When she came up, she yelled, "Now stay away from Pookie's body. Stay in the sun for a while. Until you're dry. Sunlight is supposed to kill flu virus on your skin."

"Oh, my God," Ellen said and her face went pale. "He coughed his insides out."

"Just do what I tell you! Face up to the sun, I have to go!"

She ran back across the beach, her insides churning, panic eating at her.

She spotted Quinn and the fishing fleet pulling wearily up to the dock down at the marina. She ran as fast as she could, waving her hands over her head to attract attention.

Quinn and some of the others saw her, they just didn't understand why she was yelling. Dahra was sweating hard by the time she reached the dock.

"No! No! Don't come any closer!" she yelled to Quinn.

"What the—"

"Pookie just died," Dahra panted. "Flu. Maybe. But, oh, God. Just don't come any closer. In fact, don't get off the boats."

"I already had the flu," Cigar said.

"So did Pookie," Dahra said. "Listen to me: it's catching and it's way bad."

Quinn motioned for his people to stay in their boats. "What are we supposed to do, Dahra? We can't just float around forever."

Dahra sighed. "Let me think."

"I have to go check on my—," one of the fishermen said.

"Shut up, I'm thinking!" Dahra yelled. She had acquired a fair amount of medical knowledge since stupidly volunteering to run the so-called hospital. But that didn't make her a doctor.

She remembered reading about flu, though. Nothing spread faster. Nothing mutated and adapted faster. Hand washing removed it, alcohol killed it, sunlight killed it a little, anyway. But once it was in your nose and lungs it could go crazy and kill you. Especially some new strain.

"Stay in your boats," Dahra said. "We're still going to need food. Throw your fish onto the dock. I'll get Albert to send someone here to collect it. Then go back out, row up the coast a little ways, and camp out."

"Camp out?" Quinn echoed.

"Yes!"

"You're serious."

"No, it's my idea of a joke, Quinn," Dahra snapped. "Pookie just coughed up a lung and fell over dead. You understand what I'm saying? I mean he coughed his actual lungs out of his mouth. Hah hah hah, it's so funny."

Quinn took a step back.

Dahra waited for him to make up his mind. She had no right to give orders. Except

that she knew what was happening and no one else did.

“Okay,” Quinn said. “There’s a spot just up the shore. Tell Albert to send someone right away for the fish. We have a nice big catch here. We got a shark.”

“Yeah, whatever.” Dahra’s thoughts were already turning to her next move. The virus was the enemy: she was the general in this battle. But only two thoughts were really clear in her mind: One, Jennifer B had been telling the truth. And two, how could Dahra hope to avoid catching it?

FIFTEEN

37 HOURS, 15 MINUTES

“NEAR,” PACK LEADER said.

“Where?” Sam asked wearily. It had been a long night, followed by a long morning of tired feet and bruised shins.

They were over the hills, coming down the long slope toward the road and Lake Evian. It would have been easier to come up the road, this was definitely the long way around, but Sam had needed to see Hunter first.

To kill Hunter.

And now, if he could, he meant to find the nest of greenies and take them out.

Once more he saw the dark, troubled looks of the judges he feared would someday weigh his every action. He heard their questions. *What right did you have to take Hunter’s life, Mr. Temple? Yes, we understand that he did not wish to be eaten alive, but still, Mr. Temple, don’t you understand that every life is sacred?*

The road was below them, cut off from view by a large, rocky outcropping. He’d been down that road a few times, back during the early water runs. Enough times to picture the spot in his head.

“The rock is all busted up down there, boulders and crevices,” Sam said. “It’s like a shallow cave, only it doesn’t go in very far, I don’t think.”

“The snakes that fly are there,” Pack Leader confirmed. “Now kill me, Bright Hands.”

“How do I know you’re not lying?”

“Why lie?” Pack Leader snarled.

“Because you’re a murderous creepy animal who obeys the Darkness,” Sam said. He was too tired and sleepy to be diplomatic.

“The Darkness is dead,” Jack said.

“No,” Pack Leader said.

“No,” Sam agreed with a significant look at Jack. This was the first outside confirmation that the gaiaphage still lived. If you could call it living.

A new bug mouth erupted from Pack Leader’s flank. The canine looked at it, snapped at it, and bit it. Black liquid gushed from the insect head.

“Is this his doing?” Sam asked. “Are these things creatures of the Darkness?”

“Pack Leader not know.”

Sam nodded. “How do we kill it? The Darkness, I mean? How do we kill the gaiaphage?”

“Pack Leader not know.”

Sam sighed. “Yeah, well that makes two of us.”

Sam could see the creatures writhing within Pack Leader’s skin. Like he was a baggie full of worms.

“Ready?”

“I am Pack Leader,” the coyote said. He tilted back his head and howled at the sky. Sam aimed both his palms at the beast just as his hide split open.

The killing light burned and burned. Pack Leader was dead instantly. His fur stank

as it burned. His flesh crisped like bacon.

The creatures, the insects, whatever they were, crawled out of the flames and popping fat. Unfazed. Unharmred. Bright-lit and yet seemingly invulnerable.

Sam had used his power to burn through concrete and solid rock and steel. It was impossible that he couldn't kill these things. It was like they had some magical power to shrug off his deadly light. Like they had developed an immunity to him.

"Jack," Sam said. "Get a rock. A big one."

Jack was frozen until Dekka smacked him on the back of the head. Then he leaped to a rock the size of a Smart Car. It was half-buried in the ground. Jack grunted with the effort, but the rock tore free of the dirt with a little gravity-canceling help from Dekka.

Jack lifted the rock high over his head. He smashed it down with all his strength on two of the squirming, escaping bugs.

The rock hit so hard it shook the ground, literally making Sam bounce.

"Now push it back off," Sam ordered.

Jack did. The rock rolled easily from Jack's shove.

Beneath it were two very crushed bugs. Their carapaces were dully reflective, like smoky mirrors. They had short, crushed wings held tight against their bodies. Their wicked, curved mandibles had not been broken. Their slashing mouthparts still glittered like tiny knives.

"Like cockroaches," Sam said. "Hard to kill. Not impossible."

"Yeah. Roaches. A couple more over there," Dekka said, and pointed. As she pointed she suspended gravity and the two bugs lifted into the air. They motored helplessly on their legs.

"Your turn, Jack," Sam said.

Dekka let gravity flow, the boulder rose and fell and scored two more dead bugs.

Others, though, were skittering down the hill.

Sam, Dekka, and Jack pelted after them, high on the discovery that the nasty creatures could in fact be killed.

Half a dozen of the monsters raced over rock and through scrub grass.

Jack snatched up a smaller boulder and threw it one-handed. It hit one of the bugs and missed the others.

"Dekka!"

"Yeah," she said, and raised her hands. Dirt and litter and gravel floated into the air ahead. Another one of the insects floated with it. Jack grabbed a rock but it wouldn't come free, it was an outcropping of something too big even for Jack's strength.

He scabbled and found a head-sized rock. He threw it hard and missed the floating bug.

"The others are getting away!" Sam yelled.

"What's that noise?" Dekka cried, and made a shushing gesture.

The three of them froze and listened. A sound like a mountain stream rushing over stones.

No, a beating of wings.

"Greenies!"

The flying snakes came in a cloud, rushing up from their lair below like swarming bats emerging from a cave at sundown.

Like tiny dragons, most just a few inches long, some as much as a foot long. They had leathery wings and whipped their tails back and forth to sustain a very shaky aerodynamic ability.

Sam yelled a curse and fired. Too late to catch them by surprise. A mistake that might prove fatal.

Bright beams of light sliced through the attacking cloud. Greenies burned and fell flaming.

Not enough. Not nearly enough and the greenies were not backing off.

Dekka canceled gravity beneath the leading edge of the swarm, but it only had the effect of disorienting some of the snakes, who responded by flying upside down or in wild circles.

They began to squirt greenish-black fluid.

Sam remembered Hunter telling him about being hit by some secretion from a greenie.

“Don’t let them hit you!” Sam yelled. “Run!”

Running uphill would be too slow on the steep slope. They ran at right angles to the swarm, ran all-out, panic speed, tripping and jumping back up, oblivious to bruises and scrapes.

The swarm was slow to react, but react they did, and wheeled after them.

Sam hit the road, staggered, caught himself, and spun around. The swarm was still emerging from its lair in the rock face above. Sam aimed hastily and fired.

Brush on the hillside instantly caught fire. Rocks heated and cracked. He played his light on the cave itself, lighting it up, making it a bright, blazing green mouth.

The swarm was lost now, unsure. It swirled in the air, dropping green-black droplets like an evil rain, but not over Sam and the others, not yet.

Confident he had burned out the cave, Sam swept his light upward into the swarm itself.

A mistake. Attacking their lair confused the greenies, but a direct attack on the swarm gave them a target.

Sam aimed again at the rock wall, hoping to distract them. Too late: the swarm was coming.

“Run! Run!”

Dekka ran backward, canceling gravity behind her. A cloud of gravel and dirt rose into the swarm. This slowed them.

Dekka turned and ran full speed after Sam and Jack.

The swarm seemed to be losing interest in following them. But a few of the more persistent greenies were still after them as they ran.

Dekka fell hard. Sam could see she was winded. He ran back to her but the greenies were faster than he was.

Dekka rolled over and looked up just as one of the greenies fired its fluid. The dark drop hit her bare shoulder. A second drop hit her jeans. Other drops fell around her.

Sam fired. The hovering greenies flamed.

Dekka jumped to her feet. “It got me, it got me!”

“Get your jeans off,” Sam ordered.

She complied. Jack grabbed the garment and carefully inspected the fabric. “It didn’t get through.”

“My shoulder,” Dekka moaned. “Oh, my God, it got me. It got me. Oh, God.”

“Hold out your arm, Dekka,” Sam ordered. “This is going to hurt.”

“Do it,” Dekka agreed. “Do it, do it!”

Sam formed a narrow beam of light. Carefully, carefully he moved it closer and closer to the dark splotch on Dekka’s shoulder.

Dekka gritted her teeth.

The beam of light burned and she cried out in pain but then yelled, “Don’t stop, don’t stop!”

But Sam did stop. He quickly grabbed Dekka as she came close to fainting. “Let me see the arm,” he said.

There was a burned scoop mark in Dekka’s skin. Maybe half an inch deep. Twice as wide. The flesh was cauterized, so there was no blood.

“Got it,” Sam said.

“You don’t know that,” Dekka said through gritted teeth.

“I got it. It didn’t get anywhere else. I burned it off.”

Dekka grabbed the neck of Sam’s shirt. “Don’t let it happen, Sam.”

“It’s not going to, Dekka.”

“Listen to me: don’t let it happen. You understand? You see it happen, you take care of me. Like Hunter.”

“Dekka . . .”

“Swear to me, Sam. Swear it to me by God or by your own soul or whatever you believe, swear to me, Sam.”

Sam gently pried her fingers loose.

“I won’t let it happen, Dekka. I swear it.”

“Stay inside unless absolutely necessary,” Edilio shouted into the megaphone. Using up precious batteries. Albert had not wanted to give up the batteries. But he really didn’t care what Albert wanted or didn’t want.

He walked down San Pablo, shouting through the megaphone. “We have flu going around and it’s dangerous. Stay inside unless absolutely necessary! Work is canceled today. Mall is closed.”

Flu. Yeah. A flu that makes you cough up your insides.

It was unreal, Edilio thought as he walked halfway down the street and repeated the loudspeaker warning.

Epidemic. The so-called hospital was full. All through the morning, feverish, coughing kids had dragged themselves to the hospital. The disease was spreading like fire and Lana was useless.

No way to know how many it would kill.

Maybe everyone who got it.

Maybe everyone, period.

“Quarantine,” Dahra had said, pounding her fist into her palm. “You have to shut everything down.”

“Kids have almost no food or water in their homes,” Edilio had protested.

“You think I don’t know that?” Dahra had cried in a shrill voice tinged with panic. “If we don’t stop this epidemic, no one will be thirsty, they’ll be dead. Like Pookie. Like that Jennifer girl.”

Kids poked their heads out of windows or stepped out onto the darkening streets. Which was kind of the opposite of what he was going for.

“I already had the flu,” kids would yell.

“Yeah, well, no one is immune,” Edilio would shout back.

“How am I supposed to eat?”

“I guess you’ll be hungry for a day. Give us time to work things out.”

“Is this the thing with bugs coming out of your body?”

How had that news spread so fast? Everyone knew about Roscoe being locked up. No phones, no texts, no email, nothing, and still kids heard things almost instantly.

“No, no, this is just flu,” Edilio said, stretching the truth almost to the breaking point. “Coughing and fever. One kid’s already died, so just do what I’m asking, okay?”

In fact, three kids had died. Pookie and a girl named Melissa and Jennifer H. Three, not one. And maybe more than that, no way to know what was happening in every house in this ghost town. No point in spreading more panic than was necessary.

One death should be enough to get their attention. Three deaths, on top of the bugs some kids were nicknaming maggots and others were calling gut-roaches, that was enough to create panic.

Edilio had no idea if a quarantine would work. He would get his guys to try and enforce it: the sheriffs at least would still be on the street. But what were they supposed to do if kids decided to ignore it? Shoot them to save them?

He couldn’t tell people to wash their hands: no one had washing water in their home. He couldn’t tell them to use hand sanitizer: not enough to go around and what they had was just for the so-called hospital.

Nothing they could do but ask kids to stay home.

Probably too late.

Three dead. So far.

Edilio thought of Roscoe locked in his prison. Were the bugs eating him from the inside yet?

He thought of Brianna—Lana’s healing touch had fixed her, but the Breeze was shaken up. Scared.

He thought of the monstrous thing that was both Drake and Brittney.

He thought of Orc. No one had seen him. Plenty had heard him, and there were a few smashed cars testifying to his previous presence.

He thought of Howard, out walking the streets looking for Orc, refusing to stop, even when Edilio ordered him to get to some shelter and stay inside.

And he thought of the two people who had held his job before him: Sam and Astrid. Both beaten into despair by trying to hold this group of kids together in the face of one disaster after another. Both of them now happy to let Edilio handle it.

“No wonder,” Edilio muttered.

“Stay inside unless absolutely necessary,” Edilio shouted, and not for the first or last time wished he was still just Sam’s faithful sidekick.

SIXTEEN

33 HOURS, 40 MINUTES

BLAZING SUNLIGHT, DIRECTLY overhead, woke Orc.

It took him quite a while to sort out where he was. There were desks. The kind they had in school. He was on the floor, a cold linoleum-tile floor, and the desks were tossed and piled around him. Like someone had tossed them all around in a rage.

Someone had.

There was a chalkboard. Something was written on it, but Orc's eyes wouldn't focus well enough to read it.

The really confusing thing was the hole in the ceiling and part of the wall that allowed sunlight to pour so directly on his face, on his blinking eyes. The wall had been partly torn down, and without support a part of the ceiling had collapsed.

He felt something in his right hand. A hunk of wallboard.

He had done it. He had attacked the desks and the windows and the walls.

The memories were flashes of desaturated color and wild, jerky motion. He saw, as if standing outside himself, a drunken rock-bodied monster storming and rampaging and finally beating at the walls with great stone fists.

Orc groaned. His head was pounding like someone was using a sledgehammer on it. He was thirsty. His stomach felt as if it had been filled with coals.

Other memories were coming back. Drake. He had let that psycho creep get loose.

Howard would . . . well, actually, Howard wouldn't say much. Howard knew better than to ever really attack Orc.

But what about Sam? And Astrid?

Sudden fear. Astrid. Drake would go after her. Drake hated Astrid.

He should do something. Go and . . . and find Drake. Or guard Astrid. Or something. Astrid had always been good to him. She'd always treated him nice, like he wasn't a monster. Even back in school.

Suddenly Orc recognized the room. It was the room they used for after-school detention. Astrid would sometimes come tutor him there.

Truth was, he had always liked it better in detention than at home.

Orc squeezed his eyes shut. He needed a bottle. Too many things coming into his head. Too many pictures and feelings.

He noticed an awful smell and knew right away what had caused it. When he had passed out his muscles had all gone slack. He'd wet himself and worse.

He was lying in a puddle of urine and feces.

With a sob he rolled over onto hands and knees. The fat-guy sweatpants he wore were stained and reeking.

Now he would have to walk down to the beach to clean off. He'd have to walk down there like this, like this depraved, disgusting, drunken, stinking monster.

Which was what he was. What he'd always been.

And then, one more memory. A sick little boy. A stop sign.

God, no. God . . . no.

Orc stumbled from the room, sick and weeping and hating himself so much more

than anyone else could ever hate him.

Drake became conscious and was likewise confused about where he was and why.

His hands were tied behind his back and the wire cut uncomfortably into the pulpy flesh of his whip hand.

“Untie me,” he snapped at Jamal, who was dozing with his back against a palm tree, rifle cuddled to his chest like a stuffed animal. Jamal looked about six years old when he was asleep.

Drake noticed a rope tied from his ankle to Jamal’s ankle. He yanked on it and Jamal snapped awake.

“Untie me,” Drake repeated.

Jamal crawled over and fiddled with the knot until Drake was free.

“Where are we?” Drake asked.

“Down the highway. You know, up past Ralph’s?”

“What are we doing here?”

“I had to get Brittney out of town,” Jamal said. “I barely got you out of the church before Edilio came.”

Drake remembered the fight with Brianna. It brought a savage grin. “Did you finish that skinny little witch?”

Jamal shrugged. “I shot her.”

“Did you finish her?”

“No, man, I don’t think so.”

Drake stared hard at him. “I told you to do her.”

“Did you?” Jamal licked his lips. “I saw you saying something, but you were, you know, changing and all. It was hard to understand.”

Drake knew he was lying. Jamal had disobeyed him. But did he really want a Jamal tough enough to shoot a helpless person in the face?

No, he needed Jamal to be a little weak. Just a little. Still . . .

Drake snapped his whip and caught Jamal across the back.

Jamal cried out and backpedaled away.

“Don’t disobey me,” Drake said. Then he smiled in what he hoped was a friendly way. “I didn’t cut too deep. Just a little reminder for you.”

“It burns like fire!”

“Yeah, well, man up, Jamal. And get me some water. I’m thirsty.”

“Don’t have any water.”

“Well get some!”

“Where?”

Drake jumped up and looked around. They were near where the road came down from Coates and met the highway. He tried to think if there was anything left at the old school. Had to be some kind of water up there.

Or he could head back into town. Of course they’d be ready for him now. And by the time he got there he might be Brittney Pig again.

Drake felt a surge of frustration. If it was just him, he’d go straight into town and take out anyone who got in his way. He might not be able to take Orc down, but he could wear the stupid, fat drunk out. And Brianna? Bring it on.

With Sam and Caine both away there was no one who could take him on in a fight.

But if Brianna was backed by a few of Edilio's guys with rifles, well, they might be able to get Jamal, and if they got Jamal, they could grab him when the Brittney Pig emerged. Lock him up again. And this time when Sam came back Sam would finish the job.

It had been supernaturally cool putting himself back together after being sliced in three pieces. But he wasn't sure that would happen if Sam incinerated him, burned him to ashes.

Threw the ashes in the ocean.

That image made Drake very nervous.

He had to find a way to rid himself of the Brittney Pig. Otherwise he'd be dependent on Jamal. But how was he supposed to do that? It was hopeless. For a moment Drake felt despair. He would be trapped like this forever.

But then, faint hope. Maybe there was someone who could help. He felt its touch on his mind. It had never forgotten him.

"Get up. We're going," Drake said.

"Where to?" Jamal asked.

"Going to see . . ." He'd been about to say, "a friend." But friend wasn't the right term. Not a friend. Much more.

"My master," Drake said, self-conscious about the word. But when Jamal didn't laugh, Drake repeated it, more confidently. It felt good. "Going to see my master."

Sanjit found flowers easily enough. A lot had been picked for eating, but there were still untended gardens behind abandoned houses where it was possible to pick a small rose or a marigold or whatever. He didn't really know what flowers they were. Some were probably just weeds.

When he had a half dozen he stopped to check in on Bowie, who was being watched by Virtue. Bowie was better today. Maybe a permanent improvement, maybe not. Sanjit never counted his chickens before they'd hatched.

Virtue stared at him and at his flowers. He stared like Sanjit had lost his mind.

"What are those?"

"These?" Sanjit looked in mock surprise at the bouquet. "I think these may be flowers."

"I know they're flowers," Virtue said. "Why are you carrying flowers?"

"I'm bringing them to someone."

"That girl?"

"Yes, Choo. They are for that girl."

"You should stay away from her. She's a very scary girl."

"Hot, though, don't you think?"

Virtue stared at him. "Don't you know there's a quarantine? Where have you been? No one is supposed to go out."

"A what?"

"A quarantine. That flu going around. Everyone is supposed to stay inside."

"I've had flu before, big deal," Sanjit said dismissively.

"Look, if they put on a quarantine they have good reasons. You don't know these people, I think most of them are crazy. You don't know what they might do if they catch you out."

“I’ll be back,” Sanjit said with a jaunty wink. “Unless I get really lucky.”

“Or she shoots you with that big gun of hers.”

“That’s also a possibility,” Sanjit said cheerfully.

He patted Bowie on the head and checked on the others. Then he headed out into the sunlight.

The streets of Perdido Beach had never exactly been busy. It wasn’t New York or Bangkok. But they were particularly quiet now. Not a soul in sight.

Maybe Virtue was telling the truth about a quarantine after all. But hey, who better to be with than Lana, the Healer?

He reached Clifftop without seeing anyone.

He pushed through the lobby doors. He knew that Lana had the best room on the highest floor, a room with a balcony that looked down at the cliff and the beach and out at the ocean.

He was confronted with a confusing hallway full of doors, some closed, many showing signs of having been kicked open or battered down so kids could raid the minibars.

He found what he thought was the right door. He straightened his clothes and his flowers and knocked. From inside Patrick erupted in loud barking.

He saw the peephole go dark as someone looked out.

He smiled and waved.

Soft cursing from inside. Then, “It’s okay, Patrick, it’s just some idiot.”

The door opened. Lana had a cigarette hanging from the corner of her mouth. She had her pistol in her hand.

“What?” she snapped at Sanjit.

“Flowers,” Sanjit said, and held them out to her.

Lana stared at the flowers. “Are you kidding me?”

“I would have brought candy, but I couldn’t find any.”

“Are you retarded? There’s a quarantine on. No one is supposed to be outside.”

He had hoped for a little smile. He detected no smile. Instead he smelled alcohol on her breath. Although she didn’t seem drunk, her words weren’t slurred, and her eyes focused the full intensity of her incredulity quite effectively.

“May I come in?” Sanjit asked.

“In?” Lana echoed. “Here?”

“Yes. May I come in?”

Lana blinked.

“Okay,” she said, and her eyebrows shot up like she was amazed the word had come out of her mouth. She stepped back and Sanjit stepped through.

The room had once been a sterile, anonymous hotel room.

It still was. Lana had hung no pictures, collected no precious possessions. No stuffed animals lay on the bed. The room was filthy, of course, but so was just about every room in Perdido Beach.

It smelled of cigarette butts, whiskey, and dog. A huge shotgun leaned against one wall. Patrick seemed almost as agitated as his owner. Neither Lana nor Patrick was used to receiving guests.

There was a small Sammy sun in the closet so that when the closet door was left open there would be light, and when closed less light.

Sanjit crossed to the glass door. "Great view."

"What do you want?"

"I want to get to know you," Sanjit said.

"Why?"

"You're interesting."

"Yeah," Lana said. "But not in any way you're going to like."

Sanjit sat down on the desk chair. He laid the flowers on the hutch next to the TV set. He noticed a scratch from a thorn. It was bleeding a little, no big deal.

"No," Lana said, "I'm not going to heal your scratch."

"Good," Sanjit said.

"Good? Why good?"

"Because when you hold my hand, I don't want it to be work for you."

"Hand holding?" Lana barked out a laugh. "That's what you want? Hand holding?"

"Well, we would work up to that. If we like each other."

"We don't."

Sanjit smiled. "You seem awfully sure of that."

"I know me, and I've met you," Lana said. She sighed. "Okay, look, I get it. You're one of those people who thinks they have to help screwed-up people. Or maybe you're attracted to dangerous, unbalanced people. But listen up: I'm not Edward and you're not Bella."

"I don't understand what that means," Sanjit said.

"You're not going to get some kind of contact cool off me, okay? You're a normal kid, I'm a crazy freak, it's not really the basis for true love."

"Oh. You think I'm normal."

"Your mom and dad are movie stars."

"My mom was a teenage prostitute who died of pneumonia after a bout of hepatitis. My father was any one of maybe a thousand guys. If you know what I'm saying." Sanjit made a fake perky smile. "Up until I was adopted half of everything I ever ate was stolen, and the other half came from some charity." He let this sink in for a moment. "Oh, and see this?" He opened his mouth and pointed to a gap where two molars should have been. "Got beaten up really bad by a pimp who wanted to sell me to some old dude from Germany."

Lana glared at him. Sanjit met her gaze and refused to look away.

Finally, she said, "Okay. You want to talk, okay. I'll talk, then you get it through your head and you leave." Lana lit a new cigarette, puffed it, and looked at him through the smoke. "I went up there to kill it. The gaiaphage. I drove a tank of propane up there, let it flow into the mine shaft, and all I had to do was light a match. The coyotes came after me. I shot them. I still could have set off the explosion, but I didn't. Is that the story you want?"

"Is that the story you want to tell?"

"It was inside my head. I couldn't kill it. Instead it made me crawl to it. Hands and knees. Like a worm. I gave myself to it. I became part of it."

Sanjit nodded because he felt like he should.

"It made me shoot Edilio. Bang." She pantomimed it.

"He survived."

"Sam and Caine knocked the gaiaphage pretty hard. I was freed."

“And you saved Edilio. But you don’t want to talk about that, right?”

“You know, it’s not a big wonderful thing when you save someone you just shot.”

“You didn’t shoot him, this monster did. You cured him. That was you.”

Lana’s eyes were so penetrating he almost couldn’t meet her gaze. But he held steady. She was looking for weakness in him. Or maybe she expected disgust.

“You went up there on your own to kill it,” Sanjit said.

“And failed.”

“But tried. If you were a guy, I’d say you had a big brass pair.”

Lana laughed, caught herself, laughed again. Then she kept laughing, stopping, trying not to laugh again, and failing.

“I don’t know why I’m laughing,” she said, almost apologizing and definitely puzzled.

Sanjit smiled.

“I don’t know why I’m laughing,” Lana said again.

“You’re probably a little stressed,” Sanjit said dryly.

“You think?”

Lana laughed again and Sanjit realized he was really enjoying her laugh. It wasn’t silly or hysterical. It was, like everything about this strange girl, wise, sardonic. Profound. Mesmerizing.

“Oh, dude,” she said, sobering. “Is that what you’re here for? Laughter is the best medicine? Is that it? Am I your act of charity or whatever? Heal the Healer with the power of laughter?”

The full force of her cynicism was back on display.

“I don’t think I want to heal you,” Sanjit said.

“Why not?” she snapped. “I mean, let’s not lie, huh? I’m about as screwed up as a girl can be. I am a monument to screwed up. Why don’t you want to heal me? I’m a freaking mess!”

Sanjit shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“You think I’m so messed up, it will be easy to get into my pants, is that it? I’m an easy target?”

“Lana,” Sanjit said, “you carry a pistol and look like you’ll use it. You have a dog. You tried to kill a monster all on your own. Trust me when I say, no one. No. One. No one looks at you and thinks, ‘She’ll be easy.’”

Lana sighed wearily, but Sanjit didn’t believe the sigh or the weariness. No. She wasn’t tired of him.

He said, “I saw you. I heard your voice. I connected. It’s not very complicated. I just had a feeling. . . .”

“Feeling?”

Sanjit shrugged. “Yeah. A feeling. Like the whole point of my life, from the alleys in Bangkok, to the yachts and private island, to coming here like a crazy person trying to fly a helicopter, like all of it, from birth to here, point A to point Z, was all some big cosmic trick to get me to meet you.”

“Whatever,” she said dismissively.

He waited.

“The other day you said I was the second bravest girl you ever met. Who was number one?”

Sanjit's smile disappeared. In the space of a heartbeat he was back there, in that filthy alley smelling of rotten fish, curry, and urine.

"The pimp who knocked my teeth out? He was going to finish me off," Sanjit said. "You know? To send the message that you couldn't refuse him. He had a knife. And man, I was already half dead. I couldn't even move. And this girl was there. No idea where she came from. I never saw her before. She, uh . . ."

Suddenly, to his own amazement, he couldn't talk. Lana waited until he found his voice again. "She came up to the guy and just said, 'Don't hurt him anymore.'"

"So he let you go? Just like that?"

"Not quite. Not quite. She was a pretty girl, maybe eleven, twelve years old. So, you know, a nice-looking young boy is worth some cash to a pimp. But a pretty young girl, well, she was worth more."

"He took her?"

Sanjit nodded. "I was sick for about a week, I guess. Thought I was going to die. Crawled as far as a pile of garbage and just . . . Anyway, when I was able to move again I looked for her. But I didn't find her."

The two of them sat there looking at each other. It seemed to go on for quite a while.

"I have to go to town," Lana said finally. "I can't seem to cure the flu thing. So much for being the Healer. But I can at least deal with the usual broken bones and burns and so on."

"Of course," Sanjit said and stood up. "I'll let you go."

"I didn't say you couldn't come with me," Lana practically snarled.

Sanjit suppressed the smile that wanted badly to break out across his face. "Whenever you're ready."

SEVENTEEN

33 HOURS, 14 MINUTES

“DEKKA. WAKE UP.”

Her eyes opened. She blinked up at Sam. It was full daylight. Not even early morning, later. She had slept a long time.

A sharp intake of breath. She jumped up and began patting her body, probing, pushing, feeling for anything that shouldn't be there.

The divot in her shoulder burned like fire.

Her stomach growled. Her feet ached. Her scraped shins hurt. So did her back from sleeping on a rock.

“I hurt all over,” Dekka said.

Sam looked concerned.

“I mean, that's good. Hunter couldn't feel much of anything, right?”

Sam nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, that's good. So I guess burning a hole in you was actually a good thing?”

“Not quite ready to find that funny, Sam. Where's Jack?”

Sam pointed toward the top of a hill. They were in a very dry and empty place. The hill wasn't much more than two hundred feet high and was more of a dirt mound than a mountain.

Jack was at the top, shading his eyes and looking to the northeast.

“What do you see?” Sam yelled to him.

“There's a place over that way that looks like it's all burned.”

Sam nodded. “Yeah. The hermit's shack. What else?”

“Bunch of rugged-looking hills, all rocky and stuff,” Jack yelled. He started to climb down but the dirt was loose, so he slid and slipped and fell. Then he stood up again and jumped.

He jumped thirty feet and landed very near Sam.

“Dude,” Sam said.

“Huh,” Jack said. “I never realized I could do that.”

“There might be other ways you can use that strength, too,” Sam said.

“I wish I could use it to find some water.”

“Dekka, what do you think? We climb those mountains or go through the burned zone?”

“I kind of hate climbing.”

“The mine shaft isn't too far from the shack,” Sam pointed out.

“Yeah. I remember where it is,” Dekka said. “We just don't go there.”

It wasn't far to the shack. Or more accurately the few charred sticks that marked Hermit Jim's shack. Sam pulled out the map again. He measured with his fingers. “It looks like six or seven miles to the lake. I guess we'll all get a drink when we get there.”

The Santa Katrina Hills were on their left now. They were bare stone and dirt, and some of the rock formations looked as if they'd been shoved right up out of the earth, like the dirt was still sliding off them. Off to the right there was the taller mountain,

and the cleft in that mountain, which hid the ghost town and the mine shaft.

None of them spoke of that place.

It was an hour's thirsty walk across very barren land before they reached a tall chain-link fence. The dirt was the same on either side of the fence. As far as they could see there was nothing that needed fencing.

There was a dusty, rusty metal sign.

"Warning, restricted area," Jack read aloud.

"Yep," Sam said. "We are subject to search."

"How great would it be if someone did come and arrest us?" Dekka said wistfully.

"Jack. Rip down the fence."

"Really?"

"The barrier's that way." Sam pointed. "We should hit the barrier and follow it to the lake. And like Dekka says: if there was anyone around here to arrest us, it would be great. They'd have to feed us and give us something to drink."

Sam wasn't sure quite what he expected to find at the Evanston Air National Guard base. He wasn't sure quite what he'd been hoping for. Maybe a barracks full of soldiers. That would have been excellent. But failing that, maybe a giant tank of water. That would have been nice, too.

What they found instead were a series of underground bunkers. They were identical on the outside: sloping concrete ramps leading down to a steel door. Jack kicked the first one open.

Sam provided illumination. Inside was a long, low room. Completely empty.

"Probably kept bombs here or something."

"Nothing here now," Jack said.

They opened four more of the bunkers before admitting that there was nothing to be found.

Wandering through the bunker field they came upon a truck with the keys in the ignition. The battery was dead. But there was a liter bottle of Arrowhead water, half full.

The three of them rested in the shade of the truck and shared the water.

"Well, that was disappointing," Sam acknowledged.

"You wanted to find bombs?" Dekka asked.

"A giant supply of those meals soldiers eat, what are they called?"

"MREs," Jack said. "Meals ready to eat."

"Yeah. Some of those. Like, maybe a million of those."

"Or at least the truck could have worked so we could drive and not walk," Dekka grumbled.

They started walking again. Already the half liter of water seemed like a distant memory. They began to notice the blankness of the barrier looming ahead. It rose sheer from the sand and scrub.

"Okay, so we hang a left. Let's go find this lake and get back to town," Sam said.

They kept the barrier on their right. The terrain was getting more difficult, with deep gullies, like dry riverbeds, cracks in the desert smoothness.

Ahead, shimmering like a mirage, was a low building that reminded Sam of the kind of "temporary" building schools sometimes resorted to. There were few windows and these showed the horizontal slats of ancient blinds. Air-conditioning units poked

out of the walls in several places.

In a parking area there were more sand-colored camouflaged trucks. A couple of civilian cars. All neatly squared away between white lines.

A tall antenna stabbed at the sky. And beyond the building a tumbled mess of huge rust- and ochre- and dust-colored blocks.

“Hey, that’s a train!” Jack said.

Sam checked the map. Only now did he notice the crosshatched line indicating a railroad track. He hadn’t known what it was before.

Sam wished he’d thought to bring binoculars. There was something off about the building. It was too isolated. Although, Sam reminded himself, there might be a whole bunch of buildings just beyond the FAYZ wall. So maybe this one building was just at the edge of a big compound.

But it didn’t feel that way. It felt like this place was deliberately far from anything else. He doubted it would even be noticeable from a satellite photo. Everything except the few cars were painted the same ochre color as the surrounding emptiness.

“Let’s check the building first.”

The door was unlocked. Sam opened it cautiously. Dirt and dust had filtered onto the polished linoleum floor. A main room, two hallways leading away, and two private offices behind glass partitions. There were half a dozen gray-painted metal desks in the main room and old-style rolling office chairs, some with mismatched cushions. The computers on the desks were blank. Lights off. Air-conditioning obviously off, too; the room was stifling.

Sam glanced at framed photos on a desk: someone’s family, two kids, a wife, and either a mother or a grandmother. He spotted a stress ball on another desk. There were official-looking binders and racks of ancient floppy disks.

Everything was dusty. Flowers in a tiny vase were just sticks. Papers had flowed from desks onto the floor.

It was eerie. But they had all seen plenty of eerie: abandoned cars, empty homes, empty businesses.

One thing they had not seen in a very long time: a jar of Nutella was open on one desk, lid nowhere to be seen, and a spoon standing inside.

The three of them leaped as one.

“There’s some left!” Jack cried with the kind of pure joy that should have signaled the discovery of something far more important.

Sam and Dekka both grinned. It was a large jar, and it was at least half full.

Jack lifted the spoon. The Nutella dripped languidly.

Jack closed his eyes and stuck the spoon in his mouth. Without a word he handed the spoon to Dekka.

It was like a religious ritual, like communion. The three of them taking spoonfuls, one after the other, each silent, each awed by the wonder of intense flavor, of sweetness after so much fish and cabbage.

“It’s been, like, how long?” Dekka asked. “It’s sweet.”

“Sweet and creamy and chocolaty,” Jack said dreamily.

“Why is it still creamy?” Sam asked.

Jack had the spoon. He froze. “Why is it still creamy?” he echoed.

“This jar had to have been opened months ago, back before FAYZ fall,” Sam said.

“It would be all dried out. All crusty and stiff.”

“I’d still eat it,” Dekka said defiantly.

“This wasn’t opened months ago. This hasn’t been open for even a few days,” Sam said. He put the jar down. “There’s someone here.”

Jack had started reading some of the papers strewn carelessly about. “This was a research station.”

Dekka was tense, looking around for intruders, enemies. “Research on what? Weapons? Aliens?”

““Project Cassandra,”” Jack read. “That’s the header on most of the memos and stuff. I wish I could get into these computers.”

“Someone is here,” Sam said, sticking to the most important fact. “Someone who can unscrew a jar of Nutella and eat it with a spoon. Which makes it not a coyote. There’s a person here.”

“Someone from Perdido Beach?” Dekka wondered. “Maybe someone left town and found this place and never came back. It’s not like we would notice everyone who ever left.”

“Or someone from Coates.” Sam made a motion with his hand, indicating silently that he would go down the hallway to the left and Jack and Dekka should be ready to back him up.

It wasn’t a long hallway. Just four doors on each side. Milky light came through a reinforced glass window in the door at the far end of the hallway.

Sam opened doors, one at a time. The first two opened onto empty private offices. The next opened to a dingy room with a metal table and chairs, facing each other. A screen was on one wall. A clipboard was on the floor.

Sam picked it up. ““Project Cassandra,”” he read aloud. ““Subject 1-01. Test number GV-788.””

He placed the clipboard on the table and went to the next room.

He opened this room and instantly knew someone was inside. Even before he saw anyone.

This room had a window of regular glass and sunshine poured in. There was a bed, a desk, a large blank TV mounted on one wall. Game players lay dusty beneath the screen.

Books were piled high on a side table.

And one book was in the hands of a boy who sat in a reclining chair with his feet up on the desk. He was maybe twelve. His black hair hung down his back almost to his waist. He would probably be tall when he stood up. Thin. Dressed in jeans, sneakers, and a black-and-white Hollywood Undead T-shirt.

“Hi,” Sam said. He frowned.

The boy barely reacted.

“Don’t I know you?” Sam pressed.

The boy looked at him with eyes narrowed to slits. He smiled a little. He seemed to want to go back to his book.

“Dude,” Sam said. “Aren’t you Toto?”

The boy’s eyebrows went up. His lip quivered. He said, “Is he real?”

He was speaking to a life-sized Styrofoam head of Spider-Man, complete with blue and red cowl, that rested on a shelf.

"I'm real," Sam said. Then he yelled, "Dekka! Jack!"

"Why is he yelling?" Toto asked Spidey. "He could be a Decepticon."

"I'm not a Decepticon," Sam said, feeling a bit ridiculous.

"It's the truth," Toto told Spidey. "He's not a Decepticon. But maybe he works for the Dementors, for Sauron, for the demon."

"What are you talking about, Toto?" Sam asked.

Jack and Dekka came rushing up. "Whoa," Dekka said.

"He knows what I'm talking about," Toto told Spider-Man. "He guesses, he's testing. 'What are you talking about, Toto?' he says. Right. He knows. He knows the demon."

"I don't work for anyone," Sam said.

"Liar, liar, pants on fire. Someone sent you."

"Albert, but—"

"They always try to lie, but it never works, does it?" Toto said.

Sam turned to Dekka. "I think our boy here has been alone for a long time."

"He means I'm crazy." Toto addressed Dekka directly, not Spider-Man, though he glanced back at the Spidey head and seemed torn between Dekka and the web slinger. "The truth teller, truth teller Toto."

"Are you test subject 1-01?" Jack asked.

Toto didn't seem to hear. But now tears were welling in his eyes. "One zero one. Yes. One zero two, what happened to her, do you want to hear?"

"Yes," Sam answered.

"Should we say, Spidey?" Toto bared his teeth and snarled, "She used to live across the hall. Darla. She was eight. All her stuff was Hello Kitty. She could walk through walls. She didn't want to stay, she wanted to go home, so she tried to just walk right through the wall to the outside and the guards tased her as she was going through and you know what happened?"

"Tell us."

"He doesn't want to know, not really, does he?" Toto asked Spidey. "He's seen too many bad things, hasn't he? But I'll tell him anyway, which is that the Taser froze her halfway through the wall. She died. They had to bust out the whole wall to get her out of there."

"Albert's cat," Jack said.

Sam nodded. They'd all heard the story of the teleporting cat that misjudged and solidified with a book inside it.

"They aren't surprised," Toto said. He tilted his head and shook it back and forth, vastly amused by some secret joke. "They know, don't they?" he asked Spidey.

"Yeah, we know," Sam said. He raised his hand, palm out, and fired a brilliant green beam at Spider-Man's head. The fabric of the cowl caught fire and the Styrofoam within melted.

Toto's pale face went paler. He swallowed hard and looked directly at Sam for the first time.

"Sorry, man," Sam said. "But honestly we have all the crazy we can stand. And we don't have all day."

"Yes, he's telling the truth, he's in a hurry."

"He's still talking to Spider-Man," Dekka pointed out. "He's nuts."

“Yeah, well, we’re all a little nuts, Dekka,” Sam said.

“No, he’s not nuts, the Sam boy,” Toto said and he shook his head back and forth. Then, slyly, he added, “Anyway, he doesn’t think he is.”

“We’re looking for a big lake. Lake Tramonto. You know how to get there?”

“We don’t know how to get anywhere,” Toto said. Suddenly he looked as if he might cry. “Where’s Spidey?”

“How long have you been here?” Sam asked impatiently.

It was Jack who answered. “A little more than a year. The start date for subject 1-01 was several months before the FAYZ.”

Sam thought it over for a few seconds. Wondering what to do. He couldn’t just dump the kid and walk away. Could he? Especially after he’d impatiently burned Spidey.

On the other hand, the very last thing he needed was another person to keep track of. And it didn’t look like this kid was going anywhere. Sam could always pick him up later. And in any case, if they found the lake then the whole town would probably be moving, and they’d pass this way again.

“Listen, Toto, I’m going to pretend you’re not completely crazy. I’m going to leave it up to you. So you either come with us and start acting at least a little bit normal, or you stay here. Your choice.”

Toto kept glancing back at the brown and black magma that had been the Styrofoam head. But in between he looked at Sam and Dekka and even Jack.

“What do you have to eat?” Toto asked.

“Dried fish. Cabbage. Artichokes.”

To Sam’s amazement Toto literally licked his lips. “You have some other things, too, but you don’t want to share. That’s okay. I’ve only had Nutella. Ever since.”

“You must have a whole lot of Nutella,” Dekka said, unable to conceal her greedy hope.

“Yes.”

“Show us,” Sam said. “Show us what you’ve got. Then we’ll go find this lake.”

Sam led the way outside. Jack and Dekka fell in beside him. “They knew, didn’t they?” he asked Jack.

Jack still had a fistful of papers scooped up from one of the desks.

“Yes,” Jack said, still fascinated, reading through printed sheets of data as he walked. “I don’t think they knew what, or knew what was causing it. But they knew.”

“What did they know?” Dekka asked.

“Whoever was running this place,” Sam said angrily. “They knew something was going on with kids in Perdido Beach.”

Jack caught up to him, grabbed his shoulder, and handed him a piece of paper. “A list of names.”

Sam’s eyes went directly to his own name, third on a list of five names. “Toto, Darla, me, Caine, and Taylor.” He shoved the paper angrily back at Jack. “Not all of the freaks, but some of us, anyway.”

He didn’t know what to say or think. It made him angry, but he didn’t even know why it should. Of course they would want to learn about kids who suddenly developed supernatural powers.

And of course they would want to keep it secret.

But still it made him angry and uneasy. “This means they know. People on the outside, they’ve been able to guess some of what happened.”

“The real data are on those computers,” Jack said. “This printout is just a small file. If the power was back on . . .”

Sam glared at the barrier near at hand. And wondered, not for the first time, what kind of welcome they would get if that barrier ever came down.

EIGHTEEN

32 HOURS, 36 MINUTES

TOTO LED THEM from the facility to the train.

It was farther than Sam had thought. It had been a trick of perspective in the desert emptiness that had made the train seem to be right beside the building. In fact, they were a ten-minute walk away.

There were two yellow and black Union Pacific diesel engines. Both still stood upright on the track.

Behind the engines was a rust-colored boxcar, also still on the track.

Behind these came a jumbled mess. There were seven derailed flatbed railcars. Each had spilled two containers—massive steel rectangles—onto the dirt and stunted bushes.

At the far end, the barrier had sliced a boxcar in half. The barrier had snapped into place, bisecting the burnt-orange boxcar, and the sudden shift must have derailed the other cars.

But Sam, Dekka, and Jack were not very interested in such speculation. Dozens of plastic-wrapped pallets had been flung across the tracks and the ground, spilled from the sliced-open boxcar.

Each of the pallets was piled high with flats of Nutella.

“That’s, like, hundreds and hundreds of jars,” Sam said.

“Thousands,” Jack said. “Thousands. We’re . . . we’re rich.”

If each jar had been a giant diamond, Sam would still have preferred the Nutella.

“This is the greatest discovery in the history of the FAYZ,” Dekka said, sounding like she was witnessing a miracle.

“What is a phase? What do they mean by phase?” Toto asked.

“FAYZ. Fallout Alley Youth Zone,” Sam said distractedly. “It’s supposed to be funny. Dude: what’s in the rest of these containers?”

Toto looked uncomfortable. He squirmed so much he looked like he was dancing. “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know? Are you lying?” Dekka demanded sharply.

“No lies,” Toto said, eyes flashing. “I’m Toto the truth teller, subject 1-01. Not Toto the liar.”

“Then what are you saying? You never looked in any of these containers? There’s fourteen containers. Plus that first boxcar. What do you mean you don’t know?” Dekka found it outrageous.

Toto did his squirming dance again. “I couldn’t get them open. They’re locked. And they’re steel. I hit them with chairs, but they wouldn’t open.”

Sam, Dekka, and Jack all stared at the strange boy.

Then they stared at the containers.

Then they stared at one another.

“Well,” Sam said, “I do believe we can get them open.”

Approximately eight seconds later Sam had burned the lock from the nearest container. Jack then pushed the door open.

The contents of the container were wrapped in plastic but still unmistakable.

“Toilets?” Dekka said.

Many of the porcelain fixtures were cracked from derailing, the shards held in place by the shrink-wrap.

A second container revealed more toilets.

The third container held what had to be thousands of medium-sized cartons. The cartons contained baseball caps. Dodgers caps.

“One size fits all,” Dekka said, disgustedly. “But I’m an Angels fan.”

“This is going to take us a while to go through everything,” Sam said. “But I think it’s probably worth it.”

The fourth held wicker lawn furniture.

“Or not,” Sam said, disgusted.

The fifth container was wicker flowerpots and cracked terra-cotta pots as well as two pallets of plaster yard pretties: cherubs, gnomes, and the Virgin Mary.

The sixth was house paint and deck stain.

The seventh was better, a mixed load, pallets of shrimp-flavored Cup-a-Noodles, chicken-flavored ramen, coffee filters and coffee makers, and boxes of mixed teas.

“I wish I’d had some of those noodles,” Toto said wistfully. “It would have been nice to have noodles.”

“Noodles are fine,” Sam agreed.

“I wouldn’t say no to some noodles,” Jack said.

“True, true statement! He would not say no to noodles,” Toto babbled.

The eighth container was empty. Nothing.

The ninth was two big pieces of industrial machinery. “Whatchamacallits,” Jack said. He searched for the words. “You know. Like industrial lathes or whatever.”

“Yeah, great,” Dekka said. “All we need is two hundred and twenty volts and we can set up a machine shop.”

Sam was starting to feel anxious. Nutella and noodles were fine. Great, in fact. Miraculous. But he’d been hoping for more food, more water, more medicine, something. It was absurdly like Christmas morning when he was little: hoping for something he couldn’t even put a name to. A game-changer. Something . . . amazing.

When Jack opened the tenth container he just stood, staring.

Sam said, “Okay, what is it?”

No answer.

Sam leaned over Jack’s shoulders to look. Pallet after pallet of heavy cartons. Each carton was emblazoned with the Apple logo.

“Computers?” Sam wondered. “Or iPods?” Neither would be of any use.

At last Jack moved. He rushed to the nearest pallet, then hesitated. He carefully wiped his hands on his pants. Then he tore away the shrink-wrap and gently, cautiously, opened the first carton.

It was with trembling fingers that he lifted out a white box. On the box was a photo of a laptop.

“That would be great if we had internet,” Sam said. “Or electricity.”

“They ship them fully charged,” Jack snapped, angry at Sam’s interruption. Like Sam had started talking in church. “It’s been so long but . . . but they may still have some charge.”

“Okay,” Sam said. “So you can play some games. Let’s move on to the next—”

“No!” Jack cried, his voice somewhere between anguish and rapture. “No. I have to . . . I have to see.”

He spent five full minutes carefully opening the box, lifting out Styrofoam packing pieces like they were fragile works of art.

It was like watching some unfamiliar but profound religious ritual. Sam found it almost moving. He’d never seen Jack so emotional.

He picked patiently at the small piece of tape that held the laptop’s thin foam sheath in place.

And finally he held up the silver laptop as if holding a baby in his trembling hands.

He turned it over. By now the suspense was even getting to Sam.

Jack closed his eyes, took a steadying breath, turned the laptop over, and pressed the battery indicator light. Two tiny green lights blazed.

“Two!” Jack exulted. “Two! I was afraid it’d be one blinking light.” Then, in a whisper. “Two. That’s maybe an hour and a half. Maybe two hours even.”

“Dude. Are you crying?”

Jack wiped his eyes. “No. Jeez.”

“He’s lying, he’s crying,” Toto called out unhelpfully.

“You need some time?” Sam asked. He doubted any power on earth could convince Jack to move on yet.

Jack nodded.

“Okay. Dekka and I will get the next one.”

The eleventh container was more lawn furniture.

The twelfth container was filled from bottom to top with the greatest sight Sam and Dekka had ever seen in their lives.

This time it was they who stood, awestruck. Overcome by emotion.

There was no mistaking that logo.

“Can you put Pepsi in Cup-a-Noodles?” Dekka wondered.

They leaped at the shrink-wrapped pallets and ripped cans free.

Crack psst!

Crack psst!

Crack psst!

The sound that had not been heard in the FAYZ for months was heard once again. Pop-tops were popped, and Sam, Dekka, and Toto drank deep.

“Oh,” Dekka said.

“So good,” Toto said.

“It’s . . . It’s like life is all right again. Like the universe has finally decided to smile at us,” Sam said with a huge smile.

Burp.

“Oh, yeah,” Dekka said. “Soda burp.”

The three of them were grinning. “Jack!” Sam yelled.

“I’m busy!” he called back.

“Get over here. Now!”

Jack came running like he was expecting trouble. A grinning Sam held a can out for him.

“Is that . . . ?”

"It is," Sam assured him.

Crack psst!

Burp.

Jack started crying then, sobbing and drinking and burping and laughing.

"You going crazy on us, Jack?" Dekka asked.

"It's just . . ." He couldn't seem to find the words.

Sam put his arm around Jack's shoulders. "Yeah, dude. It's too much, isn't it? I mean too much like the world before."

"I eat rats," Jack said through his tears.

"We all eat rats," Dekka said. "And glad to get a good juicy one, too."

"True," Toto muttered with some concern. "They eat rats. They didn't mention rats before, Spidey."

The sun was well past noon. Sam said, "We need to check the last containers. Then get moving. Just because we're living large doesn't mean people at home are."

"We don't need to find water, we have Pepsi!" Jack said.

"Which is great," Sam said. "Might last a few days. If we could get it back to town."

That sobered Jack. He nodded briskly and said, "Yes, you're right. Sorry. I was just . . . I don't know. For a few minutes there it was like maybe it was all over."

Just to do something different they went to the boxcar. The instant they rolled back the door they were assailed by a sickly sweet smell.

The boxcar had been full of oranges. But this was only obvious because of the perky labels on the flats. The oranges themselves had long since rotted in the heat. A sticky liquid covered the floor of the car. Some of the crates sprouted fantastic growths of furry mold.

"A little late on this one," Sam said regretfully.

"Oranges would have been good," Toto said.

The very last container was a mixed load: Stanley brand screwdrivers and saws and assorted hand tools, and exercise equipment of various types.

But by then no one cared, because it was the next-to-last container that weighed on their minds.

The thirteenth container had been loaded with shoulder-fired missiles.

The so-called hospital had sounded even worse after the fire. Because then kids had been screaming. Screaming Lana's name.

No screams this time, Lana noted. Coughs. Lots of deep, rasping coughs. Like kids were trying to cough their lungs right out.

Dahra was standing over one of the cots, laying a wet cloth on a kid's head. She hadn't noticed Lana walk in with Sanjit.

Lana did a quick count. Twenty? Twenty-one? Some of them were on cots, some were on mattresses covered in piled-high blankets from a dozen homes, a dozen beds. Some were lying with very little clothing on the cool tile floor.

And most were coughing, coughing, coughing.

Dahra looked up at the sound of their voices. "Lana. Thank God. You want to try again?"

Lana spread her hands helplessly. "I'll do whatever. But the magic isn't working on

this thing.”

Dahra wiped sweat from her brow. She looked like she hadn't slept. Maybe ever. “Look, secondary infections, they're called. Someone gets a virus and then something else moves in, too. A lot of times that's what kills people.”

“You're the boss,” Lana said. She meant it, and she meant it only for Dahra.

“Her.” Dahra pointed. “Start with her. One hundred and six fever. That's what Pookie was before . . .”

Lana went to the girl. She looked familiar; Lana thought her name might be Judith, but it was hard to recognize someone whose face was red from coughing, drenched in sweat, hair plastered down, eyes scared, bleary, and defeated.

Lana laid her hand on the girl's head and almost yanked it away. She was hot to the touch. Like touching a plate fresh from the dishwasher.

Lana had no particular ritual for healing. She just touched the person and tried to focus.

“Who are you?” Dahra snapped at Sanjit.

“Lana's boyfriend,” Sanjit said.

“No, he's not,” Lana said.

“You shouldn't be here,” Dahra said to Sanjit. “We've got three known dead already. Go wash yourself off in the ocean and go home.”

“Thanks, but I'll stay. I want to help.”

Dahra stared, eyes narrowed, trying to figure out if he was crazy. “You really want to help? Because I need someone to empty out the bucket. If you really want to help.”

“I do. What bucket?”

Dahra pointed to a plastic trash can with a lid. Around it was a reeking pile of Tupperware containers that Dahra used as bedpans.

Sanjit scooped up the bedpans and balanced them on top of the bucket of urine and feces. The stench filled the room.

“There's a trench in the square. Then, if you're motivated, you could rinse everything out in the surf.”

“I'll be right back,” Sanjit said.

When he was gone, Dahra said, “I like your boyfriend. Not many guys volunteer to carry ten gallons of diarrhea and vomit.”

Lana laughed. “He's not my boyfriend.”

“Yeah, well, he can be mine if he wants to be. He's cute. And he carries crap.”

Lana felt the girl under her hand shudder and shake.

Dahra was moving automatically from bed to bed, cot to cot, pile of blankets on the floor to pile of blankets on the floor. She sighed as she wrote down another temperature. She was keeping records. Probably not as good as a doctor would do, but better than the average fourteen-year-old girl with twenty-one hacking, shivering patients could be expected to do.

“Why can't I do this?” Lana wondered aloud. “The first round of flu it worked, mostly.”

“Immunity, right?” Dahra said. “The virus gets into you, and then your body fights back. The virus learns, comes back ready for a new fight. So instead of reprogramming to beat antibodies it reprogrammed to beat you.”

“I'm not an antibody,” Lana said.

“Yeah, and this isn’t the old world, is it? This is some freak show where nothing works exactly the way it should.”

His freak show, Lana thought. A single match and she could have burned it out, killed it. Maybe. How many deaths had come because Lana had failed?

A boy Lana knew, a first grader named Dorian, suddenly stood up and started running for the door. It was a weaving, unsteady run.

Dahra cursed and made a snatch for him.

The kid was out the door in a flash.

A moment later Sanjit reappeared with Dorian under one arm and the now semi-clean toilet bucket and containers in the other.

“Come on, little man,” he said. “Back to bed.”

But Dorian wasn’t having it. He started screaming and flailing around.

Pandemonium erupted. Two kids started crying loudly, a third rolled off his bed onto the floor, and a fourth was shouting, “I want my mommy, I want my mommy.”

Then, a cough that was so loud it drew every eye. The little boy, Dorian.

He was standing up. He seemed startled by what had just come from his mouth.

He reared back and coughed again.

“No,” Dahra gasped.

Lana leaped to the little boy’s side and pressed her hand against the side of his head.

He coughed with such force it knocked him down, flat on his back.

Sanjit straddled him, holding him down, while Lana lay her hands on him, one on his heaving chest, the other on the side of his throat.

Dorian coughed, a spasm so powerful Sanjit fell backward and Dorian’s head smacked against the floor with a sickening crack. Lana kept her hold on him.

“He’s so hot I can barely keep my—,” Lana said as Dorian convulsed, bent into a C, and erupted in a cough that sprayed bloody chunks over Sanjit’s face.

Lana did not waver, did not pull back, but Dorian coughed again, and now blood seeped from his ears and pulsed from his lips.

Lana stood up suddenly and backed away.

“Don’t stop,” Dahra begged.

“I can’t cure death,” Lana whispered.

Just then two kids appeared in the doorway carrying a third. Lana could see from clear across the room that the girl they were struggling to carry was already gone.

Dahra saw it, too. “Set her down,” she said to them. “Just set her down and get out of here, wash yourselves in the surf, and then go home.”

“Will she be okay? She lives with us.”

“We’ll do everything we can,” Dahra said flatly. And when they beat a hasty retreat, she added under her breath, “Which is not a damn thing.”

Lana closed her eyes and could sense the Darkness reaching out for her, questing, a faint tentacle reaching to touch her mind.

So this is how you destroy us, Lana thought. This is how you kill us off. The old-fashioned way: plague.

NINETEEN

28 HOURS, 11 MINUTES

ORC TOOK A small detour on his way to the beach to tear his old home apart looking for a bottle. He found two.

With one bottle in each hand he headed toward the water. He was drinking from both bottles, a swig from the left, a swig from the right, and very soon he was finding the weight of feces in his pants almost funny.

“Orc. Man, where you been?”

Howard. Right there in front of him.

“Go away,” Orc said. Not angry, too happy now to be angry.

“Orc, man, what is going on with you? I been looking everywhere for you.”

Orc stared dully at Howard. He drank deeply, tilting the bottle back so far he almost lost his balance.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Howard said. He stepped forward and reached for the bottle and got his fingers around it.

Orc’s backhand sent him flying. He had a sudden savage urge to kick Howard. Howard was looking at him as if he had already been kicked and not just swatted away. A look of betrayal. Of hurt.

Orc closed his eyes and turned his head away. Not up for this. He had turds in his pants, his head hurt, bad memories were bubbling up inside his brain, and he didn’t need this.

“Dude, come on, man, this isn’t right. I’ll take care of you, man.” Howard stood up and made a show of being fine. His voice was soothing, like he was talking to a baby. Or to some stupid animal or something.

“I got what I need,” Orc said. He held the two bottles out like trophies.

Howard stood cautious, ready to jump back. There was blood running from his nose. “I know you’re feeling bad about Drake. I know that, because you and I are best friends, right? So I know how you’re feeling. But that’s done. Anyway, it was just a matter of time, sooner or later it was going to happen.”

Orc liked this line of reasoning. But he felt like maybe there was a diss hidden in there, too. “Cause no one could trust me, right?”

“No, man, that’s not it,” Howard said. “It’s just, no jail was ever going to hold Drake forever. This is all Sam’s fault, if had just done what he should have done—”

“I think I hurt some little kid,” Orc said.

Just like that. Out it came. Not planned. More like it had to escape. Like Drake: it was going to get out sooner or later.

The comparison made Orc laugh. He laughed loud and long and took another drink and was feeling almost cheerful until his bleary eyes settled on Howard’s face once more. Howard was grave. Worried.

“Orc, man, what’s that mean? What do you mean you hurt some kid?”

“I just want to go wash off,” Orc said.

“This kid you hurt. Where did it happen?”

“I don’t know,” Orc growled. He looked around like he might be in the right place.

No, this wasn't it. It was . . . He spotted a stop sign at the far end of the block.

There was a pile of rags at the bottom of the sign.

Orc felt an icy cold fill his body. Howard was still talking, but his voice was just a distant buzzing sound.

Orc stood staring, unable to speak, unable to move, unable to look away, unable to breathe. Stared at the little pile of rags that was so clearly, so terribly clearly, a body.

Memory. Orc was back in his old body, the one before, the one made of flesh and not rock. He was raising his baseball bat, intending to teach Bette a lesson. Just a tap. Just a smack to show her he was in charge.

He had never meant to kill her, either.

"I'll get rid of it," Howard was saying from far away. "I'll hide it. Or something."

It. Like the pile of rags wasn't a little kid.

Orc walked away, numb, indifferent to Howard's pleas.

It was a small, sandy area, not quite a cove, not really large enough to be much of a beach. It was just a sandy space between jumbled rocks on one side and a stand of scruffy-looking palm trees and grass on the other.

The five fishing boats—the fleet—were beached, pulled up onto the sand. It was like one of those picture postcards from quaint European fishing villages, Quinn thought. Not that the boats were very pretty, really, they were actually rather scruffy, and lord knew they smelled.

Still, kind of perfect.

Quinn and his fishermen had set up a reasonably pleasant campsite. There was never any rain so the fact that they had no tents or other cover didn't matter.

"We'll camp out old-school," Quinn had announced as though it was all a fun diversion.

There were nineteen of them all together and they soon discovered that the beach was alive with fleas, tiny sand crabs, and assorted other animals that made sleep really unpleasant.

It was going to be a long night.

Then someone had the bright idea of burning a patch of grass on the theory that the cleared area would be relatively bug- and crab-free.

This of course gave way naturally to a bonfire of driftwood. It smoked way too much and was hard to keep burning, but it improved everyone's mood and soon they were cooking an early dinner of fish, including some excellent steaks from the shark.

The dinner talk was all about what was happening back in town. Quinn hoped someone would think to update them.

Not just forget about them. He made a point of reassuring his crews that Sam and Edilio would be taking care of their siblings and friends.

"This is just so we don't get sick and can keep working," Quinn explained.

"Oh, goody: work," Cigar said, and everyone laughed.

None of the fishermen seemed sick. No one had complained. Maybe the fact that they were a sort of self-contained group who mostly hung out together and spent most of their time out on the ocean had kept them safe. Maybe they would be okay.

Quinn watched the sun plunge toward the horizon. He walked out alone onto a spit of rock and sand that stretched a few dozen feet from the shore. Weird how much he

had come to love his job and being out on the water. He'd always loved surfing, and now that was gone, but the water was still there. Too calm, too peaceful, too much like a lake, but it was still a remnant of the actual ocean, and he loved being near it and on it and in it.

If the barrier ever came down, what would he do? Wait until he was old enough and move to Alaska or Maine and become a professional fisherman? He laughed. That was not a career path that would ever have occurred to him in the old days.

But now he just could not even pretend to care about college or being a lawyer or a businessman or whatever it was his folks thought he should be.

He had crossed a line. He knew it and it made him a little sad. None of them would ever be normal children again. Especially those who had found ways to be happy in the FAYZ.

A light. Down in the direction of the islands. It would never have been noticed back in the days when Perdido Beach itself was lit up.

Quinn had heard the story about Caine and Diana occupying one of the islands. It was weird to think that the light might be coming from Caine's bedroom. And that Caine might be gazing out at the dark night.

Life would never be totally peaceful as long as that guy was alive.

Quinn turned his gaze south. The Sammy suns in people's homes weren't bright enough to light up the town. But the red glow of the setting sun painted the bare outline of Clifftop, snug up against the nearest arc of the barrier.

Lana. Quinn had liked her. Had even thought maybe she liked him. But something had changed in Lana. She was, in some sense, too large and powerful a person for Quinn.

Like Sam, who had once been Quinn's closest friend. They were both part of some different class of person.

Sam, a hero. A leader.

Lana? She was grand and tragic. Like someone out of a play or a book.

And Quinn was a fisherman.

Unlike them, though, he was happy. He turned back to look at his crews, his fishermen. They were cleaning their nets, tending to their reels, cutting grass to make beds, complaining, joking, telling stories everyone had already heard, laughing.

Quinn missed his parents. He missed Sam and Lana. But this was his family now.

Roscoe had fallen asleep from sheer exhaustion. He awoke to find persistent itching on his stomach. He scratched it through his T-shirt.

He went back to sleep. But dreams kept him from sleeping soundly. That and the itching.

He woke again and felt the itchy spot. There was a lump there. Like a swelling. And when he held still and pressed his fingers against the spot he could feel something moving under the skin.

The small room was suddenly very cold. Roscoe shivered.

He went to the window hoping for light. There was a moon but the light was faint. Roscoe pulled his shirt over his head. He looked down at the spot on his stomach.

It was moving. The flesh itself. He could feel it under his fingertips. Like something poking back at him. But he couldn't feel it from the inside, couldn't feel it

in his stomach. And he realized that his entire body was numb. He could feel with his fingertips but not the skin of his stomach—

The skin split!

“Ahhhh!”

He was touching it as it split, and he shrieked in terror and something pushed its way out through a bloodless hole.

“Oh, God, oh, God, oh, no no no no!”

Roscoe screamed and leaped for the door. His hand clawed at the knob as he babbled and wept and the door was locked, locked, oh, God, no, they had locked him in.

He banged at the door, but it was the middle of the night. Who would hear him in the empty town hall?

“Hey! Hey! Is anyone there? Help me. Help me. Please, please, someone help me!”

He banged and the thing in his belly stuck out half an inch. He was scared to look at it. But he did and he screamed again because it was a mouth now, a gnashing insect mouth full of parts like no normal mouth. Hooked, wicked mandibles clicked. It was inside him, chewing its way out.

Hatching from him.

“Help me, help me, don’t leave me here like this!”

But who would hear him? Sinder? No. Not anymore. That was over. All over. And he was alone and friendless. No one even to hear as he screamed and begged.

The window. He grabbed the pillow from his bed and pushed it against the glass and then punched it hard. The pane shattered. He took off his shoe and smashed at the starred glass until most of it fell tinkling to the street below.

Then he screamed for help. Screamed into the Perdido Beach night air.

No answer.

“Help me! Please, please, oh, God, please help me! You can’t just leave me locked up!”

But still, no answer.

Fear took hold of him, deep crazy-making fear.

No. No. No no no no, this couldn’t be happening. He hadn’t done anything to hurt anyone, he hadn’t done anything awful. Why? Why was this happening to him?

Roscoe fell to his knees and begged God. God, please, no, no, no, I didn’t do anything wrong. I wasn’t brave or strong but I wasn’t bad, either. Not like this, please, God, no no no, not like this.

Roscoe felt an itching in the middle of his back.

He sat down and cried.

TWENTY

25 HOURS, 37 MINUTES

DIANA FED PENNY a little late. But Penny didn't complain. She was off in some dream that had her smiling to herself, smiling at her own illusions.

The bathroom reeked of human waste. Penny was sitting on the tile floor, legs twisted in front of her, just sitting on a plastic exercise mat.

"Hey, you want to take a shower?" Diana asked.

Penny didn't respond, just giggled at something Diana couldn't see.

Diana bent down and tapped her shoulder. She had to do it several times before Penny's faraway eyes focused on Diana.

Penny laughed. "Oh, that's the real you, isn't it?"

"As real as I get," Diana answered.

"You come to feed the zoo animal?"

"Here's your food. But I thought you might want to take a shower or bath. I could help you."

"Is it because I smell like a sewer? Is that it?"

"Yes," Diana said bluntly. Without waiting for an answer, she went to the tub, a huge oval affair, all pink marble.

How long the water would last, Diana didn't know. But for right now there was water and it was even hot. There was an assortment of Bulgari bath beads, salts, and shampoos. She popped a couple of the bath cubes into the water.

Penny wasn't wearing much, just a dirty yellow tank top and a pair of stained pink shorts. She had two pairs of socks on over her broken ankles.

"How's the pain?" Diana asked.

"Painful. Feels kind of like someone broke my legs and my ankles and my feet. I'll show you what it feels like."

Suddenly a pack of rabid, vicious dogs were there in the room. Their eyes were red, their breath steamed, they snapped at Diana, ready to launch themselves and rip her apart.

Then they were gone.

"Like that," Penny said, taking malicious pleasure from the way Diana had leaped back, batting wildly at the illusion.

Diana calmed herself. Getting upset would just give Penny more of a sense of power.

"Sorry," Diana said for lack of anything else to say. "Eat something while the tub fills."

"You don't have to stay here. I can haul myself up into the tub." She scooped some of the spaghetti and meat sauce into her mouth with her hand.

"You could drown."

"Yeah, that would be terrible, wouldn't it?"

Diana didn't answer. There was nothing but pain in Penny's future. There was no way to fix her legs, not without Lana, and nothing to treat the pain but Tylenol and Motrin. It was like trying to put out a forest fire with a squirt gun.

"It's good you have your power," Diana said.

"Yeah. It's great. Really great. It's like having my own kind of sucky movie theater. You want to know what I was seeing when you came in?"

Diana was pretty sure she did not.

"I was creating monsters with needle teeth. Like vampires, I guess, but more like wolves, like rabid bats, like every scary thing you see pictures of living down at the bottom of the ocean. And you know what they were doing?"

"Let me help get your shorts off."

Diana knelt and worked Penny's shorts down her thighs. Carefully, as gently as she could. But still Penny made a rising, shuddering cry of pain.

"They were ripping you apart, Diana," Penny gasped through gritted teeth. "They were all over you, Diana, doing every horrible thing I could think of."

"Lift your arms."

Diana pulled the shirt, none too gently, over Penny's head.

"Watching you scream in my head helps keep me from screaming," Penny said.

"Whatever works," Diana said.

She put her arm under Penny's, bent low, and lifted her. The girl wasn't heavy. Food had not cured Penny's runway-model thinness.

"Oh, oh, ohhhhhh," Penny sobbed as Diana lifted her.

Diana rested Penny on the edge of the tub, reached awkwardly to turn off the water.

"Caine could do this easier," Penny said. "But he won't, will he? He doesn't want to come in here and see his handiwork. Not the mighty Caine."

Diana maneuvered to bear most of Penny's weight and lower her bottom first into the hot water. Her twisted pipe-cleaner legs dragged, then followed their owner into the tub.

Penny screamed.

"Sorry," Diana said.

"Oh, God, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts!"

Diana stood back. Penny was sweating, even paler than before. But she stopped screaming. She lay back against the tub, up to her chest in water and bubbles.

"There's a sprayer. I'll wash your hair." Diana turned on the nozzle, tested the water temperature, and played it over Penny's lank hair.

She worked in shampoo until it foamed.

"Just like the hair salon," Penny said.

"Yeah. Probably where I'll end up working someday," Diana said.

"Nah, not you, you're too smart," Penny said. She had closed her eyes. Diana rinsed shampoo down Penny's face and neck. "Beautiful and smart and you have Caine all to yourself now, don't you?"

Diana sighed. "I'm a loser, Penny. Same as you."

Caine burst in. He looked startled. "I heard screaming."

"Oh, sorry about that," Penny snarled. "I hope I didn't wake you up, you piece of ___"

"You okay?" Caine asked Diana.

"She's perfect," Penny said. "Perfect hair, perfect teeth, perfect skin. Plus she has legs that work, which is really cool."

"I'm out of here," Caine said.

"No," Diana said, "Help me lift her back out."

"Yeah, Caine, don't you want to see me naked? I'm still kind of hot. If you don't mind my legs. Just don't look at them. Because they'll kind of make you sick."

To Diana's surprise Caine said, "Whenever you're ready."

Diana popped the drain.

"Why don't you just kill me?" Penny demanded. "You know you will sooner or later, Caine. You know you can't take care of me forever. You want to do it, don't you?"

Diana tried to read the answer in Caine's eyes. Nothing. There were times she was sure she saw human decency there. And other times when his dark eyes were as pitiless as a shark's.

"Okay, raise her up," Diana said.

Caine stepped closer and lifted up his hands. Penny rose from the water like some awful parody of a surfacing dolphin. She rose and the water fell and bubbles slid off her.

Diana took the nozzle and sprayed Penny off as she floated a few feet in the air. Even the touch of the water on her legs made Penny wince and grit her teeth.

Diana spread a clean towel over the mat and Caine set Penny down slowly. Gently.

"I could fill your head with living nightmares," Penny said to Caine. "I could make you scream like I scream."

"But then I would kill you, Penny," Caine said coldly. "And I don't think you're quite ready to die."

Albert stared at the ledger book like it could answer his worries. But it was the source of his worries. The columns where he normally entered the amount of produce coming in from the fields, the number of pigeons or gulls caught by Brianna, the number of rats sold to him, the quantity of birds, raccoons, opossums, squirrels, or deer brought in by Hunter, were all empty for this day.

Albert reminded himself to get someone down to the dock to bring up the catch. He should have done it earlier, but it had been a hectic day. Maybe he could send Jamal. Speaking of which, where was Jamal? He was supposed to be back by sunset and it was well after that.

Albert made a mental note to himself: give Dahra something nice as a reward for her quick thinking. If Quinn and his people had been brought down by this flu, the situation would be even more desperate.

Albert had a page for water. Bottled water found in homes or cars: nothing in days. Water trucked in: nothing in a day.

Just like that, in the blink of an eye, Perdido Beach had gone from self-sufficient at a very, very basic level to disaster.

Albert glanced around the room. His natural caution had become something closer to paranoia lately. The house was empty—even the maid was away. But what he was about to do would have been troublesome if observed: he opened his desk and pulled out a bottle of water.

It made a snapping sound as he broke the seal on the bottle of Arrowhead water. He drank deep, then carefully sealed the bottle and hid it away again.

He closed the ledger. Nothing to add to the incoming columns.

Then an unmistakable noise: shattering glass.

Albert froze. The sound was from close by. The kitchen?

He hesitated only a moment, running through his options. Then he reached under the desk, fumbled for and found the pistol taped to the underside.

A door opened. He heard the sound of it and felt the air pressure change and pushed back his chair and tried to rip the tape free so he could hold the gun properly as he'd been shown by Edilio, but he was too slow, too late, they were in the room and on him.

Turk, Lance, Watcher, and Raul. All armed.

It was Watcher—a quiet eleven-year-old who had been caught stealing—who whacked his knee with a crowbar.

“Aaahh!” It hadn't been that hard a swing but the pain shot up his leg and for a second he could think of nothing else. He'd never felt pain like that. His ankle and foot were tingling like he'd stepped on a downed power line.

“Get him!”

“Yeah!”

“Hit him again!”

“No!” Albert yelled, but the next blow came from Turk, who smashed the butt of his rifle into Albert's face. His nose gushed blood. This was more numbing than painful. His thoughts were scattered, ripped into fragments.

“Wha . . . ?” he said.

His pistol, gone. Where? He squeezed his hand, stupid for a few seconds, not able to figure out—

Turk grabbed him from the back of his neck and slammed him facedown on the ledger. A distant part of Albert's mind worried that his blood would seep onto the pages and make them hard to read.

He groaned as someone punched him in the back and in the side and ground his face savagely against the ledger.

Turk yanked him back and shoved him against the wall. Albert's legs gave way and he fell on his rear end.

The four of them loomed over him. Albert knew he was crying as well as bleeding. And he knew that both his tears and his blood would make the creeps happy.

“What do you want?” he said, slurring his words, realizing a broken tooth was stuck into his tongue.

“What do we want?” Turk mocked. “Everything, Albert. We want everything.”

After cleaning Penny, Diana felt the need for a shower herself.

She shampooed. She conditioned. She shaved her legs and armpits. So normal. So like being home. Except that here her mother's creepy boyfriends didn't sneak in to get a look at her and pretend they'd come looking for aspirin or whatever.

She turned off the shower with great reluctance. She could stand there under the spray forever. But in the back of her mind was the knowledge that they had all wasted food until they were starving. She had learned a deep lesson about waste.

She wrapped one of the soft bath sheets around herself and brushed her teeth.

She went toward her bed and found Caine waiting there for her. He was standing

awkwardly, chewing his thumbnail.

“Napoleon?” she asked him.

“No,” he said, and looked down at the floor.

“Uh-huh.”

“I helped with Penny.”

“Yes, you did. And you only threatened to kill her once.”

A flicker of a smile. “Even Sam would have threatened her.”

Diana went to him. They did not touch. But they stood just inches away. Close enough for Diana to feel his breath on her face.

“Why did you save me?” Diana asked.

Caine sucked in a deep, steadying breath, like he was getting ready to dive into a pool. “Because I . . .” He paused, blinked, seeming surprised at the words coming out of his own mouth. “Because what would I do without you? How would I live without you? Because.”

“Because?”

“Because you are the only human being I need.”

Diana looked at him skeptically. Was he changed? Even a little? Or was it all just manipulation?

She might never know. But at that moment she also knew this was all she would get from him. And she knew that it was enough. Because she was not going to turn him away.

She grabbed his head in both hands and drew him to her. She kissed him hard. It was a hungry, needy, wild kiss. No time to breathe, no time to be gentle, no time for any more stupid questions or doubts.

Diana took a step back, unwound the towel, and let it drop.

Caine made a sound like a strangling animal.

She pushed him hard. He landed on his back on the bed.

He began to fumble with his shirt, trying to get it off.

“No, I’ll do that,” Diana said. “I’ll do everything.”

PETE

SOMETHING WAS NOT right. He could no longer balance atop the sheet of glass. He had fallen. He was falling still.

There was a ringing in his ears. A fire burned inside his body and that body was almost all he saw now. The sister was a faint echo. The Darkness was far away. He was inside himself, burning, twisting, and falling forever and forever.

He tried to make his mother appear, but she wavered and slipped away.

The cool breeze could not reach inside him, it sliced his skin but did not put out the fire.

He felt his body empty out. Wrong. Wrong even to see himself, wrong to have his body be so big a part of his mind, pushing everything else aside.

Pain. An explosion, one of many, erupted from him and shot white-hot spears into him again and again.

His sister was upset, her distraught, too-bright, too-blue eyes swam around like fish in an aquarium.

The pale tentacle reached, quested, but could not find him because he was no longer high atop it all, perched and balanced, he was falling, spinning downward into thirst and burning and pain.

He had to make it stop.

But how?

TWENTY-ONE

24 HOURS, 10 MINUTES

LITTLE PETE LICKED his lips. They were dry and cracked.

Astrid was thirsty, too. She'd gone out a couple of times, defying the quarantine, to look for water.

Her plan now was to wait for dawn when the dew would settle on the leaves of the trees, on the siding of the house.

She had a squeegee and a bucket and some fairly clean rags. She had to get water. She had to get Pete something to drink.

No one to call on for help. Sam was gone. She had looked for Edilio but not found him. Who could get her anything? Who could help her?

Little Pete coughed hoarsely and licked his lips as he hung in midair, twisting slowly, like a chicken on a rotisserie, hovering in the breeze that blew strong through the window.

Afterward Diana lay alone in her bed. She'd kicked Caine out and Caine was relieved to go.

Diana would not have minded him staying. But she sensed he needed to go off and think, wonder what he'd gotten himself into, and regret any implication that he had cleaned up his act and accepted her terms.

It was all a fantasy, of course, the idea that he would change. Maybe someday. Maybe when he was older. Maybe when he got a career and a house and a wife and all the other things that cause wild boys to turn into men.

Not that men were always better behaved than boys.

Diana stayed on her side of the bed, just as if Caine was still there. That had become his side of the bed. It belonged to him.

Of course if that was true she was going to have to find some condoms. From just the two times the risk of pregnancy wasn't great, especially given the fact that her body was half wrecked. But still. The last thing anyone wanted was a baby.

What chance would any kid have with Caine as father and Diana as mother? Diana laughed softly. And could not later recall the exact moment or the exact reason that her laughter turned into bitter tears.

Edilio stood completely still in the hallway outside of Roscoe's room.

He could barely breathe.

What could he say? What could you say to a boy who was going to die? The terrible truth was that he could do nothing for Roscoe. It was good that Roscoe was calling to God because only God could save him. Edilio could not.

And what Edilio had to do next would destroy Roscoe's last hope.

Edilio looked at the plywood. Three half sheets, each four by four feet. A hammer and nails. Two-by-fours.

It had to be done. It had to be. Roscoe—the things inside him—could not be allowed to escape.

Edilio dragged the first sheet across the dark hallway and propped it against the

door.

"I hear someone out there!" Roscoe yelled.

"It's me, Roscoe. It's Edilio," he said.

"Edilio! Please, can you help me?"

Edilio opened the box of nails, grabbed the hammer, lined the nail up so it would go through the plywood into the door molding.

"Roscoe, there's nothing I can do, brother. I have to . . . You're going to hear some hammering."

"What?"

Edilio slammed the hammer into the nail. He had to be careful; it was dark, and operating by feel alone was a bad way to hammer nails.

This was going to take a long time.

"Roscoe, I have to do this, man," Edilio said.

"You're going to lock me in here and let me die?"

Edilio hesitated. "Yes."

"No way. No way. No!"

"And I have to do the same thing to the window, man."

"Edilio, no. No, man. You don't want to do this."

"No, I don't want to do this," Edilio said.

Roscoe fell silent as Edilio nailed the remaining plywood in place. Edilio propped the two-by-four against the plywood and nailed it into place. The other end he nailed into the floor with massive long nails that took forever to hammer in.

Outside in the fresh air, Edilio steeled himself for what came next. He leaned the ladder against the building and with some difficulty wrestled a sheet of plywood up the ladder. He was going to fall and kill himself, he thought, and it would be justice, wouldn't it?

Roscoe was there at the window. His face was ghostly in the pale moonlight. "Isn't there anything . . . ?" Roscoe pleaded.

"Sam can't even kill the things," Edilio said. "He tried but he couldn't. I can't let them hurt more people."

"Yeah," Roscoe said. He nodded, jaw so stiff his teeth were cracking audibly.

"Sorry, man," Edilio said. He slapped the wood into place against the window, resting it precariously on the narrow sill.

"Tell everyone I was ever mean to that I'm sorry," Roscoe said, his voice muffled now.

"You were never mean to anyone, man. You were a good guy." Edilio winced, realizing too late that he was using the past tense. He quickly drove in the first nail. He hit his thumb with the hammer. The pain was stunning.

He welcomed it.

Orc woke to a headache and shivers.

He was facedown. On the sand. The surf was lapping at his legs, covering his feet, gently surging to wash over his calves.

His head was a single giant ball of pain.

There was sand in his mouth. Sand in the cracks between the pebbles that formed his skin.

He could see the bottles. Just a few inches from his head, empty. Not even a tiny little drop left.

He was still drunk, he had not slept long enough to sober up. But he was no longer blacked-out, brain-dead drunk.

He was naked. That surprised him a little. But he had vague memories of ripping his stained, filthy clothes off and rampaging like a wild animal through the water. Bellowing.

There was no one to see him anyway. No one around. No one was going to hang around when Orc went crazy.

Scared of me, Orc thought. Surprise, surprise. Orc the monster, all covered in his own crap and staggering and lurching through waist-high water trying to get clean, scared people.

He decided to go look for another bottle, quick, before it all came rushing back into his head but it was too late because it was all coming back now.

He got to his knees. He might be a filthy, disgusting drunk, but he was still strong.

He'd have to walk naked through the dark streets. What did it matter? He wasn't a boy, he was a monster. A naked Orc was just a curiosity for people to laugh at. One more thing for people to find disgusting.

He tried to stand up but somehow ended up rolling onto his back. He vomited. It dribbled over the side of his face, over the last patch of human skin.

There were stars in the sky. They kind of swam around and sometimes doubled and blurred.

Here he was: Charles Merriman.

He hated himself. Hated himself so much. He had what he deserved: cold sand and colder water and pain.

Why couldn't he just die? He deserved to die. He needed to die. If there was some kind of God up there looking down at him, then God was wanting to throw up.

Of course God probably liked doing stuff like this. Charles Merriman was probably, like, his favorite person to beat on. Yeah, it was, like, *I'm going to give this kid a violent drunk for a daddy, and a dumb dishrag for a mother, and I'm going to make it hard for him to even learn to read, and then, just when he's starting to finally get some respect, I'll turn him into a monster.*

No one ever treated Charles Merriman like he might be a kid. Like he might not be totally worthless. Except Howard, and that was just so Howard could use him.

The only other person who had been nice to him was Astrid. Not like she liked him, but she didn't think he was scum. Like he wasn't just some nothing.

He had saved her life once. But even before that she'd been nice to him. One person. Ever.

With a supreme effort, Orc got to his feet.

In the end Sam decided to camp for the night by the train. They had crates to burn and a reassuring fire roared high into the night sky.

They made a camp out of lawn furniture. They ate Nutella and drank Pepsi, nowhere near tired of the sweetness.

They stared into the flames and up at the sparks.

"If we bring kids here, they're going to find out about the missiles," Dekka said.

“Yeah,” Sam agreed. He made a *keep it down* gesture and added a significant glance at Toto, who was dozing fitfully on a wicker chaise lounge.

“We can’t get all this to town. They have to come here.”

“Yep,” Sam said.

“What we need right now is a bunch of . . . what were they called?”

“M3-MAAWS,” Jack said. “Multi-role Anti-Armor Anti-Personnel Weapons System.” He was reading the instruction manual by the light of the fire.

Sam rolled his eyes. “M3s. Yeah, this would be, like, the last thing I would want to see getting into a kid’s hands.”

“Can we hide them?” Dekka suggested.

“I won’t tell anyone,” Jack said distractedly. “I don’t want kids coming here and stealing my ’puters, anyway.”

“We have a new member of our little band,” Sam said. “Toto the truth teller. I don’t think he’s great at keeping secrets.”

He got up to throw another wooden crate on the fire. The fire would most likely keep the coyotes away. He yawned and flopped into the wicker rocking chair and hefted his sore feet onto the little table.

“You know what?” Sam said. “I keep forgetting: I am not the guy in charge.” He laughed contentedly. “I’ll tell Albert. I’ll hand Toto off to Edilio. Then? Not my problem.”

“Yeah, that’s totally going to work, Sam,” Dekka said.

Sam noticed her feeling her stomach, pressing in on it, frowning.

“Anything the matter?” he asked.

Dekka shook her head. “I think I’ll get some sleep.”

Sam nodded off. At some time in the night he woke to see the fire had burned down to glowing coals. He saw Dekka some distance away, just outside the circle of firelight. She had her back to him, her shirt lifted up to expose her stomach, which she prodded and poked.

Sam went back to sleep and came fully awake what felt like mere seconds later, though the fire was almost entirely out and Dekka was on her own chair, snoring.

Something. Something out there in the dark.

Coyotes? He didn’t want a fight with coyotes—if he or one of the others was badly hurt, there was no easy way to get back to Lana.

He raised his hand and tossed a Sammy sun into the air. It hovered ten feet up, casting a sickly light over the camp. Jack and Toto asleep. Dekka, no longer.

“What is it?” Dekka hissed.

“Don’t know.” He pointed to the direction he thought the sound had come from. Then, in a voice pitched loud enough to be heard but not loud enough to wake his sleeping companions, he said, “If anyone’s out there, I am Bright Hands. I will burn you if you bother us.”

No answer.

A faint but definite rustling sound. Maybe a clicking. Maybe not. Then silence.

“So much for sleep,” Sam said.

“I’ll sit watch,” Dekka said.

“Dekka: you have anything you need to tell me?”

He heard her sigh. “Just being paranoid, Sam. Just, you know, making sure. My

stomach was just rumbling and I thought maybe . . . You know.”

“Dekka, the last time you had anything even a little bit sweet was months ago. It’s not a surprise your stomach would be a little off.”

“Yeah. I know. Is yours?”

“Sure. A little,” Sam lied.

Jack woke with a loud snort and a crash as he smashed his arm down, crushing a table.

“What?” he yelled. He sat up. Rubbed his face. Found his glasses. “Why are we awake? It’s still night.”

“It’s true: it is nighttime,” Toto said.

“Well, if we’re all up, we might as well push on. Sooner the better,” Sam said with a sigh. “Let’s go find this lake.”

Sanjit was slight in build. But he was strong. So when Lana collapsed he was able to catch her and hold her.

Dahra saw it happen. “She needs sleep,” she said to Sanjit. “Get her out of here.”

“What about you?” Sanjit asked.

“I’ve gotten really good at grabbing power naps,” Dahra said. “Besides, Virtue is almost as much use around here as you are.”

“Almost?” Virtue grumbled.

He had come to the so-called hospital with word that Bowie was doing much better. He had tucked the rest of his brothers and sisters into bed with too little water and too little food. And now he was helping Dahra.

Dahra put a hand on his shoulder and said, “You’re a lifesaver, Virtue. My little African brother, here.”

That brought one of Virtue’s rare smiles. Dahra’s folks came from Ghana and Virtue’s from Congo, so they weren’t exactly from the same neighborhood, but it gave them something in common, Sanjit realized. That, plus the fact that they were both incredibly decent people.

“I can’t carry Lana to Clifftop,” Sanjit said. “But I can get her a place to lie down.”

Lana woke up long enough to say, “Urrhh. Wha?” And then her eyes rolled back in her head and Sanjit lifted her in his arms. Virtue brought him a couple of blankets and draped them over his shoulders.

He carried her up out of the basement, up through the hallway crowded with hacking, miserable kids, and out to the plaza.

Five unburied bodies lay there side by side. Mismatched blankets covered each one, corners tucked underneath, faces covered by chenille or satin or tartan wool.

They’d given the plague a name, a callous nickname. The SDC they called it: Supernatural Death Cough.

But at some point during the day they’d begun to notice that some kids were getting better, too. The flu was awful. But it wasn’t a death sentence to everyone who caught it.

They’d been unable to keep complete records, but according to Dahra’s hasty notes and frazzled memory about one in ten progressed to full-blown SDC.

Sanjit was struggling a bit to carry Lana, but he was unwilling to lay her down near the dead or within sound of the hacking coughs.

She wasn't just going without sleep. She was going without love and hope. She was living with guilt for having failed to be Superwoman, having failed to kill the evil in the mine shaft, having failed to see what was happening to Mary.

He took her to the beach and laid her down on one of the blankets, which he spread on the soft, dry sand. She was lying on top of the gun in her belt, so he slid it out and lay it on her stomach. Then he covered her with the other blanket.

Her faithful dog had followed them the whole way and now Patrick snuggled beside her. He looked up at Sanjit, questioning.

She would almost certainly be safe here alone. No one wanted to hurt the Healer. And Patrick would bark if anyone came close.

But Sanjit couldn't just leave her here all alone. So he settled into a sort of yoga sitting posture, sighed, and decided to await sunrise.

Albert did not resist. Maybe, he thought, a braver kid would have. But he wasn't that kid. When Turk demanded to know where Albert's secret stash was, Albert told him.

Simple as that.

Albert had wet himself. He had cried. Still was crying.

He was going to die. He knew that. They would figure out pretty soon that there was no safe way to release Albert.

They would know that. He knew it, so how could they not know it?

But he could negotiate, maybe. Maybe now that they had all his stuff, his stash of canned food and bottled water.

It didn't look like much. It wasn't, although it was untold wealth in the FAYZ. They had filled two small boxes with his things and filled their hoodie pockets as well.

"You got what you wanted," Albert said, trying desperately but failing to keep the sobby quaver out of his voice. "Just go away. I won't tell anyone."

"Man, you were hiding cans of Beef-a-Roni," Raul said. He was disbelieving. "You had three cans!"

"Take it," Albert pleaded. "Take it all."

Turk glanced at Lance. Even in his despairing, shattered state, Albert knew they weren't quite sure just yet. Hope rose like a tiny flame inside him. Maybe. Maybe they wouldn't.

"Look, you want food and water, right?" Albert pleaded.

"You have more?" Lance demanded angrily.

"Not-not-not here."

"Not-not-not," Lance mimicked.

"N-n-n-n-not h-h-h-here," Watcher said, and laughed.

"So where is this other stuff?" Turk asked, and kicked him almost tentatively. It was enough, though, to send a breathtaking spike of pain up Albert's leg from his broken knee. The knee was already swelling to twice its normal size. It was the worst of many agonies in his body.

"I don't have anything else here," Albert said. "But listen, I make more, right? I buy more. I control what gets made and picked and all."

"Yes," Turk said, mock-serious. "You're a big man, Albert. Too bad you peed yourself."

That set off another round of laughter.

“You think we’re stupid?” Lance demanded. “You think we’re just some stupid white boys who don’t know you can snap your fingers and have Sam or Brianna or one of those freaks come after us?”

“I wouldn’t do that,” Albert said. His jaw was quivering so bad he almost couldn’t speak. “I wouldn’t. Because if I did that, you’d, you’d, you’d tell people I cried.”

“And wet your pants.” Watcher seemed the most likely to let him go, but Albert knew the decisions were being made by Turk and Lance.

There was no pity in either face. Lance was aglow with hatred. Turk was less emotional.

“You know what we ought to do?” Turk suggested, laughing in anticipation of his punch line. “We ought to throw him in one of the slit trenches we dug for him.”

“No, no, don’t do that,” Albert begged. A dunking in excrement was infinitely better than being killed. “No, don’t, I’m begging you.”

Lance squatted down, brought his handsome, chiseled face right down to Albert’s level. “You just think you’ve got it all, don’t you? Yeah, it would be fun to see you wallow around in the crap like you made us do. But then you’d just climb out and next time one of us turned around, there’d be Sam Temple. Flash of light and *zap*, we’d be dead.”

“I’m not . . . That’s not . . .,” Albert said. “Please. Please don’t kill me.”

Turk looked offended. “Did we say we were going to kill you?” He turned to Lance. “Where did he get that idea?”

Lance played along. “I have no idea, Turk.”

“Maybe because of this,” Turk said. He leveled his rifle at Albert’s face.

Something exploded.

Albert heard no sound.

He was on his side.

Blood covered his right eye, blinding him. Or maybe his eye wasn’t there anymore, he didn’t know.

He tried to breathe and heard gurgling in his lungs. Heard his heart slow . . .

Turk looked at once alarmed and ecstatic. Lance’s face became sullen. The two younger kids backed away, tripping over each other, and ran.

Lance punched Turk’s shoulder in rough congratulations.

Albert’s one good eye went dark.

TWENTY-TWO

12 HOURS, 48 MINUTES

“**THAT IS A lake,**” Sam said. “That is definitely a lake.”

“I can’t believe we didn’t even know this was here,” Dekka said.

The sun was still not up, but a pearly gray light showed a long slope heading down to a vast body of water. Bigger than anything Sam had seen outside of the ocean.

Dry grass grew in tufts. Amazingly scraggly, stunted pine trees showed here and there, but the shore itself was formed by a line of large jumbled rocks broken up by narrow, halfhearted sand beaches.

At the limits of their vision was a small marina with perhaps two dozen boats at the dock.

The barrier sliced right across the lake, but the part on the inside was more water than the kids of Perdido Beach could ever need or want.

“You think it’s drinkable?” Dekka wondered.

“Let’s find out,” Sam said. He jogged downhill toward the shore, careful not to trip, but anxious to see and taste. It would be too cruel to get here and find that it was salt water. That would be one more dirty trick, one more disappointment. Not to mention the fact that it might doom them all.

He reached the lakeshore with the others close behind. The pale rock was shifting and unsteady, so he felt his way gingerly.

He pulled off his shoes and then impulsively dived in a flat arc into the water.

It was shallow near the shore and he scraped his chest on submerged rocks, but with two strokes he was out in water over his head.

Sam gulped a mouthful. Treading water he looked back to see Jack, Dekka, and Toto standing uncertainly on the rocks. “Ladies and gentlemen,” Sam said, his face split by a huge grin, “we have fresh water.”

In something less than five seconds, the three of them splashed in after him.

“It’s water!” Jack cried.

“It is so totally water!” Dekka agreed.

“She’s telling the truth, Spidey!” Toto said.

Sam turned a joyful somersault. The lake was cold but not bone-chilling. The surfer part of his brain calculated he’d have been warm and toasty enough with a 3/2 wetsuit.

He gulped some more water and swam over to his friends.

“Fresh water,” Dekka said. “Cold fresh water. Brrr.”

Sam scanned the shore. “This isn’t a great place to set up a new town, really. We’d need something flatter. And then we’d have to be careful about not having everyone’s sewage end up flowing into our drinking water. I guess we . . .” He stopped himself. Albert and Edilio could figure out the details. He had done what he needed to do.

“I saw boats,” Jack remarked. “I wonder if there are fish.”

Toto said, “Fish, yes, fish.”

“You know something?” Sam asked him.

“My dad used to take me fishing.” Then, as if puzzled by his own words, he looked

for the Spidey head that wasn't there and said, "This isn't that lake, is it? No, that was Lake Isabella."

"Okay," Dekka said patiently. "Were there fish in that lake?"

"Trout," Toto said. "Bass. Also crappie. Fish."

"If we find fishing poles and stuff on the boats, it means there are fish," Jack pointed out.

"It's only, like, half a mile. We could swim," Sam said.

"You could swim half a mile," Dekka said. "Me, I'll walk."

They climbed out, Sam with great reluctance. It was invigorating, this new and unexplored body of water. Who knew what might be found on or around the lake?

But he understood that Dekka and the others might not be thrilled by a long, cold swim.

The shore was a series of curves, like the edge of a lace doily made with sketchy sand beaches and rocky promontories. They soon came upon a trail and were laughing and chatting lightheartedly.

Sam knew logically that without gas—and a lot of it—they'd never get enough water down to—

He stopped dead. "Marinas," he said. He felt a chill that had nothing to do with temperature. "Marinas. You know what they have?"

"Boats?" Jack suggested, like he was afraid it was the wrong answer.

"Boats." Sam grinned. "Sailboats, maybe. But you know what else? Motorboats. Jet skis."

"You want to jet ski?"

"What do jet skis run on, my friend?"

"I want to say water," Dekka said.

"Gas!" Jack cried.

Sam slapped him on the shoulder. "Yes! A marina isn't a marina if they don't have fuel."

He grinned and started to run toward the marina. A nagging voice in his head warned him not to hope, not to expect a good answer. *It's the FAYZ*, the voice said.

It's still the FAYZ.

But after so much pain, so many disappointments, and so many horrors, surely they were due for some good news?

Surely.

Lana opened her eyes.

Patrick licked her face. Which was probably why she opened her eyes.

Something heavy lay on her chest. A head. Long, dark hair.

She pushed it away and it groaned, and said, "I'm awake."

Sanjit sat up, looked at her, and wiped drool from the corner of his mouth.

Lana was on the beach. The sun was up but had not yet cleared the mountains. How she had come there she did not know. Instinctively she felt for her gun. It was not in her waistband. It had become tangled in the blanket.

"How did I get here?"

"I brought you here."

Lana absorbed that. "Why?" she demanded suspiciously.

“You passed out.”

Lana ran her hands through her tangled hair. She wiped her mouth and made a face, tasting the inside of her mouth. “You have any water?”

“Sadly, no,” Sanjit said.

She sighed and looked at him with tired eyes. “What is it with you? You don’t even have a blanket,” Lana said.

“I wasn’t going to sleep.”

“Tell me you weren’t watching me sleep, because then I’d have to throw up.”

Sanjit grinned. “I did. I watched you sleep. And heard you sleep, too.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, you farted once. But mostly you talk in your sleep. Groan in your sleep.”

“What did I say?”

Sanjit made a show of trying to recall. “Well, mostly it was, urrgh, mmmm, unh, unh, don’t try to . . . urgh. And the fart was very, um, genteel. Like: *poot-poot!* Almost musical.”

Lana stared at him.

He shivered.

“Are you cold?” she asked.

“Just a little chilly. You know, from just waking up.” He shivered again and wrapped his arms around his drawn-up legs.

She pulled her top blanket off, balled it up, sand flying, and shoved it at him. He draped it over his shoulders.

“How many more dead?” she asked.

“It was five total when we left.”

Lana hung her head down for a moment and Sanjit remained silent. Then she stood up. She walked down to the water’s edge. She stripped off her outer clothing, leaving only her underthings.

Then, gritting her teeth, she ran into the surf, and as soon as the water was up to her knees, she dove headfirst. It was freezing. But it was clean. It washed away the blood and the grime.

She rinsed her mouth with salt water.

Then, shivering, she came back out of the water and ran back to Sanjit.

“You’re staring,” she said.

“Yes. I am. I’m a teenage boy. Beautiful girls in wet underwear have a tendency to cause staring in teenage boys.”

She bent down, picked up the blanket, shook the sand out of it, and wrapped it around her. Sanjit stood up.

She kissed him on the mouth.

A real kiss.

He cupped her wet head in both hands and kissed her back.

“That wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be,” Lana said.

For once, she noted with satisfaction, Sanjit did not seem to have a glib comeback. In fact he looked just a little sick, and very much as if he meant to kiss her again.

“Back to the hospital,” she said.

Brittney rose to consciousness on a narrow dirt path. Seven-foot-high dirt and stone

walls hemmed her in, towered over her. And perched atop those walls, coyotes leered down, their mouths open, tongues lolling out.

Jamal was behind her, checking the wire that held her arms pinned together at wrist and elbow.

Her ankles, too, were tied, but with a loose rope so that she could take short steps, but not run.

“Where are we?” Brittney asked.

Jamal shrugged with his one good shoulder. “Somewhere Drake wants us to go.” He yawned, glanced up nervously at the coyotes, and yawned again.

“You should get some rest,” Brittney said. “You’re in pain and tired.”

“Here?” He laughed bitterly. “This feel like the place for a nap?”

No, Brittney acknowledged silently. There was something dark about this place, even though the sun was up in the sky. Something about the air. Something about the look in the eyes of the coyotes. A darkness that reached inside to her un-beating heart.

“I want to go back,” Brittney said.

“Yeah? Me, too,” Jamal said. “But if I do, old Drake will whip the skin off me.”

He shoved her forward. She stumbled when the rope snapped at her ankles and almost fell. But she caught herself and shuffled on, not knowing what else she could or should do.

What must I do, Lord, to earn my true death and my place in your heaven?

“This is a bad place, Jamal,” Brittney said. “I can feel it.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Drake is a bad boy, and he goes to bad places. But better off with him than against him, I figure.”

They emerged from the cut-through in view of a half-ruined hole in the side of a sheer rock face. There was just enough pale pink light to see that the mine shaft was blocked by tons of fallen rock. The massive timbers that framed the hole were splintered and looked as if they might snap.

Whatever evil Brittney felt, it came from there, from that hole, that pile of rocks.

“Where are we?”

“The mine shaft,” Jamal said. “Haven’t you heard all about that? In there? That’s the thing that gave Drake his whip.”

“In where?” Brittney said. “It’s all collapsed. It’s sealed up.”

“That’s probably good, huh? ’Cause if that thing feels this bad from out here, I don’t want to know what it feels like up close.” He bit his lip and in a low voice said, “Like a big claw holding your heart. Like icicles in your brain.”

“Jamal, if you ran away . . .”

He shook his head. “Drake would come after me. Look, you can’t be killed, right? And he can’t be killed, right? Which means, I betray him, sooner or later he gets me.”

“Maybe fire,” Brittney said softly. “Maybe God’s holy fire can destroy us both.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t happen to have any of that.”

“Only Sam can end this.”

Jamal put up his hands in a *who, me?* gesture and said, “I am cool with that. If big Sam wants to take Drake out, I’m not going to say anything to stop him. But listen: all you’re trying to do is slow Drake down, girl. Him and Sam, they’re going to get into it eventually, right? So maybe you should be trying to speed him up, you see what I’m saying?”

Brittney stared at Jamal. Was it a trick?

Is this the devil tempting me?

“What did the demon Drake ask you to do?”

Jamal nodded at the cave. “He just said be here. He’s got in his head that he can talk to that thing in there. Or at least hear what it says.”

Brittney could believe that. How could she not believe in things that seemed supernatural? Her brother sometimes spoke to her as an angel. And God was with her always. Wasn’t He?

And she herself, this gruesome remnant of the girl she once was, she herself was something outside of nature.

Was Sam the Lord’s servant? The very tool God had chosen to liberate Brittney? She’d begged Sam often for liberation. But God’s ways were not knowable to her. His time was not her time. His will be done.

“What does Drake want of me?” Brittney asked.

“Just, you know, don’t always be trying to run away so I have to tie your legs and slow us down and all.”

“Is he going after Sam? Is that his plan, to go after Sam?”

She thought she caught just the slightest falseness in Jamal’s eyes as he said, “That’s exactly his plan. Straight for Sam, as soon as he checks in with . . . you know.”

“You can sleep, Jamal,” Brittney said. “Sleep until Drake comes back. I won’t run away.”

“How am I going to trust you?”

“Because I swear it. On the blood of the Lamb, I swear it.”

Jamal woke to the pain of Drake kicking him.

“What?”

Drake was actually smiling. It wasn’t a good look for him.

“You were asleep,” he said. “And I’m still here.”

Jamal jumped up and quickly untied Drake. “Yeah, I did just what you said, Drake. Just like you said. I told her that you would go after Sam first thing. Then Sam would burn you both up and . . .”

He gulped, suddenly realizing that this might be taking it too far.

But Drake was in a charitable, expansive mood. He patted Jamal lightly on the cheek with the tip of his whip. “You did good. And I will get Sam Temple. Sooner or later.”

Drake gazed at the mine shaft. What he felt toward the Darkness within was something very much like love. Fear, yes, but the Darkness deserved his fear. His fear and his devotion.

If he had to pull the rocks out of there one by one, and if it took weeks, he would reach the Darkness and free him.

“My old body’s down there,” Drake said, realizing it for the first time. “My old body is down there with him.”

Drake felt a sudden pang of longing. He wanted to press his body against the rocks in the mine’s mouth. It would bring him closer. Maybe the Darkness would reach out to him, touch his mind, tell him what to do next.

But he couldn’t do that in front of Jamal.

“Start hauling rock,” Drake said. “You have to pile it, like, back over there.” He pointed a relatively flat space. “I don’t know how far the rock fall goes. It may take us a while. Put Brittney Pig to work when she comes back.”

For two hours or more they lifted and carried. It would have helped if they had a wheelbarrow. It would have helped if Jamal’s arm weren’t broken. They had to lift each chunk of stone, each shattered timber. Some were big enough that they had to each take an end. Some were so big they couldn’t even budge them and had to just go around them.

At the end of two hours they’d moved no more than a foot and a half deeper into the shaft.

Brittney had reappeared once during that time and she had bought into the idea of helping with the digging. But Drake couldn’t kid himself: they weren’t getting anywhere. It could take months. Years. Forever.

The coyotes came and went, watching, no doubt thinking about eating Jamal. So when Drake heard the sound of movement coming from around the bend in the road, he assumed it was coyotes.

Only it wasn’t the usual stealthy *pad-pad-pad* of coyotes. This was a sound with clicks and sudden rushes.

Drake wiped his brow and turned warily toward the sound.

It looked like something from a science fiction movie. Like an alien or a robot or something, because it was way too big to be just an insect.

It was silver and bronze, dully reflective. It had an insect’s head with prominent, gnashing mouthparts that made Drake think of a Benihana chef flashing knives ceremonially. Its wickedly curved mandibles of black horn or bone protruded from the side of its mouth.

It smelled like curry and ammonia. Bitter but with a tinge of curdled sweetness.

More came now, scurrying up beside the first. They had eyes and antennae. The eyes were arresting: royal blue irises that could almost pass as human. But with nothing of human awareness, nothing of human vulnerability or emotion. Like ice chips.

They ran in a rush on six legs, stopping, starting, then skittering forward again at alarming speed. Their tarnished silver wings folded back against bronze carapaces, like beetles or cockroaches. The wings sometimes flared slightly as they ran.

Bugs. Maybe. But each at least five feet long and three feet tall, with antennae adding another foot.

Drake stared into the soulless blue eyes of the first bug.

He was ready with his whip hand, and Jamal was ready with his rifle, but Drake didn’t like his chances much if they were looking for a fight. There were a dozen of the creatures, jostling around one another, like ants pouring from a mound or wasps storming angrily from a disturbed hive.

Drake felt a stab of fear: could he survive being eaten? Chopped into chunks by those gnashing mouths and swallowed?

A coyote, keeping a cautious distance, loped to the top of the rise and spoke in the strangled speech his species had achieved.

“See the Darkness,” the coyote said.

“Them?” Drake asked. The coyotes and these monstrosities could communicate?

“They want to see the Darkness? Fine,” Drake said. He jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward the mine. “Go for it.”

“They hungry,” the coyote said.

Drake didn’t have to ask what he was supposed to do about that. Because now the same foul, insinuating voice that was speaking through the coyote reached him directly, touched his willing, submissive mind and flooded it with a deep and awful joy.

Drake closed his eyes and rocked slowly back and forth, feeling the touch of his master.

Soon Drake would be with the Darkness. The Darkness would give him all he needed. And Jamal had served his purpose.

“So tell them to eat something,” Drake said. “Sorry, Jamal.”

“What?” Jamal waited for Drake to laugh, like it was a joke. But Drake just smiled and winked and said, “Dude, sooner or later I was going to kill you anyway.”

“No, no!” Jamal gasped. He backed away. He turned and ran.

The nearest bug, icy blue eyes focused with terrible intensity, flashed out something that might have been a tongue. It was black, and as thick as a rope with a barbed tip like a cluster of fishhooks. The tongue caught Jamal’s leg and Jamal fell facedown.

“Drake! Drake!” Jamal yelled. “Please!”

Drake laughed. He gave a little wave as the rope tongue yanked Jamal toward his doom.

Jamal fired. *BLAM BLAM BLAM*. At close range, then closer range, then inches from the bug’s hideous face.

The tongue released and snapped back. Then scimitar mandibles cut Jamal in half and there was no more firing, just a hopeless wail of despair.

The massive bugs surged, and within seconds nothing was left of Jamal.

Then, without a pause, the blue-eyed monsters went to work moving rocks at dazzling speed, pushing with their mandibles, rising on their hind four legs and gripping with their front two.

Drake felt Brittney returning. But that was okay, because now his Lord and Master, the Darkness, Drake’s one true God was with him, filling his heart and soul.

And It would not be thwarted.

TWENTY-THREE

9 HOURS, 14 MINUTES

ASTRID WAS IN the backyard using the slit trench when it happened. She had sat by Little Pete's bed for two days, waiting, fearing.

But even dehydrated, she still had to go eventually. She'd hoped it would be safe. She'd hoped to see that Albert's people were delivering water and food and the epidemic was past.

But the streets were abandoned. She heard no distant sounds of truck engines, nor even the squeaky wheels of hand-drawn wagons.

So she did what she had to do at the slit trench in the yard and continued to pray as she had almost constantly.

Whoosh-craaack!

The entire upper floor of the house blew apart.

There was no fire. No flame.

The top floor—the tile roof, the siding, the walls, wood, and drywall, all of it—blew apart almost quietly. A big chunk of roof spun over her head, throwing off red tiles as it spun and dropped with a massive crash against the wall of the house next door.

She saw a window, the glass still somehow in place, go whirling straight up like a rocket. She followed it with her eyes, waiting for it to come spiraling down at her. It crashed into the branches of a tree and finally then the glass shattered.

The bed from her own bedroom was on a roof two houses down. Sheets and clothing fluttered to the ground like confetti. It was almost festive, like someone had set off a Fourth of July rocket and now she could oooh and aahh as the sparkles came down.

But no fire. No loud explosion. One second it had been a two-story house and now it was a one-story house.

One of Astrid's kneesocks from her dresser landed on the grass, draped over the lip of the trench.

Astrid remembered she could move. She ran for the house yelling, "Petey! Petey!"

The back door was partly blocked by a small piece of siding. She threw it aside and ran through the kitchen and up the debris-strewn stairs.

The full weirdness struck her then. The handrail of the stairs stopped as it reached the level of the upper floor. The steps themselves ended on a splintered half riser.

Astrid stepped out onto what was now a platform, no longer the second floor of a house. Everything was gone. Everything. It was as if a giant had come along with a knife and simply sliced off the top, cutting through walls and plumbing pipe and electrical conduit.

All that was left was Little Pete's bed. And Little Pete himself.

He coughed twice. He licked his lips. His eyes stared blankly up at open sky.

Astrid followed the direction of his gaze. And there, in the blue morning sky, a puff of gray cotton. Directly above the house.

Brianna was seething. She seethed a fair amount at the best of times, but she was still doing a long, slow burn over the fight with Drake and the fact that Jack had left town without even telling her so she had to hear it from Taylor.

She didn't much like Taylor. She had once suggested that Taylor should adopt a cool name, like Brianna had with "the Breeze." "The Teleporter," maybe. Taylor had laughed at her.

Brianna wasn't supposed to be on the street. The quarantine was still in effect. But she was thirsty, hungry, humiliated, and furious, and she was looking for trouble.

Or at least a sip of water.

She was giving this whole waiting-around thing a few more minutes and then she was going to run up to Lake Evian herself for a drink. Taylor said the road was dangerous, that the greenies were there. But Brianna didn't fear flying snakes. Not even flying snakes that peed green bug eggs, or whatever that was all about. She was too fast for some stupid snake, flying or crawling.

Someone had nailed plywood up over a window in town hall.

"What's that about?" she wondered aloud.

She shrugged and was getting ready to zoom when she heard a sound like chewing. Like a lot of chewing getting rapidly louder. And coming from the window with the—

Splinters pushed out through the bottom of the plywood. They were pushed by something silvery that moved with respectable speed.

Brianna stared up at it for a few seconds and then, quite suddenly, metallic-looking insects, each the size of a small dog, began to force their way through the plywood.

The first to emerge spread beetlelike wings and floated to the ground.

Brianna had plenty of time to observe its gnashing mouth and its antennae, and to be utterly creeped out by eyes the color of rubies.

She could guess what they were. These were the things that Taylor had gotten all freaked out by. The things that had supposedly come out of Hunter's guts. Only now they were right here and pouring down the wall from the second floor of town hall.

The instant the first bug landed it launched itself at Brianna. She sidestepped it like a matador with a bull.

"You're quick, I'll give you that," Brianna said. "But you're not the Breeze."

As one the swarm raced toward her, scythe mandibles slashing and mouthparts gnashing and red eyes blazing.

This was more like it. She could just zoom far away, of course, but she was enjoying this game.

Until Edilio came at a run, unlimbering his automatic rifle and yelling at the top of his lungs.

"Oh, well," Brianna said. "Time to end this, I guess."

She unsheathed her big knife and sliced the antennae from the nearest bug. Then, just for show, just because it was a cool move, she somersaulted and landed almost astride another bug. She stabbed it, aiming for the space between its hard-looking wings. Her blade bit the wing instead and did not penetrate.

The bug twirled, fast, very fast. Not fast enough. Brianna stabbed straight for the bloodred eyes and the blade sank deep into one.

The bug stopped moving.

"That's why you don't bug the Breeze," Brianna said.

Edilio had almost arrived and Brianna was pretty sure he would spoil her fun. So she awaited the charge of another bug, dropped low, swept her knife, and sliced through its two front legs. It crashed forward onto its horror-movie face.

BLAM! BLAM!

Edilio fired at one of the bugs that had evidently had enough and was running from the Breeze.

Brianna saw the bullets hit. And she saw them ricochet off the hard wings.

“Head shots!” she yelled to Edilio. “You have to get ’em in the head!”

She had meant to point to the one she killed as an example. But the dead bug was moving.

So was the bug from whom she had subtracted the front legs.

With a frown she pulled out her shotgun. She caught up to the wounded bug, placed the muzzle right in its eerie eyes, and pulled the trigger.

The bug head blew most of the way off. Greenish-black brain goo sprayed.

The bug shook itself like a wet dog. Then kept moving.

“No, no, no,” Brianna said. “I may lose to Drake, but I do not lose to a bunch of bloodshot roaches.”

BLAM! BLAM!

Edilio shot his bug twice more. Then, seeing Brianna hesitate, he yelled, “Try to crush them!”

“With what?”

Edilio looked around helplessly. “I don’t know.”

“They’re getting away!”

The bugs, half a dozen of them, were ignoring Brianna and Edilio now and racing off down the street, away from town.

“They’re too fast for you,” Brianna said.

Edilio looked like he was going to have a stroke. He glanced at the window above, the bugs racing away, and Brianna could have sworn his next move would be to throw up his hands and say, “Forget it, I’m outta here!”

But he gritted his teeth, took a deep breath, and visibly steeled himself for a decision he knew might be wrong. Might even be fatally wrong.

“Breeze,” he said grimly. “Listen to me before you go tearing off. I want you to follow them, see where they go. But this leaves us with, like, no one playing defense. Orc’s off on a drunk, Sam and Dekka and Jack are out of town, kids are falling out sick all over the place, and Drake may still be lurking . . .” He stuck his finger at her. “Don’t take risks, don’t be your usual reckless, stupid self: come back as soon as you can, as soon as you see where they’re going.”

Brianna executed a mock salute—she didn’t mind being called stupid so long as he was acknowledging her bravery—and loped off at an easy sixty miles an hour to catch up with the swarm.

“Don’t sweat it, Edilio,” she called over her shoulder. “The Breeze is all over these bugs.”

Orc was running dry. He stared balefully at the bottle in his hand. Shouldn’t he be dead by now? How much booze did it take before you just died already?

His mind labored to work out solutions to the problem. Probably still a couple

bottles back at the house, if kids hadn't looted them. If not, he had another option, but it was a long walk and he wasn't really in the mood for a long walk. A long walk would sober him up.

He was on his way to the house and drowning his brain in booze again when he thoughtlessly walked past the stop sign.

No body lay crumpled there.

For a moment he thought he might be in the wrong place. Or that maybe he was mistaken about the body. But then he vaguely recalled running into Howard and Howard promising to fix things.

So now the little boy's body would be rotting in an unused house. Probably not the only body lying around. Probably.

Orc took a drink. He was shaky in body and mind. He was used to booze, but even by his standards he had punished his body in the last day. His stomach burned. His head hammered. Now he had to fight down an urge to run and run and run until . . .

Until what?

Run where?

They would figure it out, sooner or later. That he had slammed that little boy, that little boy who never hurt Orc or probably anyone else. Just some sick kid.

Someone would have seen it happen, or one of the smart ones—Astrid or Albert or Edilio—would figure it out. And he wouldn't even be given a chance to explain. They would make him leave, go live outside town, like they had Hunter.

But he wasn't Hunter. He couldn't live out there. Out there was where the coyotes were.

Orc remembered the coyotes. He remembered the way they had sunk their muzzles into his living guts and ripped and torn his insides out.

That's when it had started. That's when the ripped-up flesh had turned into gravel and the rocky, pebbly, monster skin had grown to take over his whole body.

No. They couldn't make him live out there.

Astrid had rules, though; she had made them up and that's what they would do, push him out, *Go away, Orc, go away and die, you freak.*

Yeah, well, Charles Merriman was inside this monster. He was not an orc. He was Charles Merriman.

He had to talk to Astrid. She'd always been nice to him. The only one who'd been nice to him. They were her stupid rules, so she would be able to figure out something. She was smart, after all. And nice.

With that vague thought sloshing around in his brain, Orc stomped off toward Astrid's home.

Two blocks away he noticed something very strange. So strange he thought he might be imagining it. Because it wasn't right, that was for sure.

There was a cloud. Up in the sky. As he gaped up at it the sun started to slide behind it.

Cloud. A dark, gray cloud.

He kept moving. Kept drinking. Kept looking at that crazy cloud up in the sky.

He stepped onto Astrid's street. From half a block away he saw the wreckage strewn out over trees and yards and draped over fences.

Then the house. That stopped him dead in his tracks. The top of the house was

gone.

And there stood Astrid, right up on top, right out in the open because the walls were all gone, and there was her 'tard brother, only he was kind of, like, floating in the air above a bed.

Orc gaped up at Astrid, but she didn't notice him. She was looking up at the sky, up at the cloud. Her hands were at her side. In one hand she held a huge-looking pistol.

A brilliant flash lit everything up.

A tree not ten feet away blew apart.

CRRR-ACK!

BOOOOM!

Lightning. Thunder.

Splinters and leaves from the tree came down in a shower all around Orc.

And suddenly the cloud seemed to drop from the sky, only it wasn't the cloud itself, it was rain. Gray streamers of water, pouring down.

It was like stepping into a cold shower. The rain fell on Orc's marveling, upturned face. It pooled in his eyes, it ran in streams through his quarry of a body.

Astrid cried out, words irrelevant. Orc heard the despair, the fear. She was soaked through, standing there with her big gun, screaming at her brother, sobbing.

Orc opened his mouth and water flowed in. Clean, fresh, as cold as ice water.

TWENTY-FOUR

9 HOURS, 6 MINUTES

BRITTNEY SAW THE huge, blue-eyed bugs. She saw the cave. And she understood none of it.

Then she saw Jamal's gun. Shreds of his clothing. The blood that soaked them.

Nothing left but his clothing, his shoes, and his gun.

The bugs skittered madly past her carrying rocks eight, nine, ten times their own size. Like busy ants. But ants the size of wolves or Shetland ponies.

Coyotes watched. They were anxious, skittish, scared of the massive insects.

She wished she could ask Jamal what was happening. But Jamal would not be answering any more questions.

She wondered if she could flee. She wondered if she should flee. But what difference would it make?

The bugs had piled up a small mountain of rocks. Bigger and bigger stones were being hauled out.

She stepped in front of one of the insects. It was carrying a rock that could easily crush her. It would be nothing for these bugs to attack her, tear her apart as they'd apparently done to poor scared Jamal.

But the bug just scuttled around her.

Why? Why would they eat Jamal and not her? Because they ate only truly living flesh? Or because they knew that she was Drake and Drake was she and they could not harm Drake?

What was stopping them?

Who was stopping them?

But Brittney already knew the answer. She knew that something, someone, some mind was touching hers. It was as if she'd always known it. As if that cold consciousness had always been there in the background watching her even as she averted her eyes and looked to heaven.

When she was still in her grave, clawing at the dirt, she had felt it.

When she looked deep into the eyes of her brother, Tanner, she could sometimes catch glimpses of it, in layers down beneath his disguise as an angel.

She had known but had not wanted to know that Drake was its creature, the creature of this devil, just as she was God's creature.

She looked at the mine shaft, stood there as the insects cleared the rocks. Like a rock herself in the midst of rushing waters.

They were freeing the evil one. She could do nothing to stop them. She would do nothing to stop Drake from going to be with it. The devil would win this battle.

The dark mind teased at the edges of her own muddled thoughts. In faint, wordless whispers it made promises.

"What do you want with me?" she asked.

To give you what you want.

"I want to die," Brittney said. "To go to heaven."

When she closed her eyes she felt, rather than saw, something very like a glowing

smile from a deep pool of darkness.

She had begged God to free her. Maybe this was His way. Maybe it wasn't Sam who would free her, but this devil inside the mountain.

Brittney walked into the mine shaft, lifted a small rock, and carried it away.

"Can you make any sense out of that?" Sam asked Jack.

They were in the marina's office. Two dozen boats sat placidly in the water. Several dozen more were raised out of the water in a long boathouse. There were papers on a desk, books in gray steel shelves, two broken-down rolling office chairs. The out-of-date calendars were reminders that no one had been here in a very long time.

The computers were useless, of course, without electricity. But Jack had insisted on carrying three of the half-exhausted laptops from the train. And a search had turned up a flash drive.

"It's some kind of proprietary software. I had to open it in Preview and it's hard to make sense of."

Toto was rummaging through cupboards, finding nothing much. Dekka was sitting in one of the chairs with her feet up, gazing gloomily out at the lake. From time to time she surreptitiously ran her hands over her stomach, shoulders, thighs, checking for any sign of infestation.

And from time to time she would pull her shirt back to check the cauterized wound from Sam's fire.

"Hah!" Jack said. "I think I've got it. They had a truck deliver marine gas just a week before the FAYZ. A thousand gallons in round numbers. That should have brought them up to about twelve hundred gallons total. And they have diesel, too. I just can't find those. . . ."

He trailed off, lost in the numbers again.

This, thought Sam, is why I brought Jack.

Sam was feeling amazingly contented. He'd had a sudden flood of good news. They had found food. They had found soda. They would undoubtedly find beer and more soda and maybe a few bags of ancient chips once they searched the boats, the kind of stuff people took for a day on the lake.

Best of all, the lake was huge and filled with fresh water. More fresh water than they could ever use in a thousand years.

They'd also found a clipboard with scrawled figures indicating that the lake had recently been restocked with trout and bass.

It was like stumbling into the Garden of Eden. They could move the whole population up here. Use the boats as housing. Fish the lake. Drink the water. Use the gas to haul the crops from the fields up here.

It wasn't perfect. But for the FAYZ it was heaven.

If only Astrid were here.

He tried to push that thought aside. He was mad at Astrid. He was sick of Astrid. And yet, all he could think of was her face when he handed her a jar of Nutella and a can of Pepsi.

"Why didn't they do something?" Dekka wondered aloud.

"Who?" Sam asked.

“The people who were studying crazy boy over there.” She jerked her head toward Toto.

“What were they going to do?” Sam asked with a shrug.

“How about warn people what was happening?” Dekka said. “Like, ‘Hey, people of Perdido Beach, something very weird is happening’?”

“They were scientists,” Jack mumbled, no longer deciphering boring documents but searching the laptop’s hard drive, reveling in the sheer visceral pleasure of opening applications.

“So they were scientists,” Dekka snapped. “So what?”

“So they were studying, right?” Jack said. “They had to understand it first. Can’t just run around . . . Hey, look, there’s this cool Easter Egg if you press—”

“Means people on the outside know what’s happening,” Dekka said.

“What do you think happens when the barrier comes down?” Sam wondered aloud. “I mean, to all of us?”

Jack said, “Most likely all our powers go away.”

“Most likely,” Sam agreed.

“But not for sure,” Jack said.

“No.”

Dekka said, “They don’t even let you carry a Swiss Army knife at school, what are they going to do with you, Sam? You’re like a guy carrying two massive lasers.”

“Like Jack said, most likely our powers will be gone. That will be a relief.”

“Not true,” Toto said. “He says it will be a relief, but that’s not what he believes.”

Sam glared at Toto. “Okay. I would probably miss it.”

“Truth,” Toto said. Then, communing once more with his imaginary Spider-Man head, he added, “It’s the truth.”

“Look what they did with Toto and subject number two,” Dekka said.

“Locked us up,” Toto said. “No family. Stole us away and locked us up.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Sam said. “Everyone in the world probably knows about us. We’d be too well-known.”

“He believes it,” Toto said.

“But he’s not sure,” Dekka said dryly. “Sam, you’ve never been a freak out in the real world. Me? To a lot of people I was a freak before I ever got here. If my parents would send me away to Coates just for being a lesbian, imagine how happy they would be to see that I can also cancel gravity.”

She laughed to take the edge off it. But Sam did not join in.

“I still want the barrier to come down,” Sam said.

“Not the truth,” Toto said.

“Yes it is,” Sam protested. “You think I like things like this?”

Toto started to answer, but Dekka cut him off. “Sam, maybe you haven’t spent much time thinking about this, but I have. And trust me, lots of kids have, and not just freaks with powers. I mean, you think Albert wants this all to end so he can go back to school and to being some little nerd?”

“Astrid wants it to end,” Sam said.

Dekka nodded. “No doubt. And Jack here wants it to end so he can get back to his computers and all because half the time he doesn’t even remember he has superstrength. Edilio wants it to end, too, I guess, unless he starts thinking about

getting deported back to Honduras. But do you honestly think Brianna wants to stop being the Breeze?”

“Brianna would hate it,” Sam admitted.

“There’s kids who pray every night for all this to be over. There’s other kids who pray every night that the barrier stays right where it is. And now that we’re going to show them all this lovely fresh water, this nice place up here . . .”

“You believe that,” Toto confirmed.

“Thanks,” Dekka said sarcastically.

Sam gazed out at the lake with a very different feeling now. If they had water, if they had food, if peace could be kept between him and Caine, and especially if they could get power flowing somehow, how many kids would stop hoping for an end to the FAYZ?

“You need to think about all that, Sam,” Dekka said. “You’re the leader, after all.”

“Not anymore,” he said.

Dekka laughed. She stood up and stretched. “Sam: you’re still the leader. You’re always going to be the leader. It’s not something you choose: it’s something you are.”

She took his arm and guided him out of the building, out onto the dock.

Her mood was different now. Sam was shocked by the suddenness of the change. She’d been putting on an act. But now her eyes were dull and her mouth turned down at the edges. She stood close to him, took his hand, and pressed it to her shirt over the top of her abdomen. “Feel that? That lump?”

He nodded.

“My mom had a benign cyst once, so maybe that’s all it is,” Dekka said gravely.

“You think it’s . . .”

“Maybe I just noticed it because I’m looking for it, but maybe it’s one of them,” Dekka said.

“Don’t jump to—”

“I’m not,” Dekka said. “But if that’s what it is, if it’s those things, I’m going to ask you to take care of me.”

“We’ve been over this,” Sam said, pulling his hand away.

“If I tell you it’s time, you do it, okay, Sam?”

He couldn’t answer.

“I’m not afraid to die,” Dekka said.

Sam was glad Toto wasn’t there to hear.

“And you have to promise me something,” Dekka said.

“What?”

“Don’t you ever tell Brianna what you know about how I feel. It would only bring her pain. I love her and I wouldn’t want to make her hurt.”

“Dekka . . .”

“No,” she said briskly. “Don’t argue, okay? Maybe I’m wrong and this is nothing. So let’s not argue about it.”

“Yeah,” he said. They stood awkwardly for a while, then Sam said, “I don’t want to sound weird, but you know I love you, right?”

“Love you, too, Sam.”

Sam made a move as if to hug her, but stopped himself.

She smiled. “Yeah, we’re not the huggy type, are we?”

Sam said, "Let's go see what we can find down in the boats."

TWENTY-FIVE

9 HOURS, 5 MINUTES

ONE THING WAS crystal clear to Astrid as she stood in the drenching rain: the secret she had kept for so long was no longer a secret.

She looked down at the street and saw Orc there. He was staring up at her, his stone-and-flesh jaw slack.

And coming up the street behind him were four other boys. She recognized Lance and Turk. The other two she barely knew.

All four were armed. Orc didn't need a weapon.

She scanned in every direction, frantic, looking for some source of support. Maybe Sam had come back. Maybe Brianna. Maybe Edilio and some of his soldiers.

But no, the streets were abandoned but for a sick-looking girl, crouched and weary, moving in the general direction of the plaza, stopping to cough, staggering on.

Orc had defended Astrid once before, rescuing her from Zil and his Human Crew thugs. Now four of those thugs were pointing at her, at the amazing rain cloud, then breaking into a run, all eager malicious energy.

The cloud was growing. The rain was spreading.

Orc was standing in it, an animated gravel heap under a deluge.

The others slowed and then stepped gingerly into the rain and, like Orc, tilted their heads back and drank in the wondrous fresh water.

She had a gun. Would she use it?

"It's the 'tard," Turk yelled. His face broke out in a grin. He was standing beneath a tree that was decorated with a yard sale's worth of clothing and bits of broken toys. "It's that dumb brother of hers, Petard!"

Turk circled past Orc and hopped the fence into Astrid's yard. His friends followed warily, eyes darting from Astrid to Orc. Orc did nothing.

Then, in a sudden rush, Turk was up the stairs and standing on the platform. The others crowded beside him.

Turk laughed loudly, gleeful. "It's the 'tard! He's the one making it rain."

"Orc!" Astrid cried.

"That little kid must have some mad powers," Lance said.

"Go away," Astrid said.

She was aware of the fact that her drenched nightgown clung far too closely to her body. The gun in her hand weighed a ton.

"Grab the kid," Lance said. "If we have him, we control the rain, right?"

There was blood on Turk's shirt. Too much of it.

"What have you done?" Astrid demanded.

Turk looked down at the blood. He seemed surprised by it. "Oh, that?" He laughed savagely. "That's nothing much. Just means we run this place now, Astrid. No Sam around, huh? Where's mister light hands?"

"Orc!" Astrid cried out. She didn't want to reveal the depths of her fear. But she knew what Turk would do. And she did not want to use the gun. Not even now, not even for Petey.

“What other tricks can the ’tard do?” Lance demanded. “Float in the air, make rain. What else?”

“Mutant retard. Freaktard,” one of the other kids said, and laughed tentatively like he wasn’t quite sure it was funny.

“He doesn’t know what he’s doing,” Astrid said. She was chilled now and beginning to shiver. “He was just thirsty. He has the sickness, the flu, and he was thirsty.”

On the street below, other kids were coming out of their homes, carrying bowls and buckets. They advanced with wondering eyes, edging toward the rain curtain as it edged toward them.

“The ’tard must be some kind of serious moof to do this,” Lance said. “Blow off the top of the house? Call up a rain cloud? That’s, like, at least three-bar powers there. Maybe four.”

“If you bother him, he may stop.” The threat was a sudden inspiration and it worked. Lance’s eyes narrowed even further and Turk was suddenly very still. Drinkable water was important, even to such sub-geniuses as Turk and Lance.

Then Turk shook his head and said, “Nice try, Astrid. But if the freaktard makes rain whenever he gets thirsty, all we gotta do is keep him thirsty and we own the rainmaker.”

“Wonder what he does when he gets hungry?” Watcher asked.

The rain beat on the carpet. It was already pooling around their feet. Shallow puddles in dirty carpet.

Turk made his decision. “I think we’re just going to take old Petard with us.” He motioned to the two younger boys. “Grab him.”

The pistol came up suddenly, almost as if the gun itself had made the decision. Astrid aimed it at Turk.

Despite the rain her mouth was dry as parchment. Her throat wouldn’t make sounds. Her finger was on the trigger, stroking the grooves, feeling it. Her thumb was on the safety.

She clicked it off.

All she saw now was Turk’s face, and the v-sights of the pistol.

“You aren’t going to pull that trigger, Astrid,” Turk said.

A sound from the steps. Running feet.

Edilio emerged. He had an automatic rifle aimed at Turk. “It’s over, Turk,” Edilio said.

Astrid dropped the pistol to her side. She breathed a huge, shaky sigh of relief.

“You going to let Astrid just own this freak?” Turk demanded of Edilio.

“Drop all your weapons. Right now!” Edilio yelled.

The two younger kids looked to Turk for guidance.

Lance was the one who moved. He raised his own pistol and pointed it at Little Pete. “Anyone shoots anyone, the ’tard takes one in the head.”

“Man, you don’t want to do this,” Edilio warned.

“Yeah? Well, listen up, Edilio: Albert’s dead.”

Edilio’s eyes opened wide.

“See, the situation has changed rapidly,” Lance said in a parody of a newscaster’s voice. “So, now, ladies and gentlemen, what we have here is a Mexican standoff. You

squeeze one off, Edilio, chances are I can still get the kid. Bang.”

“You should understand what a Mexican standoff is,” Turk mocked. He raised his own gun and aimed it at Astrid. “See? Now it’s even more complicated. Lance is right: Albert is, uh, not feeling well. Forever. So no one is even paying you, wetback. You need to walk away. Run before the immigration cops get here.” He laughed.

A terrible thought formed in Astrid’s brain: if Little Pete was killed it might all end.

A simple act of murder . . .

What kind of life did he have? Was Little Pete’s life worth all of this? Was it worth Edilio dying? Was it worth the many more deaths that would surely happen? Was it worth all of them dying in this violent, foul, God-forsaken FAYZ?

“Go ahead,” Astrid said flatly. She let her pistol drop to the sodden carpet. It splashed. “Go ahead. Shoot him. Kill Little Pete.”

Diana and Caine had made love several more times. In her bed. In his bed. In the big bedroom with its ego wall of the two movie star parents grinning out from photos taken with Leo DiCaprio, Natalie Portman, that actress who was in *Mamma Mia!*, Steven Spielberg, Heath Ledger, and a bunch of people who were probably famous but looked more like they were businessman types.

Diana was in the kitchen, wearing a robe and slippers and heating some food for Penny. New England clam chowder. A quesadilla. A mismatched kind of meal, she supposed, but Penny wasn’t going to complain. They were all still a long, long way from complaining about food.

Diana had not intended it to be this way with Caine. Somehow she’d imagined the one time, but not an endless series of sequels. But Caine’s appetite had not been sated. He had come back to her bed in the night. And then, this morning, before the sun was even up.

Something was happening to her. She was coming to like Caine. Love? She didn’t even know for sure what that meant. Maybe she loved him. That would be strange. He wasn’t exactly lovable. And once you knew the real Caine, he wasn’t even likable.

Diana had always found Caine fascinating. And she’d always found him attractive. Hot, she would have said when she was younger. Hot in a cold sort of way, if that made any sense.

But this was different. She wasn’t using him now. That was her usual attitude toward Caine, at least that’s what she’d always told herself: he was useful. A girl like Diana, a girl who enjoyed taking risks, who enjoyed sticking a knife of wit and cruelty into other girls at school, who enjoyed taunting the panting hormonal boys and leering old men, a girl like that could use a strong male protector.

And Caine was definitely a strong protector. It would take a suicidal guy to cross him. Even before Caine had started to develop powers, he was the kind of boy other boys steered clear of. He wasn’t always the biggest or the toughest-looking, but he was always the most determined. The most ruthless. You knew if you messed with Caine, you’d suffer for it.

She supposed, if she had to be serious, that she’d long ago developed genuine emotions for him. Of some sort. Not love. Not even like. But something. Something normal people might have thought was sick, in a way.

Emotions. But not what she felt now—whatever this was.

Diana plated the quesadilla and poured the soup into a bowl. She set it all on a tray and carried it upstairs. She knocked, opened the door, and placed the tray of food in front of a sleeping Penny. It was like feeding a dog.

She found Caine out on what had once been a well-manicured lawn that covered the ground from the house to the cliff. It was now wild with weeds, some as much as head-high. He was looking toward the distant town through his telescope.

He heard her approach. Without looking back he said, “Something’s happening in town.”

“I don’t care.”

“A cloud. Like a rain cloud. In fact, I think it is raining. It’s just a small cloud. Way down low, though, not an illusion in the barrier.”

“You’re probably seeing a reflection. Or an illusion.”

Caine handed her the telescope. She wanted to refuse it, but she was curious. She looked. The town leaped closer. Not enough to see people, but enough to see that there was indeed a cloud, just one, hanging far too low, staying put in one place. The gray smudge beneath it might be falling rain.

“So?” she asked. “So some freak has developed the power to make a cloud.”

“You don’t wonder who? That’s a pretty major power.”

Diana sighed theatrically. “What do you care?”

“I don’t like the idea of there being another four bar. Two of us is already one too many.”

“It doesn’t mean it’s a four bar,” Diana said. “Brianna and Dekka and Taylor are only threes. They have greater powers than that.”

“At least a three bar, though.” He took the scope back. “You don’t think if they can find a way they’ll come after us? If Sanjit made it there alive, then Sam knows what we have here. You don’t think he’ll come after it?”

“No,” she said honestly. “I don’t think he’ll look for a fight with you. He’s not as insecure as you are.”

Caine snorted a laugh. “Yeah, that’s my problem: insecurity.”

“It doesn’t matter anyway. There’s no way for us to get back even if we wanted to.”

“There’s always a way, Diana. There’s always a way.”

“Don’t,” she said. “Don’t find a way.”

TWENTY-SIX

9 HOURS

“YOU WANT US to shoot your brother?” Turk was incredulous.

“Don’t even think about it,” Edilio said. He had a tight grip on his rifle, finger on the trigger. The sights were centered on Turk’s anxious face. But his eyes were bleary and he was stifling a need to cough. “She doesn’t mean it.”

“Too many dead kids,” Astrid said wearily. “There just can’t be any more dead kids. It’s time to end it.”

Edilio felt panic rising within him. What was he supposed to do now? Was Astrid losing her mind like Mary Terrafino?

“I know how many kids have died,” Edilio said. “I buried most of them.”

“It’s all because of Little Pete,” Astrid said.

“No. You don’t know that.” Edilio aimed a furious look at her.

She blinked. Shook her head slightly. Her long hair, soaked, hung like golden snakes. “You aren’t the one taking care of him, Edilio. You’re not the one responsible.”

Edilio coughed, fought it back, coughed again. He tried to steady his mind and calm himself down. Had to keep focus.

“What are you two talking about?” Turk demanded. He was clearly confused.

Edilio felt the house rumble. Heavy footsteps. Orc. It had to be Orc. Orc on whose side? That was the question.

The boy-monster emerged onto the platform. He made a strange slushy sound as he moved, like someone shuffling their feet on wet gravel.

He pushed past Edilio. His head sagged to his chest, and for a moment Edilio had the incredible thought that Orc might have fallen asleep.

No, he was just hammered, Edilio realized. “Drop your guns.”

“No, no, no. What are you two talking about? That’s the first question,” Turk demanded, sensing an advantage he couldn’t quite put his finger on. His gun was still aimed at Astrid.

“Shut up, Turk, and drop your gun. If you murdered Albert, you’re going into exile.”

“What happens if I shoot the ’tard?” Lance demanded.

“You know the law. You kill someone, we give you a trial. And if you’re guilty, you leave town and never come back.”

“That’s not what I’m asking, and you know it, Edilio,” Lance snarled. “Tell me, Astrid. Tell us all. What happens if we shoot the ’tard?”

Panic. It was eating at Edilio’s mind. What was he supposed to do? He had to get control of the situation. He had to be in charge. But what should he do?

Edilio stared down the barrel of his rifle at Turk. His head was swimming. His neck and face were hot.

He shifted his aim, traversed the gun just an inch of arc to bring Lance into his sights.

The first one to decide would win.

“If—,” Astrid said.

BLAM!

The rifle kicked against Edilio’s shoulder. The side of Lance’s handsome face erupted in a fountain of blood.

“Lance!” Turk cried.

Lance brought his own gun around, not aiming at Little Pete now but at Edilio.

BLAM!

Lance’s aim was off. Nowhere near Edilio. Instead the bullet struck Orc in his thigh and ricocheted off.

Turk, his face a mask of fury, aimed at Edilio. But Edilio had already shifted his aim and his sights were back on Turk.

“Don’t!” Edilio warned.

Turk hesitated. But Edilio didn’t see the hesitation, he saw Turk’s gun and only his gun, the round black hole of the barrel, and without thinking he squeezed the trigger.

Another loud bang.

Another kick against his shoulder.

Turk was on his back. His gun was beyond his reach, although he was struggling to get to it.

“I said, don’t!” Edilio yelled again.

Turk held his stomach with one hand and reached for the gun with the other. Edilio’s finger was slippery on the trigger. He could feel something awful inside him, a tidal wave of awful, barely held in check as he aimed at Turk’s head.

Orc crunched Turk’s gun beneath his foot.

Edilio breathed. Sobbed for breath. Coughed.

He lowered his weapon.

Lance shrieked. It was a sound made up of fear and shock and pain. The bullet had struck his cheekbone and come out through his ear. Quivering red flesh hung loose.

Turk groaned more quietly. His throat convulsed. Like a fish on dry land, he was gulping, trying to breathe. His hand still stretched toward his now-useless gun.

Neither boy was dead.

Edilio formed the thought that would shame him later: he should finish them. He should do it now. Just walk up close and *bang!* If he didn’t, they might live, with Lana’s care. And if they lived they’d be back for revenge.

Orc and Astrid were both watching him.

It seemed terribly unfair that even now they were looking to him for some kind of answer.

“I’ll get Lana,” Edilio said.

He turned and ran, and fell down the steps. Heaving with sobs, blinded by rain and tears he ran for Clifftop.

It took Sam and Jack working together to start one of the motorboats. Almost all had dead batteries. But one of the boats had just enough power left to fire the engines.

They roared to life with a deep, wet growl.

“You know, this boat has power enough that it could pull water skiers,” Sam observed.

Dekka smiled fondly at him. “You want to water ski?”

“Not right now. I’m just saying . . .”

“That’s a lie. He wants to go now,” Toto said.

“Yeah, well, I don’t always do what I want,” Sam grumbled. “We need to explore the rest of the lake, then we can head back to town and be welcomed as heroes.”

He’d meant that last part to be self-deprecating, but a part of him actually was looking forward to striding into town to announce that they had found all the water they could ever need, and a fair amount of sugary snacks besides.

Then he would go see Astrid.

And then what would happen?

Then nothing would happen. They would still be right where they’d been.

“Cast off,” Sam called to Jack. Then, with the ropes aboard, he pointed the boat toward the west and roared out of the marina.

The feel of spray on his face and a throbbing engine beneath his feet was intoxicating.

Later they would run out of fuel, and later all the Pepsi would be drunk, and all the noodles would be eaten. But it wasn’t later yet.

They could build a better life here at the lake. Leave behind all the reeking sewage and trash and memories of Perdido Beach. Leave behind the wrecked church and the burned houses. Leave behind that awful cemetery.

This time they would do it right. They’d organize before they ever started to move anyone up here. Form little families that could live aboard the boats or use the boathouse or the marina office. He frowned, trying to count in his head how many of the boats had any kind of superstructure. Maybe half a dozen of the small sailboats, a dozen of the motorboats. And then there were the four or five houseboats.

That wasn’t enough, obviously, but they could set up tents and maybe build small shelters. It’s not like it ever got cold in the FAYZ, not like anyone needed insulation. Just a roof to keep the sunlight off them.

He scanned the shoreline, hoping to spot a campground. Logically there had to be one, there were always campgrounds at a lake. It just stood to reason.

Of course they could be on the other side of the barrier. . . .

Never mind, it was all good. They had enough gas to drive the various Winnebagos and campers and trailers up here from Perdido Beach—there were at least a dozen parked in driveways, although a lot had burned in the big fire.

He would have a boat. Big enough for himself and Astrid and Little Pete. Maybe he would ask Dekka to live with them, too. Assuming he got dibs on one of the houseboats. And why shouldn’t he?

One of those forty-six-footers would probably sleep six. Him and Astrid . . . It occurred to him that in his head he had them sharing the master’s berth. Which wasn’t likely to happen.

Was it?

Maybe. Maybe if they got away from Perdido Beach, maybe . . . A new thought occurred to him. He pushed it aside. But back it came.

What if they got married?

Then they’d be like a family. Him and Astrid and Little Pete.

There was no telling how long the FAYZ would last. Maybe forever. Maybe they would never get out. In that case, what were they all going to do? He was fifteen,

Astrid was fifteen, they'd both survived the poof. That was young in the outside world, but it was old in the FAYZ.

"Yeah, but who can marry us?" He spoke the question aloud, not meaning to. He glanced nervously over his shoulder to see if anyone had overheard. Of course not, with the engines roaring and the *boosh-boosh-boosh* of the bow smacking the wavelets.

Dekka was sitting on one of the cushioned seats in the stern, gazing wistfully toward the land. Jack was hunched over one of the laptops, fingers flying over the keys, grinning. Toto was talking to someone who wasn't there.

"Ship of fools," Sam said to himself, and laughed.

Water and gas, noodles and Pepsi and Nutella, a crazy truth-telling freak, and despite Dekka's fear, there was hope.

Quinn. He would make a good justice of the peace. That's all you needed to perform a marriage, right? That's how his mom had married his stepfather. If they could elect someone mayor, why not elect someone justice of the peace?

"Marry me and live on a houseboat," he said.

"I like you, Sam, but not in that way," Dekka said.

Sam jerked and yanked the wheel to one side. He steadied and tried to ignore the blush that was spreading from his neck up to his cheeks. She was standing next to him.

"How's the shoulder?" Sam asked.

"See, this is why it's good that Taylor isn't still with us," Dekka said. "If she'd heard you, the news would have spread faster than the speed of light."

Sam sighed. "I was having a moment of optimism."

Dekka patted him on the back. "You should, Sam. The FAYZ owes you some good news."

Orc stood staring.

The kid, the Petard, he was still just floating there in the rain, like it was all nothing.

Astrid looked like a zombie or whatever.

The two shot kids were yelling and spazzing. Grinding Orc's last nerve. He didn't care about them. They were no better than he was. Let them scream, but not now, with his head banging like a drum, with the echo of gunshots still bouncing around in his skull.

Edilio had said to get out of town. That's what was rattling around in his brain, too. Killers had to get out of town.

Astrid's laws. She made them up.

"That true, right?" he asked her without preamble.

"What?"

"Anyone kills anyone, they have to go away for good."

"Are you going to kill them?" She meant the two hurt kids. It took him a while to realize that.

"What if . . . what if you didn't mean to kill some kid."

"I have to get him away from here," Astrid said. But Orc didn't think she was talking to him.

"I mean, if you didn't even mean to. Like it was just an accident?"

“I don’t know what you’re asking,” Astrid said.

Orc was out of words. He felt so tired. He hurt so badly.

“Can you pick him up? Can you carry him?” Astrid was asking him something. So maybe she didn’t care what he’d done.

“The ’tard?”

“Little Pete. Can you carry him, Charles?”

“Where to?”

“Away,” Astrid said. “That’s the law. Killers have to leave. That’s what he is, you know. He’s the worst of us all. Every death from the FAYZ . . . All those kids . . .”

Orc seized on an idea that drifted through his slow brain. He lost focus when Lance started howling louder than before.

“Shut up or I’ll shut you up,” he yelled. He struggled to regain his thought. Little Pete. Killing. “Yeah, but he don’t know what he’s doing, right? People who don’t know what they’re doing, it’s not their fault.”

“Please, Charles. Pick him up. Edilio will be back with Lana soon. We have to be gone by then.”

Orc stepped over Turk. The boy was shivering uncontrollably now, his legs stuck straight out, feet twisted, shaking as he held his guts.

Lance was still screaming, he hadn’t stopped, but now he was mixing in curses, raging at everyone, spewing every hateful word he could think of.

Orc looked down at Little Pete. Astrid said he had killed people. Orc didn’t see how that was possible. He couldn’t even move much, it didn’t seem.

Little Pete coughed three times real fast. He didn’t cover his mouth or anything. It was like he didn’t even know he’d coughed.

Orc plucked Little Pete out of midair. He didn’t weigh much. Orc was strong.

Astrid watched it all like she was a million miles away. It was as if she was seeing everything through a telescope.

“Where to?” Orc asked her.

Astrid knelt and picked up the gun she had dropped. “Away,” she said.

Orc shrugged and headed down the stairs and walked north, toward the hills, and away from the sound of screams.

TWENTY-SEVEN

6 HOURS, 11 MINUTES

DRAKE EMERGED.

He was holding a stone. Which meant Brittney had been holding the same stone.

It must have been heavy for her but his tentacle wrapped around it and held it without much strain.

Around him the bugs were looking less and less like insects. Not even like really large insects. The least of them was as big as a Dalmatian. The largest were as big as ponies. They reminded him more of Humvees or tanks.

They seemed more fragile at this size, as though the same weight of burnished exoskeleton had been stretched to make a much larger creature. Only half of them were still carrying out debris. The rest, the larger ones, had stepped aside and now waited with an impression of impatience about them. Like jets waiting for takeoff.

That's what they reminded him of: fighter jets. They had a predatory, dangerous air about them. Like all they had to do was get the word and they'd go blasting off, dealing out death and destruction.

Who was to give them the word? Him?

The coyotes had disappeared. Had they decided to leave? Or had the bugs eaten them finally? Drake noticed a smear of blood on a slab of rock and thought he knew the answer.

Had the Darkness made the coyotes sacrifice themselves to feed his new servants?

Drake tossed his rock onto the pile. Then he turned back toward the mine shaft. Back to the welcoming shadow of that hole in the earth. His step was light. His heart beat fast, but from joy, not fear.

He felt the mind of the Darkness touching his. Felt that powerful will. It wanted him. And he was sure now what the Darkness would ask of him, and what weapons it would give him.

The mine shaft was clear but still a dangerous place. The supporting timbers had not been replaced and now the stone roof was jagged, hanging precariously in some places, while in others it had been hollowed out into dark cathedral domes by the collapse.

"I'm coming," Drake whispered. But why whisper? "I'm coming!" he yelled.

He left the last of the light behind. Total darkness now. He felt his way forward, step by step, hand and whip hand outstretched. He scraped against jutting rocks, stubbed his toes dozens of times. The air smelled stale. It was hotter than it should have been in the shaft, warmer than the outside. He was sweating in the pitch black, gasping for scarce oxygen.

"I'm coming!" he shouted again, but his voice now was metallic and flat and did not carry any distance. He tripped and fell to his knees. When he stood up, he banged his head.

He was going down a long, long slope. How far had he come? He couldn't say. He heard the rustle of the bugs coming behind him. In tight places they had to squeeze through, like massive cockroaches, flattening themselves to squeeze beneath low-

hanging ledges, squirming onto their sides to edge past piers of solid rock.

They were following him. His army. Yes. He was certain of it. They would be his to command, his to use.

His army!

He could no longer breathe the air. But this was not his first time without oxygen. He still could see in vivid flashes the long, slow claw up through the mud of his grave.

No, Drake did not need air. Air was for the living, and Drake was something so much better than alive.

Unkillable.

Immortal.

The immortal soldier of the gaiaphage. His head swam with the joy of it.

Suddenly the floor ended and he pitched forward, face-first. He fell for several stretched seconds. He slammed into unyielding rock, bounced, rolled over, and laughed a soundless laugh.

He felt around with his hands and knew he was on a narrow ledge on one side of a deep vertical drop.

He stood up, put his toes on the edge, and looked down. Far below, a dim green light glowed, the only light in this pit of blackness. It might be a hundred feet, it might be a mile, it might be a hundred miles. There was no way to know.

He fell and fell, like Alice down the rabbit hole. It seemed to go on forever. Not seconds but minutes. An eternity.

WHUMPF!

He hit with such force that it should have snapped his calves and thigh bones and burst his knees and jackhammered his spine and cracked his head open like an egg.

Instead, after lying crumpled for a moment, he unwound his twisted limbs and pushed himself back onto his feet.

The walls around him all glowed. With his eyes fully adjusted to the pitch black he could see fairly well now with nothing but the toxic radioactive glow.

Was he there? Was he at the end of the trip?

Come.

Farther still, down a sloping ramp. He realized that this was a different type of tunnel, no longer a man-made mining shaft but a natural cave deep, deep in the bowels of the stifling earth.

He entered a cavern that soared hundreds of feet above him. Green-tinged hanging stalactites met stumpy stalagmites. Like walking into the jaw of a gigantic shark.

Through the cavern and ever downward, following the faint trail of green. The creatures kept pace behind him. They had fallen after him, one by one, slowing their descent with their wings, spiraling down like helicopter seedpods.

An army! His army!

How far had he fallen? He could not know. How deep was he now? Miles.

Closer and closer.

And then, even as he felt his journey drawing to a close, his desperate goal coming close, Drake felt the familiar disturbance and swift onset of stumbling awkwardness that accompanied the transformation.

“No!” he moaned. “No, not now!”

But he had no power to stop the transformation.

It was not Drake but Brittney who finally came to the place where the gaiaphage lay. It was like living green sand. Billions of particles, each almost invisible to the eye, but together forming a single living thing, a hive.

The cavern was vast, impossibly huge. As if someone had sunk a sports stadium into the earth. The green, glowing mass of the gaiaphage covered stalactites and stalagmites, granite walls, and sandstone rock skyscrapers.

But beneath Brittney's feet the floor was strangely level and smooth. The gaiaphage had left an uncovered space for her to see and to understand.

She knelt and pressed her hand against a clear patch of translucent, pearly gray beneath her. The searing pain a living person would have felt was only an interesting tingle to Brittney.

She knew what it was and where she was. This was the bottom of the FAYZ wall, the bottom of the giant bubble. She was ten miles down, at the lowest depths of the enclosed universe of the FAYZ.

She stood and looked left and right, in every direction, turning slowly to see. It was all resting on the barrier, she realized. The rock walls, the jutting stalagmites, all of it rested on the barrier itself.

And everywhere but in this one patch, the gaiaphage covered the barrier. It touched the barrier and did not feel pain.

Then, as Brittney looked down, she saw the color of the barrier change. The eternal blank grayness was crossed by fingers of dark green, the color of late summer leaves.

She understood: the gaiaphage could touch and alter the barrier itself.

She knew it was conscious. She knew it because she felt now the dread touch of that awful mind in hers. There could not be the slightest doubt.

Brittney fell to her knees.

She laced her fingers together and squeezed her eyes tight. But she could not block out the green glow. She could not stop herself seeing. She could not keep her mind safe from its terrible touch.

She felt her every thought opened, like so many files on a computer, each opened, observed, understood.

She was nothing. She saw that now. She was nothing.

Nothing.

She tried to call on her God. But her prayers would not form in her brain, would not whisper from her numb, trembling lips.

She saw it all clearly, the whole of it. A race of creatures who worshipped life. A virus designed to spread life wherever it reached. The planet first infected, then deliberately blown up so that seeds of life would spread throughout the universe in a billion meteors.

The endless, endless blackness of space, of millennia during which one of those rocks spun along a path that might never reach an end.

It was caught in the gravity well of a small star.

And then of a small planet.

The shattering, fiery impact.

A death. A man obliterated.

And the absorption into that alien virus of something new and incredible: human DNA.

A new life-form. The unintended consequence of a noble plan.

No God in His Heaven had created the gaiaphage. And here, now, in the airless pit, no God could save her.

It was then in her despair that Brittney prayed, not as she always had, but to a new Lord. A savior who waited to be born, to break free.

Brittney bowed her head and prayed to the gaiaphage.

Tanner appeared to Brittney as she prayed.

Her dead brother was an angel. Not with wings and all of that, but she knew he was an angel. And now he appeared to her and spoke in a soft, soothing voice.

“Don’t be afraid,” Tanner said.

“Let me die,” Brittney whispered.

“Who do you pray to?” Tanner asked.

“To you,” she said. Because she had no doubt that Tanner was speaking for the gaiaphage.

“I cannot give you death,” Tanner said. “You are two in one. Your immortality is his. And he is necessary to me.”

“But who made me this way? Why? Why?”

Tanner laughed. “‘Why’ is a question for children.”

“I am a child,” Brittney said.

There was softly glowing magma dribbling from Tanner’s cruel mouth. He bent down and touched her with fingers of ice.

“I must be born,” Tanner said. “And then, at the ending of my beginning, you will die.”

“I don’t understand.” With piteous eyes she looked up at the angel-turned-devil. “What do you need me to do?”

“Nemesis must be mine,” Tanner said. “Nemesis must serve me and me alone. All who defend him and protect him must be destroyed. He must live to serve me.”

“I . . . I don’t understand.” She knelt with bowed head, unable to look at Tanner, knowing now that he had never been an angel, that he had never been God’s servant, that he was nothing real at all, just the voice of the evil one.

“Nemesis,” Tanner said, hissing the word. “We are two in one, like you and the whip hand. Two in one, waiting to be born. Only when he is alone, utterly alone, will he serve me. And then I will be burst from this cocoon.”

“I don’t know anyone called Nemesis,” Brittney whispered.

She could feel her consciousness fading. Already her fingers were melting together to form the whip.

In the moments before she lost sight and sound, as she spiraled down into the blackness and Drake surged upward, Brittney’s tortured mind saw the image of Nemesis.

She knew his name.

Peter Michael Ellison. Who everyone called Little Pete.

PETE

HE FLOATED ABOVE the ground in the arms of a monster. His cheek lay against a stone shoulder. Rain no longer fell. Wild colors—green and yellow, brown and red, jagged edges of color scraped at him, wounding his ears.

The sister walked behind him. Her face was as stony as the monster's. Lips too red, eyes too blue, the sound of her breathing too loud.

At each step the monster's pebble skin rubbed against Pete's raw flesh, like sandpaper, like a thousand saw blades drawn slowly over tender scabs.

He wanted to scream, but if he screamed the loud colors would get louder.

He was no longer high atop the sheet of glass. He had fallen, fallen, down into the world of noise and blazing light. The Darkness was only a distant echo now. Now was now, utterly now and here and like needles under his skin, like knives in his ears. His eyes ached and throbbed.

He coughed and it was a cannon firing out of his chest, up through his throat, his mouth, burning him like blazing lava.

Why was he here? Why in a monster's arms? What was happening to him? After a long and peaceful escape he had been recaptured by the too-much world of furious activity and disjointed images.

His body, his body, that was all he could see or feel, the pain and the ache and the shivering that made him feel as if parts of him might come loose and fall, his body, forcing his attention away from the pristine glass cliff. Forcing him to feel every shiver, recoil at every cough, to feel, really feel, the sickness that was overwhelming his defenses.

TWENTY-EIGHT

5 HOURS, 1 MINUTE

DRAKE DID NOT see Tanner.

The gaiaphage needed no angelic illusions to reach into Drake's fevered mind. Drake knew all he needed to know. The bugs, the creatures would serve him. He had his army.

And in his head he had a list of names. The freaks first. The normals next. All of them.

All but one, the gaiaphage told him. Kill until there is no one left to kill. But don't harm Nemesis.

Drake was filled with a pure joy he had never known. He felt a wild energy. All his life he had waited for this kind of moment. It was as if every single thing he had ever done—the beatings he had suffered, the much more numerous beatings he had delivered, the pleasure he had found in burning frogs and microwaving a puppy and drawing all those endless loving pictures of weapons, spears, knives, torture devices, all of it, all the hatreds, all the burning lust, all the madness and rage, had come together to form this perfect, ultimate moment of crystalline joy.

He thought he might die from the pleasure he felt, so much emotion, a flood, a storm, a crashing of planets! Death! He was death, unleashed at last.

He snapped his whip and threw back his head and howled till his throat was raw.

Then he ran, leaped, cavorted through the swirling tides of insects, running and climbing, indifferent to the sharp rocks that lacerated his undead flesh.

Kill them all!

He raged when he reached the heights he couldn't climb but then the creatures rushed to lift him up and sped him up and up at dizzying speed through the endless caverns.

An army!

His army!

They vomited from the mine shaft and Drake leaped onto the rock pile. A single coyote waited there.

"Where is he, Pack Leader?" Drake demanded.

"Not Pack Leader. Pack killed."

"I don't care what you call yourself, where is he?"

"Who?" the coyote asked.

Drake grinned. "The one with the killing hands, you stupid dog. Who do you think? Sam!"

"Bright Hands is far. By the big water." He simpered and turned in a circle and then with his muzzle pointed to the west.

"Excellent," Drake purred.

Just then a rush of bugs, a new column of the creatures came over the ridge and poured into the mass of Drake's army. Different. These had bloodred eyes.

They were not alone.

Brianna stood, arms on hips, glaring down at him.

“You!” Drake said.

“Me,” Brianna said.

To the creatures he said, “Red eyes, serve me! To the town. Kill everyone but Nemesis!”

“You talking to these bugs now?” Brianna said. “I have to tell you: I don’t think they speak psycho.”

“Blue eyes, with me!” Drake said. “Two columns, two armies: blues with me, reds back to town and kill. Kill!”

“What exactly do you think you’re doing?” Brianna demanded.

“Me?” Drake laughed loudly. “I’m going on an epic killing spree.”

“You’ll have to go through me,” Brianna said.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Drake said.

They walked out of the rain. Astrid and Orc and Little Pete. The cloud did not follow them. No new cloud appeared. The cloud remained, no longer expanding, but still pouring rain on the street and the ruined house.

Little Pete coughed directly against the side of Orc’s face. It was getting worse, the cough, slowly but steadily worse.

Maybe it would kill him.

Go ahead. Shoot him. Kill Little Pete.

Astrid told herself she hadn’t meant it. It was just a tactic. After all, if someone was using a threat you had to devalue the importance of the threat, pretend it didn’t matter.

Lance’s face exploding. Some of it had hit her.

Turk moaning in pain, writhing on the wet carpet.

It had to stop. It had to end. One death to save dozens, maybe hundreds of kids?

A simple act of murder . . .

Astrid saw herself choking Nerezza. She felt again the way her fingers dug into the soft neck, fingertips finding the spaces between tendon and artery.

Astrid had never felt anything like that red-misted rage before in her life. She had hated before—she had hated Drake. She had feared before—many, many times. But she would never have believed herself capable of that murderous rage.

The true revelation was the joy she’d felt at that moment. The sheer, vicious, uncomplicated joy of feeling the blood pounding to get past arteries blocked by Astrid’s own hands. Feeling the spasms in Nerezza’s windpipe.

Astrid let loose a whimper. It had to end.

“You okay?” Orc asked.

Would she ever be herself again? Or had Astrid, the old Astrid, died, to be replaced by this new creature, this angry, frightened witch?

Not for the first time she realized that this had been Sam’s life since the coming of the FAYZ. How much rage and fear had he endured? How much bitter shame for his failures? How much guilt ate at his soul as it now ate at hers?

She wished he were here now. Maybe she would be able to ask him how he lived with it.

No, she told herself, it’s not Sam you need. A priest. You need to confess and do penance and be forgiven. But how could she be forgiven when even now she was

watching Orc as he labored uphill, seeing Petey's lolling head, and asking herself over and over again if she had meant it.

Go ahead. Shoot him.

God hears prayers, even from those who have not repented, she told herself. She wanted to pray. But when she tried she couldn't see the face of a patient Christ as she had in the past. She could see memories of crucifixes, paintings, statues. But the God she had believed in was not there anymore.

Was she losing her faith?

Had she lost it already?

A simple act of murder . . .

Leslie-Ann knew about the quarantine. But she also knew she couldn't stand being thirsty and hungry any longer and her two brothers couldn't stand it, either.

The one good thing about being Albert's maid was that Albert made sure she had enough to eat. Albert always had food and water. He wouldn't let her starve.

So Leslie-Ann made her way from the house she shared with her siblings to Albert's much fancier house.

She noticed a strange thing over toward the west: a cloud. Leslie-Ann frowned, wondering why that seemed so strange.

But she had no time to wonder: the FAYZ was full of weird stuff. If you'd seen Sam shoot light from his hands—and she had—you stopped being amazed by strange things.

Albert's front door was open. That in its way seemed weirder than the cloud. Albert never left his door unlocked. Never. Let alone open.

Leslie-Ann approached cautiously. She felt for the hilt of the knife she carried. She was nine years old, and not exactly big or scary. But once she had waved the knife at a kid who wanted to steal her cantaloupe and he had run away.

"Albert?" she called out.

She pushed the door all the way open. She drew her knife and held it out in front of her.

"Albert?"

She thought she heard something coming from the living room. Her foot slipped on the Spanish tile. She looked down: a red smear.

Blood. It was blood.

She turned and ran back to the door. Ran outside, waving the knife around her.

She looked around, wishing Edilio or someone would come along. But if they did she'd be in trouble for going outside during the quarantine. Her brothers would still be thirsty and hungry, and so was she.

Leslie-Ann steeled herself and headed back inside, knife first. She stepped over the blood smear.

Her foot kicked a can. It rolled noisily. A can on Albert's floor? Who would have made that kind of mess? She would have to clean that up or Albert would fire her.

She bent down and snagged the can with her free hand. It smelled of food. Her mouth watered. She held the knife awkwardly as she ran her finger inside looking for anything that might be left. She came up with maybe a tablespoonful of tomato sauce and licked it greedily from her finger.

It tasted like heaven.

She carried the can with her to the living room. And there the full extent of the mess became clear: cans and wrappers everywhere. And tomato sauce all over the white carpet.

Only here it wasn't tomato sauce and Leslie-Ann knew it.

Then she saw Albert. He was sitting with his back against the wall, which was splattered with gore.

His eyes were closed. He wasn't moving.

"Albert?"

She fought the desire to run and run and keep running. Only, she was still thirsty and hungry. And there lay a water bottle with a few precious sips still. She drank it. Not enough, but something.

She went to the kitchen and with shaking fingers dug out the plastic trash bags. Then, quick, quick, before someone stopped her, she gathered all the cans and bottles and thrust them into the bag. It wasn't much, but her brothers could find a couple of ounces of food.

She glanced at Albert, feeling sorry for him and a little guilty and . . .

His eyes. They were open.

"Albert?"

She went closer. Were his eyes following her?

"Are you alive?"

He didn't answer. But slowly, slowly his eyes closed. And then opened again.

Leslie-Ann ran from the room and from the house. But she did not drop her bag.

TWENTY-NINE

4 HOURS, 8 MINUTES

BRIANNA DREW THE bowie knife from its sheath. “Cutting you in three pieces didn’t do it,” she said to Drake. “So this time I’m going to dice you like an onion.”

She blurred and Drake split open at the waist. Not clean-through, but she’d finish it with the next one.

“Get her!” Drake yelled.

She twirled in midair, kicked off the back of a bug, and brought the huge knife down again, chopping Drake’s whip hand and leaving it like a reddish python, squirming but no longer attached to Drake.

She struck! Again! Again! In the blink of an eye.

But the creatures were reacting now, a mass of them, rushing her. Slow, too slow, but still she had to sidestep them, and that cost her a precious second.

And Drake was still alive. Or something like alive.

She threaded past gnashing mouthparts and scything mandibles and buried the knife in Drake’s skull. The blade sank into the bone, stuck.

She yanked on it, but Drake’s upper body came with it. The blade would not come free.

Speeeewt!

Something slapped her calf. She twisted to look and saw a long, barbed, black rope extending from the mouth of the closest bug. She shook her leg but it did not come off.

“Gross!”

Another bug tried the same thing and she somersaulted out of the way. Still that first tongue was attached to her and she could feel hooks buried in her skin.

She needed her bowie knife. But now it was out of range as Drake dragged himself away with his one arm.

Brianna spotted a stone with a dull edge. She slammed it down on the tongue with all the force her speed afforded. The tongue bled but did not break. Blue bug eyes fixed on her with what now looked like triumph.

“Oh, no you don’t.”

She hit the tongue fast, twenty times in a second with her rock and it yanked away, quick as Drake’s whip hand.

Shwoop!

But now the bugs were around her, snapping at her with their creepy froggy tongues and those tongues were fast, fast even by Brianna’s standards.

The bugs had played her. They’d concealed this weapon in their arsenal and she’d gotten cocky.

Speeewt!

Brianna kicked and squirmed, but two of them were on her. She used the rock on the tongue that latched on to her stomach and knocked it loose but it was instantly replaced by three more.

Speeeewt! Speeewt!

They had her! She was held in a web, yelling, cursing, smacking.

Drake was putting himself back together, but his whip hand was still squirming by itself like a snake on hot pavement.

She was pinioned by half a dozen of the tongues and now the rest of the bugs were closing in to chew her up, mandibles slicing the air like scimitars.

Brianna felt a sudden wave of fear. Was it possible she could lose this fight?

“Don’t kill her,” Drake said. “Hold her! She’s mine!”

He was on his feet and searching through the wild melee for his whip arm.

Suddenly, the coyote was in the fight. He leaped for her, jaws open, teeth flashing yellow.

“Really?” she cried.

She shoved back against the greedy muzzle with all her strength. The move stretched one of the lashing tongues taut. The coyote’s powerful jaw, missing Brianna’s arm, clamped hard on the tongue, which snapped back like a cut high-tension cable.

She was pinned, but she still had her speed.

She grabbed the coyote’s ruff and swung it around to clamp on a second tongue.

Now just four tongues still pinned her. She didn’t have the strength to hold on to the coyote. The creature, maybe fearing the bugs would retaliate, took off yelping as if it had been kicked.

Four lines held the Breeze, all more or less on her left side, so she kicked off, pushing straight toward the insects. The tongues slackened. Brianna somersaulted. It was a sketchy maneuver, poorly executed, and she landed hard on her back, but the four tongues had been twisted around and now, as one, they released her.

Even as they released others struck. She could see them flying toward her like striking cobras.

She kicked a bug in the face, kicked hard against a slashing mandible, then *boom boom boom*, three hard kicks and she was out of there.

She caught her breath on a rise a hundred feet away. Her body was blistered wherever the tongues had touched. But she was alive.

She watched, panting, shaking, as Drake’s tentacle melded seamlessly into his shoulder.

“Come on, Breeze,” Drake taunted. “Come and get me. Here I am!”

Brianna had never been one to ignore a taunt. She had never run from a fight. But she had escaped by inches. By millimeters.

“It’s the end, Breeze,” Drake crowed. “I’m going to kill all of you. Every last one of you!” He danced in a circle, twirling in wild glee. “Run, Breeze! Ruuuuun! Because when I catch you, I’m going to make you suffer!”

Brianna ran.

Leslie-Ann fed her siblings the scrapings from the cans and let them drink the water.

Okay, she told herself: You did all you could.

Except that she hadn’t done all she could. Not yet.

She had never liked Albert much. He was kind of a jerk to her. He never said anything nice like, “Good job, Leslie-Ann.”

But he didn’t deserve to just die like that. Maybe he was still alive.

“I’m just a kid,” she said aloud to no one.

But she knew what she felt, and what she felt was that she hadn't done right.

She went out into the streets, not knowing exactly who she should locate, or who she should tell, but she knew she had to tell someone.

From where she stood she could see the big, weird cloud more clearly. It looked like it was raining. And just then two kids came past. They were walking in tandem, sharing the load of a heavy plastic tub. It was sloshing water over the sides and they were soaked through.

One of them noticed her and grinned. "It's raining!"

"No one's s'posed to go out," she said.

The kid snorted. "No one's telling anyone what to do right now, and there's water. If I was you, I'd get some fast."

Leslie-Ann ran back inside and located a bucket in the garage. Then she walked as fast as she could toward the rain cloud. If everyone was there, maybe she could find someone to tell about Albert.

As she drew nearer she noticed something that was, in its own way, as weird as the cloud, which was now almost overhead: there was water running in the gutter. Actual water. Just running down the gutter.

She broke into a run and saw a crowd of dancing, cavorting kids ahead of her. Buckets sat under the downpour. Kids stood with their mouths open, or tried to shower, or just shoved and played and splashed.

A very unusual sound for the FAYZ: the high-pitched laughter of children.

Leslie-Ann set down her own bucket and watched, marveling, as a quarter of an inch of water covered the bottom.

When she looked away, she saw an older kid. She'd seen him around. But usually he was with Orc and she was too scared of Orc ever to get near him.

She tugged on Howard's wet sleeve. He seemed not to be sharing in the general glee. His face was severe and sad.

"What?" he asked wearily.

"I know something."

"Well, goody for you."

"It's about Albert."

Howard sighed. "I heard. He's dead. Orc's gone and Albert's dead and these idiots are partying like it's Mardi Gras or something."

"I think he might not be dead," Leslie-Ann said.

Howard shook his head, angry at being distracted. He walked away. But then he stopped, turned, and walked back to her. "I know you," he said. "You clean Albert's house."

"Yes. I'm Leslie-Ann."

"What are you telling me about Albert?"

"I saw his eyes open. And he looked at me."

Albert dead.

Sam gone, and no telling when he would get back.

Astrid gone with Little Pete and Orc.

Dekka away with Sam and Jack.

And now Edilio, numb with the scale of the disaster, sat exhausted on the steps of

the so-called hospital. He didn't need Dahra's thermometer to tell him what he already knew: he was hot, flushed, weak.

He coughed. And stared blankly at Brianna, who buzzed and vibrated to a wild halt before him.

"Bugs!" she yelled. "I passed them heading this way. Drake and a bunch more bugs are still back at the mine shaft. I saw them heading west but I think it's just a fake; he's probably coming here, too."

"How do we stop them?" Edilio asked and coughed into his hand.

"We need Sam," Brianna said.

"We—" He coughed again and fought off a wooziness that made him desperately want to lie down. "I don't know where he is."

"I'll find him," Brianna vowed.

"You're all I've got left," Edilio said. "You're the only freak with any serious powers. I don't think the Siren would be much help against"—he coughed—"those creatures."

"She might work on Drake, though," Brianna said, and laughed as if oblivious to what was going on around her. In fact, as Edilio coughed again, she blinked, frowned, and said, "Are all these kids sick?"

"When the Siren sings, it affects everyone; she's just a pause button." Edilio coughed hard. It hurt his chest.

He was sick. Sick in his body and sick in his heart.

He had seen so many terrible things and done so many terrible things since the coming of the FAYZ. But nothing so cold-bloodedly awful as lining up the sights on Lance's head and squeezing the trigger.

It was the right move. Probably. It was the winning move, it seemed, since Astrid and Little Pete had both survived.

It was the ruthless move. The lesser-of-two-evils move. It was what Sam would have done in his place.

But it was poison in Edilio's heart.

"I can't save us," Edilio said. "Neither can you, Brianna. And Sam . . . I don't know if he can, either. So maybe this is the end. Maybe this is it and we lose."

Brianna slapped herself in the chest. "I don't lose!"

"You can't beat them alone, Breeze." A coughing fit, the worst one yet. It was several minutes before he could continue. "I'm done for. I don't know if this will kill me or not but I can't even stand up."

"Hey, we can't just give up," Brianna said. "Those things are the size of ponies now, some of them. And they're growing! You can't give up, Edilio. You're the one in charge."

He aimed his eyes at her, but they were swimming. She was an angry, unfocused face.

"Get me a piece of paper and a pen," Edilio said.

She was back in less than a minute.

His fingers were trembling as a fit of chills racked his body. He had a hard time steadying the pad and holding the pen. But with supreme effort he scribbled something, folded the paper, and handed it to Brianna.

"Quinn," he said.

She read the message and flushed furiously. She threw the paper at him. It hit him in the face. "Are you nuts? I'm not doing this!"

"I'm in charge," he whispered. He bent with shaky fingers and retrieved the note. "My call. It's the only way. Do it, Breeze: do it."

"No, no. No way."

Edilio grabbed her arm and squeezed it with the last of his strength. "For once in your life, think. Can you stop them? Can you stop those bugs from reaching town and killing everyone here? Yes or no?"

"I can try."

"Yes or no?"

She stifled a sudden sob. She shook her head. "No."

"Okay, then," Edilio rasped. "Do you want to be responsible for the lives of everyone who will die just so that you can act all tough?"

She had no answer. She glanced around as if seeing the sick and the dead, the wrecked church, and the sad graveyard for the first time. "No," she said.

"Then go, Breeze. Go."

THIRTY

3 HOURS, 50 MINUTES

SAM HAD RUN the boat all the way up the lake and all the way back. They had found two small campgrounds in all, but had not explored them carefully. Maybe a dozen big campers, a few ragged tents in various states of collapse. No doubt some camp food, soda, beer, coffee, all the things people brought camping.

And gas in some of those tanks. Lovely, lovely gasoline.

He was already imagining the steps they'd have to take. They would drive the campers to the marina area and form them up in a rough circle or maybe two concentric circles. They would have to dig some serious septic tanks well away from the lake so there wasn't any seepage into drinking water.

They would need to ration the gas carefully, carefully, saving it for moving produce from the fields and fish from the ocean. They would still need Quinn's steady supply of blue bats to pacify the zekes. Besides, they would need to be cautious about overfishing the lake.

No more stupid mistakes. This time they would have to get it right.

That was a job for Albert, Sam had to concede. No doubt Albert would get richer still, but he was the only one with the organizational skills for the job.

Yes, it would work. They would build it and organize it and this time they would get it right.

For his part he had to find a way to destroy the flying greenies. But surely with Jack's strength and Dekka's powers and maybe Brianna—who could probably run through a cloud of greenies without getting hit—they could seal up that cave and crush or burn whatever survived.

They were heading back toward the marina now, chugging along slowly, taking their time. It was getting late in the day and Sam was trying to decide whether they should try to start one of the vehicles parked at the marina and drive back tonight, or plan a little more carefully and go in the morning.

The last thing anyone needed was three hundred or so kids tearing off in mad search for sweets. Half would end up lost in the desert or the hills and end up being coyote food.

The news needed to be handled the right way. Edilio and the rest of the council would have to plan a little.

To Dekka he said, "I think maybe we should load as much water as we can carry in an SUV and drive back tonight."

"I guess you've noticed there's no road that goes straight back."

"According to the map the road that follows the lake curves up around, hits the barrier. Right? But there has to then be a road that goes down through the Stefano Rey and hits the highway, right?"

Dekka shrugged. Her mind was elsewhere.

He couldn't blame her. But he had convinced himself she was worrying for nothing.

He indulged himself with a moment of fantasy. They would be heroes, showing up

in town with water, even if it wasn't that much water. That would be one very welcome sight, an SUV full of water bottles. Maybe a few jars of Nutella, too, if they drove east to the train before cutting south.

Then, a meeting with the council. They could start trucking water right away. That would keep everybody calm until a plan was worked out.

"We'll go in . . ." His words died as his gaze traveled to the marina. "Dekka. Jack. Look."

They looked.

Creatures, like giant silvery cockroaches, cockroaches the size of minivans, clustered on the shore. Maybe a dozen.

It had to be an illusion. A trick. They were impossible. Like a nightmare out of some ancient science fiction movie.

Sam reached for the binoculars he'd found in a locked case on board. He raised them, focused.

"It's Hunter's bugs," he said. He couldn't keep the awe out of his voice. "But they're huge."

He traversed his binoculars and then saw a human standing atop one of the creatures. He could not see the face well enough to identify it. But there was no mistaking the long, jauntily waving tentacle.

Drake. No longer locked in his basement prison.

Sam's Garden of Eden had its own snake.

Howard's first impulse had been to go to the so-called hospital and find Lana. But what profit would be in it for Howard?

Orc was off somewhere, freaking out, hammered, faced, blasted. He'd come back when he ran out of alcohol, but for now, Orc was gone, and Drake's escape was a sort of black eye for Howard.

In the back of his calculating mind, Howard wondered if Orc was just determined to pull a Mary and off himself. He was nowhere near the deadly fifteenth birthday, but Orc might one of these days pick a fight that would get him killed.

Or he might just drink himself to death. And then what? What did Howard have if he didn't have Orc?

On a level still deeper was a genuine sadness that Orc would abandon him. They were friends, after all. Amigos. They'd been through everything together. Orc wasn't just Howard's main asset, he was Howard's only friend.

He cared for Orc. Genuinely cared for him. Obviously Orc didn't care much about him.

Howard took his time making the decision. Took his time and a fully clothed shower, too. But finally he made his decision and sauntered away from the cloud, soggy but moderately clean, unnoticed by frolicking kids.

It wasn't far to Albert's place. He found the door open, and quickly located Albert. The young mogul's eyes were closed. He definitely looked dead. Very definitely dead.

He advanced cautiously, as though Albert might suddenly rise up and start yelling at him for intruding. He pressed two fingers against Albert's neck. He didn't feel a pulse.

But he did feel warmth. The body should be colder.

He squatted in front of Albert and with his finger pushed up one eyelid. The dark iris contracted.

“Yaaaah!” Howard said, and fell backward. “Are you alive, man?”

No answer. Nothing.

Howard was frustrated because he’d hoped—if Albert was still alive—to negotiate a deal. After all, if Howard saved Albert’s life then it stood to reason that he owed Howard a little somethin’ somethin’.

Howard hesitated. He could do nothing and sooner or later Albert would be a hundred percent, stone-cold dead. Or he could try to find Lana. And maybe there would be some reward. Albert was tight with his money, but surely if Howard saved his actual life . . .

“Okay, I don’t know if you can hear this or not, Donald Trump, but if I save your butt, you owe me.” He frowned and decided he’d better add, “And oh, by the way, this is Howard talking. So it’ll be Howard you owe.”

Howard arrived at the so-called hospital to see a very disturbing sight: Edilio, shivering and muttering on the stone steps, ignored. He was just one of dozens of sick kids with various degrees of illness. Coughing, hacking, shivering.

The last thing Howard wanted to do was get any closer.

“Hey!” Howard yelled up the steps.

No one answered. He winced, turned away, turned back, doing a little dance of indecision. Without even knowing what his reward might be, it was hard for Howard to decide to risk his life. A man needed to know what he was getting paid, after all.

Kkkrrraaalf!

A kid at the top of the steps suddenly coughed with a force Howard had never seen or heard or imagined. The cough blew the boy backward. He landed hard, head smacking granite with the sound of a melon dropped on a floor.

The boy rolled over, got to his knees, then coughed a spray of blood all over a girl nearby.

“No way,” Howard said. “No way.”

The new kid, Sanjit, Helicopter Boy, appeared at the top of the steps. He rushed down to the coughing kid and grabbed his shoulders from behind.

He spotted Howard standing there. “Give me a hand, I need to get him off these steps.”

“I’m not touching that little dude,” Howard said.

Sanjit shot him an angry look. But then softened, like he understood.

Sanjit tried to walk the boy back up the stairs, but then the kid started coughing again with such violence that he threw Sanjit off and went flailing back again.

This time he rolled down the stairs to stop at Howard’s feet. He lay there, shivering and moaning. A fountain of blood flowed at once from his ears and nose and mouth.

Sanjit came down and stood over him. “Get out of the way,” Sanjit said to Howard. “I have to drag him across the street.”

“Is he dead?”

“No, he’s in perfect shape,” Sanjit snapped. He grabbed both of the boy’s wrists and started to haul him toward the plaza.

“You see Edilio there?” Howard demanded.

“Yes, I saw Edilio there,” Sanjit said.

“Shouldn’t you . . .” Howard motioned vaguely.

“Yeah, I should call for a stretcher and get him straight to the intensive care unit,” Sanjit said with contained fury. “I’ll get him on an oxygen machine and pump him full of antibiotics. Or maybe I’ll just see if he lives or dies because that’s really all I can do. All right?”

Howard took a step back in the face of the slender boy’s anger.

“Didn’t mean to . . .,” he said, and followed at a safe distance as Sanjit dragged the body off the curb and onto the blacktop.

Sanjit stopped halfway across and stared at the sky.

“What’s that? Is that a cloud?”

“Oh, that? Yeah, it’s raining. More weirdness,” Howard said.

“What? It’s raining? Like, water?”

“Yeah, water. It was a shock to me, too,” Howard said. “This being the FAYZ you’d expect it to be raining fire or dog turds or something.”

“Choooooo!” Sanjit yelled at the top of his lungs. “Chooooo!”

A few seconds later, his chubby African brother came running down the stairs, looking alarmed.

“Water!” Sanjit said.

“Where?” Virtue demanded.

Sanjit pointed with his chin. “Get a bucket. Get every bucket you can find!”

Virtue gaped, then ran.

Sanjit resumed dragging the corpse.

“Listen, dude,” Howard said. “I need Lana. You know who I mean? The Healer.”

“You have a boo-boo?” Sanjit snarked. “She’s kind of busy trying to save a couple of creeps Edilio shot.”

“Where?”

“Astrid’s house. I don’t know where it is. How about you either help me or get lost?”

“I’ll choose B.”

Astrid’s house. Okay. That would be . . . pretty much right directly under the cloud.

Well, well, Howard thought as the truth dawned on him.

“Little Pete,” he said. “So that’s out there, then. Well, buckle up, Howard, buckle up.”

Quinn and his crew were pulling toward shore, far later than usual. They’d had a tough day of it. After a miserable night in camp, they’d had trouble getting one of the boats floating again. They had unknowingly run it ashore and scraped a hidden rock. A gash had been gouged in the bottom, which meant hours of finding a way to patch it.

Fortunately it was one of the wooden hulls, not one of the metal or fiberglass ones; those would have been impossible to patch without going back to town for equipment.

Still, they’d had to use just their Swiss Army knives to whittle some driftwood into fairly flat, fairly smooth planks. Then they’d found they had no screws, so they had to remove bolts from other boats, drill through the repair patch and the hull, and use the bolts to attach the patch. They had scraped and then melted some paint to use as a sealant.

When they were all done the boat was surprisingly seaworthy. They’d all felt pretty

well pleased with their work, but a day of fishing was still to be done.

Harder later in the day. As the sun heated the top layer of seawater, some of their most reliable catch went deeper or stopped feeding.

So there were none of the jokes or laughs or bits of song that often accompanied their homeward row.

“They still haven’t picked up yesterday’s catch!” Quinn yelled when they drew close enough to see.

And sure enough, most of the fish they’d worked so hard to land the day before were still on the dock, rotting in the heat.

This revelation set off a round of angry curses from the crews, followed by a more disquieting worry. It was hard to imagine how Albert could have let this happen.

“Something’s deeply wrong,” Quinn said. “I mean even more wrong than we knew.”

They were still two hundred yards out when Quinn saw a blur that froze and became Brianna. She was at the end of the dock.

There was something in her hand.

“You guys hang back,” Quinn yelled to the other boats. “We’ll go in and see what’s up.”

Quinn’s boat touched the dock and he tossed a loop over one of the cleats.

“About time,” Brianna said.

“Hey, sorry, we were kind of busy,” Quinn snapped. “And I didn’t exactly realize I was on a schedule.”

“I don’t like what I have to do here,” Brianna said. She handed Quinn the note.

He read it. Read it again.

“Is this some kind of joke?” he demanded.

“Albert’s dead,” Brianna said. “Murdered.”

“What?”

“He’s dead. Sam and Dekka are off in the wilderness somewhere. Edilio’s got the flu, he might die, a lot of kids have. A lot. And there are these, these monsters, these kind of bugs . . . no one knows what to call them . . . heading toward town.” Her face contorted in a mix of rage and sorrow and fear. She blurted, “And I can’t stop them!”

Quinn stared at her. Then back at the note.

He felt his contented little universe tilt and go sliding away.

There were just two words on the paper: “Get Caine.”

THIRTY-ONE

3 HOURS, 49 MINUTES

SAM PULLED THE boat to within thirty yards of the shore.

“I guess you wish you’d burned me all up, huh?” Drake called to him.

“I do,” Dekka growled.

“That’s true,” Toto said. “She does wish it.”

Sam had to master a furious anger that burned within him. How had Drake escaped? Had he found a way to bribe Howard?

“He wouldn’t be standing there taunting us unless he thought he could beat us,” Sam said quietly. “Those bugs: I couldn’t kill them when they were a lot smaller.” He looked at Toto. “All you’ve got is the truth-telling thing, right? You don’t have some other power?”

Toto gave his answer to the missing Spidey head. “No weapons.”

“Can those things swim?” Jack wondered.

“If they could they’d already be after us,” Sam said.

“Do you think Drake can control those things, make them do what he wants?” Jack wondered.

“I guess we’ll find out sooner or later,” Sam said.

They all fell silent, gazing at him expectantly.

For the moment they were probably safe, Sam reasoned. Otherwise Drake would have come after them. If they went ashore it would mean a fight. And Drake was pretty cocky, swaggering around and taunting them from shore.

He could head the boat back up the lake. He could land and get around Drake’s insect army. They could make it to someplace where they could fight without destroying the marina.

“We need to get away from here,” Sam said.

“Hey, Sam,” Drake shouted. “I thought you’d like to know this isn’t my whole army.”

Sam didn’t doubt it.

“Your girl Brianna tried to stop us.” Drake waved a bowie knife in the air. “I took this from her. I whipped her, Sam.” He snapped his whip hand. The crack was like a pistol shot. “I broke her legs so she couldn’t run. Then . . .”

Dekka was halfway over the side, ready to swim ashore. Jack grabbed her and held her.

“Let me go!” Dekka yelled.

“Hold her,” Sam ordered Jack. “Don’t be stupid, Dekka. He wants us to come rushing at him.”

“I can beat him,” Jack said. “Dekka and me together, we can kill him.”

Sam registered the fact that Jack was actually making a physical threat. He didn’t remember ever hearing that kind of thing from Jack. But Dekka was Sam’s greater concern.

“I’m going to kill him,” Dekka said in a voice so deep in her throat she sounded like an animal. “I’ll kill him. I’ll kill him.” Then she shouted, “I’m going to kill you,

Drake. I'm going to kill you!"

Drake grinned. "I think she liked it. She was screaming, but she liked it."

"He's lying," Toto said.

"Who?" Sam snapped.

"Him." He pointed at Drake. "He hasn't killed that girl or hurt her."

Dekka relaxed and Sam and Jack let go of her.

"Truth-teller Toto," Sam whispered. "He can tell when people are lying."

"I just decided I like you," Dekka said to Toto. "You might be useful."

Toto frowned. "It's true: you just decided you like me."

"Keep listening, Toto," Sam said. He thought for a minute. Then he yelled, "Brianna may be dead, but we still have more than enough muscle to deal with you."

Drake threw back his head and laughed. "Yeah, the rest of my army is finishing off the last few kids in Perdido Beach. It was a beautiful massacre, Sam, you should have been there."

Sam made a motion to Dekka not to answer. The more Drake talked the better.

"But I still have Astrid alive, Sam," Drake shouted. "I have her somewhere safe. I want to take my time with her."

Sam waited, held his breath.

"Those are lies," Toto said.

"All of it?"

"All of it."

Sam breathed.

"Well, Drake," Sam shouted across the water. "I'm sorry to hear about that. I guess there's nothing left but for you to come and get me."

His tone was so casual, it left Drake gaping openmouthed. It took the psychopath a few moments to regroup.

"What's the matter, Sammy? Scared? Chicken?"

"No, actually we were thinking we might catch some fish," Sam yelled. "I hear the trout from this lake are delicious. Would you like to join us? You can swim with that whip hand, can't you?"

Drake stared. He looked at the knife in his hand as if it had somehow betrayed him. Then, eyes narrowed, he glared at Toto.

"Come on, Drake. Don't be a baby. Come and get us."

All the while Sam had been letting the boat edge closer, closer while not grounding. He was within ten yards of Drake. He didn't have to raise his voice to be heard.

Without turning toward her, and speaking in a whisper, he said, "Dekka, can you reach him from here?"

"Barely," she said. "The sharper the angle, the less I can do. But yeah."

"On one," Sam said. "Three . . . two . . ."

Dekka raised her hands and Drake rose feebly from the ground. He felt it immediately, knew what was happening, and kicked against the air like a marionette.

Sam raised his hands. Twin beams of green light fired. They hit one of the creatures, two feet to the left, but Sam swung right and caught Drake's leg.

The leg turned bright and smoke swirled.

Drake lashed with his whip and caught one of the creatures. He yanked himself out

of Dekka's field and tumbled among the creatures, blocked from Sam's beams.

"Will he die?" Toto asked.

"Sadly, no," Dekka said.

From shore they heard Drake bellowing in outrage, then: "Get them! Go!"

The creatures responded instantly. They rushed to the water's edge. It was almost impossible for Sam to see them as living creatures, they seemed more like robots. Insects simply were not that big. Couldn't be that big.

They rushed in a swarm to the water. And kept running straight in.

"They float," Jack said. "That's bad."

"Yeah, but they can't swim very well," Sam pointed out. He threw the engine into reverse and chug-chugged slowly back to a safer distance. The creatures had stopped rushing into the water. Those that could reach bottom scurried ignominiously back to dry land. Two of the creatures floated like unmoored rafts, or like trailers caught in a flood, twisting slowly, helpless.

Then one of the creatures on shore opened its wings. Beneath the hard carapace were wings like a dragonfly's.

"They can't actually fly, can they?" Dekka wondered.

The creature lifted off. It was awkward and slow. But it flew.

It flew toward the boat.

"Go back to camp after you off-load the catch," Quinn instructed his crews. "I'll catch up with you later. And if I don't . . . well, keep up the routine."

He felt worried eyes following him as he walked down the dock. There was one motorboat that still had a few gallons of fuel. They had designated it for emergency use only. He supposed this was emergency enough.

"You coming?" Quinn asked Brianna.

She shook her head. "I can't beat these things, but I can at least fight them."

"What if he won't come?" Quinn asked.

"He'll come. It will be his big moment."

"Will he be able to stop these creatures?"

"How would I know?" Brianna demanded. "It wasn't my idea. I'm not the one saying we should bring him back. Maybe he and Drake will go back to being best buddies. How would I know?"

"Well, I guess Edilio thinks Caine can save us."

Neither of them spoke for a while, both thinking of Edilio, wondering if he would survive. Right from the start Edilio had been one of the good guys. Probably the best of them.

He and Mary: two selfless, loyal, decent people. One dead after betraying everything and everyone. The other maybe dying right now, ignored and alone.

"One more question for you, Brianna. It's serious. So don't just give me your automatic tough-chick answer, okay? Because I want the truth."

"Yeah?"

"Can you beat Caine? If he starts in with his usual, starts pushing people around, hurting them . . . Can you take him?"

He saw the beginnings of a cocky smile. But then she dropped the act, sighed, and said, "I don't know, Quinn."

Still he hesitated. He didn't want to go. And he knew why. "Everybody kind of likes me now because I fish. I have this thing I do, right, and it's necessary and so people respect me." He sighed and unwound the motorboat's rope from its cleat. "Now I'll be the guy who brought Caine back."

Brianna nodded. "Sucks to be you. Sucks worse to be me."

Impulsively, Quinn hugged her. Like a brother. She didn't return the gesture, but she didn't blur away either.

"Hang in there, Breeze."

"You too, Fisherman."

Quinn stepped down into the boat. Brianna was out of sight before he could fire the engine.

He headed out of the marina, chugging along slowly until he was away. Then he pushed the throttle to full speed and pointed the bow toward the distant island.

Astrid looked around, wondering where they were and where they were going. Orc seemed to have someplace in mind. But he also seemed confused. They were in an area of tangled woods and sharp, sudden, brush-choked valleys.

"Are you taking us to Coates?" Astrid asked.

"Yeah," Orc answered.

"Why there?"

"You wanted to get away, right?"

"I want my brother to be somewhere safe," Astrid said, conscious of the hypocrisy.

"It's safe there," Orc said.

"How do you know?"

"It's a secret," Orc grumbled. "I mean, there's no one there. None of those kids anyway. Caine and all them guys."

"What if Drake goes there?"

Orc shrugged, which caused Little Pete's head to fall from his shoulder and loll back. "If Drake's there, I'll take care of him."

Astrid stepped quickly to catch up with Orc. She put her hand on his shoulder. He slowed down and moved aside so she could walk beside him.

"Are you looking for Drake?" Astrid asked. "Because I don't think that's a good idea."

"I don't care about Drake," Orc said angrily. "I had enough of him. But I have to be away from town. Where else am I going to go?"

Astrid felt sure that was part of the truth. But not all of it.

"Thanks for helping us," she said. "But you don't have to stay away from town. It's not your fault Drake escaped."

"Didn't say it was."

"Then why?"

Orc said nothing, just walked on heavily, stone feet trampling the undergrowth like some undersized Godzilla. Then, "This kid," he said.

"What kid?"

"This kid, this little kid, was all sick or whatever, and I was . . . I guess I was drunk."

"What happened with the kid?"

“Got in my way,” Orc said.

It was hard to read Orc’s expression. But she heard anguish in his voice.

“Oh,” Astrid said.

“Gotta leave town. Like Hunter. That’s the law. You oughta know, you made up that law.”

“I didn’t come up with ‘thou shalt not kill,’” Astrid said defensively. The sanctimony in her own voice made her sick. The same Bible that said “thou shalt not kill” also said “he who hateth his brother is a murderer.”

Didn’t she hate her brother? Hadn’t she contemplated murder? Hadn’t she dared Turk and Lance to do it for her? If Orc had to go into exile, then didn’t she as well?

Would she wish her brother dead and live with that mortal sin, and yet draw the line at sleeping with Sam? How absurd was that? Murder, sure, but fornication? No way.

Astrid had never felt so low. She dropped back so Orc wouldn’t see the tears in her eyes. Oh, God, how had she become this person? How had she failed so utterly?

Hypocrite. Murderer in her heart. A cold, manipulative witch. That’s what she was. Astrid the Genius? Astrid the Fraud.

And now she slogged through darkening woods to find a cold shelter with a drunken killer and her brother. One who killed from rage and stupidity; the other who killed from what? Ignorance? Indifference? From the simple fact of too much power for anyone to handle, let alone an autistic child? She laughed, but it was not a happy sound.

“What’s funny?” Orc demanded suspiciously.

“Me,” Astrid said.

They spotted the dark gabled roofs of Coates through the trees and then struck the road that led up to the front gate.

It was a gloomy place, a haunted place. Pale whitewashed stone that showed evidence of violence. A massive hole in the facade was like a fatal bullet wound. The door had been ripped apart, shredded.

Orc stomped steadily forward, climbed the steps, and yelled, “Anyone here?”

His voice echoed in the arched entryway. “There’re beds upstairs. Gotta take the back stairs.”

He led the way, obviously familiar with the layout. Astrid wondered how he had come to know the place so well. Orc was not a Coates kid.

They found a dorm room that hadn’t been burned or shredded or used as a toilet.

Orc tossed Little Pete negligently onto a bare mattress. Astrid searched for and found a tattered blanket, which she spread over him.

She felt his forehead. Still feverish, but perhaps no worse than before. She had no thermometer. He was coughing in fits and starts. Not worse, not better.

“What’s next, Petey?” she asked him.

If Lance had squeezed the trigger, would the bullet have killed Little Pete? Would he have had the power to stop it? Surely. But would he have known what was happening?

“How much do you know, Petey? How much do you understand?”

He would need clean bedding after he wet himself. And she herself needed clothing, she was still in just a nightgown. And although there would be no food left in

this place, surely there might be a few drops of water.

Astrid called to Orc, but he didn't hear. She heard his heavy footsteps reverberate in the eerie silence.

Best to leave him be. In another room she found clothing that was close to her size. Close enough. It wasn't clean, but at least it had not been worn recently. Coates had been abandoned for a while. She wondered if it belonged to Diana.

She went in search of water. What she found was Orc. He was in the dining hall. His massive legs were propped on a heavy wooden table. He had pushed two chairs together to bear his weight and spread.

In his hand he held a clear glass bottle full of clear liquid.

The room smelled of charcoal and something sickly sweet. The source was obvious: in the corner, next to a window, was a contraption that could only be a still. Copper tubing probably salvaged from the chemistry lab looped from a steel washtub that rested on an iron trestle over the cold remains of a fire.

"This is where Howard makes his whiskey," Astrid said. "That's how you know the place."

Orc took a deep swig. Some of the liquor sloshed out of his mouth. "No one ever comes here since Caine and all them took off. That's how come Howard set up here."

"What does he use?"

Orc shrugged. "Don't matter much as long as it's any kind of vegetable. There's a patch of corn only a few people know about. Artichokes, too. Cabbages. It don't matter."

Astrid took a chair at some distance from him.

"You changed clothes," he said.

"I was cold."

He nodded and drank deep. His eyes were on her, looking at her in detail. She was very glad to no longer be wearing her nightgown.

She wondered whether Orc was old enough for her to worry about in that way. She thought not. But it was a frightening possibility.

"Should you be drinking that so fast?"

"Gotta be fast," Orc said. "Otherwise I pass out and can't get enough to do the trick."

"What trick?" Astrid asked.

Orc made a sad smile. "Don't worry about it, Astrid."

She didn't want to worry about it. She had enough of her own worries. So she said nothing as he gulped and gulped until forced to take a breath.

"Orc," she said softly. "Are you trying to kill yourself?"

"Like I said, don't worry 'bout it."

"You can't do that," she said. "It's . . . it's wrong."

She noticed two more bottles down on the floor, right where he could reach them without moving.

"It's a mortal sin," she said, feeling like a stupid fool. The very word "sin" felt like a sin when she spoke it.

Hypocrite, she berated herself silently. Fraud.

"If you do this, you'll have no chance to repent," Astrid said. "You'll die with a mortal sin on your conscience."

“Got that already,” Orc said.

“But you’re sorry for that. You’ve thought about it. And you’re sorry for it.”

Orc sobbed suddenly, a loud sound. He tilted his head back and she saw the last of the bottle drain into his mouth.

“If you’ve asked for forgiveness, and if you felt truly sorry, then God has forgiven you for that little boy.”

The bottles weren’t corked, just sealed with a piece of Saran Wrap and a rubber band. Orc pulled the plastic off a second bottle.

“There’s no God in the FAYZ, didn’t you know that?” he said.

THIRTY-TWO

3 HOURS, 48 MINUTES

SAM FIRED. THE beams of light hit the hovering bug squarely. The rays of light bounced and fragmented, steaming the water.

“Dekka!” Sam yelled.

She killed gravity beneath the hovering bug so that it shot suddenly upward followed by a swoosh of rising water.

But it was no good. More of the creatures were opening their roachlike wings and flying awkwardly out toward the boat.

Sam cursed. He threw the engine into gear and spun the wheel. The boat zoomed toward the middle of the lake.

The bugs tried to chase, but they were insects, not eagles, and their flight was jerky and poorly controlled.

“I can maybe crush them,” Jack said over the roar of the engines.

“He believes he maybe can,” Toto commented.

“But they scare me.”

“That is true, too,” Toto said.

“Yeah, I could have guessed that,” Sam yelled as they dodged another lumbering creature.

They could keep dodging the bugs, maybe forever, but when Sam tapped the gas gauge it showed just an eighth of a tank.

There was a hand pump built into the dock’s gas tank. But it wasn’t as if Drake would let them pull in and refuel.

“We need gas,” Sam said.

He headed the boat away from the marina, keeping close to the shore, hoping Drake’s creepy army would follow. They were faster on land than in the air so they zoomed in their crazy bumblebee way back to land on shore.

He looked back and saw Drake urging the creatures on. They were quick, skittering on their insect legs. But not quite as fast as the boat. At top speed he could pull away.

“Are we running away?” Toto wondered.

“Yes,” Sam snapped.

“That’s not true.”

“Is there any way to shut you off?” Sam demanded. “We’re faster than they are. So we’re going to draw them off, double back, and beat them back to the marina.”

“Then what?” Dekka asked.

“We gas up and drive around out here forever,” Sam said.

“Great plan,” Dekka said.

“Sooner or later Drake gives way to Brittney. We might have a shot then.”

It didn’t take long at full speed to reach the end of the lake. The huge roaches swarmed along the shore, rushing eagerly to catch up. None were airborne now.

“Where’s Drake?” Jack asked.

Sam scanned the insect army. No sign of Drake. Sam killed the engine, saving gas

for the mad dash back to the marina. In the sudden quiet he heard a different engine.

A sleek boat with two big outboards was throwing up a cloud of spray and *whump-whumping* toward them. There could be no doubt as to who was driving the boat.

The bugs on the shore. Drake on the water.

“If he has a gun, we’re in trouble,” Dekka said.

“He doesn’t need a gun,” Sam said grimly. “He can ram us. He’s unkillable, we’re not.”

“What do we do?” Jack asked. Then, more panicked, “What do we do?”

Dekka put a calming hand on his shoulder. “Take it easy.”

Sam measured the shoreline, checked the gas supply, glanced at his two friends, and finally appraised Toto.

“Dude, do you think you can pump gas?”

Toto looked away and passed the question along to the imaginary Spidey head. “Can I pump gas?” Then, apparently hearing an answer, he said, “Yes.”

Sam fired the engine up. He turned the wheel, waited, waited, as Drake’s bow wave grew large.

“Jack. Grab that boathook. And be ready.”

“What?”

“You ever see that movie where Heath Ledger was a knight?”

“Not his best movie,” Dekka said.

“True,” Toto agreed.

“Hold on,” Sam warned. He put the engine into gear, pushed the throttle all the way, and flew toward Drake.

Lana did not run, she was too tired for it, and anyway Howard was probably wrong. Turk and Lance surely did believe they’d killed Albert. As he’d laid there, shrieking in pain beneath Lana’s healing touch, Lance kept babbling something about forgiveness, praying to be saved, saying he was sorry for Albert. “It was Turk, it wasn’t me!” he’d said, his destroyed cheek flapping bloodily with each word as the drenching rain swept the blood down to the carpet beneath his head.

Lana had mostly healed Turk and Lance. They wouldn’t die, at least. She hadn’t much seen the point: they were scum and someone would only have to kill them all over again, sooner or later. But she supposed it wasn’t her decision to make. She was just a player in the madness.

She had missed her chance to be a hero by destroying the gaiaphage. And she had failed to stop the virus that now claimed nine bodies. Instead she’d saved a couple of creeps. Yay for her.

She and Howard found Albert just as he’d said: sitting with his back against the wall.

Lana noticed an awful lot of blood. A small, sticky sea of it around Albert.

“He didn’t die right away,” Lana observed. “Dead people don’t bleed as much. And see how the wall is smeared? He sat up.” She knelt and placed her fingers on his neck. “Then he just sat here and bled to death.”

No question in her mind. He had a bullet hole in his face. And a much larger exit wound out the far side. It looked as if some wild animal had taken a messy bite out of his skull.

"I don't raise the dead," Lana said.

"No, wait," Howard insisted. He knelt beside her and lifted one eyelid. It was dark, there wasn't much light for an iris to react to. So Howard fished out a lighter and flicked the flame.

Lana's eyebrows went up. "Do it again."

Howard lifted the other lid. That iris, too, responded.

"Huh," Lana said.

She pressed both hands against Albert's head. After a few minutes holding that pose she bent his head forward to see the awful exit wound. Around the jagged, ripped edges, flesh was growing.

"The brother's not dead," Howard said.

"About as close as you can get," Lana said. "But no: he's not dead. And this kind of thing, at least, I can heal."

"Boy's going to owe me," Howard said.

"You're a trip, Howard, as my dad would say," Lana said. "You are definitely a trip."

"You'll tell Albert I brought you, right? You'll tell him it was me, right?"

"Why? Are you leaving?"

Howard stood up. "Gotta go find Orc. I just figured out where he'd go."

Lana got herself into a more comfortable position. Patrick went off to scavenge around in the house.

"You find anything, you better share," Lana called after her dog.

The two boats raced toward each other.

Six seconds to impact.

Sam's mind was racing. Drake would know he was bluffing. Drake didn't fear an impact, he would know Sam was bluffing and he would expect Sam to suddenly veer aside.

Four seconds to impact.

"Jack!" Sam yelled. "Up on the bow!"

"What?"

"Do it!" Sam bellowed.

Jack sprang straight from the stern to the bow. He was holding the boathook like a lance. Like he really was a knight. Hopefully Drake had noticed.

One second.

"Now, throw it!" Sam shouted.

Jack threw it with all his desperate, supernatural strength.

Sam had not expected the boathook to impale Drake—and it didn't. But even an unkillable killer had instincts, and Drake instinctively dropped to let the boathook fly harmlessly over his head.

Sam had already twisted the wheel.

They blew past Drake's boat, spraying it with their bow wave and taking a drenching spray in return.

Dekka grinned at Toto. "See, this is what makes Sam, Sam."

It took a furious Drake ten seconds to turn his boat and come after Sam.

The bugs were even slower to catch on. Now they were racing back along the

shore, but neither Drake nor the bugs would get to the marina before Sam.

“Okay,” Sam yelled over the throb of the engines. “Toto, when we get there you pump like crazy, right? I’ll show you how. But Drake will be on us quick and he may try again to ram us, so Jack? You and Dekka be ready.”

“Ready to do what?”

“Hang on!” Sam yelled. He aimed the boat for the dock, threw it into reverse, the water boiled, the engine roared, and the boat scraped harshly to a stop by the gas pump.

Sam grabbed Toto and shoved him bodily up onto the dock.

“Dekka! Tie us off.” He unlimbered the hand pump, thrust the nozzle into the gas tank and physically placed Toto’s hands on the pump. “Up and down, up and down, and don’t stop until I tell you to.”

Sam ran to the end of the dock. Drake was roaring down on them. Sam glanced left, right, looking for what he needed. A low-slung sailboat. That would do.

“Dekka! Float that boat!”

Dekka raised her hands and the boat rose from the water, dripping all over them, tilting to one side so that for a moment Sam was afraid it would roll over and smash its mast down on their heads.

“Okay, Jack. You missed with the boathook. Try this!”

Jack had to skirt Dekka’s field, and for a second he lost his footing and almost fell into the water. Sam grabbed his hand and hauled him upright.

Jack backed up twenty feet, took a deep breath, and ran straight at the boat that now hovered over the end of the dock.

Sam had the pleasure of seeing the sudden realization dawn in Drake’s eyes.

Jack rushed forward, jumped, and hit the stern of the sailboat.

The boat flew, twisting crazily through the air. Not far, just twenty or thirty feet before it exploded into flames as Sam aimed and fired.

The boat fell, hit the water, and Drake’s boat smashed into it at full speed.

Both boats shattered, flaming wood splinters flew, bits of metal railing and big pieces of the engine spiraled and landed like shrapnel all around them.

Toto cried out in pain. His hip had been hit and he was bleeding and screaming and not pumping any longer.

“Jack! Pump! Dekka, get Toto.”

Sam dropped back into his boat and began snatching up and tossing out bits of flaming debris.

“Be dead, be dead,” Sam muttered under his breath.

A sudden sound and Sam felt a burning pain. A red lash mark appeared on his arm.

Drake was holding the dock with his real arm, whip hand drawn back to strike again.

Sam fired. Missed. Bought two seconds as Drake sank beneath the disturbed water.

He shot a look up the shore. The racing creatures pelted through the parking lot, swarmed over and around the cars, would be on them in seconds. Now or never.

“Enough! Back in the boat!”

No one needed to be told twice. Toto and Jack were first in. Dekka stumbled as she ran, slapped her belly, and for a moment Sam thought something had hit her.

Drake was up and his whip hand found Jack. Jack howled and grabbed at the

tentacle but missed.

Sam gunned the engine. But he had forgotten the rope. The boat roared, shot forward, and snapped the cleat off the dock. The resistance was enough to yank the boat around.

It smashed into another parked boat and sent everyone tumbling.

By the time Sam cleared his head, Drake had his hand on the gunwale and his whip hand was flailing madly into the boat, striking Jack again and Toto.

Sam threw the boat into reverse, pushed the throttle, twisted the wheel, and ground Drake between boat and dock.

Then he changed gears and roared off, leaving Drake cursing in the water as the bugs raced down the dock, their mandibles slashing at the air.

Sam drove to the middle of the lake and killed the engine. The gas gauge showed a hair over a quarter tank. Enough for now. But at the cost of Toto screaming in pain.

“It’s bad,” Dekka reported. “But he’ll live.”

She lifted Toto’s shirt to show Sam a nasty gash. “Jack, see if there’s a first aid kit aboard.”

Sam sagged, very tired now. “You okay?” he asked Dekka.

She didn’t answer.

He looked more closely at her. “Dekka?”

She looked sick. She bit her lip. “I am sorry to add to your problems, boss,” she said. Then she raised her own shirt and Sam saw the tiny mouthparts poking through her flesh.

The light died and night fell as the boat rocked on the gentle waves.

THIRTY-THREE

3 HOURS, 47 MINUTES

DIANA ROLLED OUT of the bed, accidentally pulling the covers off Caine as she did.

“Hey!” he protested.

“It’s nothing I haven’t seen. Repeatedly.”

Caine grinned and laced his fingers behind his head. “I could get used to this life. I think I’ll have another can of peaches.”

Diana took a quick shower and stepped out, dripping wet, to find him waiting for her, holding a towel.

“Seriously: no,” she said. “We’re done.”

“Well, until we get something to eat,” he said.

She dried off and combed her hair while he watched. The lack of privacy was a little irritating, but she told herself it was a small price to pay for peace. In any universe this would be a lovely room, in a lovely house, on a lovely island. But in the FAYZ every part of it was exquisite, a miracle of beauty and comfort. She remembered Coates all too well. Especially the last months there as the food ran out and the fear and depression and self-hatred set in.

This was a beautiful place. And Caine was a beautiful boy—a young man, she supposed—at least on the outside.

If comfort and luxury and Diana herself could keep him pacified, maybe life would go on this way: peaceful.

Even caring for Penny and dealing with Bug were small problems compared to what she had survived. Panda: she shuddered at the memory and felt sick.

“What’s the matter?” Caine asked.

“Nothing.” She forced a smile. “I guess I’m hungry.” Then, seeing his expression, amended the statement. “For food.”

They pulled on underwear and wrapped themselves in soft, expensive robes bearing famous, embroidered initials. She slid her feet into silk slippers and together they headed down to the kitchen.

Bug was there, looking even more disturbed than usual. He was breathing hard. Diana glared at him, wondering whether he had been spying on them.

“There’s a boat coming,” Bug said.

“What do you mean?” Diana asked.

“A motorboat. It’s real near.”

Caine was out the door in a flash and Diana had to run to catch up. The sky was near dark, the sun setting gorgeously and sending fingers of gold and red across the water below them.

And there, shockingly close, was a motorboat. She saw one person aboard, a boy, but could not make out his shadowed face.

She looked searchingly at Caine. On his face she saw the expression she expected to see, the expression she dreaded.

His eyes were alight, his mouth in a feral grin. His whole body seemed to lean forward, anticipating, ready. Excited.

“Whoever it is, just tell him to leave,” Diana said.

“Let’s at least find out who it is,” Caine said.

“Caine, just get rid of him.”

The boat scared Diana. She wrapped her arms around herself as if shielding herself from cold.

Now the boy in the boat looked up.

“It’s Quinn,” Caine said. “What’s he doing here? I expected it to be Zil or one of his losers.”

“You expected?” Diana frowned. “What do you mean, you expected?”

Caine shrugged. “Sooner or later one of them was going to come to me.”

“But . . . Why would you . . . ?”

He laughed. A smug, cruel laugh. “There are only two four bars in the FAYZ, Diana. Sooner or later someone would get sick enough of Sam lording it over them that they’d come to find me.”

Diana felt something twisting inside her.

“Hey, Quinn. Up here!” Caine yelled. Then, in an aside, “Bug, disappear. Stay ready. It might be some kind of trick.”

Bug faded from view.

Quinn killed the engine. He stood up, moving easily with the rocking of the boat. “Caine. Where do I land the boat?”

“No need,” Caine said. He was grinning hugely now. “Sit down and hold on.”

Caine stepped to the very edge of the cliff. He raised his hands. The boat began to rise from the water. Dripping, and trailing a fringe of algae, it floated up and up and came to rest on the overgrown grass. Caine released it and it tipped onto its side. Quinn jumped to avoid being spilled out of the boat.

“Well, Quinn, what brings you to Fantasy Island?” Caine asked.

“Hey, Diana,” Quinn said.

Diana didn’t respond. She knew. Just like Caine knew. Somehow, despite everything, Quinn was here to bring Caine back.

“Edilio sent me,” Quinn said.

Caine smiled skeptically. “Edilio? Last guy on earth I expected to be sending me messages.”

“Edilio’s mayor now.”

Diana felt a pang. “Is Sam dead?”

Quinn started to answer, but Caine interrupted. “No, no: let me guess. I’m going to say . . . Sam got tired of doing everyone’s dirty work, taking all the risks, and then catching all the blame when things didn’t go perfectly.”

Caine relished the mute confirmation on Quinn’s face. He laughed and said, “Come on, Quinn. Come inside and have something to eat.”

“I’m just here to—”

Caine waved this off and said, “No, no, no, you have to come in. I don’t want to stand out here in a bathrobe. After all, this is a big moment in the history of the FAYZ.”

“A big moment?” Diana said.

“My triumphant return, Diana. That’s why Quinn’s here: to beg me to come back.”

“Well, he’s wasting his time,” Diana said, but even she didn’t believe it. She

followed Caine and Quinn back to the house.

“Would you like some crackers and cheese?” Caine suggested brightly. He could barely contain himself. He was grinning hugely. Cocky. Swaggering. Even as Diana felt the small hope she’d nurtured die inside her.

They brought Quinn some crackers and cheese and a cookie. He didn’t resist but ate them quickly with pleasure he could not conceal.

“You know, we have a very nice life here,” Caine said expansively. “Plenty of food. Water. Even hot water for showers if you can believe it. In fact, we were just lying in bed talking about it.”

“Yeah. It’s nice,” Quinn said with an embarrassed glance at Diana.

Caine watched him eat, considering. “Diana, I think you’d better do a reading on Quinn. Just in case something has developed.”

Diana hadn’t done a reading in a long time. It was her power: an ability to read whether a person was a freak or a normal. And then to know how much power the person had. Diana was the one to invent the half-mocking bar system. One bar, two bars, like a cell phone.

Diana stood next to Quinn and laid a hand on his shoulder. She concentrated, forming the picture in her head.

“Nothing,” Diana said.

“Could have told you that,” Quinn said, voice muffled by cookie.

Diana dropped her hand to her hip. “You’re normal, Quinn. Now . . .” She stopped in midsentence. She’d been about to tell Quinn to go home, leave, get off the island right now, this instant.

But something . . . she felt something. Something registered, some power.

A freak.

Bug was close by, still invisible, but not touching her, not making physical contact. Nor was Caine touching her. The power to read freaks only worked on direct touch.

Was she sensing her own power? No. No, this was something different. It was faint but persistent.

She turned away and placed her hand on her stomach.

“So, Quinn, tell me: what’s the big crisis?” Caine asked.

Diana nearly fainted. There it was, clearer than before. A reading. Two bars. Definitely. Clear, unmistakable.

“There’s a sickness,” Quinn was saying. “Like a flu or something, but kids are coughing their lungs out, dying.”

No, Diana thought. Please, no.

“And there are these creatures, like, well, people are calling them roaches . . . And Drake . . .”

“Old Drake’s alive?” Caine stood suddenly.

“In a way,” Quinn said darkly.

“I have to . . . ,” Diana said faintly. “I have to go to the bathroom.”

She fled the room and held it together until she reached her room. There she threw herself on the bed and lay both hands on her belly. She read her own power—as always, two bars. But there it was still, definitely there. A second power.

Not possible. It didn’t happen this quickly. She tried to recall half-remembered lectures from sex ed a million years ago. Words like “blastocyst” and “embryo” swam

in her brain.

It had been just twenty-four hours since the first opportunity for fertilization. She knew from past experience that a home pregnancy test wouldn't even work until ten days after.

Absurd. She was panicking. She was misreading. There was no way, none. Impossible, not this quickly.

Impossible, some cruel voice inside her said, as impossible as an impenetrable dome. As impossible as everyone over the age of fourteen disappearing. As impossible as coyotes who could speak.

As impossible as a boyfriend who could mock the laws of physics by raising a boat from the sea with nothing but a thought.

Little Pete's fever was spiking again. Astrid had found a thermometer in the former nurse's office at Coates.

Nurse Temple—Sam's mother—she realized with a pang. Nurse Temple. This had been her workplace. Of course like everything at Coates it had been trashed—medicine cabinet emptied, glass doors smashed, sheets on the cot soiled, reference books tossed around for no apparent reason.

Someone had made a little fire of medical records. The ashes were scattered near the window.

A bird had built a nest on a high shelf and then abandoned the nest. There were pinfeathers wafting around on the floor, mixing with the ashes.

That's how she'd found the thermometer, by noticing the feathers. There was no way it would be sterile, of course, but nothing had been clean in the FAYZ for a long time.

Little Pete registered 103.1. And his cough was worsening.

"What are you going to do, Petey? Are you going to let yourself die?"

Did he even know he might be dying? Little Pete knew nothing about viruses. How would he cope with an enemy he didn't even know existed? He didn't understand germs, but he knew he was hot. A breeze had started blowing. How long until he blew this roof off?

Astrid heard Orc bellowing out a song downstairs. She couldn't watch him anymore. If he wanted to drink himself to death, why stop him? For the sake of his immortal soul?

Orc drunk was Orc dangerous. She had seen him looking at her with a strange, intense gleam in his eyes.

She realized she was crying. Let him kill himself. Wouldn't she want to die if she were Orc? Didn't she want to die herself?

It was all a macabre joke. The FAYZ: full of sound and fury and signifying nothing but death and despair. Why cling to this life?

She tried to imagine being out in the real world. She tried to call up pictures of her parents and her old house. Of course that house was burned to the ground. And her parents would hardly even recognize her, let alone their son.

No, that wasn't true. They would recognize her and him and think they were still the kids they'd loved. Only gradually would they come to understand what monsters they were: grown as ugly inside as Orc was outside.

Maybe if the FAYZ ended, Orc might be restored to his normal form. But how would she ever be restored to hers? How would the girl who loved math and science, who could read all through the night, the girl of sweet romantic daydreams and big plans to save the world, how was that girl ever going to exist again?

“It ends with all of us dead, doesn’t it?” she asked Little Pete. “It ends when evil wins and we all surrender.”

The sad thing was, they were already lost, all of them.

She could see her own breath. The room was getting colder by the minute.

She stuck the thermometer in Little Pete’s mouth again. He coughed it out.

“Yeah, okay,” Astrid said. “Petey, I . . . I think if you can’t stop this . . . All of this . . . Petey, it has to end. There are kids dying of this cough. And it’s all because of this place you made, this FAYZ. You changed the rules and that has consequences.”

Little Pete did not answer.

She had not expected he would. There was a pillow. Press it down over his face. He wouldn’t even know, probably. He wouldn’t be afraid. He wouldn’t suffer. He would cross painlessly from life to death and down would come the barrier and in would rush the police and the ambulances and food and medicine. And no one else would die.

Mom. Dad. I’m alive. I made it. But Petey didn’t. I’m so sorry, but . . .

Astrid jerked back. She was trembling. She could do it unless Petey himself stopped her. She could. And she would never be caught. No one would ever reproach her.

“No,” she whispered in a shaky, uncertain voice. Then, stronger, “No.”

It should have made her feel good. Maybe in the past it would have. Maybe she would have congratulated herself for making the high and mighty moral choice. But she knew deep down inside that her choice would condemn many to death. No police and ambulances rushing in through the open barrier. Just more of the plague, more of the monsters, more suffering and death.

Astrid put her hands together, meaning to pray for guidance. But the words would not come.

From the recesses of her extraordinary memory she dredged up an old, old text. A fragment from a lecture she’d attended. From one of the ancient Greeks. Aristotle? No, Epicurus.

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able?

Then he is not omnipotent.

Is he able, but not willing?

Then he is malevolent.

Is he both able and willing?

Then whence cometh evil?

Is he neither able nor willing?

Then why call him God?

There was only one god in the FAYZ. God was a sick, disturbed, unaware child on a filthy cot in an abandoned school.

“I can’t stay, Petey,” Astrid said. “If I stay here . . . I’m sorry, Petey. I’m done.”

Astrid shivered, rubbed her hands together for warmth—the breeze had grown downright chilly—and walked out of the room.

Down the hall.

Down the stairs.

Out through the front door.

“Done,” Astrid said, standing for a moment atop the stone steps. “Done.”

She walked off into the falling night.

THIRTY-FOUR

2 HOURS, 51 MINUTES

“YOU’RE GOING?” DIANA asked.

“Of course,” Caine said. “We’re going. We’re even going to bring Penny. She’ll come in handy. Maybe Lana can fix her legs. And then she’ll be very useful at controlling people.”

Caine started whistling happily as he stuffed clothing into a Dolce & Gabbana bag.

“You should grab some clothes,” Caine said. “It might be a while before we get back here.”

“I’m not going,” Diana said.

Caine stopped. He smiled at her. Then his eyes went dead and she felt herself pushed by an invisible hand, shoved toward the closet.

“I said pack,” Caine said.

“No.”

“Don’t make me do something we’ll both regret,” he warned. Then in a more reasonable tone, “I thought you loved me. What’s all this about?”

“You’re a despicable person, Caine.”

Caine laughed. “And now you’re shocked. Right.”

“I hoped—”

“What?” he snapped. “Hoped what, Diana? Hoped you’d keep me happy? Hoped you’d tame me?”

“I thought maybe you were finally growing up a little,” Diana said.

Caine made a negligent, come here gesture with his hand. Diana was propelled toward him. She tripped but did not fall. He held her immobile with powers she could not resist and kissed her.

“I have what I wanted from you, Diana. And it’s great. I mean that. I got you to give it up willingly. I could have forced you whenever I wanted, but I didn’t, did I?”

She did not answer.

“But if you think,” he went on, “that you’ve gotten some kind of control over me, well, guess again. See, I’m Caine. I’m the four bar. I’m the one running things. And I’m happy to have you be a part of that. You can go on teasing me and making fun of me: I’m not sensitive. I like having one person who can stand up to me and tell me what she thinks. A good leader needs that.” He leaned so close she could feel his breath on her ear as he whispered. “Just remember: I’m Caine. And people who fight me regret it. Now pack up. Make sure you bring that little lacy black thing. I like you in that. Bug. Go tell Penny we’re leaving.”

Bug faded into view. He’d seen and heard it all. From behind Caine’s back he gave Diana the finger.

“We’re going to figure something out, Dekka,” Sam said.

She sat perfectly still in the back of the boat. Sam sat beside her. Toto had been banished to the bow—Sam didn’t want him pointing out every soothing lie.

“I’m not scared,” Dekka said. “I mean, look, I don’t know if any of us are ever

getting out of the FAYZ alive.”

Sam didn't know what to say, so he just nodded.

“I mean, you think about all the kids,” Dekka said. “Bette. The twins. Duck, poor old Duck. Harry. E.Z. Hunter.” After a pause, “Mary.”

“Lots of others,” Sam said.

“Yeah. We should remember all their names, shouldn't we?”

“I try to. So if this ever does end, and I ever get out, I can talk to all their parents and say, ‘This is how it happened. This is how your kid died.’”

“I know you worry about that.” Dekka put a comforting hand on his. He took her hand and held it in both of his.

“A little bit, yeah. I see, like, a trial, kind of. Old dudes and old ladies all looking harsh and asking me to justify . . . You know: what did you do to save E.Z., Mr. Temple?” He shook his head. “In my imagination they always call me Mr. Temple.”

“What did you do, Mr. Temple, to save Dekka Talent?” she said.

“That's your last name? I didn't think you had a last name. I thought you were like Iman or Madonna or Beyoncé. You just needed the one name.”

“Yeah, me and Beyoncé,” Dekka said with a wry laugh.

They sat silent together for a while.

“Sam, we don't know how well those things see in the dark.”

He nodded. “I've been wondering. I have a plan. It's fairly crazy.”

“Wouldn't be any fun if it wasn't crazy.”

“You can swim, right?”

“No, because black folk can't swim,” Dekka said, sounding like the old Dekka. “Of course I can swim.”

He called to Jack and Toto, asking them to join him. “Can both of you swim?”

They both nodded apprehensively. “But it's dark,” Jack said.

“The water doesn't get any deeper at night,” Sam said.

“Who knows what's in the water?” Jack argued.

“Trout and bass,” Sam said. “They don't eat people.”

“Yeah, and snakes don't fly and coyotes don't talk,” Jack shot back.

“Fair enough,” Sam said. “But I think we'd better take our chances. Here's what I'm thinking: you all go quietly into the water. I'll get the boat started, then I'll lash the wheel down and jump. If it works, Drake and his buggy friends will hear the boat and chase it. We'll go ashore and run like crazy.”

“They'll follow us,” Jack objected.

“They'll try,” Sam admitted. “But they're insects, not bloodhounds. I doubt they can see tracks at night.”

“He's not sure,” Toto said.

“No, he's not,” Sam admitted.

“True,” Toto said. Then, to his imaginary friend, “He's confusing.”

“Which way do we run?” Dekka asked.

“Drake will expect us to head straight for town. We don't want to fight him out in the open. So, toward the train.” He nudged Jack. “You want another laptop, right?”

Jack squirmed. “Well, at least some more of the batteries.”

“Okay, then. Into the water. Swim for the marina. If they don't chase me, I'll come back before you can reach the dock and we'll think of some other plan.”

“Could we think of that other plan before this one?” Jack asked.

Caine stood in the bow of Quinn’s boat as it plowed through the very light chop toward Perdido Beach.

Quinn had warned him to sit down, but Caine wasn’t worried about falling in the water: he would not fall. He used his power to support most of his weight so that his feet barely touched the deck.

He was not going to arrive hunched over. He was going to Perdido Beach like George Washington crossing the Delaware: standing tall.

He was floating. Almost flying. Physically, yes, but mentally as well. He was filled with a warm sense of perfect well-being.

They needed him. They had sent for him. They had found they could not survive without him. Him, not Sam. Him.

Penny lay crumpled in blankets in the back of the boat. Diana sat staring at empty space. Bug kept starting to whistle and then stopped himself, only to start all over again.

Quinn was at the tiller, looking at Caine’s back. Caine could feel his eyes boring into him. Quinn’s doubt and worry were written all over his open face.

Diana had been completely silent. Caine figured it was dawning on her that he was still in charge, that she still depended on him. That she still needed him as much as the kids in Perdido Beach needed him.

Well, she would get over it. Diana was a survivor. She would get past her disappointment. And together they would be the first couple of Perdido Beach, like king and queen.

The thought made him smile.

“It’s a pity we don’t have a camera,” Caine said. “I’d love to capture the moment of my return.”

“I’m cold,” Penny moaned.

“You’re just not getting enough exercise,” Caine said, then laughed at his own cruel joke. Penny’s sourness wasn’t going to ruin this for him. Not her sourness or Diana’s sullenness or Quinn’s guilt.

This was Caine’s moment.

Quinn maneuvered the boat expertly alongside the dock. He tied it off and then stood waiting to help them up. Caine refused Quinn’s hand. But looked at him hard. Eye to eye until Quinn had to look away.

“What is it you want, Quinn?” Caine asked.

“What do you mean?”

“What would make you happy, Quinn? What do you want above all else?”

Quinn blinked. Caine thought he might even be blushing. Quinn said, “Me and my crews? We just want to fish.”

Caine put his hand on Quinn’s shoulder. Caine looked him in the eye with that simulation of openness and honesty Caine could still manage when the occasion demanded. “Then, Quinn, here’s my first decree: you are free to fish. Keep doing what you’re doing, and nothing else will ever be asked of you.”

Quinn started to say something but stopped in confusion.

Caine spread his arms wide, palms down, and levitated out of the boat and onto the

dock. The grandiosity of it made Caine laugh out loud, laugh at his own sheer arrogance.

Behind him, Diana and Bug climbed wearily to the dock. Caine lifted Penny and set her, helpless, on the wooden planks.

"Things will be different this time," Caine said. "There was too much contention, too much violence the last time. I tried to be a peaceful leader. But things went badly."

"I wonder why," Diana muttered.

"These people," Caine said grandly, sweeping his arm toward the town, "need more than a leader. They need . . . a king."

It had come to Caine in a flash of insight. Until just a minute earlier the thought had never entered his mind. But with all Diana's teasing about him being Napoleon, he'd found a screenplay about Napoleon in the mansion's library and he'd skimmed it.

Napoleon had taken over after the French people had grown disillusioned with a brutal, ineffectual republic. They had accepted Napoleon's rise to absolute power because they were just tired, burned out. They had wanted and needed someone with a crown on his head. It was only natural, really. It had been that way for most of human history.

Napoleon had named himself emperor. Like Michael Jackson had named himself the King of Pop and Howard Stern called himself the King of All Media. Weird thing was: that's how you got to be king, by calling yourself one. And getting others to agree.

King.

Caine saw Quinn's mouth drop open.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a disbelieving smile form on Diana's face. She shook her head slowly, ruefully, as though finally understanding something that had puzzled her.

"From now on, Quinn, you'll refer to me as your king. And you and your people will be left alone."

Caine felt all eyes on him. Penny savagely ready to enforce his will, however much she hated him in her heart. Bug smirking, ever the useful tool. And Diana amazed, and amazed by her own amazement.

"Okay," Quinn said doubtfully.

"Okay?" Caine echoed, and raised one eyebrow expectantly. He smiled to show he wasn't angry. Not yet, anyway.

"Just . . . okay?" Caine prompted.

"Okay . . ." Quinn glanced around, desperate, not knowing the answer. Then it dawned on him. Caine could almost see the wheels turning in his head. "Okay, Your Highness?"

Caine looked down modestly, and to hide the triumphant smirk that would ruin the moment.

"Go now, Quinn. Go back to work."

And Quinn went.

Caine met Diana's disbelieving gaze and laughed aloud. "Why so gloomy? Doesn't every little girl want to grow up to be a queen?"

"Princess," Diana said.

"So, you got a promotion," Caine said. "Bug: find Taylor."

Taylor was the biggest gossip in Perdido Beach. He needed information and he needed it fast. It was the middle of the night and he didn't know who was where or what they were doing. All Quinn had said was that Sam was out of town, Albert had been murdered, and Edilio was sick and might die.

Albert being dead was a pity. Albert was a born organizer and Caine was sure he could have used him. On the other hand, a dead Edilio would be excellent news. Edilio had been Sam's right hand from the start.

He didn't even know when these supposedly giant insects or whatever they were would reach Perdido Beach. It could be at any moment.

He would need to defeat the invasion. That was clearly the most important thing. But obviously kids were exaggerating. Giant insects? They were probably six inches long. Although the idea of them hatching inside your body was enough to make him sick.

Caine stood on the seawall that ran along the beach. Stood on the brink, he thought, the dividing line between past and future. Not just his, but everyone's.

The town was quiet and dark. Here and there the pale, eerie glow of Sammy suns could be glimpsed through windows. The moon was behind the strange cloud that hung too low over the western part of town.

On the brink, with so many possibilities. He felt as if he might explode from the giddy joy of it. He was back. Back as their savior.

Quinn had inadvertently shown him the way forward. Quinn had wanted exactly what most people want: to be left alone. To not be afraid. To not have to struggle. To not have to ask hard questions or make hard decisions.

We just want to fish.

Caine turned slightly to stare thoughtfully at Diana. He had given her hope, and taken hope away, and now she stood still, almost as if in a trance, counting up her losses, realizing the totality of her defeat.

Resignation. Acceptance.

She could see now that he was in charge. When everyone saw that, and when everyone simply accepted that this was life now, that this was the only possible life, then he would have complete control.

He could feel the fear in Perdido Beach. They were leaderless. They were sick, weak, hungry, lonely. They cowered because of a microscopic flu bug and a very different, much larger bug.

When it was over, when he had won, he would say: *I have saved you. I alone had the power to save you. Sam failed. But I succeeded. And now settle down and do your work and pay no attention to your betters. Shhh: go to sleep, the king will make the hard decisions.*

Bug was back surprisingly soon, with Taylor.

"Where did you find her?" Caine asked.

Bug shrugged. "Where she lives. I remember it from the old days when I used to sneak into town."

"He means back when he used to sneak in and watch you get undressed," Diana said to Taylor.

"He's a little kid," Taylor said with a shrug. She looked Caine up and down, skeptical and appraising. Caine knew she did not fear him—not with her powers. She

couldn't be intimidated. So he would have to reach her some other way.

"Have a seat with me," Caine said, hopping down from the wall. "How have you been, Taylor?"

"Life's one big party," she said.

He laughed appreciatively at her joke. "Things must be pretty bad for Edilio to send for me, huh?"

"Things are always pretty bad," she said. "We're at a new level of bad. I saw those bugs."

Caine mustered all his sincerity. "I have to go and fight these creatures. But I don't know much about them."

Taylor told him what she knew. Caine felt some of his confidence drain away as she laid out the facts in gruesome detail and with complete conviction.

"Well, this should be fun," Diana said dryly. "I'm so glad we came back."

Caine gritted his teeth but ignored her. "Who can I count on to help me?" he asked Taylor.

Taylor laughed. "Not me, dude. I've already gotten as close as I'm going to get."

"What about Brianna?" Caine asked.

Taylor made a face. "You mean the Breeze? She zooms in and starts yelling to Edilio about how the bugs are coming toward us and they're as big as SUVs. And since then, I don't know where she's been. Probably looking for Jack. Or Dekka," she added with a leer.

Caine nodded and kept his face down so as not to betray his pleasure. Brianna was a problem: her speed was almost as effective as Taylor's power when it came to evading Caine. And she was absolutely loyal to Sam.

"What about Sam and Astrid?"

"Oh, no, there is no Sam and Astrid, not anymore." Taylor leaned closer and began to unload everything she knew. In ten minutes Caine had a very complete picture, far more detailed than what Quinn had grudgingly revealed.

Sam was definitely off on a harebrained search for water. Dekka and Jack, too. Astrid had left with Little Pete.

And Quinn had evidently not known the shocking but not unwelcome news: that Albert wasn't dead but recovering under Lana's care.

"So are the two guys who tried to kill him," Taylor said. "That'll be trouble."

"What two guys?"

"Human Crew losers: Turk and Lance. Maybe Orc, too. No one knows what happened with him except that he's on a bender."

Better and better. There was no one in town right now who could fight Caine. It was incredible. It was miraculous. It was fate.

Kings were supposedly chosen by God. Well, if there was a God in the FAYZ, it seemed like He'd made His choice.

But it wouldn't last. He would have to act quickly.

"Taylor, I need you for something very important," Caine said.

"I don't work for you," Taylor said huffily.

Caine nodded. "That's true, Taylor. You have amazing powers. And you're a smart girl. But no one ever seems to respect you for it. I didn't mean to sound bossy."

She shrugged, mollified. "No problem."

“I just think you’re a very valuable, useful girl. I think you should have a place with me. I respect you.”

“You’re just trying to get me to help you,” Taylor said.

Caine smiled broadly. “True, true. But I can pay much better than Sam and Albert. For example, you know about the island, right? And you can bounce to any place you’ve seen, right? Any place you know?”

She nodded, cautious. But Caine could see she was intrigued.

“If I arranged to have you rowed out to the island, you’d be able to get back and forth anytime. Easy as pie.”

She nodded slowly.

“What would you say to a hot bubble bath?”

“I’d say, ‘Hello, long time no soak.’ That’s what I’d say.”

“All kinds of food. Peanut butter. Chicken soup. Crackers. All kinds of movies in the system there. Popcorn to go with the movie.”

“You’re trying to bribe me.”

“I’m promising to pay you.”

She didn’t need to say it. He could see it in her eyes.

“I need to know where these creatures are, these bugs. How fast they’re moving. Which way they’re coming.”

“That’s all?”

“That’s all,” Caine said.

And suddenly Taylor was gone.

THIRTY-FIVE

1 HOUR, 55 MINUTES

SAM WATCHED HIS friends until they disappeared from view. Toto wasn't much of a swimmer, so they'd given him a seat cushion to float on and Jack hauled him along with one hand.

Jack wasn't much of a swimmer, either, but you didn't have to be elegant when you had ten times normal strength.

Sam fired up the engine. It roared as he gunned it loudly. Drake would have to be deaf not to hear it.

Then he threw it into gear and went tearing parallel to the shore.

The moonlight was faint, but it was enough to reveal the sudden rush of movement by the creatures on shore. They were falling for it.

Sam quickly lashed the wheel. He dove off the starboard side, jumping clear of the screws that blew past, churning water into foam.

He looked again to see that the bugs were in motion. They were a silvery swarm heading away. He did not see Drake.

Sam swam after the others. He'd stayed with the boat a bit longer than he'd planned and now he was a half mile from the dock. He had a long swim ahead of him.

But water was Sam's natural element. He'd surfed since he was a toddler, and powering through placid lake water was nothing compared to fighting the surf.

The cold water felt good. Clean. He switched from freestyle to backstroke for a while, gazing up at the night sky, but powering along as fast as he could all the while. If he were back in the world, he'd be looking to join the high school swim team. His butterfly stroke was weak, but his freestyle was as good as anyone's, and his backstroke even better.

What would it be like to be worrying about improving his butterfly or breaststroke instead of worrying that his friend was being eaten alive from the inside?

What was he going to do next? They trusted him, Dekka and Jack. They expected him to always have a plan. But beyond getting away from Drake and his bug army, he didn't have a plan.

Drake would go after Perdido Beach next. He would send those creatures rampaging through town killing everyone.

Then he would take Astrid and . . .

Don't get emotional, Sam warned himself. Just figure out how to win.

He heard clumsy splashing ahead. He rolled over smoothly into a crawl and powered hard and fast.

"Shhh," he hissed as soon as he was up with them. "You people make more noise than a bunch of littles in the kiddie pool."

The four of them closed the distance to the dock. Sam motioned for Jack, Dekka, and Toto to slip silently beneath it. Toto had lost his grip on his cushion and it floated away. Jack banged his head on the bottom of the dock and cursed under his breath.

Sam palmed the dock and hoisted himself up, drenched.

"Hi, Sam."

Brittney stood not twenty feet away.

He spotted three of the creatures over by the marina parking lot. They were waiting. Like a well-trained pack of attack dogs.

He'd been outwitted. Outplayed.

"Hi, Brittney," Sam said, standing there, dripping.

"I asked you so many times to release me, Sam," she said. Her voice was cold and far away. Not angry, not scared. Just maybe a little sad.

"I know, Brittney. But I'm not a cold-blooded killer," Sam said.

Brittney nodded. "No, you're a good person." She said it without sarcasm.

"I try to be. Like you, Brittney. I know you're a good person."

He glanced at the creatures. They hadn't moved, but they were alert. They could be on him in ten seconds.

"He hates you," Brittney said.

"Drake?" Sam laughed. "He hates everyone. Hate is all he's got."

"Not Drake. Him. God."

Sam blinked. What was he supposed to say to that? "I thought God loved everyone."

"I used to believe that, too," Brittney said. "But then I met Him."

"Did you?" She had lost whatever grip on reality she'd had. He couldn't blame her. What Brittney had endured would leave anyone mental.

"He's not in the sky, you know," Brittney said in a normal, conversational tone. "He's not up in Heaven somewhere."

"I didn't realize that."

"He's in the earth, Sam. He lives in a dark, dark place."

Sam's heart missed a beat. He felt cold. "You met God in a dark place?"

She showed her twisted, damaged braces in a surprising, rapturous smile. "He explained His great plan."

"Yeah?"

"His time is coming. All of this . . ." She swept her arm wide. "It's all like, like . . . like an egg, Sam. He has to be born from this egg."

"He's a chicken?"

"Don't mock, Sam," Brittney chided. "He waits to be born. But He needs Nemesis to join Him, Sam, and you . . . you won't let that happen."

"Nemesis? What's a nemesis?"

Brittney had a crafty look as she said, "Oh, Sam. You know who Nemesis is. He has the power to complete God's plan." She laced her fingers together, almost awestruck by the act, like it was sacrament. "They must be joined, the Darkness and Nemesis. Together they will have all power, and then, Sam, it all ends, you know. Then the eggshell cracks and He is born."

"That sounds . . ." He resisted the urge to say "crazy." "It sounds interesting. But I don't think the gaiaphage is God. I think he's evil."

"Of course he's evil," Brittney enthused. "Of course! Evil, good, there's no difference, don't you see that? They're the same thing. Like me and Drake. Yin and yang, Sam. Two in one, a duality, a . . ."

She faltered a little, like a child trying to explain something she didn't quite understand. She frowned.

“He lied to you, Brittney. The gaiaphage is not God. He reaches into people’s minds and makes them do terrible things.”

“He warned me you would say that,” Brittney said. “My Lord and Nemesis must be joined. And all of you have to die. You’re all like a disease. Like a virus. A plague that must be wiped out so that He can unite with Nemesis and be born.”

Sam was getting tired of the talk. He’d never cared much for religion one way or the other, and some fantasy religion made up by a dead girl to justify the gaiaphage’s lies was even less interesting than Astrid’s religious excuses for not having sex. He was impatient to find out what Brittney meant to do. If there was to be a fight, then let there be a fight.

“And then what, Brittney? Did the gaiaphage explain that to you?”

“Then all the world will be remade. That’s His purpose, you know.”

“No, I didn’t know. I guess I missed that part. I was still back at the part where he has to kill everyone.”

“He was forged by a race of gods in the far reaches of space to remake the world, to create it anew.”

“Yeah, well, that sounds just a tiny bit insane, Brittney.”

She smiled. “It’s all insane, Sam. All of it. But He will make it all over again. Once He is born anew.”

Sam felt tired. He wished Astrid were here, maybe she could find out more. Maybe she could talk Brittney out of her lunatic delusion. But he wasn’t Astrid.

“I’ll tell you what,” Sam said. “If your friend in the mine shaft wants me, he can bring it on. Because he’s tried. And I’m still here.”

“Not for long,” Brittney said. “Do you think these creatures just happened on their own? The Lord has molded them, created them to be indestructible, so that you could not stop them, Sam.”

“I’m sorry for what’s happened to you, Brittney,” Sam said. “You’ve been abused about as much as any person ever has been. But I’m still going to have to stop you.” He raised his hands, palms out. “Sorry.”

Twin beams of green fire hit Brittney in the chest. They burned a hole through her.

The bugs leaped, raced to cover the few feet between them and the dock.

“Jack! Dekka!” Sam yelled.

Jack punched straight up through the planks of the deck, but he’d picked a bad spot. He erupted between Brittney and Sam, blocking Sam’s fire.

Brittney screamed, “Kill them!”

Jack tripped, which moved him out of the line of fire. Sam aimed and hit Brittney again but now she was running away. Her back melted, her spine exposed then burned through, and still she ran.

Sam swung his beams at the nearest of the onrushing bugs. Light beams hit the huge creature and bounced away to slice a sailboat’s mast neatly in half. The stump was a torch.

Jack hauled Dekka up from the water and she struck even before she could stand. Gravity beneath the nearest creature ceased. The bug went airborne and its momentum carried it just over Sam’s ducked head. It shot through Dekka’s field and landed half in the water, with its rear portion on the dock.

“Push it!”

Jack slammed into the bug's rear end and it splashed into the water.

Jack spun, ran at the second giant roach. He ripped a plank from the dock and rammed it with superhuman strength into the gnashing mouthparts.

The board splintered. The creature didn't miss a step.

Jack fell on his back and the monster was on him in a flash.

"Jack!" Dekka cried.

Jack, flat on his back, kicked up with such force that the wood beneath him snapped.

The third creature swarmed over the first. Its mandibles swept Dekka, missed cutting her in half, but knocked her twenty feet away into the water.

Sam saw in a split second of clarity what he would have to do. He didn't like it.

The bug rushed at Sam.

The mouth blades sliced.

Sam timed his leap, shouted a desperate curse, and dove straight into the bug's gaping mouth.

"The days of uncertainty are over!"

Caine stood at the top of the steps to town hall. Below him the sick lay coughing and shivering. Edilio, helpless, as weak as a newborn kitten, shivering so hard he looked like he was having a seizure.

Beyond the sick were dozens of kids, many wet from having come through the rain in the west. Many still wiping the sleep from their eyes. Some of the youngest were carrying their blankies.

Diana stood apart, blank, downcast. Penny had been given a chair. Lana leaned against a tree in the plaza, her hand resting on her pistol, with Sanjit nervous beside her.

Caine saw it all. Every upturned, moonlit face. He saw the fear and the anticipation. He reveled in it. Gloried in it.

"First, I say this," Caine said. "Taylor, who has joined me, reports that the creatures are almost here. They are nearing the highway and will reach town in minutes. When they do they will hunt down, kill, and eat . . . every living person."

"We can fight!" someone yelled. "We beat the coyotes. And we beat you, too, Caine!"

"How will you fight without Sam?" Caine demanded. "Is he here? No! Sam can't stop these creatures. He tried, and he failed, and now he has run away!"

He waited for someone to speak up in defense of Sam. But not a word.

Gutless, faithless weaklings, Caine thought. He was almost sorry for Sam. How many times had Sam put himself in harm's way for these ingrates?

"He saved himself," Caine went on, "for a while, at least, by running away with Astrid and Dekka. He saved his friends, but abandoned poor, sick Edilio there. And all of you."

Stony silence.

"That's why Quinn—Quinn, who works night and day to feed you all—came to get me, to beg me to help."

"What are you going to do?" someone shouted.

"What am I going to do?" Caine asked, relishing the moment. "I'm not going to

run away, that's the first thing." He stabbed a finger in the air and shouted, "When the ultimate danger came, Sam ran. And I came back. I was safe and warm and well-fed on my island. I had my beautiful queen, Diana. I had my friends, Penny and Bug. It was a very good life."

He moved to Diana and gave her a little kiss. She let him, no more.

"A very good life. But when I heard what was happening here, what terrible dangers threatened to destroy you, I could not sit there eating delicious food and watching movies while swathed in clean sheets."

He watched those words take effect. Food? Movies? Clean anything? They were magical concepts to these desperate, starved, and, until recently, parched kids.

And the subtle implication that he had been sleeping with Diana worked in a way, too, making older boys jealous, and some girls as well.

Caine smiled inwardly. It was working. He had them. The sheep.

"I will save you," he said humbly, eyes down. "But not just from this terrible threat. No. Isn't it time we all had a better life? Haven't we suffered enough?"

A murmur of agreement.

"You've suffered from hunger, from thirst, from violence. Well . . ." He waited, waited for the moment to build. He was deliberately stretching time, knowing they were picturing the insect horde advancing on the town. At last he said, "Well, that's enough suffering."

"What about Drake?" someone shouted.

"He's your friend," another voice accused.

"No," Caine snapped. "I was the one who destroyed him. Or had. Until Sam and his followers allowed Drake to return."

He paused, watching the reaction, hearing the murmurs of agreement. He sent Diana a secret droll look. Nothing worked better than a really big lie.

"Listen to me. You need a true leader. But this thing where they force you to elect someone, like it's some popularity contest, like we're picking a prom queen or whatever, that has to stop. Edilio is a good kid. But he's just a kid, just Sam's loyal dog. No offense." He raised a hand indicating that he may have chosen his words carelessly. But kids were already nodding. Yes, Edilio was just like Sam's dog. Brave, yes, and decent, yes. But he hadn't saved them.

"And Sam?" Caine said, raising his voice. "Sam was a brave leader once, but he's burned out and you all know it. His heart was never in it. Now at last he's run away. Sam is not what the FAYZ needs. He's not a king."

He turned away while that word sank in. He could hear a voice asking, "Did he say a king?" And he distinctly heard a sardonic laugh from Lana.

Caine raised his hands high. "We need a true leader, not someone who has to answer to a town council. Come on, folks, Howard is a member of the council!"

That earned a knowing laugh.

"So Sam's faithful dog Edilio reports to a known crook like Howard." He allowed his smile to fade. It was time to finish it. "You need a leader who will actually lead. A leader to save your lives today and give you better lives from now on."

Caine spotted Turk and Lance waiting, smirking.

Caine had sent Taylor for them. He had told them he could use a couple of tough kids like them. He'd promised them a trip to the island.

“Turk. Lance. Come on up here,” Caine said.

They climbed up the stairs to stand beside him, pale and shaken, but sure they were about to be handed new and important positions.

“These two admitted to me that they shot Albert while robbing him.”

That started the crowd muttering angrily, and even some of the sicker kids looked up bleakly. Albert might not have been popular, but he was necessary.

Lance and Turk exchanged a nervous, uncertain look.

“You’ll be relieved to know that Lana has been able to save Albert’s life,” Caine said. “But what are we to do with two would-be murderers like these?”

Turk was looking even more pale. This wasn’t going the way they had expected. Lance was edging away, getting ready to run.

Barely moving, and with a slight smile, Caine raised a hand and Lance found himself pushing weakly against an invisible barrier.

“Shall we convene a council meeting? Hold a trial? Waste everyone’s time while minute by minute the threat gets nearer and nearer? We know what should be done. Justice! Quick and sure and without a lot of meaningless delay.”

“Hey!” Lance cried. “That’s not what you—”

“He says a lot of things,” Diana muttered.

With a broad, dramatic sweep of his hand Caine sent Lance hurtling through the air. Lance flew like he’d been launched from a catapult. Up into the night sky with every eye following. A thin scream floated down.

There was something comical about it and Caine could not keep from smiling.

The scream changed in pitch as Lance tumbled down and smashed into the ground at the far end of the plaza.

“Justice!” Caine cried. “Not later, right now. Justice and protection and a better life for everyone!”

Turk lost control of himself. “No, no, no, Caine, no, no.”

“But not justice without mercy,” Caine said. “Lance paid the price in his way. Now Turk will pay by serving me. Isn’t that right, Turk?”

He looked at Turk and in a low voice said, “Bow down.”

Turk fell to his knees without any further urging.

“It’s a sign of respect,” Caine said. “Not for me. It’s not about me. It’s about you, all of you. You’re the ones who need a ruler. Isn’t that true? After so much suffering, don’t you need one person to take charge? Well,” Caine said, “that’s what I’m doing. And when you bow down you’re just showing respect. Like Turk here.”

In the mob of kids maybe half a dozen knelt. A few more executed awkward head bobs, unsure of themselves. Most did nothing.

Good enough, Caine thought. For now.

“The creatures are coming,” Caine said in a low voice. “In all the FAYZ, who can defeat these creatures?”

He waited, as if he really was expecting an answer.

“Who can defeat them?” he repeated. “Me. Only me.”

He shook his head as if marveling at something awesome. “It is as if God himself chose me. And if I win, if I save your lives, God’s will shall be very clear.”

THIRTY-SIX

1 HOUR, 45 MINUTES

SAM LEAPED INTO the open mouth of the creature.

Head and shoulders made it in. The bug's throat spasmed, like wet rubber, crushing the air from his lungs.

His eyes were tightly closed, but he could not close his nostrils and nearly vomited from a wave of stench like rotten meat, seaweed, and ammonia.

He grabbed with his hands, trying to get something to grip, had to pull his legs in before the mouthparts sliced, had to right now, right now, quick!

Something sharp against his calves. But the bug was just reacting, choking, not yet trying to chop him apart.

He yanked his legs in. All the way inside the wet, stinking, pulsating throat.

Not fast enough: the mouthparts clipped his right heel. He didn't notice the pain, too awful, stifling, squashed, skin burning, blackness, no air.

He pushed his hands out and fired.

He couldn't see the light, his eyes were shut tight. But he could feel the shudder that passed through the bug's body.

He fired and moved his hands against the slimy insides, firing and firing, feeling his skin burn from whatever ammonia chemical was inside the creature, but then, far worse from the heat of his own killing light.

He had to stop or else he would cook himself.

He could feel the bug moving, like being in a car with square wheels, a violent shaking. The bug raced in mad panic as its insides bled and burned.

But no good, not enough, and in seconds he would die from lack of oxygen.

Ignore the pain: fire!

He laced his fingers together blindly, turning the twin beams into one. He pushed against the seizing guts of the creature and inscribed what felt like a circle.

Then silently screaming from the heat, the starvation of his lungs, the violent spasms of his own body rebelling, he kicked and kicked, pulled himself into a tight ball and kicked where he had burned, with all his fading strength.

Air!

He breathed and vomited almost at the same time. He pried open one eye. Jack stood above him.

"Gaaahh!" Jack said, disgusted by the sight of Sam cocooned in a steaming mess of bug guts.

Jack grabbed his hand and yanked him up and out with such force that Sam flew through the air. Sam plunged gratefully into the water.

He surfaced, sucked in air, and dove under again. He washed the reek from his body and quieted the burns. But it had broken the skin. The creature had cut him. His heel hurt, but far worse was the terrible fear that he was destined for Hunter's fate.

When he came up again he could see that the bug that had gone into the water was struggling, not far away, trying to get back to shore.

The dead one—the one Sam had killed from the inside—lay completely still. It

almost seemed to Sam that it had a surprised look on its face. Or what passed for a face. Its creepy blue eyes glazed over.

One bug dead, one trying to get ashore, and the third still very dangerous.

“Jack!” Sam shouted. “The mast! On that boat!”

Jack frowned in confusion, then he nodded. He leaped onto a nearby sailboat, grabbed the aluminum mast, planted his feet, and, with a Herculean effort and a sound like a slow-motion chainsaw, ripped the mast out.

Dekka raised her hands and the rushing bug motored its legs helplessly in the air. It would only hold for a few seconds, but that’s all Jack needed.

“Okay, Dekka, drop him!” Jack cried.

Dekka dropped the creature.

Jack lifted the mast—a thirty-foot-long spear—over his head and stabbed it straight at the bug’s mouth.

The first thrust missed but gouged out one of the bug’s blue eyes.

Jack backed up to the end of the dock and ran at the creature. “Yaaaahhhh!”

He slammed the mast into its mouth and pushed madly, frantically, feet snapping deck planks, until the top of the mast suddenly burst through the creature’s side in a squishy explosion of guts and goo.

Sam started to push himself back up onto the dock but his hands were blistered. Jack had to heft him up by his armpits.

“Where’s Brittney?” Sam demanded.

Dekka shook her head.

“She ran away,” Toto said. “But she seemed to be changing. One arm was . . .” He didn’t seem to have words for it.

“Like a snake. A whip hand,” Dekka supplied.

“Yes,” Toto said. Then, “I’m ready to go back home now.”

“I can barely walk,” Sam said. He had to grit his teeth to keep from crying out in pain. The skin of his heel was gone, a chunk sliced out of it. He was bleeding all over the dock.

Sam slipped off his wet shirt and wrapped it awkwardly around his foot, making a very poor bandage.

“Let’s get out of here while we can. Drake will be back, with the rest of his army, and then we’re bug food for sure.”

Sam started hobbling but Jack grabbed him and hefted him up onto his shoulders. It was ludicrous: Sam was a head taller and quite a bit broader than Jack. But for Jack it was as easy as carrying a baby.

“You rocked, Jack,” Sam said.

Dekka slapped Jack on the back. “Got that right.”

Jack beamed although he tried not to show it. Then his face went green and he set Sam down and vomited onto a bush.

“Sorry,” he said. “I guess it made me sick.”

“Nerves, dude,” Sam said. “Been there. Let’s get out of here. Back the way we came. Drake will expect us to take the most direct route back to town and if he catches us out in the open we’re done for.”

“What happens when he gets to town with those creatures?” Dekka asked.

“Edilio’s got Orc—I hope. Plus Brianna. Taylor. He’s got his soldiers, although I

doubt guns will work too well unless they can shoot through the mouths.” Sam shook his head.

His imagination went to Astrid. Too many awful pictures of what could happen to her crowded his head.

Could they reach town quickly enough to help in the fight? Maybe with him and Jack and Dekka joining the others they could stop Drake. Maybe.

Did Edilio even guess what was coming his way? Was he preparing? Had he found a way? Sam had not. Again and again he tried to find the way to win. Tried to imagine the scenario that would defeat this enemy.

Again and again he came back to the realization that there were only two people with the power to stop the creatures.

One: Caine. And Caine was far off on the island.

The other: Little Pete. He was far off on a different sort of island inside his own damaged mind.

Caine and Little Pete.

“Listen, guys,” Sam said, “I don’t see a winning move here. Not from me, anyway. It’s going to be on Edilio and the people back in town. I don’t even know if they know what’s coming. So we have to warn them.”

“How?” Dekka asked.

“Jack.”

Jack had been leaning forward. He stood back suddenly.

“Jack can move faster without us. With his strength comes a certain amount of speed. And he won’t tire as fast as we will. Hills don’t bother him, so he can go right over the hills, a straight line.”

“Yeah,” Dekka admitted. “That makes sense. And don’t get me wrong, Jack’s become a hero and all. But is that enough? I’ve done the math, same as you have. Orc and Jack and Brianna?”

“There are two who could do it,” Sam said. “Caine. He might be able to do it.”

Dekka snarled. “Caine?”

“Either him or Little Pete,” Sam said.

“Little Pete?” Jack looked puzzled.

Sam sighed. “Little Pete. He’s not exactly just Astrid’s autistic brother.” He explained briefly while Toto added a chorus of “Sam believes that’s true” remarks.

“How do we get Little Pete to do anything?” Dekka asked.

“The last time Little Pete felt mortal danger he made the FAYZ,” Sam said. “He needs to be in mortal danger again.”

Jack and Dekka exchanged a wary look, each wondering what the other had known or guessed about Little Pete.

“Little Pete?” Jack asked. “That little kid has that kind of power?”

“Yes,” Sam said simply. “Next to Pete, me, Caine, all of us, we’re like . . . like popguns compared to a cannon. We don’t even know what the limits of his powers are,” Sam said. “What we do know is we can’t communicate with him very well. We can’t even guess what he’s thinking.”

“Little Pete,” Dekka muttered and shook her head. “I knew he was important, I got that a long time ago. But he can do that? He has that kind of power?” She pondered for a moment, nodded, and said, “I see why you kept it secret. It’s like having a nuclear

weapon in the hands of, well, a little autistic kid.”

Sam stood up, winced as he rested his weight on his hurt heel. He put his hand on Jack’s shoulder. “Tell Edilio to get Caine, if they can do it in time. If not, Jack, you go and get Little Pete.”

“And do what with Little Pete?” Jack asked, obviously horrified at the entire idea and still getting his head around the fact that the little boy was the most powerful being in their universe.

Sam knew the answer. He knew what might be the only winning move. He had told Brittney he wasn’t a cold-blooded killer. He wasn’t. And this wasn’t even his job anymore, was it?

And yet . . . And yet he could see a possible solution.

“You pick him up, Jack. Carry him to the closest one of those bugs you can find.”

“Yeah?” Jack asked in a quavering voice.

“Toss him to the bug,” Sam said.

Drake’s whip was curled around the mandible of the largest of the creatures, now racing toward the south, away from the lake. He had to lean almost flat forward to stay on, legs spread behind him.

Where was Sam Temple? They should have caught him by now if he had come this way.

Bring me Nemesis.

The voice in Drake’s head was louder, more insistent than it had ever been.

With his free hand he pounded the side of his head, trying to knock it away, trying to silence that insistent demand.

Bring him to me.

In his mind’s eye he saw Coates, his old school, his former home. The grim, Gothic main building, the gloomy vale around it, the iron gate. The picture was his own memory but it was the Darkness demanding he look at it, see it, and understand.

Nemesis was there. There!

Bring him!

But Drake had other needs. His overlord might need this Nemesis, whatever that was, but he, Drake, had an equally powerful need: to kill Sam Temple.

Sam Temple had cost him his arm. He had destroyed his old life, left him trapped in this disgusting union with Brittney Pig.

Sam, who had kept him caged like an animal.

And now Sam had escaped death again. Beaten Drake again. And he was nowhere in sight, gone!

“Sam!” Drake howled in frustration. “Sam!”

The bug moved quickly and the wind snatched Drake’s cry away, but he howled at the night again. “Sam! I’m coming to kill you!”

No answer. And no sight of Sam or the others. Surely they would be rushing back to Perdido Beach, and yet they were nowhere in view and with each passing second Drake could be moving farther from them.

Bring me Nemesis!

No. Nemesis could wait. Drake served the Darkness but he was not just some errand boy. He had his own needs.

If he couldn't catch Sam out here in the open, then he would beat him to Perdido Beach. He would be waiting when Sam got there. Waiting with whip wrapped around Astrid.

His mind flooded with pictures, lovely pictures of Sam helpless under his whip. And yet he would not kill Sam Temple, no, not until Sam had watched him reduce Astrid to a hideous skinless monster.

The vision was so clear in his head, so wonderful, it filled him with light and joy and a pleasure he could not even describe.

Nemesis!

"I'll get your Nemesis," Drake muttered. "But first . . ."

Drake's army rushed at breakneck speed away from the lake, scampering up the long slope that led from the lake to the dry lands beyond.

He felt a wave of fury directed at him. A wave of rage that shook him to his core. The dark tendril was wrapped around his brain, filling his thoughts, demanding, threatening. *Nemesis!*

"No!" Drake shouted.

The reaction was immediate. The swarm stopped dead in its tracks.

"They're my army. My army!" Drake bellowed. His own hatreds were too strong to be denied. And he might even have defied the gaiaphage. But as Drake stood agonizing, hatred contending with fear, he lost the ability to make the decision.

The choice of whether to pursue Nemesis or terrorize Perdido Beach would be Brittney's to make.

THIRTY-SEVEN

1 HOUR, 39 MINUTES

SAM HOBbled ALONG more quickly than he had hoped. He leaned on Toto and benefited as well from Dekka walking behind him and lessening gravity beneath them.

He felt low. All the lower because he'd actually managed just a little bit of hope earlier. He'd actually allowed himself to believe that things might be better now that they'd found the lake and the train.

But this was the **FAYZ**. And just because they were due for some good news didn't mean any was coming. In the space of a very few hours he had gone from the heights of optimism to utter despair.

Over and over again in his mind he played out the likely scenarios. Edilio would have his guys, plus Brianna, Taylor, hopefully Orc. If Jack reached town in time he would fight as well; Jack had really stepped up.

But it wasn't enough. Even if he and Dekka were there, it might not be enough. So instead of saving the town and showing them salvation in the form of water, noodles, and Nutella, Sam knew he would arrive back at a town devastated.

Some were sure to survive. Surely, some.

Maybe Little Pete would save Astrid. He had the power. But was he aware? Did any of this penetrate to wherever his mind was?

"Do you think he'll do it?" Dekka asked. "Jack, I mean."

"No," Sam said.

"No," Dekka agreed.

"True," Toto said, although whether he was agreeing with them or just automatically certifying that they believed what they were saying, Sam could not say.

"He's not that guy," Sam said. "He's not ruthless. Anyway, what are the odds he could even get to town and find Little Pete? And then, who knows if even that would shock Pete into doing anything."

"You would do it, Sam."

"Yeah. I would do it," Sam said.

"He would," Toto agreed.

"It's your gift, Sam," Dekka said. "It has been right from the start."

"Ruthlessness?"

"I guess that doesn't sound so good," Dekka said wearily. "But someone has to do it. We each contribute what we have."

Sam winced as his heel brushed a stone. "Probably wouldn't work anyway. The Pete thing, I mean."

"The train," Dekka said. "Those missiles."

"I thought about that," Sam said. "But how would we get them to town? How would we even figure out how to use them?"

Sam stopped limping.

Dekka stopped, too, after a few steps. Toto kept walking, oblivious.

"Dekka?"

"Yeah?"

“How high does your power go? I mean, you cancel gravity, right? So things float upward.”

“Yeah. So?”

“I’ve seen you levitate yourself. I mean, you cancel gravity right beneath you and you float upward, right? Well, how high can you go?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “If I’m projecting it, you know, like I want to make it happen somewhere else, I can only reach maybe fifty feet or so. Maybe a little more.”

“Okay, but that’s you hitting it at kind of an angle, right? I mean, you’re sort of shooting across gravity because gravity goes straight down.”

Dekka looked at him strangely. She spread her hands by her side. Immediately she began to rise, along with dirt and rock, a pillar of it.

Sam watched as she rose, staying well back from the swirl of debris.

In the dark he quickly lost sight of her.

“Dekka!” He tilted his head back, trying to make her out against the background of black velvet and pinpoint lights.

“Where is Dekka?” Toto asked.

“Up there.”

“That is true,” Toto said.

“Yeah. Watch where you step, unless you want to go floating, too.”

It seemed like a long time before Dekka finally appeared amid falling gravel. She floated easily down, regained her footing, and said, “Okay, more than fifty feet, that’s for sure. I don’t know how far I went, but a long way. Maybe you’re right. Maybe it works better when I’m canceling gravity straight down. But I can only fly straight up. So if you’re thinking I can go all airborne and fly to town, that’s not happening.”

“I’m thinking,” Sam said, “that the FAYZ is a big bubble. Like a . . . what are those things with water inside and you shake them up with snow and—”

“A snow globe,” Toto supplied.

“Like a snow globe. And if you have a bubble inside that snow globe, what does it do? It rises to the top, right?”

“The top of this bubble is probably directly over the power plant,” Dekka said. “I mean, if the FAYZ is a perfect sphere.”

“Okay, tell me if this makes sense.” Sam frowned, trying to work it through as he talked. “The train is near the northern wall of the FAYZ. So if you were standing there and you canceled gravity . . .”

“You’d go scraping along the wall—very painfully—until you reached the top. Like a bubble rising to the top of a snow globe.”

“There are cars at the power plant. I mean, ones that have been used more recently, within the last month, cars Edilio drove there. So the batteries should still work. A lot have had their gas drained, but we wouldn’t need much.” He was thinking out loud. Not even paying attention to Toto’s repeated “He believes it, it’s true, Spidey” remarks.

“I can’t beat the bugs,” Sam said. “My power doesn’t work on them. Not well enough, anyway. But they can be crushed. And I think maybe they can be blown up.”

“Are you talking about those missile launchers in the train?” Dekka asked.

“I’m talking about exactly that,” Sam said. “You raise that container of missiles.”

You fly it to the top of the dome. You bring it down by the power plant. We find a vehicle with a gallon of gas and we go tearing for Perdido Beach.” He shrugged. “Then we see how these bugs like the M3-MAAWS, Multi-role Anti-Armor Anti-Personnel Weapons System.”

Caine walked the few blocks from the town hall to the highway alone. A gunslinger out of some old cowboy movie.

Kids followed him, but at a safe distance. A dozen of them crowded just inside the busted-out plate glass window of an insurance company. A couple more found seats in parked cars.

Good, let them watch as I save their butts, Caine thought.

But now, alone, standing in the middle of the highway astride the old divider line, he was far from confident. How many of the creatures would come? How large were they? How powerful?

Were they already watching him, out there in the dark?

And what about Drake? Would there be a chance for him to win Drake over? Drake could still be a very useful number two guy. Unless he was determined to be number one.

Fighting these superbugs plus Drake? Suddenly the island seemed very, very inviting.

He could walk away right now. Diana and him, just the two of them, alone on the island. Stick the townies with Penny and Bug. Just him and Diana. Food, luxury, sex. Wasn't that infinitely better than this battle?

An old suspicion shadowed his thoughts: was he being played? The Darkness had used him before. Was this the gaiaphage's will reaching into his mind again?

He didn't feel it. He hadn't felt the Darkness at all while on the island. Even before that, from the point where Caine had defied the Darkness, the gaiaphage had left him alone.

No. This was his own decision. But why? Why give up the island? For what? To be torn apart by monsters hatched in human bodies? Even if he survived, what would he face? Artichokes and fish, resentment, probably a fight with Sam, and Diana's sullen withdrawal.

“King Caine! Yeah!”

He rounded quickly, angry, assuming it was a taunt. A boy in the insurance company raised a fist and yelled, “Woooooh!”

Caine nodded in his direction.

Sheep. So long as they had a shepherd to ward off the wolves, they were happy. Spineless, indifferent, weak, stupid: it was hard not to have complete contempt for them.

Of course, if he failed, they'd turn on him in a heartbeat.

Then again, if he failed, they'd be busy running for their lives.

A sudden flash of silver down the highway.

Caine peered into the dark. No light, of course, not even a Sammy sun up here by the main road. Just a little moonlight and a little starlight and a whole lot of dark.

But yes, something. Something moving.

And a sound. *Clickety-clackety*, very fast on concrete.

He saw flashing steel mouthparts, like moonlit machetes.

He couldn't tell how many of the massive creatures there were. Just that there were at least half a dozen, each the size of a city bus and close enough now that he could see red eyes glaring malignantly.

He pointed at the spectators lounging in a parked car. "Get out of that car!"

The two boys shrugged as if they couldn't see why they should obey. Then, with a popping of slackening springs and the groan of metal, the car just beside them floated up off the ground.

They got the idea. They bailed out fast.

Caine raised the car up and up. It was hard to see color in this light but it looked like it might be blue. A small, blue SUV.

"Let's hope this works," Caine breathed.

He drew back his hand and hurled the car through the air. It whooshed over his head. It tumbled through the air toward the closest of the creatures.

It fell short, smashed into the pavement with a crunch of metal and shattering glass, then tumbled into the bug's mandibles.

Caine had no time to see what effect it had because a second bug scampered without pause up and over the SUV. One of the bug's pointed legs pierced the moonroof.

"I got plenty of cars," Caine said.

He raised the station wagon the boys had been sitting in and hurled it in a quick, sidearm throw. The car turned once in the air and hit the leading bug at almost ground level.

"Yeah, suck on that!" Caine yelled. Not exactly a kingly thing to say, but battle first, propaganda later.

Caine couldn't see the creature's face, but he could see that its legs were kicking randomly, out of any rhythm.

"Scratch one." This was going to be easier than he'd expected.

But just as he was congratulating himself a solid wall of creatures pushed itself up and over the first two. And worse, there were half a dozen of the creatures rushing up the highway from behind him.

They had circled around!

He had picked the wrong place for this fight. It was suddenly blindingly clear. The last thing he should do is fight on open ground where they could come at him from every direction like this.

Caine's heart thudded, his jaw clenched until his teeth cracked. He'd assumed the tales about the creatures were exaggerated. No. No. Not exaggerated.

Caine broke and ran. He raced at right angles to the two approaching forces. He leaped a ditch, landed hard, scrambled up and ran flat out across the service road, and flew past the shocked and confused crowd in the insurance company yelling, "Run, you idiots!"

Two of the creatures were scampering to cut him off. He snatched up a delivery van as he passed it and hurled it quickly—so quickly it flew low and almost hit him in the head as it blew past.

The crowd in the insurance company panicked. They poured from the narrow door, jamming one another, cursing and screaming.

A boy slipped, caught himself, but the delay was fatal. A bug speared him with a leg and swept him into gnashing, slashing mouthparts.

“Oh, no, no, nooooo!” the kid screamed. The sound died suddenly, replaced by a noise like a garbage disposal chewing up chicken bones.

Caine ran down San Pablo with the kids pelting behind him and the swarm was forced to funnel into this more narrow space.

Things had gone from bad to desperate far faster than Caine could have imagined.

A second kid was caught by what looked like a black frog tongue firing from a bug’s mouth. She screamed as the bug reeled her in.

Caine stopped in the middle of the street. Shaking all over. Jaw clenched. He couldn’t outrun them and this was as good as any place: middle of the block so he couldn’t be attacked from the sides, at least.

The insurance company crowd splintered, kids rushing in every direction, all of them screaming, some beating helplessly against locked doors and crying to be let in. Others scrambled over fences into backyards.

Caine raised a parked car and hurled it, then another, another, three cars in rapid succession. It was like a pileup on a freeway, crashing, smashing, glass spraying, side mirrors popping off, rims rolling down the sidewalk.

His furious counterattack may have stopped or even killed some of the bugs—he couldn’t be sure in the darkness—but the swarm never hesitated. Up and over they rolled, like a wave.

Shaking, he stood his ground and raised trembling hands. If he couldn’t smash them maybe he could just hold them back.

The nearest bug slammed into an invisible wall of telekinetic power. Its legs motored madly, tearing gouges in the blacktop, kicking the smashed cars, but unable to advance.

“Yeah, try that!” Caine yelled.

A second, a third, a fourth creature, all pressed against the barrier, all relentlessly scrambling, pushing, determined. And all the while, Caine stood alone in the middle of the street.

But for how long? he wondered. The bugs didn’t seem to be tiring. In fact they were scabbling over one another in a mad tangle of legs and massive silvery carapaces and scythe-mandibles and always the gnashing mouths and glowing ruby eyes.

He faltered, seeing those eyes, and suddenly the wall of bugs surged a foot closer.

He redoubled his focus. But he was feeling something he’d never felt before when using his power: a physical push back, as if he was holding them back with his muscles as well as his telekinetic ability.

Without thinking, he had set his feet in a strong stance, and he could feel the weight on his calves and thighs, even more on his arms. He wasn’t just projecting power as he always had, he was pushing back, at the limit of his powers, being pressed by thousands of pounds of thrust from dozens and dozens of stabbing legs.

They were just twenty feet away. Piling high against the invisible barrier. With a terrible shock he realized they were climbing over one another in a deliberate effort to get over the top of the invisible wall of energy.

Then, a far worse shock: some of the creatures had come around Golding Street

and were rushing him from behind.

He switched his pose, one hand for the mass of bugs, one for the onrushing attack. But it would not do. He couldn't hold them.

"Should have stayed on the island," he told himself. He had gambled and lost.

The two invisible walls were closing in. He was holding back tons of pushing, questing monsters and he couldn't do it, could not. He just did not have the power. And once he broke, they would be on him before he could blink.

"Hey! Jerkwad!"

He glanced toward the sound. Standing, arms akimbo, atop the flat roof of a two-story apartment building, was Brianna.

"Come to gloat?" he managed.

"See the front door of that house?"

"What?"

"That's where we're going."

"No time!"

"No time," Brianna mocked. "Please. Just go limp."

"Go limp?"

"Yeah: limp. And oh, by the way: it's going to hurt."

He never saw her move but he felt the linebacker impact as she hit him at blazing speed.

Caine went flying. His shirt was ripped from his back. He spun crazily and fell hard onto the lawn. The bug armies crashed together like two waves behind him. Like the Red Sea closing behind Moses.

Caine tried to stand, but already there were hands on his back pushing him, propelling him forward at insane speed. He hit the doorjamb on his way through. The bugs swarmed toward the door but it had already been slammed, locked, and barricaded with a chair.

Brianna stood in the middle of the room, examining her fingernails with theatrical calm.

"The whole superspeed thing comes in helpful at times," she said.

"I think you broke my back," Caine said. He felt sharp pain in his ribs. But it was very much better than the alternative.

The door exploded inward and a tangle of bug legs appeared.

"I can hold them, but I can't kill them all," Caine shouted.

"Yeah. They're hard to kill. You got a plan?"

Caine bit savagely at his thumb, worrying the cuticle. They were surrounded. The very walls were being battered. The windows were all smashed. They couldn't fit through the door but they would soon make it wide enough.

They stood, Caine and Brianna, in the kitchen, the center of the house, as far as possible from the windows, but now the bugs had their mandibles shoved in through the doors and windows, questing, slicing the air, their ropelike tongues lashing madly.

The entire house was like a drum pounded by dozens of drumsticks.

"You know, I'm kind of disappointed," Brianna said. "Situation like this? Sam would come up with a plan."

THIRTY-EIGHT

59 MINUTES

SAM HAD COME up with a plan.

Three, actually. One involved the very faint hope that Jack would reach Little Pete and do something awful.

The second involved something purely insane. Flying a huge container of missiles through the air, dropping them in just the right place, finding a vehicle with gas and a functioning battery, then figuring out how to fire the missiles in time to save the town.

That was insane.

The third plan involved Dekka. He wasn't even going to tell her about that. Because it wasn't just insane, it was monstrous.

None of the plans had a chance of working. Sam knew that.

Sam's foot was beyond pain. It was agony. Dekka was doing all she could for him by lessening gravity somewhat but he still had to move forward, and he had to move as fast as he could.

"How are you doing, Dekka?" he gasped as he hobble-trotted.

"Stop asking, Sam," she said.

"You have to—," he began.

"What? What do I have to do, Sam? They're eating me from the inside, what do you want me to say?"

"She's telling the truth—"

"Shut your stupid mouth, you freak!" Dekka snapped at Toto.

They were close, Sam could feel it. They had to be. They had to reach the train before the bugs finally burst from Dekka and ate her alive.

He needed her to live a while longer. To the bitter, bitter end, he needed her and she was spending her last minutes running and trying to help him and he was helpless, could do nothing but keep hoping she would stay alive, suffer some more, conquer her fear, all for a stupid, pointless, doomed plan.

"There!" Toto said. "I see the train."

The light was faint, gray, watery, and inadequate. But yes, Sam could see the train.

He gritted his teeth and ran now, full out, every step like a knife plunged into his foot with the pain radiating all the way up his leg.

"I can't even see which container it was, Spidey."

Sam cupped his hands and grew a ball of sickly greenish-tinged light. It swelled until he could see the two faces of his companions. To his horror the light showed a bug had eaten its way through the front of Dekka's blouse. She was trembling.

"Dekka," he said. "You don't have to . . . I can . . ."

She grabbed his arm with a painfully hard grip. "I'm with you, Sam. I guess I don't get to take the easy way out."

"This is the container with the weapons," Toto called. Then, as an afterthought he added, "That's true."

"Sam," Dekka said. "If I die . . ."

"Then we fall," Sam said. "You and me, Dekka. If I have to go, it'll be an honor to

be with you.”

Sam slammed the container shut and the three of them climbed to the top. The container was not perfectly flat on top, it was ribbed for strength. But the steel ribs were no more than six inches high. They flattened themselves down on their backs, facing up.

“Here we go,” Dekka said. She spread her hands flat against the container, palms downward.

The container rose.

Sam lay staring up at the sky, which was no real sky. The stars were paling. The moon had set.

How fast were they rising? The barrier was quite near, just a few dozen yards away from the train. For the first time in his life, he wished he’d paid more attention in geometry. There was no doubt a formula for how long it would be before they scraped against the barrier.

If Astrid were here, she would be able to—

Screeech!

The door end of the container was scraping and the entire container tilted wildly.

“Hold on!” Sam yelled.

He gripped the ribs even tighter. But he realized with a pleasant surprise that he was weightless against the container. He was holding on to keep from floating up.

Chunk! Chunk! Screeee!

The container banged a couple of times, tilted even more sharply, and yet rose. Rose!

Suddenly Sam’s knuckles, chest, and face were against the barrier. It was like grabbing a power line. Pain that obliterated every other thought. It was not his first time touching the barrier, but it was the first time he’d had his face pressed against it.

“Dekka!” Sam cried.

“Doing my best!” she yelled.

The container became more nearly level and Sam could at least loosen his grip on the steel ribs, which allowed him to press his hands down by his side and keep them from being crushed.

The barrier moved away from his face, blessed relief, but all the while the screeching sound of steel being dragged along the barrier continued.

Screeeeee.

Still rising. Faster. The air rushed past as their speed increased.

How high? They would either stall or fall or, if somehow Dekka could keep it up, they would rise and follow the curve of the dome. As they reached the top of the arc, their faces would be crushed against the barrier again. Sam wasn’t looking forward to that.

Sam rolled onto his stomach and wormed his way to the edge of the container. There wasn’t much to see below. No lights. No way to know exactly where they were. He wished he had Albert’s map, maybe he could make some sense out of the patterns of shadow and dimly perceived, starlit heights.

Looking up, he could not see the barrier at this height; it was not the smooth, pearly translucence he was used to. It was more as if he was pressed against glass, seeing stars beyond it. He’d halfway expected to find the stars were something painted

on, but of course that was crazy. The barrier maintained the illusion even up here. He felt himself flying, staring out into the near-void of space.

“How are you doing, Dekka?”

“I can’t believe it’s working. But Sam . . .”

“What?”

“I’m numb, I can’t feel it, it doesn’t hurt, but I can hear them, Sam. I can hear mouths chewing, Sam.”

What did he say to that? “Hang in there, Dekka.”

“It’s like we’re floating through the stars,” Dekka said. “I’m pretending we’re floating up to heaven.”

“Kind of hope we’re not,” Sam said.

The screeching sound had changed pitch as speed built. And there was a very stiff breeze now, pressing down on him as the container, unbound from gravity, flew and screeched.

“I wish you had not found me,” Toto said. “I was happier alone.”

“Yeah. Sorry about that,” Sam said.

Sam tried to guess how fast they were going by judging the wind. He tried to visualize being in a car with the window down. How hard did that wind blow when the car was going thirty or sixty or eighty miles an hour?

Was it blowing that hard now?

“Oh God, oh God, no, no, I see it, I see it!” Dekka cried and the container lurched hard and sank like a dropping elevator.

It stabilized quickly and rose to once again scrape along the dome.

In an unnatural voice Dekka said, “Sorry. I looked. It’s eating my . . .” She couldn’t finish. “I don’t think I have long, Sam.”

“Glide path,” Sam whispered. If they were moving as quickly as he hoped, wouldn’t they keep some of that forward momentum even if Dekka dropped them?

Yes. And they’d hit the ground at terminal velocity and that would be that.

It felt as if the speed might actually be dropping now and when Sam stuck his hand up he got a shocking jolt. They were nearing the top of the dome and it was flattening out. Soon it would be full body contact and how long could they stand that?

Not long.

As the slope lessened their speed would drop and they’d be more and more pressed against the barrier.

“It’s enough, Dekka,” Sam said. “Start lowering us. But not slowly.”

“What?”

“Move your gravity field so it’s stronger at the back end and weaker at the front.”

“That’s what I’ve been doing so that we’d stay tilted away from the barrier.”

“Yeah. Just do it more. Weaken it all, but more at the front end, right? It should be like sliding down a slope, right?”

To his amazement Dekka laughed aloud. “If I gotta die, this is the way to go. Wouldn’t have missed this craziness for anything.”

Suddenly the constant screech stopped.

The container lurched so wildly that Toto lost his grip and came tumbling downhill toward Sam. He tumbled slowly—they were in reduced gravity—and Sam grabbed him.

“The people back at the facility would have liked to meet Dekka,” Toto said, with his face inches from Sam’s.

“I’m sure they would.”

Another wild lurch and suddenly the container was sliding, dropping away forward. It was like a sled running down well-packed snow on a long slope.

“I can’t see the ground,” Dekka said. “I don’t want to move. You have to tell me when we’re close.”

Sam peered into the dark below, trying to pick out anything that might tell him where they were, where they were heading. But it was hills and scrubland and he’d never seen any of it from miles up in the air.

They were moving fast, sliding down an invisible slope, letting gravity pull them forward as much as downward.

“My—,” Dekka cried out.

Like an elevator with the cable cut, the bottom dropped. The container spun sideways. Sam, Toto, and Dekka spilled off.

Sam windmilled through the air, flashing on sky and ground and sea and sky again, falling and spinning, and he was sure of one thing: they were too high up and the fall would kill them.

The creatures beat on the house like bulls slamming into a wall. The windows and doors had already been bashed in and now the walls themselves were splintering. The din was shocking. The living room wall splintered, showing broken two-by-fours and twisted conduit.

Caine and Brianna cowered in the kitchen. It only had walls on two sides, with one side open to the breakfast nook and a counter separating the family room.

Caine looked around frantically for something to throw. Some furniture, some kitchen equipment, but nothing big enough to do any damage to motivated, armored beasts able to bash through walls.

“This isn’t right,” Caine said.

“You think?” Brianna yelled.

“They’re animals. They shouldn’t be this focused. They’re intelligent!”

“I don’t care if they speak Latin and can do trigonometry,” Brianna yelled. “How do we kill them?”

“They should have gotten frustrated and moved off to look for someone else to eat,” Caine said.

“Maybe we’re extra tasty.”

“There’s an intelligence behind this. A plan.”

“Yeah, the plan is kill the two of us and no one will be left to stop them,” Brianna said.

“Exactly,” Caine agreed. “Bugs don’t think that way.”

“Shhh!” Brianna held up a hand. Caine heard it, too: the sound of gunfire. At least three or four guns blazing away.

“Edilio’s guys,” Caine muttered. He was furious and relieved at the same time. He didn’t want Edilio or his cops sharing in the glory of saving the town. On the other hand: so far there wasn’t any glory.

“Upstairs!” Caine said. He ran for the steps but it meant passing close to the front

door. One of the monsters had its mandibles all the way inside and was swinging them left and right, widening the shattered doorway.

Caine jumped clear of the scythes and Brianna, who was already past him and up the stairs, dashed back to grab his hand and pull him up.

“Watch out they have—,” Brianna started to say.

Something barbed and painful slapped Caine in midback. He reached over his shoulder and grabbed a sticky wet rope.

“—tongues,” Brianna finished.

She drew a knife, slashed the tongue, and yanked Caine away.

Caine tore for the bedroom window. The house was entirely surrounded. At least a dozen of the behemoths plowed the lawn with their pointy legs and drove their mandibles again and again, like battering rams, against the house.

Down the street, a block away, Ellen and two other kids fired at the backs of the creatures. The bugs ignored them.

“Yep, they are definitely focused on us,” Brianna said.

“I can’t even reach a car from here,” Caine said. “I have nothing to hit them with.”

And then it came to him: he did have something to throw.

Caine raised his hands. The bugs below spotted him and rose up on their hind four legs to come slamming themselves against the window where he stood.

Caine focused on the closest creature. And suddenly six sharp-tipped insect legs were motoring in midair. He lifted the creature as high as he could, then dropped it. The bug landed hard, but shook itself and was instantly back on the attack without so much as a broken leg.

“Turn them over!” Brianna yelled.

Caine reached for the same aggressive bug, lifted him, and this time gave the creature a spin before dropping him.

It landed on its back. All six legs kicked madly in the air. Exactly like a beetle turned over on its back.

“The washing machine,” Caine said. “Is it upstairs—”

“Right down the hall,” Brianna said.

Caine ran, lurching into a wall as the bugs outside hit the house with concerted force. Found the washing machine and lifted it away from the wall, ripping power cord and hoses in the process, and levitated it down the hall to the bedroom.

He threw it through the window. It landed harmlessly on a bug’s back. The one he had turned over had righted itself, so Caine flipped a different bug.

Then, while the creature was kicking madly trying to turn itself upright, Caine raised the washing machine high in the air and slammed it down on the creature’s exposed abdomen. It hit like a cartoon anvil.

Whumpf!

Goo spurted from the bug’s sides. The kicking legs slowed.

“Oh yeah: that works,” Caine said.

He flipped a second bug over, lifted the battered Maytag and smashed it down. This time the bug did not spray its guts immediately so he hit it again.

A huge crash and a sound of rending, twisting, ripping wood. The entire house jerked. Shuddered. And to Caine’s horror the wall before him started to fall away.

The entire house was collapsing.

Brianna blurred and was gone. Caine tried to run but the floor was tilted crazily as it fell beneath his feet. The ceiling came crashing down and Caine landed on his back as the house collapsed atop him in a wild tornado of destruction.

Something crushed his stomach. Plasterboard pressed down on his face. His hands were pinned. He gasped for air and breathed dust. He could see nothing in his immediate field of vision but wallboard and part of a framed Weezer poster.

But he could feel his legs and arms. Nothing broken. Nothing punctured.

He had the power to lift the debris off himself. But if he did, then the creatures would be on him in a heartbeat.

Whereas if he stayed under the wreckage, he might be safe.

The creatures would finally give up on him and go in search of easier victims. Then, when they were gone, he could emerge and take them by surprise.

Caine took a shaky, dusty breath.

Playing dead meant letting some kids die so that he could live. Caine decided he was probably fine with that.

THIRTY-NINE

38 MINUTES

EDILIO LAY ON the steps of town hall feeling as weak as a kitten. He had barely heard Caine's big speech. He couldn't have cared less. There was nothing he could do, not with delirium spinning his head.

He coughed hard, too hard. It wracked his body each time he did it so that he dreaded the next cough. His stomach was clenched in knots. Every muscle in his body ached.

He was vaguely aware that he was saying something in between coughs.

"Mamá. Mamá. Sálvame."

Save me, mother.

"Santa María, sálvame," he begged, and coughed so hard he smashed his head against the steps.

Death was near, he felt it. Death reached through his swimming, disordered mind and he felt its cold hand clutching his heart.

Santa María, Madre de Dios, ruega por nosotros pecadores, ahora y en la hora de nuestra muerte.

And then in the swirling darkness he saw her. A figure dressed in a flowing white and blue dress. She had sad, dark eyes, and a golden glow came from her head.

She held up one hand as if blessing him.

He heard her voice. He was surprised that she spoke in English. He'd always thought of God's mother as speaking Spanish.

"Run, Edilio," she said.

He started to repeat the prayer. *Santa María, Madre de Dios . . .*

But she grabbed him by his outstretched arm and said, "I know you're sick but run. RUN! I can't save you!"

For some reason the Virgin Mary had Brianna's voice.

Edilio stood up. The sudden movement sent jagged bolts of pain into his head. For a moment he couldn't even see, but he plowed ahead on leaden feet. Fell and rolled and got back up, blind, staggering. He ran and ran and coughed until he doubled up on the ground.

He sat there for a while. Waiting to find the strength to follow Brianna's orders, to run.

He looked up and saw that he was across the plaza. He saw the desperate sick and the peaceful dead on the steps.

And he saw demons, huge monsters, armored cockroaches with impossible red devil eyes.

They swarmed onto the steps.

Brianna saw Lana come charging out of the so-called hospital with Sanjit. The bugs were swarming.

Edilio had run, thankfully, now here was Lana. Brianna cursed and yelled, "Lana, run! Run. Out the back of the building!"

Lana drew her pistol. “No way,” she said. She took aim at the first bug she saw and fired three times. One of the ruby eyes drooled white and red pus, but the bug never stopped eating a girl who, Brianna could only pray, had already died.

“Don’t be an idiot. We need you alive. Get out! Get out! You”—she grabbed Sanjit by the neck—“get her out of here; we need her alive!”

Brianna had seen the most effective way to kill the bugs, but she wasn’t Caine. She didn’t have his powers.

But she had her own.

Brianna stuck out her chin. Caine had been crushed beneath the collapsing house. It was on her now.

The knife flashed in her hand. She was not going to win this fight, but she wasn’t going to run, either.

Dekka had seen the beasts within her.

Death, oh God, let me die.

Too much to bear. Death, she had to die, to end it, to kill them and herself and never see what they were doing to her.

The container had slipped from her. In blind panic, in sheer terror, she had lost control.

She tried to regain it now, but she was falling, wind-whipped, twirling like a top. She couldn’t even tell which way was up or down.

She spread her hands and focused but focus on what? Where was the ground? Stars and pale mountains and black sea all spun wildly. The container flashed by again and again, as if it was an hour marker on a fast-running clock. And two twisting shapes, arms windmilling.

She had to save Sam. That much, at least.

Her breathing came in gulps. Her eyes were streaming tears, blurred to uselessness. How could she stop the spinning?

Dekka pulled her arms in tight and entwined her legs. Less wind resistance. She made some sense of it now: she was falling headfirst. She was still spinning, but slower, and she was definitely falling headfirst like an arrow falling to earth. Suddenly, far too clear, she could see a line of surf directly below.

She had to get lower than Sam. Sam and Toto were below her, still spinning crazily. But Dekka, with less wind resistance, fell just a little faster.

Suddenly, though, the ground was coming clear. Rushing up to smash her to jelly.

She was below Sam. Now!

She spread her fingers, focused, and canceled gravity below.

And continued to fall. She had canceled gravity. She had not canceled momentum.

In seconds they would hit the water or the ground. Either would smash them to jelly.

Caine raised the debris off himself.

The bugs were all gone. He saw the tail of one as it raced away.

If he went after them, he’d probably get killed.

But stay here and do what? Be safe? He’d have been safe on the island. He hadn’t come back to be safe.

Two possible outcomes: the bugs killed everyone and then who would Caine rule over? Or the bugs were defeated by someone else. And then how would he ever get control? Power would go to whoever won this fight.

Still Caine hesitated. A big, warm bed. A beautiful girl to share it with. Food. Water. Everything he needed, just a few miles away on the island. The logical, rational answer was obvious.

“Which is why the world stays messed up,” Caine said under his breath. “People aren’t rational.”

He took a few deep, steadying breaths, and prepared to die for power.

Orc had not managed to kill himself. Again.

He wept a bit when he realized that he was going to live. He was doing his best, but throwing up and passing out were getting in the way of death-by-drink.

He stood up, needing to pee, but he was already peeing as he stood. So no need.

Something moved. He swung his head ponderously to look. A monster. In a cracked fragment of mirror just barely clinging to the wall.

Orc stared at his reflection. Six feet, maybe more, of gray, wet gravel. He threw back his head, arms wide, and howled.

“Why? Why?”

He burst into tears and pounded his fists against his face. Then with stone fingers he ripped the last of the living flesh from his face. Blood ran red.

And now he howled at his own reflection. “Why?”

He lurched away. He ran in bounding, wild leaps toward the stairs.

Astrid.

He had no clear thought for what he would do when he found her. She was just the only one who had ever helped him. She was the only one who had ever seen him as Charles Merriman and not just Orc.

She should feel his pain. She should feel it.

Someone had to feel the pain.

He reached the top of the stairs. He knocked the door of Little Pete’s room open. He stared blankly, confused. A wind whipped through the room. Little Pete hovered in the air several feet above the cot. He glowed.

Astrid was not there.

“Astrid!” Orc bellowed.

From outside, clear and distinct through the open window, an answer.

“Is that you, Orc?”

Orc bounded to the window. It had been opened and in any case the panes of glass were shattered.

Orc’s vision took a moment to stabilize enough for him to make out what he was seeing. And then he couldn’t believe it.

Down below, in the first faint glow of morning, stood Drake.

Behind him and all around the school were things that looked like gigantic cockroaches.

It all had to be a hallucination.

“Drake?” Orc said, blinking hard to test the reality of this apparition.

“I thought that sounded like you, Orc.” Drake smirked. “And you have Astrid up

there with you? Excellent. Couldn't be better."

"Are you real?" Orc asked.

Drake laughed delightedly. "Oh, I'm real, Orc."

"Go away." It was all Orc could think of to say.

"Nah, I don't think I will," Drake said. He ran lightly to the door downstairs and disappeared from view.

Orc was completely baffled. Drake? Here?

In seconds Drake appeared at the door of the room. His cold eyes looked past Orc and focused on Little Pete.

"Well, well," Drake said. "Nemesis."

PETE

THIS WAS NOT his room.

That was not the ceiling above his bed.

He felt the burning lava build up in his chest and with a spasm he shot it out of his mouth.

When he coughed, it sent waves of pain crashing through his body.

He was all body now. No distant visions. No whispering voices. Only his pain-wracked body.

A breeze blew around him but the heat filled him still and he did not know how to come at it, what to call it. How could he wish it away if he didn't know what it was?

Where was his sister? Her eyes were gone. He was alone. Alone and trapped inside a body that lay helpless, beset by fire inside, and cold outside, and a whipping wind and always the scrape scrape of sounds, the rasp of saws, the assault of mad, shrieking color.

A voice so big it made him want to run and hide said, "Where's Ashtruh?"

Wet gravel was speaking, swaying, leaning perilously as though it might fall over.

"Ashtruh!" the monster bellowed. "Ashtruuuuuh!"

Pete's mind recoiled, sank deep down, fled before the noise, but could not escape. Once more his body kept him tethered to the real world that had never been real to him.

The monster stomped away, still shouting.

Pete coughed a volcano.

He had to do something. His body had hold of him and his body was pain.

Panic was building inside him.

He had to do . . . something.

FORTY

25 MINUTES

SAM FELT SOMETHING wet. It was everywhere, a cloud rising from below. It was like falling through a tornado of mud. Salt water and sand, liberated by weightlessness, flew upward.

“Spread your arms and legs!” Sam shouted.

Friction. The painful slap of water, the grinding of sand, like flying into a tornado.

Sam felt like his skin was being flayed. He shut his eyes, turned his head to keep his nose and mouth from filling with wet sand, and smacked hard into a surface as solid and unyielding as concrete.

The air exploded from his lungs. It was like being kicked by a mule.

His back arched too far, tendons stretched, his head snapped back, every inch of him stung and water closed over his head.

Instinctively he kicked his way to the surface. The sand washed away and he could force one eye open. He was no more than a dozen yards from shore, in water not even five feet deep.

Then all the water and sand that had floated up to meet them came pouring down.

He looked around frantically for Dekka and Toto. He splashed his way toward the beach through a blinding downpour that lasted a full minute.

Toto was just down the beach, lying on his back and moaning in pain. Sam knelt by him.

“Are you hurt?”

“My legs,” Toto said, and started to cry. “I want to go home.”

“Listen to me, Toto, your legs are broken, but we can fix them.”

Toto looked at him wonderingly, wiped sand from his face, and said, “You are telling the truth.”

“I’ll get Lana. Soon as I can. You just stay put.”

He stood up and yelled, “Dekka! Dekka!”

She did not call back to him, but he saw her swimming toward shore. He ran out and helped her to get to dry ground.

“I’m so sorry, Sam,” she gasped.

“I’m okay. So’s Toto. Just broke his legs is all.” He glanced left and right and spotted the container smashed into a low bluff. Oblong crates and their deadly contents had spilled.

“I don’t know where we are,” Sam said. “I think we’re south of the power plant.” He looked around, frantic. His plan had always been reckless and hopeless, but he’d hoped, somehow, to come down near the power plant. There might be a car still in usable condition at the plant. But here? He wasn’t even sure where here was.

And the container was wrecked. Many of the missiles would be, too.

“Sam!” A voice was calling to him from the direction of the sea. A boat. He saw four people in it, and oars splashing and pulling hard toward them.

“Quinn!”

The boat ran in and beached. Quinn jumped out. “Where did you come from?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” Sam said. “Quinn: tell me quick. What’s happening in town?”

Quinn appeared overwhelmed by the question.

Sam grabbed him. “Whatever it is, tell me. Dekka may not have another half hour. Quick!”

“Edilio’s sick. Lots of people sick. It’s bad, kids dropping all over the place. Edilio sent me to bring Caine back. To fight the bugs.”

Sam breathed a shaky sigh of relief. “Thank God he did, Quinn. I probably can’t beat the bugs, maybe he can.”

“But . . .,” Quinn began, but Sam interrupted.

Plan Two might be dead. But Sam had one last trick up his sleeve, one last wild effort—not to save the town, but maybe to save his friend.

“Dekka, she’s infested. They’re hatching out of her. I promised to . . . to make it easier for her. You understand?”

Quinn nodded solemnly.

“But I have an idea. How fast can you get us to town?”

“Fifteen minutes,” Quinn said.

They rowed like they were rowing for their lives. And in some ways they were, Sam knew. If the bugs emerged from Dekka while they were in this small boat, none of them would survive.

Toto groaned, lying on the bottom of the boat in two inches of fish-smelling water. Dekka lay against Sam in the stern. His arms were around her. He whispered in her ear not to give up.

He could feel them through her clothes. He was careful to avoid the emergent mouths, but he could not avoid feeling the surging horror of insect bodies moving within Dekka’s body.

“Sam, you promised me,” Dekka moaned.

“I will, Dekka. I promise I will. But not yet, not yet.” To Quinn he said, “As soon as we reach the dock, go for Lana.”

“Lana can’t help,” Quinn grunted, never slackening his pace. “She can’t kill them.”

“She doesn’t have to,” Sam said.

“I’ll take the kid, Orc,” Drake said. “Where’s Astrid?”

Orc stared at Drake. So many emotions in his tired, drink-addled brain.

Drake was the cause of all his problems. If he hadn’t escaped . . .

But hadn’t he himself just stormed up here to take it all out on Astrid? And yet, Drake’s sadistic, cocky grin made something like steam rise up inside of him.

“Whaddyou wan’ with the kid?” Orc slurred.

“Drunk much?” Drake taunted. “Friend of mine wants the ’tard. So, where’s the sister?”

“Leave her alone.”

Drake laughed. “Rock boy, I’m not leaving anyone alone. I have an army outside. I’ll do whatever I want with Astrid the Genius.”

“She didn’t hurt you.”

“Don’t play the hero, Orc, it doesn’t work for you. You’re a filthy, drunken degenerate. Have you smelled yourself? What do you think you are, her knight in

shining armor? You think she'll give you a big, wet kiss on your gravel face?" He peered closer at Orc as if looking inside him. "Nah, Orc, the only way you ever get Astrid is the same way I get her. And that's what you were thinking, isn't it?"

"Shut up."

Drake laughed delightedly. "Oh, you sad, sick disaster. I can see it in your bloodshot eyes. Well, I'll tell you what: you can have whatever's left over after I—"

Orc swung hard, with surprising speed. The rock fist caught Drake a little high, nailing the side of his head but only a glancing blow.

Still, a glancing blow from Orc was like a sledgehammer.

Drake stumbled sideways, slammed into the wall, but kept his feet.

Orc went after Drake, swung again, and this time missed completely. His fist punched a hole in the wall where Drake's head had been.

Drake was behind him, dancing away. "You big, stupid idiot, I can't be killed. Didn't you know that? Bring it, Orc. Come on you lumbering, stinking pile of crap."

Drake lashed him then. It didn't hurt Orc much. But he felt it.

Orc lurched toward him, but Drake was quick and nimble. He danced away, slashed at Orc again, and this time wrapped his tentacle around Orc's neck.

It wasn't easy to choke Orc, but it wasn't impossible. Drake was behind him, pulling as hard as he could, tightening his whip hand like a python, inch by inch, trying to squeeze the pebble skin.

Orc dug his fingers into the whip hand and pulled at it, tried to tear it free. But it wasn't working because somehow Orc's grip was weakening. He tried to breathe but couldn't.

Suddenly the whip hand released him.

The whip hand was withdrawing, shriveling. Orc twisted to face Drake as bright metal bands crossed his teeth. Drake's zero-percent-body-fat body became pudgy thighs and face.

"What?" Orc asked, blinking hard. Then he understood. He'd never watched Brittney emerge before but he knew it happened, had heard it happen as one voice gave way to the other.

"Hi, Orc," Brittney said.

"Brittney."

She looked around her, confused. Then her eyes fell on Little Pete.

"So, he is Nemesis."

"He's Little Pete," Orc said.

"We have to take him," Brittney said. "It's the only way. The Lord wills it."

"No," a voice said.

"Astrid!" Orc said. "I was . . . looking for you."

Astrid barely looked at him. "I ran away. But I'm back."

"Astrid, God has said He needs Little Pete," Brittney said complacently. "It's the only way."

"I know you think you talk to God—"

"No, Astrid, He talked to me. I saw Him. I touched Him. He's a dark God, a God of deep places."

"If He's a God, why does He need Little Pete? I thought God didn't need

anything.”

Brittney got a crafty look. “Jesus needed John the Baptist to announce His coming. He needed Judas to betray Him, and Pilate and the Pharisees to crucify Him so that He might redeem us. And the Father needed the Son to pay the price of sin.”

Astrid felt weary. There was a time in her life when Astrid would have welcomed an opportunity for a theological discussion. It wasn’t as if Sam had sat around with her, debating. He was completely indifferent to religion.

But this was not the time. The sad creature that was Brittney was just a tool of the malevolent creature she had confused with God.

In any case, why was Astrid defending Little Pete? She’d been ready to see him die if it meant an end to the suffering.

“God doesn’t ask for human sacrifices,” Astrid said.

“Doesn’t He?” Brittney smirked. “What am I, Astrid? What are any of us? And what was Jesus? A sacrifice to appease a vengeful God, Astrid.”

Astrid had nothing to say. She knew all the right answers. But the will was gone. Did she herself even believe in God anymore? Why argue over a phantom? They were two fools arguing over lies.

But Astrid still had her pride. And she could not remain silent and let Brittney have the final word.

“Brittney, do you really want to kill a little boy? No matter what your so-called God tells you, isn’t it wrong? When your beliefs tell you to murder, doesn’t a voice inside you tell you it is wrong?”

Brittney frowned. “God’s will . . .”

“Even if it is, Brittney, even if that mutant monster in a cave really is God, and even if you’ve understood Him perfectly, and you’re doing His will, and He wants you to kill, to deliver a little boy to Him so that He can kill, isn’t it wrong? Isn’t it just plain wrong?”

“God decides right and wrong.”

“No,” Astrid said. And now, despite everything, despite her own exhaustion, despite her fear, despite her self-loathing and contempt, she realized she was going to say something she had never accepted before. “Brittney, it was wrong to murder even before Moses brought down the commandments. Right and wrong doesn’t come from God. It’s inside us. And we know it. And even if God appears right in front of us, and tells us to our faces to murder, it’s still wrong.”

It was that simple in the end, Astrid realized. That simple. She didn’t need the voice of God to tell her not to kill Little Pete. Just her own voice.

“Anyway, Brittney,” Astrid said. “If you want to get to Petey, you have to go through me.”

She smiled then for what felt like the first time in a long time.

Brittney, too, smiled, but sadly. “I won’t, Astrid. But Drake will. You know he will. The bugs are all around this building, waiting. And when Drake comes, he will take Little Pete and kill you.”

The two girls had almost forgotten the swaying, bleary-eyed Orc.

He moved now with surprising speed. He grabbed Brittney by the neck and waist and threw her from the window.

“I don’t like her,” he said.

Astrid ran to the window and saw Brittney lying flat on the ground.

The bugs turned their blue eyes upward.

Indifferent to Brittney—who was already picking herself up, unharmed—they surged toward the ruined front door of Coates Academy.

“About time.” Orc laughed. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Orc, don’t let them kill you,” Astrid said, putting her hand on his arm.

“You was always nice to me, Astrid. Sorry I . . .” Then he shrugged. “Don’t matter now. Better get out if you can. Most likely this won’t take long.”

He ran into the hallway. Astrid last saw him as he laughed at the bugs below him, vaulted the landing rail, and dropped down into the swarm.

“You want Orc?” he bellowed. “Come and get me!”

The boy, whose name was Buster, tried to get away, tried to stand up and run, but he was far too slow, far too sick. He coughed and stumbled and fell on his knees.

The bug’s tongue attached to his neck and yanked him headfirst into flashing mouthparts.

A girl named Zoey coughed, doubled over with the pain of it, and a second later was caught and eaten.

It was a massacre.

Brianna flew like a madwoman, her knife flashed, her sawed-off shotgun barked, but the bugs were up the stairs and pushing inside, smelling the fresh meat in the hospital.

One of the bugs had grown so big it became jammed and blocked the doorway, but at least one of the creatures had made it inside already, and Brianna could hear muffled screams of terror from down below.

She darted, bypassed a flashing tongue, leaped over scythe mandibles, and stabbed a bug in both red eyes. Then she stuck her shotgun into the gnashing mouth and pulled the trigger.

The massive creature shuddered, but did not die.

Brianna barely leaped aside in time to avoid being caught. And then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw one of the massive creatures rise, turn in midair, and land hard on its back.

“Caine!” she yelled.

She threaded her way through the swarm, leaped easily through the wildly waving legs of the overturned bug, and stabbed her knife into its guts.

Then, into the largest of the gashes she thrust the shotgun and pulled the trigger.

BLAM!

Bug guts and bits of shell blew back and covered her. But the legs were jerking wildly now, slower, slower . . .

Caine had overturned another bug and this one he hammered with a car, lifting and slamming, lifting and slamming, until the creature was a giant mess of stick-legs and goo.

The creatures turned away from feasting on the sick. There were only seven of the bugs left now, not counting the one that was down in the so-called hospital or the one stuck in the doorway.

Seven.

“I’ll flip them!” Caine yelled.

Brianna picked a piece of bug guts off her cheek and nodded. She quickly reloaded her shotgun and zoomed to mount the latest overturned creature. She was learning as she went along. The creatures had weak spots, one of them was the underside of what would be their chin. She stabbed with her knife, twisted to make an opening, pushed the shotgun into the gaping wound, and pulled the trigger.

The bug’s head blew apart.

“Oh, yeah! Oh, definitely!” Brianna cried.

But Caine had been a bit too slow and now three of the creatures were pursuing him. All three had latched on to him with their tongues and he was yelling his head off for help.

Brianna dashed down the steps, now slick with blood—human and insect.

She cut the first tongue and the other two reeled back defensively.

“Flip ’em!”

“Trying,” Caine said through gritted teeth. He turned one over but the bugs were learning fast. A second bug charged the first, slid beneath it, and heaved its brother back over onto his legs.

“Oh, no, we don’t do that,” Brianna said.

Caine had to back away again as the creatures charged. If they caught Caine, then the battle was over.

Brianna raced, grabbed Caine’s arm, and yanked him to temporary safety behind a tree.

Cuh-runch!

A bug mandible sliced the tree straight through.

Caine lifted and flipped the creature, but now the swarm was converging.

“They’ll follow us,” Caine yelled to Brianna.

“I noticed.”

“Gas station,” Caine gasped. He was already running, flat out, arms pumping. Brianna caught up easily. The bugs surged after them, crowding the street.

“You understand?” Caine gasped.

“Not much gas left there,” Brianna said.

“Go!” Caine yelled, and Brianna zoomed away. She reached the gas station. There was a heavy padlock on the pump and, to her utter amazement, one of Albert’s people sitting there guarding it.

“Unlock it!” she yelled.

“I can’t unless Albert . . . ,” the kid started to say until Brianna laid her knife against his throat and said, “Really no time for chitchat.”

He unlocked the pump. Brianna grabbed the handle—the hand pump was the only way—and worked it as fast as she could. Unfortunately it wasn’t the kind of thing that worked better at superspeed.

She grabbed the guard and yelled, “You—pump! Pump unless you want to die.”

“I don’t have a tank to put it in!”

“On the ground,” Brianna said. “On the ground. All over the place. Pump it!”

Gas gushed in irregular spurts from the pump and splashed onto the concrete.

Brianna zoomed back to find Caine laboring hard and barely staying ahead as he reached the highway. Out in the open the bugs would be able to use all their speed and

catch him long before he reached the station.

“Keep running!” she yelled.

She dashed straight at the foremost of the creatures. It snapped at her with its tongue. She grabbed the tongue in midair and, holding on to it as hard as she could, she dived beneath the creature’s legs.

The bug stumbled and came to a halt, confused. Brianna released the tongue, scooted madly beneath the creature, and came out through its hind legs. She had bought Caine maybe three seconds. No more.

She took aim at the demonic ruby eyes of the next bug, fired at point-blank range, and blew back to the gas station.

She zipped past the panicky guard, who was still busily pouring precious gasoline out on the ground.

Inside what had once been the gas station’s mini-mart, Brianna searched frantically through trash and debris before coming up, triumphant, with a blue Bic lighter.

Outside she saw Caine, still barely ahead of his pursuers.

“Get outta here, kid!” she yelled to the guard. “Ruuun!”

The smell of gasoline was overpowering. It flowed in dark little streams across the parking area, filling seams in the concrete, forming shallow pools in low spots.

Caine raced past, feet splashing through the gasoline.

Brianna smiled.

The leading wave of the creatures hit the gas station, needle-sharp legs stabbing at tiny rivers of unleaded gas.

The fumes filled the air.

Brianna knew something about speed. She knew that the Hollywood thing where people outrun explosions was nonsense. Not even the Breeze could outrun a fireball.

But there was standing around in the middle of a fire, and then there was blowing through it at the speed of sound. There wouldn’t be an explosion, not right away.

It should work. Especially with a little cover.

She hid behind a pump and let the first creature draw level. She wheeled, flicked the lighter, and dodged in front of the bug as it ran by.

Whoooooosh!

It wasn’t a dynamite explosion. But it was definitely a fireball.

A wave of heat singed her hair and eyebrows. A blast wave of pressure that popped Brianna’s ears. But the bug’s bulk had shielded her from the worst of it.

The leading creature reached Caine, but he had thrown himself into the air and the fireball, the creature, and Brianna all rocketed past beneath him.

As he fell he flipped the bug over.

Three of the creatures were caught in the fireball. Fire curled their antennae and cracked their brittle shells.

Two of the creatures were far enough back to dodge around the fire but the heat and the smoke had confused them. They moved away but not fast enough.

The fire crept down the pump hose, down to meet the heavy gas vapor in the massive underground tank.

Ka-BOOOM!

Pumps, concrete, shelter, mini-mart, and the creatures exploded in a fireball that made the first blast look like a damp firecracker.

Insect parts, twisted metal, and chunks of concrete rained down.

Only the lead bug was still alive. It lay on its back, kicking in the air.

Brianna sank her knife into its chin, inserted her shotgun, and said, “When you get to hell tell the gaiaphage the Breeze says, ‘Hi!’” She pumped two rounds into the creature and its head blew apart like a smashed watermelon.

FORTY-ONE

13 MINUTES

ORC SMASHED HIS bottle against the blue-eyed bug's head. It did nothing. He hadn't thought it would.

The creature swung its mandibles in a wide sweep and caught Orc in the chest. Orc went flying, facedown on the gravel.

He was winded. Not dead, though.

He got slowly to his feet. Why hurry?

"You want me, come get me," Orc said.

Three of the monsters motored straight for him. Orc threw a wild punch, caught nothing but air, and was facedown again. This time three ropelike tongues had attached to him and he could no longer stand.

Astrid screamed.

"Whatever," he said, as flashing mouthparts closed in on him.

Jack had run and bounded along through the night. His goal was Perdido Beach. But his mission, while clear, was not sitting well with him.

How could Sam have told him to throw Little Pete to the creatures? It was crazy, wasn't it? Crazy? Anyway, it had to be wrong, right?

He raced up hills and down. He was not quite tireless, but he was very strong and reveled in that strength now for the first time. Jack felt as if he'd been living behind a curtain, not really seeing what was happening around him.

That had started to change when he found the laptops on the train. Touching live keys again, seeing a monitor glow . . . Even though he hadn't had time to do much about it, it was like magic, like the magic touch.

And then, a very different feeling when he had fought. He had used his enormous strength and he had saved Sam's life and Dekka's and Toto's. Him! Of all people: Computer Jack.

He was a hero.

He still didn't look like one—he was no taller or more muscular than before, he had not turned into some muscle-bound wrestler type. He was still doughy, nearsighted Jack. But the strength no longer seemed completely irrelevant to him.

He could be Computer Jack. But he could be more, too.

And yet, what Sam wanted him to do was to kill Little Pete? Could that possibly be right?

He had run toward town or what he thought was toward town. From the top of a hill he had sighted the sparkly water in the distance and figured that town had to be, oh, around there somewhere.

But he finally realized he had become hopelessly lost. He was deep in forest now, and he figured it might be the hills where Hunter lived, but it might just as easily be the Stefano Rey.

Then he heard a cry. A human voice. A girl, he thought, screaming.

Jack froze. He was breathing hard. He strained to hear. But there was no second

cry. Not that he heard, anyway.

What was he supposed to do? Sam had told him what to do. He had to warn Edilio. And he had to . . . He could barely even form the thought in his head of what he was supposed to do.

But he couldn't just ignore a scream, could he?

"Go find out," Jack whispered to himself. "Whoever she is maybe she needs help. And maybe she knows where we are."

He did not say but thought: And maybe I won't have to go to town after all.

Jack ran toward the sound, across a deep ravine choked with bushes and up the other side. He found himself on a narrow road cut between tall trees.

"Coates!" he said.

He did not hear another scream, but he did hear sounds like a fistfight.

Suddenly the hero role was seeming less and less attractive.

He moved on at a wary trot. Through the iron gate of the school. And there, a scene out of a horror movie. A stone-fleshed monster buried by a swarm of impossibly huge insects.

Looking down at the scene from a window, Astrid.

And then, his tentacle arm just reaching its full length, Drake.

Yes, Jack decided, the hero thing had some real downsides.

Drake emerged to a world that could hardly be more wonderful.

Orc was going down beneath a crush of bugs.

Astrid was looking down in terror.

And for some reason Drake could not fathom: Computer Jack was standing there, gaping at it all.

Drake grinned up at Astrid. "Don't go anywhere, beautiful, I'll be up in a minute to play. I just have to go say hi to my old friend Jack."

"Jack!" Astrid shouted. "Help Orc!"

Two of the creatures turned eerie blue eyes on Jack.

"What shall we do with you, Computer Jack?" Drake asked.

"I'm not looking for trouble," Jack said.

Drake made a *tsk-tsk* sound and shook his head. "I kind of think trouble is all around you, Jack. Trouble, trouble everywhere." Then he had a thought. He peered closely at Jack. "Where's Sam? Did he send you off on your own? Like a big boy?"

All the while Drake was moving closer, waiting, waiting until he could reach Jack with his whip hand. Jack backed slowly away.

Orc bellowed in pain. The creatures in Drake's army were banging into one another like cars in a demolition derby, all striving to get at the boy-monster.

"You were all bold and dangerous up at the lake, Jack," Drake taunted. Another few feet and he would be within range.

"I just . . ." Then Jack gasped at something he'd seen behind Drake's back.

Drake turned to see and in that split second Jack leaped. Drake whipped around, quick as a snake, but all that did was bring his face into direct contact with a blow of staggering power.

When he picked himself up, Drake saw he'd flown a good twenty feet through the air.

He stood up and rubbed his chin. "That was pretty good, Jack. Wow. That would have killed me. You know, if I could be killed."

Jack tried to dodge past him, rushing for the door, no doubt rushing to rescue the damsel in distress.

Drake laughed and swung his whip arm. He wrapped around Jack's leg and should have tripped him, but he hadn't counted on Jack's strength. Instead of tripping Jack, it was Drake who went flying face-first into the ground.

He released, rolled, and stood up in one swift, fluid move, but it was humiliating.

Drake's whip hand snapped, hit Jack's back, and drew a gasp of pain. But Jack didn't stop; he plowed straight on into the melee of bugs. He grabbed the nearest leg and yanked it hard.

The leg came away. It didn't stop the creature or even seem to affect it, but it gave Jack a weapon.

"Better save Orc fast, there, Jack," Drake taunted. "He looks like he's going down."

Orc's roaring voice was hoarse and fading. The clash of carapace against carapace was louder and more frenzied.

They would kill Orc soon. And then Drake's army would deal with Jack. All he had to do now was keep Jack distracted.

Jack broke the leg into two pieces, one thick and stubby, the other pointed.

Drake snapped his whip and drew blood through Jack's shirt.

"Come on, Jack, you know you can't win," Drake said. "You can't kill me. And you can't stop my army. Only way out is for you to join me."

"No," Jack said.

"My side is the only side now, Jack. There's a whole other bug army eating its way through Perdido Beach right now. Who do you think you're even fighting for? Whatever the red-eyes don't finish, we will when we get there."

"You don't know what's going on in Perdido Beach," Jack said.

"The Darkness tells me," Drake lied. "He gave me power over them. We're cleaning everyone out, Jack. By the end of the day all of them will be dead and gone. Join me and he may let you live."

He snapped his whip with lightning speed and caught Jack unprepared. His whip curled around Jack's throat. Jack hauled on the whip but all that did was to yank Drake straight into Jack. Face-to-face Drake laughed and coiled ever tighter around Jack's throat and squeezed, squeezed, seeing Jack's pale face redden.

Jack punched him in the chest so hard his fist went all the way through. But Drake's grip never loosened and Jack's eyes bulged and Drake laughed and Orc's voice was no longer heard over the sound of mouthparts gnashing.

"Sam, Sam, you swore you wouldn't let them!"

The boat touched the dock and Quinn sent his rowers racing, all shouting Lana's name.

"I have a plan, Dekka," Sam said.

Her body was no longer like anything human. Beneath her clothing it pulsated. The creatures were tearing through in places, mouthparts flashing, mandibles questing. One burst all the way out. It froze for a second, staring at Sam with eyes the color of

jade.

He grabbed for it, caught it, and dropped it. But Quinn was quicker. He threw a fishing net over the creature, stepped on the edges of the net, and held it pinned in the bottom of the boat.

“Now!” Dekka begged. “Now, Sam! Now! Oh, God, now!”

A second bug could be clearly seen moving beneath the skin of her thigh, nothing but a thin membrane of flesh covering it.

“I have a plan, Dekka, I have a plan, hang on, hang on,” Sam begged.

“Noooo!” It was a pitiful wail of despair.

Sam shot a hopeless glance at the shore. Nothing. No Lana. The crew had all disappeared.

Quinn had grabbed an oar and was smashing it down on the trapped bug like a pile driver, again and again, smashing away, and yet the creature lived.

Suddenly a rush of wind and Brianna stood at the end of the dock, vibrating, covered with gore. “About time you showed up . . .” She fell silent as she realized what was happening to Dekka. “What the—”

“Breeze: Lana. Now! NOW!” Sam cried but the second “now” was said to the air.

“I got to . . . I got to see her again . . .,” Dekka chattered.

“Don’t give up on me, Dekka. Don’t give up on me.”

But Dekka’s eyes were rolling wildly, her entire body was in spasm.

“Quinn. What I’m going to do . . . Just hold her down. Hold her down no matter what.”

Quinn smashed the bug one last time and if it wasn’t dead it was at least not going anywhere. He dropped to his knees and held Dekka’s shoulders.

“What are you doing?” Quinn asked.

“Surgery,” Sam said dully.

He held up his right hand. The green light, as focused as a laser, sliced through Dekka’s clothing and skin.

Brianna found Lana retreating with Sanjit toward the eastern edge of town.

“Lana!”

“You’re alive!” Lana said. “The kids?”

“A lot dead,” Brianna gasped. “A lot more hurt, but the bugs are done for.”

“I’m coming,” Lana said and started to trot back toward the plaza.

“Yeah. Wrong way and too slow,” Brianna said. “Give me your hand. You can heal yourself later.”

Brianna took off, dragging Lana, who instantly tripped. She dragged the Healer the rest of the way down the street, then down the length of the beach.

Dragging her, Brianna couldn’t do anything like full speed, but she could move faster than any human runner.

The Healer’s legs were scraped raw by the time Brianna yanked her to her feet at the end of the dock.

“Got her!” Brianna announced. Then, “What are you doing?”

Sam’s face was a mask of horror. He had sliced Dekka open from neck to pelvis. Dekka’s organs—a slaughterhouse mess—crawled with a dozen bugs, all swarming out of her.

Quinn snatched at the bugs and tossed them from the boat into the water. He was elbow-deep in blood.

“Lana, keep her alive,” Sam said.

Lana jumped down into the boat, which rocked madly back and forth.

Dekka was beyond speech, past even crying out.

Lana laid her hands on Dekka’s contorted face.

Brianna followed her into the boat, landed lightly, and pushed both Quinn and Sam aside. “I got this,” she said.

One by one she snatched the emerging creatures—some of which raced to attack Sam, others of which just ran like panicked cockroaches around the bottom of the boat—turned them on their backs, and blew them clear through the bottom of the boat with shotgun blasts.

Quinn tossed a rope over the dock cleat and pulled the sinking boat in. Sam and Quinn shoved and hoisted Dekka onto the dock where she lay split open like a burst orange.

Lana held Dekka’s head on her lap.

Sam, Quinn, and some strange-looking guy Brianna thought looked vaguely familiar stood watching, a circle of horrified fascination.

The boat sank. The blasted bodies of the insects floated.

Dekka’s mouth was moving but no sound came out. Her eyes were like marbles, rolling, searching without seeing.

“She’s trying to say something,” Quinn said.

“She should shut up and let me keep her alive,” Lana snapped. The Healer shot a malignant look at Brianna. “You owe me a pair of shoes.”

Again Dekka tried to speak.

“It’s you, Breeze,” Sam said. “She wants you.”

Brianna frowned, not sure Sam was right. But she knelt beside Dekka and put her ear close.

Brianna listened, closed her eyes for a moment, then stood up without saying anything.

“What did she say?” Quinn asked.

“Just thanks,” Brianna said. “She just said thanks.”

She turned and took off but not so quickly that she missed the strange new boy saying, “That’s not the truth.”

FORTY-TWO

3 MINUTES

ASTRID WATCHED, HELPLESS.

She could no longer see Orc. He might already be dead down there.

Jack seemed unable to free himself from Drake's choking grasp. And Drake knew it. He looked up at Astrid and winked.

She had reached the decision not to harm Little Pete, to let him live even if it meant others would die.

The right and moral decision.

But in a minute or less Jack would asphyxiate. And Drake would catch her. She had no illusions about what that psychopath intended.

Drake and his army would kill and go on killing. And what could stop them? Who could stop them?

She found she could hardly breathe.

Her whole body seemed to buzz with some strange energy. Was it fear? Was this what panic felt like?

Jack's face was turning dark. His struggles were less focused. His fingers clawed impotently. His eyes bulged like they might pop out of his head.

Drake was going to kill her. But not quickly.

And he would go on to kill many, many more, for as long as the FAYZ existed.

Enough. It had to end. All of it had to end.

Astrid stepped to Little Pete. She gathered him in her arms. She moved to the window and stood there, hesitating, with his limp, sweating body in her arms.

Drake saw her. The color drained from his face.

His tentacle lessened its grip on Jack's throat.

"No!" Drake cried. He unwound his python arm and began to run toward her, yelling, "No! No!"

"Sorry," Astrid whispered. "I'm so very sorry, Petey."

Drake was at the door to the room. "No!" he cried again as she heaved her brother toward the sea of insects.

"Get him!" Drake cried.

He pushed past Astrid to the window as Little Pete fell.

"Don't hurt—," Drake shouted. His words were cut off by a weak but well-aimed punch from Astrid.

Little Pete almost hit the ground. He stopped inches from impact.

His eyes opened wide. He stared into a dozen eerie blue eyes.

"Don't hurt him!" Drake cried. "The Darkness needs him!"

But it was too late. The bugs surged toward Little Pete. Their tongues snapped. Their mouthparts gnashed.

There was no explosion.

No flash of light.

The bugs simply disappeared.

There. Then gone.

Little Pete sank to the ground. He coughed once, with incredible violence. And then he, too, simply disappeared.

Astrid and Drake stood side by side, both staring down in horror.

Astrid closed her eyes. Was it over? Was it all finally over?

"I'll kill you," Drake said, but his voice was faint.

Astrid opened her eyes and saw his face already changing, melting from the hard-edged shark features to a softer, rounder countenance.

Jack came pounding up the stairs.

Lying on his back with one leg gone, Orc groaned in pain.

"Where is he?" Brittney asked. "Where is Nemesis?"

Astrid barely heard her.

She had done it. She had killed him. She had sacrificed Little Pete.

"Let's get out of here before Drake comes back," Jack said. He took Astrid's arm. But she would not go with him. Not yet.

"You killed him," Brittney said. She spoke more in wonder than in accusation.

Astrid heaved a shuddering sigh. Tears ran down her face. She had no words.

Brittney was becoming angry. "He'll get you for this, Astrid. His rage will find you. Sooner or later."

"Drake or the gaiaphage?" Jack asked.

Brittney bared her braces in a feral grin. "We are the arm of the Darkness. He will send us to take you. Both of you."

"Let's go, Astrid," Jack said, without taking his eyes off Brittney. Astrid felt the strength of his grip on her arm. She yielded.

She was almost blinded by her tears, her mind a confusion of emotions: self-loathing, disgust, anger.

And worst of all: relief.

He was gone. Little Pete was dead. And now it would end at last. The FAYZ wall would be gone. The madness would be over.

Relief. And the sickening realization that she was glad she had done it.

Jack led her down the stairs. He lifted a terribly injured, mangled Orc effortlessly. Orc was moaning in pain and crying that they should leave him to die.

"No one is dying," Jack said harshly. "We've had enough of that."

Astrid walked obediently behind Jack as he carried Orc down the hill toward town.

And she wondered as she walked, how it could be that the FAYZ was ended and yet Jack was still so strong.

Dahra Baidoo emerged from the so-called hospital for the first time in what felt like days.

Virtue held her up, although he was shaking so badly he could barely walk himself.

Both of them were covered in gore. The hospital was a slaughterhouse. The single bug that had made it inside had simply massacred kids too sick to stand, let alone run.

Virtue told himself that most of those kids were too sick to survive anyway. But that knowledge would never wipe the horror from his memory.

He had been wedged into a corner behind a cot, cowering and praying, and begging to be spared. He had thrown things at the bug, but bedpans and bottles were nothing to the monster.

And then, in an instant, the creature was gone.

Its bloody mandibles had been scraping the wall, trying to dislodge Virtue. Inches and milliseconds from gruesome death.

And then . . . nothing.

Gone.

Virtue had heard nothing but the sound of his own sobbing.

And then the sounds of others crying.

And an insistent, mad howl of despair.

Dahra was screaming as he drew her gently from beneath a body.

“It’s gone,” he’d said.

She couldn’t stop shaking. Couldn’t stop howling. And Virtue was suddenly back in that refugee camp in the Congo, remembering things he’d witnessed when he was still too young to understand.

A terrible fury boiled up inside him. An uncontrollable rage against everyone and everything that made the world a hell of fear and pain and loss.

He wanted to smash things. He wanted to bellow like a wild animal.

But Dahra had ceased howling, and now just stared up at him, needing someone, someone to finally take care of her.

Virtue took her hand and put his arm around her shoulder. “We’re getting you out of here,” he said gently.

There were kids crying out in pain. But Virtue knew that Dahra could no longer respond. So he led her out into the cool, fresh air.

The bodies of the bugs were all gone. The bodies of those they had killed were not.

Virtue didn’t know where to take Dahra. After all, she was the one kids took other kids to. He didn’t know anyone to help her. Maybe no one could help her.

He led Dahra to the ruined church. It was quiet inside, although it, too, had been a scene of battle. He cleared a space for her in a pew. He sat her down, sat beside her, so weary, and closed his eyes and prayed.

“God in your heaven, look down and take pity on this girl. She has done enough.” He sighed and added a doubtful, “Amen.”

Virtue did not stay long. There were still kids needing help.

He ran into his brother heading toward the hospital. Sanjit hugged him tight and said, “They’re gone, Choo. They’re all gone.”

Virtue nodded and patted Sanjit’s back reassuringly.

Sanjit held him out and looked at his face. “Are you okay, brother?”

“I’ve had better days,” Virtue said.

“So, I guess the island’s looking even better now, huh?” Sanjit asked. “You were right, it’s one big open-air asylum.”

Virtue nodded solemnly and glanced back at the church. “Yeah, but there’s a couple of saints mixed in with the crazies.”

Caine walked stiffly back to town. He was burned, scraped, punctured, bruised, and might, he thought, have broken a couple of ribs.

But he had won.

The only downside—aside from the various pains that made him wince with every step—was that he hadn’t done it alone. Brianna had scored an assist. He couldn’t stand

her, but man, was she good in a fight.

And some unseen, unknowable force had caused the bugs the two of them had just killed to disappear. Even their broken-off legs, their fluids and guts had disappeared. Like they'd been wiped entirely out of existence.

Brianna had zoomed off to leave him limping all alone. No doubt she was bragging and claiming all the credit.

But it wouldn't work. No, everyone had seen him walking toward the threat. And now the threat was gone, just as he had promised. He had delivered. He had earned his rightful place.

Just as he crossed the highway into town, the first kids came rushing up to him, grateful, giddy, wanting to slap palms.

"You did it, man! You did it!"

He refused their high fives and stood very still, looking at them, and just waited.

They seemed uncertain, a little worried. And then it dawned on them.

The first one bowed his head. It was a jerky, awkward gesture, but that was okay with Caine: they'd learn.

The second kid, then a third and a fourth, rushing up to join in, bowed their heads to Caine. He nodded in solemn acknowledgment and walked on, no longer feeling nearly so much pain.

THE MORNING AFTER

SAM COULD NOT face the town and the kids there. If he went into town now, there might be a fight with Caine. He couldn't face a fight. Later. Not now. Not yet.

He had seen the sudden and complete disappearance of the bugs. One minute the creatures that had hatched inside Dekka had been floating in the water and the next second they were gone.

He thought he knew what had happened. Only one power was great enough to cause them to cease to exist.

Against all odds, Jack must have succeeded in throwing Little Pete to the bugs. Only Petey could have done it. Sam's desperate, lunatic plan had worked, had actually worked.

But once Astrid knew that he was the one who had ordered Jack to do it, she would never speak to him again.

The town was saved. But Sam was lost.

You ordered the death of a five-year-old autistic boy, Mr. Temple?

The accusing tribunal was back.

That's right, he told them in his imagination. That's what I did.

He walked until he found himself at the cliff. The last time he'd been there . . . Well, groping Taylor seemed like a fairly small sin, now.

That's right. And because I did the bugs were destroyed. And lives were saved.

You don't get to make those decisions, Mr. Temple. God decides life or death.

"Yeah?" Sam said aloud. "Well, I don't think much of His decisions."

He stared out at the sea. He was standing just where Mary had stood when she jumped. But he was not tempted to follow her. Mary had been driven to insanity.

"That's right," Sam said to no one. "I did it. And it worked."

"Sam."

He spun on his heel. Astrid stood there. Jack was a hundred feet back and showing no desire to come any closer.

"Astrid."

Her eyes were red and swollen. She was looking past him, staring at the barrier with an expression he couldn't read.

"It's still there," she said.

He glanced at the impervious wall. "Yeah."

"But . . . but Petey's dead," she said. "It should have stopped. It shouldn't be there. It should all be over."

"I'm sorry about Little Pete."

"It's still there."

"I guess—," he began.

"For nothing! I killed him for nothing!" Astrid cried. "Oh, God, no! I did it for nothing!"

“You? You didn’t . . .” But then he saw the look in Jack’s eyes. Jack nodded, then looked down at the ground.

Instinctively he moved to Astrid, to put his arms around her. But something stopped him. He knew she wouldn’t welcome it.

It struck him then with the force of a revelation that she could not be with him while she felt weak or out of control. Astrid needed to be strong. She needed to be . . . Astrid.

And right now? She wasn’t. He had never seen her look so lost. He would have so happily taken her in his arms. But she wouldn’t have him. Not like this.

“Astrid . . .”

“For nothing,” she whispered.

He stepped back. “Astrid, listen: I had told Jack to do it. It was the only way. If you hadn’t . . .”

But she wasn’t listening. A look of pure hatred, a look he’d never have thought she was capable of, transformed her face. Was it for him? For the barrier?

For herself?

“I left, you know. I left town with Orc. And then I left Petey. I just walked out the door at Coates. I abandoned him. Him and Orc. Both of them needed me. But I walked away because I thought, ‘If I stay, I’ll be tempted.’ A simple act of murder. You know how a phrase will get stuck in your head and go around and around?”

He didn’t answer. She didn’t want him to answer. But yes, he knew.

“I knew if I killed Petey, it would all end,” she said. “And then, you know what? I walked around out there in the dark, just around in a big circle. And I talked myself out of it. See, I made sense of it all in my mind. Because I’m very, very smart.”

She laughed bitterly at that.

“Who is smarter than me? Astrid the Genius. I worked it all out and I made all the right arguments. And I prayed. And I came to a good and moral decision. And then? When I was there, and Drake . . . and I thought about Drake . . . when I thought . . .” She couldn’t go on.

“Astrid, we’ve all had to do—”

“Don’t,” she said. “No. Don’t.”

“Look, come with me,” he said. He reached for her, but he could feel a cold and impenetrable wall around her. She was somewhere else now. She was someone else. His hands dropped back to his side.

“How you must laugh at me with all my arrogance and superiority,” Astrid said quietly. “I wonder how you could stand me. Don’t you want to say, ‘I told you so,’ Sam? How can you not? If I were you, I’d say, ‘See? See, you silly, sanctimonious idiot? Welcome to Sam’s world. This is what I do, these are the decisions I make.’”

Yes. A part of him wanted to say that. A part of him wanted to say those very words. *Welcome to my world. It’s not so easy being Sam, is it?* He tried not to let that emotion show on his face, but it must have because Astrid nodded slightly as if he’d spoken.

He said all he could think of to say. “I love you, Astrid. No matter what, I love you.”

But if she heard him, she gave no sign. Astrid turned and walked away.

FIVE DAYS LATER

IT HAD BEEN a long time since so many kids filled the plaza. Not everyone had come, but most had. Looking down from the town hall steps, Sam saw faces that were fearful, others that were happy, and of course, as with any group of kids, some were just playing.

It was a good thing, he told himself, this ability to find some little piece of joy to hold on to.

The graveyard had swollen terribly. But the flu had burned itself out at last. There had been no new cases for forty-eight hours. No one was celebrating, no one was relaxing, but the deadly flu seemed to have run its course at last.

He stole a glance at his brother. Caine looked confident, certainly more confident than Sam felt. Caine wore the look of a self-appointed king well, Sam thought gloomily. He was perfectly dressed in gray slacks and a navy blazer over a pale blue collared shirt. How had he managed it?

The rest of his “court” were nowhere near as well turned-out, but were nevertheless better looking than Sam or his crew.

Diana, Penny, Turk, and Taylor all stood behind Caine.

Sam was with Dekka, but no longer the seemingly fearless, intimidating Dekka he had always known. She was weak in body, still recovering, and weaker still in spirit.

Brianna wasn’t standing so much as vibrating in place, unable to keep entirely still. She looked distracted and angry and was definitely refusing to make eye contact with Dekka.

Jack was the surprise to Sam, that he would bother to dress neatly and remember to show up. Jack was growing, had grown, as a person.

Edilio sat in a lawn chair. He looked like he was still close to death’s door, but the cough was gone, his fever was down, and he was determined.

The most notable absence was Astrid. She should have been there. He scanned the crowd for any sign of her. But no one had seen her. The gossips said she’d moved into a small apartment at the edge of town. Others said they’d seen her walking down the highway toward the Stefano Rey.

Sam had hoped she would appear today for the Big Break-Up, as Howard had dubbed this strange ceremony. But she was nowhere to be seen. And Sam’s friends now carefully avoided mentioning her name.

Toto stood awkwardly, self-conscious, twitchy, between the two separate camps.

“I think everyone is here,” Caine announced.

“He doesn’t believe that,” Toto said.

Caine smiled indulgently. “I think everyone is here that is likely to come,” Caine corrected.

“True,” Toto said.

“Yeah,” Sam said. His mouth was dry. He was nervous. He shouldn’t care. This

shouldn't matter. It wasn't as if he'd ever wanted to be a leader, let alone a popular one.

Caine held up his hand, signaling it was time for everyone to quiet down.

"You all know why we're here," Caine said in his fine, strong voice. "Sam and I both want peace—"

"Not true," Toto said.

Caine's eyes flashed angrily. But he forced a smile. "Toto, for those of you who don't know, is a freak with the power to tell truth from lie."

"True," Toto said.

"So. Okay. Let me start over," Caine said. "Sam and I don't like each other. My people don't like his people, and his people feel the same way about us." He paused to look at Toto.

Toto nodded and said, "He believes this."

"Yes, I do," Caine said dryly. "We have different visions for the future. Sam here wants to move everyone to this lake of his. I want to stay here in Perdido Beach."

The crowd was very quiet. Sam was both irritated and relieved that Caine was doing all the talking.

"Sam and I also have different ideas about leadership. Sam thinks it's a burden. Me? I think it's an opportunity."

"He . . . he believes that," Toto said. But he was frowning, perhaps sensing something about Caine that was neither true nor false.

"Today, each of you will make a decision," Caine said. "To go with Sam, or to stay here. I won't try to stop anyone, and I won't hold it against anyone." He placed his hand over his heart. "For those who choose to stay, let me be very clear: I will be in charge. Not as a mayor, but as a king. My word will be law. My decisions will be final."

That caused some murmuring, most of it unhappy.

"But I'll also do everything I can to leave each of you alone. Quinn, if he chooses to stay, can still fish. Albert, if he chooses to stay, will still run his business. Freaks and normals will be treated equally."

He seemed about to add something else but caught himself after a sidelong look at Toto.

The silence lengthened and Sam knew it was time for him to speak. In the past he'd always had Astrid at his side for things like this. He was not much of a speaker. And in any case, he didn't have much to say.

"Anyone who goes with me has a vote in how we do stuff. I guess I'll be more or less in charge, but we'll probably choose some other people, create a council like . . . Well, hopefully better than we had before. And, um . . ." He was tempted to laugh at his own pitiful performance. "Look, people, if you want someone, some . . . king, good grief, to tell you what to do, stay here. If you want to make more of your own decisions, well, come with me."

He hadn't said enough to even cause Toto to comment.

"You know which side I'm on, people," Brianna yelled. "Sam's been carrying the load since day one."

"It was Caine that saved us," a voice cried out. "Where was Sam?"

The crowd seemed undecided. Caine was beaming confidence, but Sam noticed

that his jaw clenched, his smile was forced, and he was worried.

“What’s Albert going to do?” a boy named Jim demanded. “Where’s Albert?”

Albert stepped from an inconspicuous position off to one side. He mounted the steps, moving carefully still, not entirely well even now.

He carefully chose a position equidistant between Caine and Sam.

“What should we do, Albert?” a voice asked plaintively.

Albert didn’t look out at the crowd except for a quick glance up, like he was just making sure he was pointed in the right direction. He spoke in a quiet, reasonable monotone. Kids edged closer to hear.

“I’m a businessman.”

“True.” Toto.

“My job is organizing kids to work, taking the things they harvest or catch, and redistributing them through a market.”

“And getting the best stuff for yourself,” someone yelled to general laughter.

“Yes,” Albert acknowledged. “I reward myself for the work I do.”

This blunt admission left the crowd nonplussed.

“Caine has promised that if I stay here he won’t interfere. But I don’t trust Caine.”

“No, he doesn’t,” Toto agreed.

“I do trust Sam. But . . .”

And now you could hear a pin drop.

“But . . . Sam is a weak leader.” He kept his eyes down. “Sam is the best fighter ever. He’s defended us many times. And he’s the best at figuring out how to survive. But Sam”—Albert now turned to him—“You are too humble. Too willing to step aside. When Astrid and the council sidelined you, you put up with it. I was part of that myself. But you let us push you aside and the council turned out to be useless.”

Sam stood stock-still, stone-faced.

“Let’s face it, you’re not really the reason things are better here, I am,” Albert said. “You’re way, way braver than me, Sam. And if it’s a battle, you rule. But you can’t organize or plan ahead and you won’t just put your foot down and make things happen.”

Sam nodded slightly. It was hard to hear. But far harder was seeing the way the crowd was nodding, agreeing. It was the truth. The fact was he’d let the council run things, stepped aside, and then sat around feeling sorry for himself. He’d jumped at the chance to go off on an adventure and he hadn’t been here to save the town when they needed it.

“So,” Albert concluded, “I’m keeping my things here, in Perdido Beach. But there will be free trading of stuff between Perdido Beach and the lake. And Lana has to be allowed to move freely.”

Caine bristled at that. He didn’t like Albert laying down conditions.

Albert wasn’t intimidated. “I feed these kids,” he said to Caine. “I do it my way.”

Caine hesitated, then made a tight little bow of the head.

“I want you to say it,” Albert said with a nod toward Toto.

Sam saw panic in Caine’s eyes. If he lied now the jig would be up for him. Toto would call him out, Albert would support Sam, and the kids would follow Albert’s lead.

Sam wondered if Caine was just starting to realize what Sam had known for some

time: if anyone was king, it was neither Sam nor Caine, it was Albert.

It took Caine a long time to answer. His smile faded as understanding dawned on him. He could only tell the truth. Which meant believing it.

Accepting it.

In a deflated voice very unlike his lordly swagger earlier, Caine said, “Yeah. Albert decides anything about money or work or trade back and forth between Perdido Beach and the lake. And the Healer goes wherever the Healer wants to go.”

Sam had to resist an urge to laugh out loud. After all that had happened between him and Caine, after all Caine’s posturing today, it wasn’t big, charming, handsome, and very powerful Caine, or Sam either, who ran the FAYZ. It was a reserved, skinny black kid whose only power was the ability to work hard and stay focused.

Caine’s big moment, his great triumphant return, had been tarnished.

“Okay,” Sam said. “I’m going to Ralph’s. Anyone coming with me, head over there. I’ll wait two hours. Bring bottled water and whatever food you have. It’s a long walk to the lake.”

He walked down the steps, turned away without looking back, and walked toward the highway. He had the strangest feeling that he was walking alone.

At the highway he paused. Brianna was there, of course. Dekka, too, and Jack. Jack carried Edilio like a baby—a very large baby.

In addition there were forty or fifty others who had picked up and left their homes to follow him.

Quinn came forward and Sam pulled him aside. His old friend looked tortured and sad.

“What’s up, brah?” Sam asked.

Quinn couldn’t speak. He was choked with emotion. “Dude . . .”

“You want to stay in town.”

“My crews . . . my boats and all . . .”

Sam put a hand on his shoulder. “Quinn, I’m glad you found something so important to do. Something you really like.”

“Yeah, but . . .”

Sam pulled him into a brief hug. “You and me, we’re still friends, man. But you have responsibilities.”

Quinn nodded miserably.

Sam scanned the crowd again, searching for Astrid. She was not there.

It wasn’t far to Ralph’s parking lot. Sam sagged against a parked car. Some of the kids came up to offer statements of support or encouragement. But most came up to say things like, “You really have Nutella?” Or “Can I live on a boat? That would be so cool.”

They were coming for Nutella and noodles, not for him.

He felt numb. Like everything that was happening was happening to someone else. He pictured himself at the lake, on a houseboat. Dekka would be there, and Brianna and Jack. He would have friends. He wouldn’t be alone.

But he couldn’t stop himself from looking for her.

She no longer had Little Pete to worry about. They could be together without all of that. But of course he knew Astrid, and knew that right now, wherever she was, she was eaten up inside with guilt.

“She’s not coming, is she?” Sam said to Dekka.

But Dekka didn’t answer. She was somewhere else in her head. Sam saw her glance and look away as Brianna laid a light hand on Jack’s shoulder.

Dahra was staying in the hospital, but a few more kids came. Groups of three or four at a time. The Siren and the kids she lived with came. John Terrafino came. Ellen. He waited. He would wait the full two hours. Not for her, he told himself, just to keep his word.

Then Orc, with Howard.

Sam groaned inwardly.

“You gotta be kidding me,” Brianna said.

“The deal was kids make a choice,” Sam said. “I think Howard just realized how dangerous life can be for a criminal living in a place where the ‘king’ can decide life or death.”

To Sam’s relief, Howard did not come over to talk to him. Orc and he sat in the back of a pickup truck. Other kids gave them a wide berth.

“It’s time,” Jack said.

“Breeze? Count the kids,” Sam said.

Brianna was back in twenty seconds. “Eighty-two, boss.”

“About a third,” Jack observed. “A third of what’s left.”

“Wait. Make that eighty-eight,” Brianna said. “And a dog.”

Lana, looking deeply irritated—a fairly usual expression for her—and Sanjit, looking happy—a fairly usual expression for him—and Sanjit’s siblings were trotting along to catch up.

“I don’t know if we’re staying up there or not,” Lana said without preamble. “I want to check it out. And my room smells like crap.”

Just before the time was up, Sam heard a stir. Kids were making a lane for someone, murmuring. His heart leaped.

“Hey, Sam.”

He swallowed the lump in his throat. “Diana?”

“Not expecting me, huh?” She made a wry face. “Where’s blondie? I didn’t see her at the big pep rally.”

“Are you coming with us?” Brianna demanded, obviously not happy about it.

“Is Caine okay with this?” Sam asked Diana. “It’s your choice, but I need to know if he’s going to come after us to take you back.”

“Caine has what he wants,” Diana said.

“Maybe I should call Toto over,” Sam said. The truth teller was having a conversation with Spidey. “I could ask you whether you’re coming along to spy for Caine, and see what Toto has to say.”

Diana sighed. “Sam, I have bigger problems than Caine. And so do you, I guess. Because the FAYZ is going to do something it’s never done before: grow by one.”

“What’s that mean?”

“You are going to be an uncle.”

Sam stared blankly. Brianna said a very rude word. And even Dekka looked up.

“You’re having a baby?” Dekka asked.

“Let’s hope so,” Diana said bleakly. “Let’s hope that’s all it is.”

PETE

HE WALKED ON the edge of a sheet of glass a million miles high.

On one side, far, far below him, the jangly noises and eye-searing colors were dimmed. He saw his sister's yellow hair and piercing blue eyes, but now he was too far away for them to hurt him.

He saw the echoes of the lurid, bright-eyed monsters who had tried to eat him. They were ghosts sinking lazily down toward the greenish glow far, far below.

They had reached for him with stinging tongues and slicing mouths. So he had made them disappear.

The pain in his body was gone. He was cool and light and amazingly limber. He turned a cartwheel along the edge of the glass and laughed.

His body, full of heat and aching and coughs like volcanoes, had gone away, too. Just like the bugs.

No body, no pain.

Little Pete smiled down at the Darkness. It did not try to touch him now. It shrank away.

It was afraid.

Afraid of him.

Little Pete felt as if a giant weight had been lifted off his shoulders. All of it, the too-bright colors and the too-penetrating eyes, and the misty tendrils that reached for his mind, all of it was so very far off.

Now Little Pete floated up and away from the sheet of glass. He no longer needed to teeter precariously there. He could go anywhere. He was free of the sister and free of the Darkness. He was free at last from the disease-wracked body. And he was free, too, from the tortured, twisted, stunted brain that had made the world so painful to him.

For the first time Little Pete saw the world without cringing or needing to run away. It was as if he'd been watching the world through a veil, through milky glass, and now saw it all clearly for the first time in his brief existence.

His whole life he had needed to hide. And now he gasped at the thrill of seeing and hearing and feeling.

His sick body was gone. His distorting, terrifying brain was gone.

But Pete Ellison had never been more alive.

PRAISE

FOR THE GONE SERIES

Gone

“This intense, marvelously plotted, paced, and characterized story will immediately garner comparisons to *Lord of the Flies* or even the long-playing world shifts of Stephen King, with just a dash of *X-Men* for good measure. A potent mix of action and thoughtfulness—centered around good and evil, courage and cowardice—renders this a tour de force that will leave readers dazed, disturbed, and utterly breathless.”

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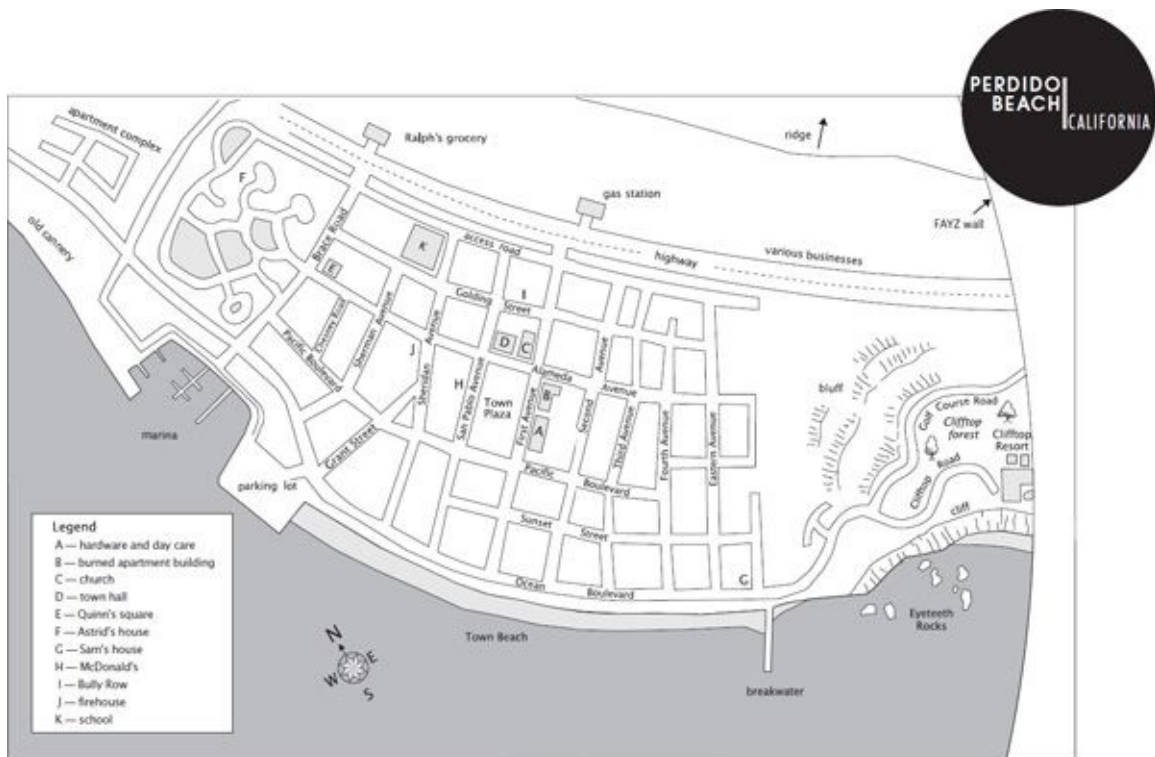
FEAR

A GONE NOVEL

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MICHAEL GRANT

MAPS





FEAR

A GONE Novel

 KATHERINE TEGEN BOOKS
An imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

MICHAEL GRANT

DEDICATION

For Katherine, Jake, and Julia

EPIGRAPH

*O LORD, my God, I call for help by day;
I cry out in the night before thee. . . .
Thou hast put me in the depths of the Pit,
in the regions dark and deep.
Thy wrath lies heavy upon me, and thou dost overwhelm me with all thy waves.
Thou hast caused my companions to shun me;
thou hast made me a thing of horror to them.
I am shut in so that I cannot escape;
my eye grows dim through sorrow. . . .
Afflicted and close to death from my youth up,
I suffer thy terrors; I am helpless.
Thy wrath has swept over me; thy dread assaults destroy me. . . .
Thou hast caused lover and friend to shun me;
my companions are in darkness.
—Psalm 88: 1, 6–9, 15–16, 18 (Revised Standard Version)*

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Later

Praise
Credits
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OUTSIDE

ONE MINUTE NURSE Connie Temple had been updating her journal on her little laptop. And the next minute she was gone.

There.

Gone.

No “poof.” No flash of light. No explosion.

Connie Temple had found herself on the beach. On her back. In the sand. She’d been sitting when it happened and so she had sat down suddenly on the sand and had fallen onto her back, with her knees drawn up.

All around her lay others. People she didn’t know. Some she recognized as faces in town.

Some were standing, some were sitting, some sat as though they were still holding on to a steering wheel. Some were in workout clothing and seemed to have arrived on the beach, on the highway, still running.

A man Connie recognized as a teacher at Sam’s school stood blinking, hand raised, like he’d been writing something on a chalkboard.

Connie had stood slowly, dazed, not believing any of it was real. Wondering if she’d had a stroke. Wondering if this was some hallucination. Wondering if this was the end of the world. Or the end of her life.

And then she had seen it: a blank, gray, featureless wall. It was incredibly tall and seemed to curve away.

It extended out into the ocean. It cut the highway. It cut Clifftop, a posh hotel, in half. It extended inland, far out of sight, cutting through everything in its way.

Only later would they learn that it was a sphere twenty miles across. Aerial shots soon popped up all over the internet.

Only later, after days of disbelief and denial, did the world accept that none of the children had been transported. Every single person under the age of fifteen was gone.

Of the population of Perdido Beach, California, and some of the surrounding area, not a single adult had been killed, though some had been injured when they found themselves suddenly in the desert, suddenly in the water, suddenly tumbling down a hillside. One woman found herself suddenly in another person’s home. One man had appeared wet, wearing a bathing suit and standing in the middle of the highway with cars swerving like crazy to avoid him.

But in the end there had been only one death: a salesman from San Luis Obispo on his way down to talk about insurance with a couple in Perdido Beach. He hadn’t seen the barrier across the road up in the Stefano Rey National Park and his Hyundai hit it going seventy miles an hour.

Connie couldn’t remember his name now.

A lot of names had come and gone in her life since then.

With an effort she pulled herself out of the memory of that day. Something important was being said by Colonel Matteu.

“The energy signature has changed.”

“The what?” Connie Temple glanced at Abana Baidoo. They had become good

friends over these long, terrible months. Abana usually had a better grasp of the scientific details than Connie. But now she just shrugged.

George Zellicoe, the third of the family spokespeople, had checked out mentally a long time ago. He still came to the briefings, but he'd fallen silent. Connie and Abana had both tried to reach out to him, but he was lost now. Depression had claimed him and now there wasn't much left of the once energetic, opinionated man.

"The energy signature," Colonel Matteu said. "What we've started calling the J wave."

"What does that mean, exactly?" Connie asked.

The colonel didn't look much like a colonel. He had the flawlessly pressed army uniform, of course, and the neatly trimmed hair, but he tended to slouch inside that uniform, leaving the impression that either it was a size too big or he had shrunk since buying it.

He was the third officer to be assigned to command the forces at the Bowl. The Bowl. The Perdido Beach Blister. He was the first to be able to answer a simple question honestly.

"We don't know. All we know is that right from the start we got this energy signature and it was one-way. And now it's shifting."

"But you don't know what that means," Abana said. She had a way of talking that turned every question into an incredulous challenge.

"No, ma'am. We don't know."

Connie heard the slight overemphasis on the word "know."

"What is it they suspect?" Connie asked.

The colonel sighed. "I preface this by reminding all of us that we've been through a dozen—a hundred—different theories. Nothing has been right so far. We had one set of theories when the twins appeared safe and sound. And then, when Francis . . ."

No one needed to be reminded of Francis. What had emerged of Francis had been a horror caught on camera, live, and rebroadcast again and again to a sickened world. Seventy million plays on YouTube.

Soon after that, there had been Mary. That, mercifully, had not been filmed. They'd found her and removed what was left of the girl to a facility where she was kept alive. If you could call it life.

The air-conditioning suddenly came alive. The trailers tended to be hot, even on cool days like this one with the ocean breeze blowing.

"We know by now not to believe everything we hear," Abana said mordantly.

The colonel nodded. "They think there may be a . . . a softening, they're calling it." He held up a hand, cutting off the quick reaction. "No, they still can't penetrate the barrier. But in the past when they've tried bombarding portions of the barrier with X-rays or gamma rays the barrier has acted as a perfect mirror, bouncing back a hundred percent of the energy that struck it."

"That's changed?"

"The last test showed ninety-eight-point-four percent refraction. It doesn't sound like much. And it may not mean anything. But it's been a hundred percent since day one. And a hundred percent every day since. And now it's not a hundred percent."

"It's weakening," Abana said.

"Maybe."

The three of them, Connie, Abana, and George (the parents of Sam, Dahra, and E.Z.) left the trailer. The California National Guard's grandly named Camp Camino Real stood on the landward side of the highway, in a vacant stretch of land just a quarter mile from the southern boundary of the Bowl. It was an array of two dozen trailers and sheds laid out with military precision. More permanent buildings—a barracks, a motor pool, a maintenance building—were under construction.

When Camp Camino Real had first gone up it was all alone on the lovely, windswept heights above the beach. But since then the Courtyard by Marriott had been completed, as had the Carl's Jr. The Del Taco had just sold its first burrito a few days ago, and the Holiday Inn Express had opened one wing while construction continued on the rest.

There were only two media satellite trucks left, parked by the side of the highway. But they rarely got any on-air time anymore: the country and the world had largely lost interest, although about two thousand tourists a day still made the trip up the highway to the viewing area, parking all along the highway for a mile or more.

A handful of souvenir vendors still made a living from canvas-awned stalls.

George climbed into his car and drove off without a word. Connie and Abana lived here now, sharing a Winnebago with a privileged parking spot overlooking the Pacific. They had a nice gas barbecue donated by Home Depot, and every Friday evening she and Abana would have a cookout—burgers or ribs—with the media people and whatever Guardsmen or soldiers or highway patrolmen happened to be around and off duty.

The two women walked across the highway from Camp Camino Real and sat in lawn chairs turned toward the ocean. Connie made coffee and brought a cup to Abana.

"Do we hold a conference call on this?" Abana asked.

Connie sighed. "The families will want to know."

The families. That was the term settled on by the media. At first they had referred to them as "the survivors." But that had implied the others, the children, had died. Even at the start the mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, had rejected that idea.

Out at sea a coast guard cutter rode on gentle waves, guarding the watery perimeter of the anomaly. A grief-crazed family member had driven a boatload of explosives into the side of the dome months earlier. The resulting explosion had had no effect on the Bowl, of course.

"I was just getting to the point . . .," Connie began.

Abana waited and sipped her coffee.

"I was getting to the point where I was starting to think I needed to get back to something else. You know? Like maybe it was time to move on."

Her friend nodded. "And now this. This weakening. This one-point-six-percent change."

"And now, and now, and now," Connie said wearily. "Hope is cruel."

"Some guy, some physicist at Stanford, says if the barrier ever does come down it could be catastrophic."

"He's not the first to say that."

"Yeah, well, maybe not. But he's the first to have a Nobel Prize. He thinks the barrier is some form of protective coating over an antimatter sphere. He's worried it could set off an explosion big enough to annihilate the western half of the United

States.”

Connie made a dismissive snort. “Theory number eight thousand seven hundred and forty-two.”

“Yeah,” Abana agreed. But she looked worried.

“That’s not going to happen,” Connie said firmly. “Because what’s going to happen is that the barrier is going to come down. And my son Sam and your daughter, Dahra, are going to come walking down that road.”

Abana smiled. She finished their long-worn joke. “And walk right past us to get a burger at Carl’s.”

Connie reached for her hand. “That’s right. That’s what’s going to happen. It’ll be, ‘Hey, Mom, see you later: I’m going to go grab a burger.’”

They were quiet for a while. Both women closed their eyes and lifted their faces to the sun.

“If only there had been some warning,” Abana said.

She’d said it before: she regretted having argued with her daughter the morning before the event.

And as usual the response was on the tip of Connie’s tongue: I did have warning.

I had a warning.

But this time, as every time, Connie Temple said nothing.

ONE

65 HOURS, 11 MINUTES

SHE WORE A pair of jeans and a plaid flannel shirt over a black T-shirt several sizes too big.

A leather belt made two turns around her waist. It was a man's belt, and a big man at that. But it was sturdy and bore the weight of the .38 revolver, the machete, and her water bottle.

Her backpack was dirty and the seams were all frayed, but it sat comfortably on her thin shoulders. In the pack she had three precious vacuum packs of dehydrated macaroni liberated from distant campsites. Just add water. She also had most of a cooked pigeon in a Tupperware container, a dozen wild green onions, a bottle of vitamins—she allowed herself one every three days—as well as pencil and paper, three books, a small bag of pot and a small pipe, needle and thread, two Bic lighters, and a spare water bottle. There was also a medicine pouch: a few Band-Aids, a mostly used tube of Neosporin and a dozen precious Tylenol, and infinitely more precious tampons.

Astrid Ellison had changed.

Her blond hair was short, hacked off crudely with a knife and without benefit of a mirror. Her face was deeply tanned. Her hands were calloused and scarred from the innumerable small cuts she'd gotten from prying open mussels. One fingernail had been torn completely off when she slipped down an abrupt hill and ended up saving herself only by clawing madly at rocks and shrubs.

Astrid swung the pack off her shoulders, loosened the drawstring, and extracted a pair of heavy gloves sized for a grown man.

She surveyed the blackberry bramble for ripe berries. They didn't all ripen at once, and she never allowed herself to take any before they were fully developed. This was her blackberry patch, the only one she'd located, and she was determined not to be greedy.

Astrid's stomach rumbled as she dealt with the incredibly sharp thorns—so sharp they sometimes went right through the gloves—and pried berries loose. She took two dozen: dessert for later.

She was at the northern edge of the FAYZ, up where the barrier cut through the Stefano Rey National Park. Here the trees—redwoods, black oak, quaking aspen, ash—grew tall. Some were cut through by the barrier. In places branches went into the barrier. She wondered if they came out the other side.

She wasn't far inland, just a quarter mile or maybe a little more from the shore, where she often searched for oysters, clams, mussels, and crabs no bigger than large roaches.

Astrid was usually hungry. But she wasn't starving.

Water was a bigger concern. She'd found a water tank at the ranger station, and she'd found a tiny stream of what seemed like clean, fresh water fed from some underground aquifer, but neither was close to her camp. And since water weighed a lot to carry, she had to watch every drop and—

A sound.

Astrid crouched, swung her shotgun off her shoulder, raised it, sighted along the barrels, all in one fluid, long-practiced move.

She listened. Listened hard. She heard her heart pounding and willed it to slow, slow, quiet so she could listen.

Her breath was ragged but she calmed it a little, at least.

She scanned slowly, turning her upper body left to right, then back, covering the trees where she thought the sound had come from. She listened hard in all directions.

Nothing.

Sound!

Dry leaves and damp earth. Not heavy, whatever it was. It wasn't a heavy sound. Not a Drake sound. Not even a coyote.

Astrid relaxed a little. Her shoulders were tight. She rolled them, hoping to avoid a cramp.

Something small scuttled away. Probably a possum or a skunk.

Not Drake.

Not the monster with the tentacle for an arm. Not the sadist. The psychopath.

The murderer, Whip Hand.

Astrid stood all the way up and slipped the shotgun back into place.

How many times each day did she endure this same fear? How many hundreds of times had she peered into the trees or bushes or rocks searching for that narrow, dead-eyed face? Day and night. As she dressed. As she cooked. As she used the slit trench. When she slept. How many times? And how many times had she imagined firing both barrels of the shotgun straight into his face, obliterating his features, blood spraying . . . and knowing that he would still come after her?

She would pump round after round into him and still she would be the one running and gasping for air, tripping through the forest, crying, and knowing that nothing she could do would stop him.

The evil that could not be killed.

The evil that sooner or later would take her.

With her berries safely tucked away in her backpack Astrid headed back toward her camp.

Camp was two tents: one—buff colored—she slept in, and one—green with tan lining—she used for storage of nonfood items scavenged from the various campgrounds, ranger offices, and trash heaps in the Stefano Rey.

Once home Astrid unloaded her berries and the rest of the food she'd brought with her into a red-and-white plastic cooler. She'd dug a hole right up against the barrier, and the cooler fit perfectly into that hole.

She'd learned many things in the four months since she had left everyone and everything behind and gone off into the woods. One thing she had learned was that animals avoided the barrier. Even the insects stayed a few feet back. So storing her food right up against that eye-tricking, pearly gray wall kept her food supply safe.

It also helped to keep her safe. Camping here, this close to the barrier, and right at the cliff's edge, meant there were fewer ways a predator could come at her.

She had strung a wire in a perimeter around the camp. The wire was hung with bottles containing marbles, and rusty cans. Anything that hit the wire would make a racket.

She couldn't say she felt safe. A world where Drake was presumably still alive would never be safe. But she felt as safe here as anywhere in the FAYZ.

Astrid flopped into her nylon sling chair, propped her weary feet up on a second chair, and opened a book. Life now was an almost constant search for food, and without any lamp she had only an hour of light at sunset to read.

It was a beautiful location atop a sheer bluff by the ocean. But she turned to the setting sun to catch the red rays on the page of her book.

The book was *Heart of Darkness*.

I tried to break the spell—the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness—that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions. This alone, I was convinced, had driven him out to the edge of the forest, to the bush, towards the gleam of fires, the throb of drums, the drone of weird incantations; this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations.

Astrid looked up at the trees. Her camp was in a small clearing, but the trees pressed close on two sides. They weren't as towering here close to the shore as they were farther inland. These seemed friendlier trees than the ones deeper into the forest.

“The heavy, mute spell of the wilderness,” Astrid read aloud.

For her the spell was about forgetfulness. The harsh life she now lived was less harsh than the reality she had left behind in Perdido Beach. That was the true wilderness. But there she had awakened forgotten and brutal instincts.

Here it was only nature trying to starve her, break her bones, cut and poison her. Nature was relentless but it was free of malice. Nature did not hate her.

It was not nature that had driven her to sacrifice her brother's life.

Astrid closed her eyes and then the book and tried to calm the rush of emotion inside her. Guilt was a fascinating thing: it seemed not to weaken over time. If anything it grew stronger as the circumstances faded from memory, as the fear and the necessity became abstract. And only her own actions stood out with crystal clarity.

She had hurled her sick, strange little brother to the huge, appalling creatures that threatened her and threatened every human in the FAYZ.

Her brother had disappeared.

So had the creatures.

The sacrifice had worked.

Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.”

Only no loving God, seeing her faith, had intervened to stop the killing.

For the excellent reason that there was no loving God.

That it had taken her so long to realize this was an embarrassment to her. She was Astrid the Genius, after all. The name she had carried for years. And yet Sam, with his shoulder-shrugging indifference to all matters religious, had been so much closer to

the truth.

What kind of a fool looked at the world as it was—and this terrible world of the FAYZ especially—and believed in God? A God actually paying attention, let alone caring about his creations?

She had murdered Little Pete.

Murdered. She didn't want to dress it up with any nice word.

She wanted it harsh. She wanted the word to be sandpaper dragged across her raw conscience. She wanted to use that awful word to obliterate whatever was left of Astrid the Genius.

It was a good thing to have decided there was no God, because if there were then she would be damned to eternal hell.

Astrid's hands shook. She laid the book flat on her lap. From her backpack she retrieved the bag of pot. She rationalized the drug on the grounds that it was the only way she could fall asleep. If this were the normal world, she might have a prescription for a sleeping pill. And that wouldn't be wrong, would it?

Well, she needed to sleep. Hunting and fishing were early morning activities and she needed to sleep.

She flicked the lighter and brought it to the bowl of the pipe. Two hits: that was her rule. Just two.

Then she hesitated. A memory twinge. Something nagging at her consciousness, warning her that she had seen something important and missed it.

Astrid frowned, tracing back her actions. She set aside the pot and the book and walked back to her buried pantry. She hauled up the cooler. It was too dark to see into the hole, so she made the decision to use a few precious seconds of battery life and flicked on a small flashlight.

She knelt down, and yes, there it was. Three sides of the hole were dirt; the fourth was the barrier. Nothing ever stuck to the barrier—nothing. And yet, a few small clumps of dirt now did exactly that.

Astrid drew her knife and poked at the dirt, which fell away.

Was it her imagination? The barrier down in the hole looked different. It no longer seemed to glow softly. It was darker. The illusion of translucency was gone. Now it seemed opaque. Black.

She drew the sharp point of her knife along the barrier, from above the hole down.

It was subtle, almost imperceptible. But the knifepoint glided with no resistance whatsoever until it reached the darker color and then the point dragged. Not much. Not much at all. Just as if it had gone from polished glass to burnished steel.

She flicked off the light and took a deep, shaky breath.

The barrier was changing.

Astrid closed her eyes and stood there for a long moment, swaying slightly.

She put the cooler back into the hole. She would have to await sunrise to see more. But she already knew what she had seen. The beginning of the endgame. And she still didn't know what the game was.

Astrid lit the pipe, took a deep lungful, then, after a few minutes, another. She felt her emotions go fuzzy and indistinct. The guilt faded. And within half an hour sleep drew her to her tent, where she crawled into her sleeping bag and lay with her arms curled around the shotgun.

Astrid giggled. So, she thought, she wouldn't have to go to hell. Hell was coming to her.

When that final night came the demon Drake would find her.
She would run. But never fast enough.

TWO

64 HOURS, 57 MINUTES

“PATRICK, YOUR GENIUS is showing!” Terry cried in a high falsetto voice.

“It iiiiiis?” Philip asked in a low, very dumb voice. He covered himself with his hands and a wave of laughter rose from the assembled audience.

It was Friday Fun Fest at Lake Tramonto. Every Friday the kids rewarded themselves with an evening of entertainment. In this case, Terry and Philip were doing a re-creation of a *SpongeBob* episode. Terry had a yellow T-shirt painted with spongelike holes, and Phil wore an arguably pink T-shirt for the role of Patrick Star.

The “stage” was the top deck of a big houseboat that had been shoved out into the water so that it wallowed a few dozen feet off the dock. Becca, who played Sandy Cheeks, and Darryl, who did a very good Squidward, were in the cabin below waiting for their cues.

Sam Temple watched from the marina office, a narrow, two-story, gray-sided tower that afforded him a clear view over the heads of the crowd below. Normally the houseboat was his, but not when there was a show to put on.

The crowd in question was 103 kids, ranging from one year old to fifteen. But, he thought ruefully, no audience of kids had ever looked quite like this.

No one over the age of five went unarmed. There were knives, machetes, baseball bats, sticks with big spikes driven through them, chains, and guns.

No one was fashionably dressed. At least, not by any of the normal standards. Kids wore disintegrating shirts and jeans in sizes way too large. Some wore ponchos made of blankets. Many went barefoot. Some had decorated themselves with feathers stuck in their hair, big diamond rings made to fit with tape, painted faces, plastic flowers, all manner of bandannas, ties, and crisscross belts.

But they were clean, at least. Much cleaner than they’d been back in Perdido Beach almost a year ago. The move to Lake Tramonto had given them a seemingly endless supply of freshwater. Soap was long gone, as was detergent, but freshwater did wonders all by itself. It was possible to be in a group of kids now without gagging on the stink.

Here and there as the sun sank and the shadows grew Sam could make out the flare of cigarette butts. And despite all they’d tried to do there were still bottles of booze—either original or moonshine—being passed around the small gaggles of kids. And probably, if he’d bothered, he could have caught a whiff of marijuana.

But mostly things were better. Between the food they raised and the fish they caught in the lake and the food they traded for from Perdido Beach, no one was starving. This was an accomplishment of epic proportion.

And then there was the Sinder project, which had amazing potential.

So why did he have this itchy feeling that something was wrong? And more than just a feeling. It was like something half-seen. Less than that. Like a feeling that there was something he should have seen, would have seen if he just turned around quickly enough.

It was like that. Like something that stood just outside the range of his peripheral vision. When he turned to look it was still in his peripheral vision.

It was looking at him.

It was doing it right now.

“Paranoia,” Sam muttered. “You’re going slowly nuts, dude. Or maybe not so slowly, since you’re talking to yourself.”

He sighed and shook his head and formed a grin he hoped would spread from without to within. He just wasn’t used to so much . . . peace. Four months of it. Good grief.

Sam heard footsteps on the rickety stairs. The door opened. He glanced back.

“Diana,” he said. He stood up and offered her his chair.

“Really not necessary,” Diana said. “I’m pregnant, not crippled.” But she took the chair anyway.

“How are you doing?”

“My boobs are swollen and they hurt,” she said. She cocked her head sideways and looked at him with a degree of affection. “Really? That makes you blush?”

“I’m not blushing. It’s . . .” He couldn’t really think of what else it might be.

“Well, then, I’ll spare you some of the more disturbing things going on with my body right now. On the good side I no longer throw up every morning.”

“Yes. That is good,” Sam said.

“On the downside, I have to pee more or less all the time.”

“Ah.” This conversation was definitely making him uncomfortable. In fact, even looking at Diana made him uncomfortable. She had a definite, noticeable bulge beneath her T-shirt. And yet she was no less beautiful than she’d ever been and still had the same knowing, challenging smirk.

“Shall we discuss the darkening of areolae?” she teased.

“Please, I’m begging you: no.”

“The thing is, it’s early for some of this,” Diana said. She tried to make it sound casual. But she failed.

“Uh-huh.”

“I shouldn’t be this big. I have all the books on pregnancy, and they all say I shouldn’t be this big. Not at four months.”

“You look okay,” Sam said with a certain desperate edge in his voice. “I mean good. You look good. Better than good. I mean, you know, beautiful.”

“Seriously? You’re hitting on me?”

“No!” Sam cried. “No. No, no, no, no. Not that . . .” He let that trail off and bit his lip.

Diana laughed delightedly. “You are so easy to mess with.” Then she grew serious. “Have you ever heard of the quickening?”

“Like for taxes?”

“No. No, Sam, that would be Quicken. The quickening is when the fetus starts to move.”

“Oh. Yeah. That.”

“Give me your hand,” Diana said.

He was absolutely sure he did not want to give her his hand. He had a terrible premonition what she would do with his hand. But he could not think of a way to refuse.

Diana looked at him with an innocent expression. “Come on, Sam, you’re the one

who can always find a way out of a life-or-death crisis. Can't you think of a way to refuse?"

That forced a smile from him. "I was trying. Brain freeze."

"Okay, then, give me your hand."

He did and she placed his palm against her belly.

"Yep, that's a, um, a definite belly," he said.

"Yeah, I was hoping you'd agree that that is a belly. I needed a second opinion. Just wait . . . There!"

He had felt it. A small movement in her tight-stretched bulge.

He made a sickly smile and withdrew his hand. "So, quickening, huh?"

"Yes," Diana said, no longer kidding. "More than that, really. I would call it a kick. And guess what? It started about three weeks ago, which would be my thirteenth week. Now, you might think, pfff, no big deal. But here's the thing, Sam: human babies all grow at basically the same rate. It's clockwork. And human babies do not start kicking at thirteen weeks."

Sam hesitated, not sure if he should acknowledge the use of that word, "human." Whatever Diana feared or suspected or even was just imagining, he didn't want it to be his problem.

He had plenty of problems already. Distant problems: down on a deserted stretch of beach there was a container-load of shoulder-fired missiles. As far as he knew, his brother, Caine, had not found them. If Sam tried to move them and Caine found out, it would likely start a war with Perdido Beach.

And Sam had problems nearer to his heart: Brianna had discovered Astrid's haunt in the Stefano Rey. Sam had known Astrid was still alive. He'd had reports of her staying near the power plant for a few days after the great bug battle and the Big Split that had separated the kids of the FAYZ into Perdido Beach and Lake Tramonto groups.

He'd also learned that she had slept for a while in an overturned Winnebago on a back road in the farm country. He had waited patiently for her to come back. But she never had, and then he'd heard nothing about her for the last three months.

Now, just yesterday morning, Brianna had located her. Brianna's super-speed made her an effective searcher on roads, but it had taken her longer to thread her way through the forest; it was not a good idea to trip over a tree root at seventy miles an hour.

Of course, searching for Astrid was not Brianna's main mission. Her main mission was to find the Drake-Brittney creature. Nothing had been seen or heard of Drake, but no one believed he was dead. Not truly dead.

Sam came reluctantly back to the problem of Diana. "What's your reading on the baby?"

"The baby is a three bar," Diana said. "The first time I read? Two bar. So, still growing."

Sam was shocked. "Three bar?"

"Yes, Sam. He, she, or it is a mutant. A powerful one. Growing more powerful."

"Have you told anyone else?"

Diana shook her head. "I'm not stupid, Sam. Caine would come after it if he knew. He would kill us both if he had to."

“His own child?” Sam had a hard time believing that even Caine would be that depraved.

“Maybe not,” Diana said. “He made it very clear when I told him that he wanted nothing to do with it. I would say the idea sickened him. But a powerful mutant? Very different story. He might just take us. Caine might want to control the baby, or he might want to kill it, but for him there’s no third choice. Anything else would be . . .” She searched his face as if the right word might be written there. “Humiliating.”

Sam felt his stomach churning. They’d had four months of peace. In that time Sam, Edilio, and Dekka had taken on the job of setting up a sort of half-aquatic town. Well, mostly Edilio. They had parceled out the houseboats, sailboats, motorboats, campers, and tents. They’d arranged for a septic tank to be dug, well away from the lake to avoid disease. Just to be safe they had set up a system of hauling water from halfway down the shore to the east in what they called the lowlands, and forbidden anyone to drink the water where they bathed and swam.

It had been amazing to watch the quiet authority Edilio brought to the job. Sam was nominally in charge, but it never would have occurred to Sam to worry so much about sanitation.

The fishing boats, with crews trained by Quinn down in Perdido Beach, still brought in a decent haul every day. They had planted carrots, tomatoes, and squash in the low patch up by the barrier, and under Sinder’s care they were growing very nicely.

They had locked up their precious stash of Nutella, Cup-a-Noodles, and Pepsi, using those as currency to buy additional fish, clams, and mussels from Perdido Beach, where Quinn’s crews still fished.

They also had negotiated control over some of the farmlands, so artichokes, cabbage, and the occasional melon could still be had.

In truth Albert managed all the trade between the lake and PB, as they called it, but the day-to-day management of the lake was up to Sam. Which meant Edilio.

Almost from the beginning of the FAYZ, Sam had lived with fantasies of a sort of personal judgment day. He pictured himself standing before judges who would peer down at him and demand he justify every single thing he had done.

Justify every failure.

Justify every mistake.

Justify every body buried in the town plaza in Perdido Beach.

These last few months he had begun to have those imaginary conversations less frequently. He’d started thinking maybe, on balance, they would see that he had done some things right.

“Don’t tell anyone,” Sam cautioned Diana. Then he said, “Have you thought about . . . Well, I guess we don’t know what the baby’s powers might be.”

Diana showed her ironic smirk. “You mean have I thought about what might happen if the baby can burn things like you can, Sam? Or has his father’s telekinetic power? Or any number of other abilities? No, Sam, no, I haven’t even thought about what happens when he, she, or it has a bad day and burns a hole in me from the inside out.”

Sam sighed. “He or she, Diana. Not it.”

He expected a wisecrack answer. Instead Diana’s carefully controlled expression collapsed. “Its father is evil. So is its mother,” she whispered. She twisted her fingers

together, too hard, so hard it must be painful. “How can it not be the same?”

“Before I pass judgment,” Caine said, “does anyone have anything to say for Cigar?”

Caine did not refer to his chair as a throne. That would have been too laughable, even though he styled himself “King Caine.”

It was a heavy wooden chair of dark wood grabbed from an empty house. He believed the style was called Moorish. It sat a few feet back from the top stair of stone steps that led up to the ruined church.

Not a throne in name, but a throne in fact. He sat upright, not stiff but regal. He wore a purple polo shirt, jeans, and square-toed black cowboy boots. One boot rested on a low, upholstered footstool.

On Caine’s left stood Penny. Lana, the Healer, had fixed her shattered legs. Penny wore a sundress that hung limply from her narrow shoulders. She was barefoot. For some reason she refused to ever wear shoes since regaining use of her legs.

On his left stood Turk, supposedly Caine’s security, though it was impossible to imagine a situation Caine couldn’t deal with on his own. The truth was that Caine could levitate Turk and use him as a club if he chose. But it was important for a king to have people who served him. It made one look more kingly.

Turk was a sullen, stupid punk with a sawed-off double-barreled shotgun over his shoulder and a big pipe wrench hanging from a loop on his straining belt.

Turk was guarding Cigar, a sweet-faced thirteen-year-old with the hard hands, strong back, and tanned face of a fisherman.

About twenty-five kids stood at the foot of the stairs. In theory everyone was supposed to show up for court, but Albert had suggested—a suggestion that had the force of a decree—that those who had work to do could blow it off. Work came first in Albert’s world, and Caine knew that he was king only so long as Albert kept everyone fed and watered.

At some time in the night a fight had broken out between a boy named Jaden and the boy everyone called Cigar because he had once smoked a cigar and gotten spectacularly sick.

Both Jaden and Cigar had been drinking some of Howard’s illegal booze, and no one was exactly clear what the fight had been about. But what was clear—witnessed by three kids—was that a fight had started and gone from angry words to fists to weapons in a heartbeat.

Jaden had swung a lead pipe at Cigar and missed. Cigar had swung a heavy oak table leg studded with big nails and he had not missed.

No one believed Cigar—who was a good kid, one of Quinn’s hardworking fishermen—had meant to kill Jaden. But Jaden’s brains had ended up on the sidewalk just the same.

There were four punishments in King Caine’s Perdido Beach: fine, lockup, Penny, or death.

A small infraction—for example, failing to show proper respect to the king, or blowing off work, or cheating someone in a deal—merited a fine. It could be a day’s food, two days’ unpaid labor, or the surrender of some valuable object.

Lockup was a room in town hall that had last imprisoned a boy named Roscoe until the bugs had eaten him from the inside out. Lockup meant two or more days with

just water in that room. Fighting or vandalism would get you lockup.

Caine had handed out many fines and several lockups.

Only once had he imposed a sentence of Penny.

Penny was a mutant with the power to create illusions so real it was impossible not to believe them. She had a terrifyingly gruesome imagination. A sick, disturbed imagination. The girl who had earned thirty minutes of Penny had lost control of her bodily functions and ended up screaming and beating at her own flesh. Two days later she had still not been able to work.

The ultimate penalty was death. And Caine had never yet had to face imposing that.

“I’ll speak for Cigar.” Quinn, of course. Once upon a time Quinn had been Sam’s closest friend, his surfer-dude buddy. He’d been a weak, vacillating, insecure boy, one of those who had not handled the FAYZ very well.

But Quinn had come into his own as the head of the fishing crews. Muscles bunched in his neck and shoulders and back from pulling at the oars for long hours. He was the color of mahogany now.

“Cigar has never been any kind of trouble,” Quinn said. “He shows up for work on time and he never shirks. He’s a good guy and he’s a very good fisherman. When Alice fell in and was knocked out from hitting an oar, he was the one who jumped in and pulled her out.”

Caine nodded thoughtfully. He was going for a look of stern wisdom. But he was deeply agitated beneath the surface. On the one hand, Cigar had killed Jaden. That wasn’t some random act of vandalism or small-bore theft. If Caine didn’t impose the death penalty in this case, when was he ever going to?

He sort of wanted to. . . . In fact, yes, he definitely wanted to impose the death penalty. Maybe not on Cigar, but on someone. It would be a test of his power. It would send a message.

On the other hand, Quinn was not someone to pick a fight with. Quinn could decide to go on strike and people would get hungry in a hurry.

And then there was Albert. Quinn worked for Albert.

It was fine to call yourself king, Caine thought. But not when the real power was held by some skinny, owlish black kid with a ledger book.

“It’s murder,” Caine said, stalling.

“No one’s saying Cigar shouldn’t be punished,” Quinn said. “He screwed up. Shouldn’t have been drinking. He knows better.”

Cigar hung his head.

“Jaden was a good guy, too,” a girl with the improbable name of Alpha Wong said. She sobbed. “He didn’t deserve to be killed.”

Caine gritted his teeth. Great. A girlfriend.

No point stalling any longer. He had to decide. It was far worse to piss off Quinn and possibly Albert than Alpha.

Caine raised his hand. “I promised as your king to deliver justice,” he said. “If this had been deliberate murder I’d have no choice but the death penalty. But Cigar has been a good worker. And he didn’t set out to kill poor Jaden. The next penalty is Penny time. Usually it’s a half hour. But that’s just not enough for something this serious. So here is my royal verdict.”

He turned to Penny, who was already quivering with anticipation.

“Penny will have Cigar from sunrise to sunset. Tomorrow, when the sun rises clear of the hills, it begins. And when the sun touches the horizon over the ocean, it ends.”

Caine saw reluctant acceptance in Quinn’s eyes. The crowd murmured approvingly. Caine breathed a silent sigh. Even Cigar looked relieved. But then, Caine thought, neither Quinn nor Cigar had any idea just how far down into madness Penny had sunk since her long, pain-racked ordeal. The girl had always been a cruel creature. But pain and power had made her a monster.

His monster, fortunately.

For now.

Turk hauled Cigar off to the lockup. The crowd began to disperse.

“You can do this, Cigar,” Quinn called out.

“Yeah,” Cigar said. “No problem.”

Penny laughed.

THREE

53 HOURS, 52 MINUTES

DRAKE HAD GOTTEN used to the dark, to seeing only by the faint green light of his master, the gaiaphage.

They were ten miles belowground. The heat was intense. It probably should have killed him—intense heat, no water, not that much air. But Drake wasn't alive in the usual way. It was hard to kill what was not quite alive.

Time had passed. He was aware of that. But how much time? It might be days or years. There was no day or night down here.

There was only the eternal awareness of the angry, frustrated mind of the gaiaphage. In the time he'd been down here Drake had become intimately familiar with that mind. It was a constant presence in Drake's consciousness. A nagging hunger. A need. A pressing, constant, unwavering need.

The gaiaphage needed Nemesis.

Bring me Nemesis.

And Nemesis—Peter Ellison—was nowhere to be found.

Drake had reported to the gaiaphage that Little Pete was dead. Gone. His sister, Astrid, had tossed him to the bugs and in a panic Little Pete had not only caused the nearest, most threatening of the huge insects to disappear: he had eliminated the entire species.

It was a shocking demonstration of Little Pete's inconceivable power.

A five-year-old, severely autistic, little snot-nosed brat was the most powerful creature in this huge bubble. The only thing that limited him was his own strange, distorted brain. Little Pete was powerful but did not know it. Could not plan, could not understand, could only react.

React with incredible, unimaginable power. Like a toddler with his finger on a nuclear bomb.

Nemesis frightened the gaiaphage. And yet he was somehow necessary to the gaiaphage.

Once Drake had asked. "Why, master?"

I must be born.

And then the gaiaphage had tortured him with shafts of bright pain, punishing Drake for having the presumption to question.

The answer had bothered Drake more than the pain. *I must be born.* There was a raw, ragged edge to that. A need that went beyond simple desire and drilled down into fear.

His god was not all-powerful. It was a shock to Drake. It meant the gaiaphage might still fail. And then what would become of Drake?

Had he sworn allegiance to a dying god?

Drake tried to hide the fear inside him. The gaiaphage might sense it if his attention was turned Drake's way.

But as the uncounted days had gone by, as he had listened night and day to the gaiaphage's desperation and impotent rage, he had begun to doubt. What place did Drake have in a universe where there was no gaiaphage? Would he still be unkillable?

Would the gaiaphage's failure mean his own destruction?

Drake wished he could talk about it with Brittney. But in the nature of things he could never do that. Brittney emerged from time to time, writhing from Drake's melting flesh to take over for a while.

During those times Drake ceased to see or hear or feel.

During those times Drake drifted in a world even darker than the gaiaphage's subterranean lair. It was a world so tight it smothered Drake's soul.

It went on like this—the pressure of the gaiaphage's need, Drake's inability to comprehend what he could or should do, and periods of nonexistence in the void.

Drake filled his time with wondrous fantasies. He replayed the memories of pain he had caused. The whipping of Sam. And he worked through in elaborate detail the pain he would yet cause. To Astrid. To Diana. Those two especially, but also to Brianna, who he hated.

The deep lair changed. Weeks ago the floor—the very bottom limit of the barrier—had changed. It was no longer pearly gray. It had turned black. He noticed that the black-stained barrier under his feet felt different, not as smooth.

And he noticed that the parts of the gaiaphage that rested on the barrier were also becoming stained black. So far the stain had spread only a little into the gaiaphage, like the gaiaphage was some sort of spread-out, radioactive green sponge and the stain was spilled black coffee.

Drake had wondered what it meant, but he had not asked.

Suddenly Drake felt the gaiaphage's mind jolt. Like someone had shocked him.

I feel . . .

“Nemesis, master?” Drake asked the green-glowing cave walls.

Lay your arm upon me.

Drake recoiled. He had touched the gaiaphage a few times. It was never a pleasant experience. The mind-to-mind awareness of the gaiaphage was horribly more powerful when he made physical contact.

But Drake lacked the will to refuse. He unwrapped the ten-foot-long tentacle from around his waist. He moved to a large clump of the seething green mass, a part he couldn't help but picture as the center, the head of that centerless, headless creature. He laid his tentacle gingerly across it.

“Ahhh!” The pain was sharp and sudden and knocked him to his knees. His eyes flew open, strained to open wider still, until he felt like he was peeling his own face back.

Images exploded in his mind.

Images of a garden.

Images of a lake with boats floating calmly.

Images of a beautiful girl with dark hair and a wry half smile.

Bring her to me!

Drake had spoken little in months. His throat was dry, his tongue awkward in his mouth. The name came out in a harsh whisper.

“Diana.”

Quinn was not happy as he pulled at the oars, heading away from shore with his back to the dark horizon and his worried gaze on the mountains where the sun would soon

appear.

None of his crews were happy. Normally there was good-natured grumbling, old jokes, and teasing. Usually the boats would call out cheerful insults to one another, denigrating one another's rowing technique or prospects or looks.

Today there was no teasing. The only sounds were the grunts of effort, the creak of oars in the oarlocks, the musical trickle of water along the sides and the lap, lap, lap of tiny wavelets slapping the bow.

Quinn knew the crews were angry about Cigar. All agreed that Cigar had screwed up in a monumental way. But what was Quinn supposed to do? The other kid had swung first. If Cigar hadn't struck back, Jaden might well have killed him.

They were prepared to see Cigar pay a fine, endure some lockup, maybe even a few minutes of Penny to teach the boy to take it easy in the future.

But a whole day under mental assault from that creepy girl . . . That was too much. Cigar had all the fears any normal kid had, and given a whole day to work her evil Penny would find them all.

Quinn wondered if he should say something. It distressed him, this sullenness, this worry. But what could he say? What words of his were going to make these kids stop worrying for poor Cigar?

He was worried, too. And he shared some of their anger at himself and at Albert. He had hoped Albert would step in. Albert could have if he'd chosen to. Everyone knew that Caine could call himself king but Albert was the emperor.

The boats moved away from one another as the pole fishers went one way and the net casters went toward the barrier. A school of blue bats had been seen there the day before, skimming along a hundred yards from the barrier.

Quinn signaled a halt and motioned to Elise to ready the nets. His boat crew today was Elise, Jonas, and Annie. Elise and Annie were weaker on the oars than Quinn and Jonas, but they were nimble with the nets, casting them out in perfect circles, and sensing when the weights had dragged the net down before closing the trap.

Quinn sat at the stern now, using an oar and the rudder to keep the boat stable while the girls and Jonas hauled in two blue bats and a nondescript seven-inch fish.

It was wearying work, but Quinn was used to it, and he handled the oar and rudder on automatic. He gazed off to see the other boats take up their own positions.

Then, hearing a splash, he turned toward the barrier to see a flying fish—not great eating, but not inedible—take a short hop.

But that wasn't what made him narrow his eyes and squint in the faint morning light.

Elise and Annie were getting ready to cast again.

"Hold up," Quinn said.

"What?" Elise demanded. She was cranky in the morning. Crankier still on this morning.

"Jonas, grab an oar," Quinn said.

While Elise neatened her net, pulling out bits of seaweed, the boat crept toward the barrier. Twenty feet away they shipped oars.

"What is that?" Jonas asked.

The four of them stared at the barrier. Up above it became an illusion of sky. But straight ahead it was pearly gray. As always. As it had been since the coming of the

FAYZ.

But just above the waterline the barrier was not gray but black. The black shadow rose in an irregular pattern. Like a roller coaster's curves.

Quinn glanced away to see the sun just peeking over the mountains. The whole sea went from dark to light in a few swift minutes. He waited until the sunlight touched the water between him and the barrier.

"It's changed," Quinn said.

He pulled his shirt over his head and dropped it onto the bench. He fumbled in the locker for a face mask, spit into it, wiped the spit around with his fingers, slipped it on his head, and without another word dived off the side. The water was cold and instantly blew the last of the morning cobwebs out of his head.

He swam gingerly to the barrier, careful not to touch it. Six feet down the barrier was black.

Quinn surfaced, took a deep breath, and went down again. He wished he had fins; it wasn't easy pushing his buoyant body downward. He reached maybe twenty feet before letting himself float back up.

He climbed back into the boat with an assist from Jonas.

"It's like that all the way down as far as I can tell," Quinn said.

The four of them looked at one another.

"So?" Elise asked. "We have work to do. The fish won't catch themselves."

Quinn considered. He should tell someone. Caine? Albert? He didn't really want to have to deal with either of them. And they had blue bats right under the boat just waiting to be caught.

Either Caine or Albert might easily tear into him for sloughing off on work just to report something that might be meaningless.

Not for the first time he wished it was still Sam he had to report to, not the other two. In fact, if there was anyone he really wished he could tell, it was Astrid. Too bad no one had seen her. She might well be dead. But Astrid was the only one who would look at this and actually try to figure out what it meant.

"Okay, let's get back to work," Quinn said. "We'll keep an eye on it, see if it changes by the end of the day."

FOUR

50 HOURS

FOR ALL OF his five years Pete Ellison had lived inside a twisted, distorted brain. No longer.

He had destroyed his dying, diseased, fever-racked body.

Poof.

All gone.

And now he was . . . where? He didn't have a word for it. He had been freed from the brain that had made colors scream and turned every sound into a hammering cymbal.

He drifted now in a silent, blissful place. No loud noises. No too-bright colors. No brain-frying complexity of overwrought sensation. No blond sister with her bright yellow hair and stabbing blue eyes.

But the Darkness was still there.

Still looking for him.

Still whispering to him. *Come to me. Come to me.*

Without the cacophony of his brain Pete could see the Darkness more clearly. It was a glowing blob at the bottom of a ball.

Pete's ball.

That realization surprised him. But yes, now he remembered: such noise, people screaming, his own father in panic, all of it like hot lava poured into Pete's skull.

He had not understood what was happening, but he could see clearly the cause of all the panic. A green tendril had reached for and touched long glowing rods, caressed them with a greedy, hungry touch. And then that arm of the Darkness had reached for minds—weak, malleable minds—and demanded to be fed the energy that flowed from those rods.

It would have meant a release of every sort of light, and everyone except the Darkness would have been burned up.

Meltdown. That was the word for it. And it had already begun and it was too late to stop it by the time Pete's father was rushing around and Pete was moaning and rocking.

Too late to stop the reaction and the meltdown. By normal means.

So Pete had made the ball.

Had he known what he was doing? No. He looked back at it now with a feeling of wonder. It had been an impulse, a panic reaction.

He had never meant a lot of things to happen that did happen.

He was like that guy Astrid used to have in the stories she read to him. The one called God. The one who said, "Poof, make everything!"

Pete's world was full of pain and disease and sadness. But hadn't the old world been that way, too?

He no longer had his handheld game. He no longer had his body. He no longer had his old, miswired brain. He no longer balanced atop the sheet of glass.

Pete missed his old game. It had been all he had.

He floated in a sort of haze, a world of vapors and disconnected images and

dreams. It was quiet, and Pete liked quiet. And in this place no one ever came to tell him it was time to do this or do that or go here or hurry there.

No sister's loud yellow hair and stabbing blue eyes.

But as time passed—and he was sure it must be passing, somewhere if not here—he could picture his sister without feeling the mere image overwhelming.

It surprised Pete. He could look back at that day in the power plant and almost look on the confusion and screeching sirens and panic without feeling panic himself. It still all seemed like too much, way too much, but no longer so much that he would lose all self-control.

Was it that memories were quieter? Or that something had changed in him?

It had to be that second thing, because Pete's mind no longer felt the same. For one thing he felt as if he could think about himself for the first time in his jangled life. He could wonder where he was and even who he was.

The one thing he knew was that he was bored with this disconnected existence. For most of his life the only peace and pleasure he had found had been within his handheld game. But he had no game to play here.

He had wished for a game.

He had gone looking for a game, but there was nothing like his old handheld. Just avatars that seemed to drift by. Avatars, symbols with curlicues inside. They formed into groups or clusters. Or sometimes they went off alone.

He sensed there might be a game, but with no controls, how could the game be played? Many times he had watched the shapes, and sometimes it almost seemed they were looking at him.

He peered closer at the avatars. They were interesting. Little geometric shapes but with so much twisted and coiled inside them so that he had the impression that he could fall into any one of those avatars and see a whole world within.

He wondered if it was one of those games you just . . . touched. It felt wrong and dangerous. But Pete was bored.

So he touched one of the avatars.

His name was Terrel Jones, but no one called him anything but Jonesie. He was just seven, but he was a big seven.

He was a picker working an artichoke field. It was hard, hard work. Jonesie spent six hours a day walking down the rows of chest-high artichoke plants with a knife in his gloved right hand and a backpack on his back.

The larger artichokes were higher up on the plant. Smaller ones lower down. The up-chokes—picker slang for the higher ones—had to be a minimum of five inches across. The ankle-chokes—the lower ones—had to be at least three inches. This was to make sure the pickers didn't wipe out the whole crop at once.

No one was exactly sure if this rule made sense, but Jonesie didn't see any reason to argue. He just moved along the row cutting with practiced ease and tossing the chokes over his shoulder to drop into the backpack. Up one row and down the next was all it would take to fill his pack. Then he would sling it off and dump it into the old wagon—a big, ramshackle wooden thing that rested on four bald car tires.

And that was all Jonesie had to worry about. Except that right now he was finding it more and more tiring. He felt as if he couldn't catch his breath.

He reached the end of the row carrying no more than the usual weight of chokes, but staggered to the wagon. Jamilla, the wagon tender, had that relatively soft job because she was only eight years old and small. All she had to do was pick up the stray chokes that might fall to the ground, and carefully rake the chokes in the wagon into an even layer, and check in each backpack load on a sheet of paper for Albert so that the daily harvest could be accounted for.

“Jonesie!” Jamilla cried angrily when he failed to heft his bag high enough and it slipped from his hands, spilling chokes everywhere.

Jonesie started to say something but his voice was gone. Just not there.

He tried to suck in breath to cry out, but air did not flow through his mouth and into his lungs. Instead he felt a sudden, searing pain, like a cut, like a knife was drawn across his throat from ear to ear.

“Jonesie!” Jamilla screamed as Jonesie fell to the ground, facedown.

His mouth gulped helplessly at the air. He tried to touch his throat but his arms didn’t move.

Jamilla had jumped down from the wagon. Jonesie could see a misty, distant, distorted image of her above him. A face, mouth wide, all the way open, screaming silently.

And behind her a shape. It was transparent but not invisible. A huge hand with one finger extended. That finger reached through his body. He couldn’t feel it.

And then he couldn’t feel anything.

Jamilla’s scream brought Eduardo and Turbo from the adjacent fields. They came at a run from different directions, but Jamilla hardly noticed them at first. She stared and screamed and screamed. . . .

And then she spun away and started running. Turbo caught her in his arms. He had to lift her up off the ground to get her to stop running.

“What is it? Is it zekes?”

Zekes were the carnivorous worms that inhabited many of the fields and had to be bribed with payments of blue bats and junk fish.

Jamilla went still. Turbo was there, and now so was Eduardo. They were her friends, her coworkers.

Jamilla steeled herself to try to explain what had just happened. But before she could gain control of her raw voice, Eduardo said, “What is that?”

Jamilla felt Turbo crane to see past her. He set her down. She no longer felt like running. Or screaming. Turbo left her and walked the ten steps to join Eduardo.

“What is that thing?” Turbo asked. “Is that what scared you, Jammy?”

“Looks like some kind of weird fish or something.”

“Big. And weird,” Turbo repeated. “I worked a couple of days filling in with Quinn and I never saw anything like that.”

“Like a fish with, like, armor. But what’s it doing here in the middle of a choke field?”

Jamilla did not dare to come any closer. But her voice was her own again.

“It’s Jonesie,” she said.

The two boys turned slowly to look at her. “Say what?”

“He was . . . Something touched him. And his whole body . . .” She made a

writhing movement with her hands. Twisting the fingers together as somehow the pieces of Jonesie had been twisted together, turned inside out, and formed this . . . thing.

They stared at her. Probably glad to have any excuse not to stare at the thing she was calling Jonesie.

“Something touched him? What touched him?”

“God,” Jamilla said. “God’s hand.”

Turk brought Cigar in with his hands tied behind his back.

“Untie him,” Penny said.

Cigar was nervous. Penny smiled at him. He seemed to relax a little.

“I don’t think I’ll have any problems with Cigar,” Penny said to Turk. “He’s basically a good kid.”

Cigar swallowed hard and nodded.

Plywood had been nailed up over the windows. The room was bare. Before leaving town Sam had left a small Sammy sun burning in one corner. It provided the only light and added a lugubrious quality, casting dark green shadows in the corners. It was dawn but you’d never know it in this room. Not even high noon would penetrate here.

“I’m really sorry,” Cigar said. “About what happened, I mean. You’re right, actually; I mean, I’m not bad.”

“No, of course you’re not bad,” Penny said. “Just a murderer.”

Cigar’s face went pale. His left hand started shaking. He didn’t know why. Why just his left hand? He fought the urge to grab it and hold it still. He stuck it in his pocket and tried not to breathe too loud.

“What do you like, Cigar?” Penny asked.

“What do I like?”

Penny shrugged. She was moving around him, her bare feet silent. “What kind of stuff do you miss? From the old days, I mean. From before.”

Cigar shifted uncomfortably. He wasn’t stupid. He could sense there was a cat-and-mouse game being played. He knew Penny’s reputation. He’d heard about her. And the way she would walk almost past him, then back up to send him a searching, penetrating look made him queasy.

He decided on an innocuous answer. “Candy.”

“Like candy bars?”

“Like Skittles. Or Red Vines. Anything, I guess.”

Penny smiled. “Look in your pocket.”

Cigar felt in the front pocket of his jeans. He felt a packet of something that hadn’t been there before. He pulled it out and stared in amazement at a fresh pack of Skittles.

“Go on. Have some,” Penny said.

“They’re not real. Are they?”

Penny shrugged. She twined her hands behind her back. “Try them. You tell me.”

He tore the package open with trembling fingers. He spilled a half dozen of the bright pellets on the floor before catching the next few. He popped them in his mouth.

Cigar had never tasted anything half so wonderful. “Where . . . Where did you get these?”

Penny stopped. She leaned in close to him and jabbed suddenly at his head with

her finger. It hurt, but just a little. “In there. From inside your head.”

Cigar looked doubtfully at the Skittles still in the pack. His mouth watered. Sugar was almost a forgotten memory. But he was pretty sure the candies had never been this good. These were crazy good. He could eat a million of these, and maybe they weren't real, but they felt real in his hand and tasted better than real in his mouth.

“Good, huh?” Penny asked. She was still way too close.

“Yeah. Really good.”

“People think because things aren't real that the pleasure wouldn't be as great. I used to think that, too. But things that are in your head can be pure, you know? Realer than real.”

Cigar realized he'd finished the whole pack. He wanted more. He had never wanted anything half as much as he wanted more Skittles.

“Can I have more?” he asked.

“Maybe if you asked me nicely.”

“Please? Please can I have more?”

She put her lips close to his ear and whispered, “On your knees.”

He barely hesitated. The longer he went without more of the candy the more he wanted it. The need was incredibly urgent. It took his breath away, he needed the candy so badly.

Cigar dropped to his knees. “Can I have more?”

“You're easy to train.” Penny smirked.

Suddenly there was a handful of Skittles in Cigar's palm. He tossed them into his mouth. “Please, more?”

“How about some Red Vines?”

“Yeah, yeah!”

“Lick my foot. No, not the top, you idiot.”

She held her foot up so he could lick the dirty sole and Red Vines sprouted in his hand. He rolled onto his back and gobbled them up and licked her foot again and got more, and his head was swimming, swirling, the taste of candy overwhelming, like nothing, like nothing he'd ever had, like nothing could ever have been, but so good. He needed more, desperately.

The Red Vines were in his hand and somehow hard to get. Like they had melted into his skin and he had to dig at them with his fingernails, and he did and sucked on the ends as soon as he had freed them.

And then, with a sickening lurch, the Red Vines weren't candies anymore. They were the veins in his wrists.

“Ahhhh, ahha, ahhh!” Cigar cried in horror.

Penny clapped her hands together. “Oh, ho-ho, Cigar, we are going to have a lot of fun together.”

FIVE

44 HOURS, 12 MINUTES

ASTRID PACKED ALL her perishable food into her backpack. It wasn't much, but she might be gone for a while, and she couldn't tolerate the idea of letting anything go to waste.

She checked her shotgun. She had four shells loaded and five more in her pack.

Nine shotgun shells would kill just about anything.

Except Drake.

Drake scared her deep down. He had been the first person in her life to hit her. To this day she could remember the sting and force of his slap. She could remember the certainty that he would quickly escalate to closed-fist punches. That he would beat her and that the beating would give him pleasure so that nothing she could ever say would stop him.

He had forced her to insult Little Pete. To betray him.

It hadn't bothered Petey, of course. But it had eaten at her insides. It seemed almost quaint now when she recalled that guilt. She'd had no way of knowing then that she would someday do far, far worse.

Fear of that psychopath was part of the reason she had needed to manipulate Sam. She had needed Sam's protection for herself and even more for Little Pete. Drake wasn't Caine. Caine was a heartless, ruthless sociopath who would do anything to increase his power. But Caine didn't revel in pain and violence and fear. However amoral, Caine was rational.

To Caine's eyes Astrid was just another pawn on the chessboard. To Drake she was a victim waiting to be destroyed for the sheer pleasure it would bring him.

Astrid knew she couldn't kill Drake with the shotgun. She could blow his head off his shoulders and still not kill him.

But that image brought her some sense of reassurance.

She slung the gun over her shoulder. The gun's weight and length, along with the pack that was loaded down with water bottles, made her a bit slower and more awkward than when she was running free down the familiar trail.

Astrid had never measured the distance from her camp to Lake Tramonto, but she guessed it was six or seven miles. And if she was going to follow the barrier so as to avoid getting lost, it would mean traveling over rough terrain, up steep hills without trails. She'd have to keep up a pretty good pace to get there before night and see Sam.

Sam.

The name made her stomach tense. He would have questions. He would make accusations. He would be angry. He would resent her. She could deal with all of that. She was strong.

But what if he wasn't mad or sullen? What if he smiled at her? What if he put his arms around her?

What if Sam told Astrid he still loved her?

She was far less prepared to deal with that.

She had changed. The sanctimonious girl with so many certainties in her head had died with Little Pete. She had done the unforgivable. And she had seen the person she

truly was: selfish, manipulative, ruthless.

She was not a person Sam could love. She was not a person who could love him back.

Probably it was a mistake going to him now. But whatever her failures and foolishness, she still had her brain. She was still, in some attenuated way, Astrid the Genius.

“Yeah. Right. Genius,” she muttered. That was why she was living in the woods with fleabites in her armpits, smelling of smoke and carrion, hands a mass of calluses and scars, eyes darting warily to identify every sound in the woods around her, tense, practicing the smooth unlimbering of a shotgun. Because that was definitely the life of a genius.

The trail led closer to the barrier now. She knew this trail well; it would disappear through the barrier. There would be some rough terrain for half a mile before another trail would appear. Or maybe it was the same trail doubling back; who could tell.

Here, suddenly, she noticed that the dark part of the barrier had crept higher. Two tall spikes of black on the barrier, like fingers reaching up out of the earth. The taller of the two stretched up for maybe fifteen or twenty feet.

Astrid steeled herself for a necessary experiment. She stuck out one finger and touched the black portion of the barrier.

“Ahhh!” She cursed under her breath. It still hurt to touch. That hadn’t changed.

As she threaded her way through dense bushes and emerged into a blessed clearing, she considered the problem of measuring the advance of the stain. Here, too, she saw rising fingers of darkness, not as high as the others she’d seen, and thinner. She watched one of the stains closely for half an hour, anxious at wasting time but wanting to have some kind of observation. The scientifically inclined part of her brain had survived intact where other aspects had diminished or disappeared.

It was growing. At first she missed it because she’d been waiting for the stain to rise higher and instead it had thickened.

“Still remember how to calculate the surface area of a sphere?” Astrid asked herself. “Four pi r squared.”

She did the math in her head as she walked. The diameter of the barrier was twenty miles, which made r half that. Ten miles.

“Four times pi is roughly twelve point six; r squared is a hundred. So the surface area is twelve point six times a hundred. One thousand two hundred and sixty square miles. Of course, half that is underground or underwater, so six hundred and thirty square miles of dome.

“It’s all a question of how fast the stain is spreading,” Astrid told herself, taking pleasure from the precision of numbers.

How long until the dome was dark? Astrid wondered.

Because Astrid had very little doubt that the stain would continue spreading.

Into her head came a memory from long ago: Sam admitting to her that he was afraid of the dark. It was in his room, in his former home, the place he’d shared with his mother. It was perhaps the reason that in a sudden panic he had created the first of what would come to be known as Sammy suns.

Sam had many more terrible things to be scared of now. Surely he was over that ancient terror.

She hoped so. Because she had a terrible feeling that a very long night was coming.

The baby would not look at her. Diana looked at him even though doing so filled her with sick dread.

He could already walk. But this was a dream, so of course things didn't have to make sense. It was a dream; she knew that for sure because she knew the baby was not able to walk.

It was inside of her. A living thing inside of her own body. A body within a body. She could picture it in there with its eyes closed, all twisted so that its tiny legs were drawn up to its barrel chest.

Inside her body.

But now in her head, too. In her dream. Refusing to look at her.

You don't want to show me your eyes, she said.

He was holding something now. Tiny, webbed fetus fingers clutched a doll.

The doll was black and white.

No, Diana begged.

The doll had a pouting, dissatisfied mouth. A small red mouth.

No, Diana begged again, and she was afraid.

The baby seemed to hear her voice and it held the doll out to her. Like it wanted her to take it. But Diana couldn't take it, because her arms were like lead and so terribly heavy.

Noooo, she moaned. *I don't want to see it*.

But the baby wanted her to look; it insisted she look, and she couldn't stop herself, couldn't look away, could not move or turn or run, and oh, God, she wanted to run.

What is it, Mommy? The voice had no character, just words, not a voice, not a sound, like someone was typing them onto a keyboard so that she could kind of hear but also see the words in letters, *bam, bam, bam*, each letter thudding in her brain.

What is it, Mommy?

The baby held the black-and-white plush toy in her face and asked again, *What is it, Mommy?*

She had to answer. No choice now. She had to answer.

Panda, she said, and with that word the full deluge of sadness and self-loathing burst in her mind.

Panda, the baby said, and smiled without teeth, smiled with the panda's own red mouth.

Diana woke. Opened her eyes.

Tears blurred her vision. She rolled out of the bed. The trailer was tiny, but she kept it clean and neat. She was lucky: the only person other than Sam at the lake to have a place without a roommate.

Panda.

The baby knew. It knew she had eaten part of a boy with the nickname Panda. Her soul was bare to the baby. It could see inside her.

Oh, God, how was she going to be a mother carrying that terrible crime in her soul?

She deserved hell. And she had the terrible suspicion that the baby inside her was

the demon sent to conduct her there.

“I don’t like the idea of leaving those missiles just lying there,” Sam said.

Edilio said nothing. He just shifted uneasily and glanced back at the dock to make sure no one was standing around listening for gossip.

Sam, Edilio, Dekka, and Mohamed Kadeer were on the top deck of the houseboat everyone called the White Houseboat. It wasn’t white, exactly, more of a dirty pink, actually. And it looked nothing like the real White House. But it was where the leaders met, up on the open top deck. So White Houseboat it was.

It was also Sam’s home, a home he shared with Dekka, Sinder, Jizzie, and Mohamed.

Mohamed was a nonvoting member of the Lake Tramonto Council. But more important, he was Albert’s liaison at Lake Tramonto.

Some said “liaison.” Some said “spy.” There wasn’t much difference. Sam had decided early on not to try to keep secrets from Albert. Albert had to know what was going on. In any case he would find out: Albert was the FAYZ’s closest thing to a billionaire, although his wealth was measured in the FAYZ currency called ‘Bertos, McDonald’s game pieces, food, and jobs.

On the White Houseboat there were two cabins aft, each with a single bunk above a double bed. Sinder and Jizzie shared one of those cabins; Mohamed and Dekka shared the other. Sam had the relatively roomy bow cabin to himself.

“If Caine’s people find out . . . ,” Dekka said.

“Then we may have a problem,” Sam said, nodding. “But we won’t ever use the things. We’ll just be making sure Caine doesn’t use them, either.”

“Yeah, and Caine will buy that explanation because he’s so trusting,” Dekka said mordantly.

The missiles had been part of a desperate ploy to get from the Evanston Air National Guard base to the coast. Dekka had been able to use the crate as a platform that, cut off from gravity by Dekka’s power, would scrape along the barrier.

The plan was decidedly imperfect. It had almost worked. Kind of worked. Worked just well enough. But it had also moved the weapons into a place where they might be found.

Found and used.

The fifth person on the deck was not a part of the council. He was a boy called Toto. Toto had been found in a desert facility—or part of a facility with the rest beyond the barrier—that had kept him imprisoned in order to study the mutations occurring in the Perdido Beach area.

The facility had been set up before the coming of the FAYZ. The government had known of, or at least suspected, the very odd things beginning to occur in the months before the barrier.

Toto was probably close to being clinically insane. He’d been alone—all alone—for seven months. He still had a tendency to talk to Spider-Man. No longer his old Styrofoam Spider-Man bust—which Sam had incinerated in a moment of irritation—but the ghost of that former bust. Which was decidedly crazy. But crazy or not, he had the power to instantly determine truth from lie.

Even when it was inconvenient.

Now Toto said, "Sam is not telling the truth."

"I have no intention of using the missiles," Sam said heatedly.

"True," Toto said blandly. "But not true when you said you won't ever use them." Then, in a furtive aside, he added, "Sam thinks he may have to use them."

Sam gritted his teeth. Toto was extremely useful. Except when he wasn't.

"I think we might have all guessed that, Toto," Dekka said.

Dekka had recovered her strength after the shocking ordeal she'd endured from the infestation of bugs. She had not entirely recovered from what she'd thought was her deathbed confession to Brianna. Even now the two girls could barely be in the same room together without awkwardness.

Dekka had never told Sam exactly what she'd whispered into Brianna's ear. But he was pretty sure he knew. Dekka was in love with Brianna. And Brianna had evidently not felt the same way.

"Yes, she might have guessed it," Toto said, speaking now to his sleeve.

"Mohamed, what is Albert's feeling about this?"

Mohamed had a habit of taking a long pause before answering any question. Even "How are you?" It was probably one of the things that endeared him to Albert, who had grown suspicious, some might even say paranoid, about secrecy.

"Albert has never spoken to me about this. I don't know whether he knows about these missiles or not."

"Uh-huh," Dekka said, and rolled her eyes. She held her palm out to Toto. "Don't even bother, Toto; we all know that's baloney."

But Toto said, "He's telling the truth."

Mohamed took another long pause. He was a good-looking kid with the barest beginning of whiskers on his upper lip. "But, of course, now that I know, I'll have to tell him."

"If we leave them where they are, sooner or later someone's going to find them," Sam said.

Edilio said, "Dude, all due respect, you're trying to talk yourself into this."

"Why would I do that?" Sam demanded. He sat forward in his chair and widened his arms and legs, sending the message that he had nothing to hide.

Edilio smiled affectionately. "Because we've had four months of peace, my friend. And you're bored."

"That's not—" Sam began, but with a glance at Toto fell silent.

"Still, if the missiles have to be somewhere, better with us," Edilio said reluctantly.

Sam felt a little embarrassed by how eager he was to grab onto that rationale. Okay: so he was bored. It still made sense to secure those weapons.

"Okay," Sam said. "We grab them. Dekka, it'll be on you and Jack to move them. We'll have Brianna check out the area, make sure no one's around. They're just inside Caine's borders. We'll need to get them across our line as quick as possible. Get them loaded onto a pickup."

"Burn gas?" Mohamed asked.

"It's worth the gas," Sam said.

Mohamed spread his hands apologetically. "Gas is under Albert's control."

"Look, if Albert gives us the gas he's supporting us," Sam said. "So how about if this once we just do it? It won't be more than a couple of gallons. We'll skim from

several different tanks so it won't show on your books."

Mohamed took an even longer pause than normal. "You never said that, and I never heard you."

"That's not true," Toto said.

"Yeah," Dekka said, rolling her eyes, "we know."

"Okay. Tonight," Sam said. "Breeze out front; Dekka, Jack, and me in the truck. We park the truck and the three of us head to the beach. Hopefully we're back by morning."

"What about me, boss?" Edilio asked.

"Deputy mayor is a heavy burden sometimes, dude." Sam smiled. He felt a rush from the idea of a daring nighttime mission. Edilio was right: running the lake had been boring after the first frantic month. Sam basically hated handling all the little details and decisions. Most of his day was taken up dealing with stupid fights over nothing—kids fighting over ownership of a toy or some food, people slacking off on work they owed to the town, crazy ideas for getting out of the FAYZ, unhappiness over accommodations, violations of sanitary rules. Increasingly—not without a feeling of guilt—he had turned most of it over to Edilio.

It had been months since Sam had been involved in any serious craziness. And this mission had just enough craziness without any real danger.

The meeting broke up. Sam stood up, stretched, and noticed Sinder and Jizzie running along the shore from the eastern end, where they were tending a small, irrigated plot of vegetables.

Something about their body language spelled trouble.

Sam's houseboat was tied up at the end of the surviving dock. (It had doubled as the stage for the Friday Fun Fest.) He waited until Sinder and Jizzie were below him on the dock.

"Sam!" Sinder gasped. She was in her modified Goth stage—it was hard to find makeup, but she could still manage to find black clothing.

"T'sup, Sinder? Hi, Jizzie."

Sinder gathered her wits, took a steadying breath, and said, "This is going to sound crazy, but the wall . . . It's changing."

"We were weeding the carrots," Jizzie said.

"And then we noticed this, like, black stain on the barrier."

"What?"

"The barrier," Sinder said. "It's changing color."

SIX

43 HOURS, 17 MINUTES

QUINN LEFT HIS crews to unload the catch at the dock. Normally he went straight to Albert to report the day's haul, but he had a more pressing concern today. He wanted to check on Cigar.

It was still an hour or so to sundown. He wanted to at least yell some encouragement to his friend and crewman.

The plaza was empty. The town was mostly empty—the pickers were in the fields still.

Turk lounged on the steps of town hall. He was asleep with a baseball cap pulled down over his eyes and his rifle between his crossed legs.

A girl walked across the square with hurried steps. She glanced fearfully toward town hall. Quinn knew her a little, so he gave a small wave. But she glanced at him, shook her head, and scurried off.

Feeling worried now, Quinn headed into the building.

He climbed the stairs to the detention room where Cigar would be.

He found the door easily enough. He listened and heard nothing from inside. "Cigar? You in there?"

The door opened, revealing Penny. She was still wearing a summer dress, and she was still barefoot. She blocked the door.

"It's not time yet," Penny said.

There was blood on her dress.

Blood on her narrow feet.

Her eyes were feverish. Lit up. Ecstatic.

Quinn took it all in at a glance. "Get out of my way," Quinn said.

Penny looked at him. Like she was trying to see something inside his head. Considering. Measuring.

Anticipating.

"What have you done, you witch?" Quinn demanded. His breath was coming short. His heart was pounding. The skin on his sunburned arms was cracking, turning deathly white and cracking like dried mud. Deep cracks.

"You're not threatening me, are you, Quinn?"

The eruption on Quinn's arm stopped, reversed itself, and his skin was back to what it should be.

"I want to see Cigar," Quinn said, swallowing his fear.

Penny nodded. "Okay. Okay, Quinn. Come on in."

Quinn pushed past her.

Cigar was in a corner. He seemed at first to be asleep. But his shirt was soaked with blood.

"Cigar, man. You okay?"

Cigar did not move. Quinn knelt by him and raised his head. It took Quinn a few terrible seconds to make sense of what he was seeing.

Cigar's eyes were gone. Two black-and-red holes stared from the front of Cigar's face.

Then Cigar screamed.

Quinn jumped back.

“What have you done? What have you done?”

“I never touched him,” Penny said with a happy laugh. “Look at his fingers! Look at his wrists! He did it all himself. It was funny to watch.”

Quinn’s fist was drawn back before he knew it. Penny’s nose exploded. Her head snapped back hard and she fell on her behind.

Quinn grabbed Cigar’s bloody forearm in a strong grip. Over Cigar’s screams, Quinn said, “We’re going to Lana.”

Penny snarled and all at once Quinn’s flesh caught fire. He bellowed in terror. The flames quickly burned away his clothing and ate at his flesh.

Quinn knew it wasn’t real. He knew it. But he couldn’t believe it. He could not refuse to feel the agony of the illusion. He could not help but smell the smoke of burning, popping flesh and—

He aimed a desperate kick.

His sneaker caught Penny in the side of her head.

The fire went out instantly.

Penny rolled over, got to her feet, trying to get control of her scattered mind, but Quinn was behind her now and had his powerful arm around her neck.

“I will snap your neck, Penny. I swear to God, I will snap your neck. Nothing you can do will stop me.”

Penny went limp. “You think the king will let you get away with this, Quinn?” she hissed.

“Anyone messes with me, Penny, you or anyone else, and I go on strike. See how well you enjoy life without me and my crews. Without food.”

Quinn shoved her away and took Cigar’s arm again.

Some jobs were tougher than others. Blake and Bonnie had the worst job you could have: maintaining the septic tank. Also known as the Pit.

Dekka had used her powers to help dig the pit, although it had still taken twenty other kids to clear the levitated dirt away. The result was a hole in the ground ten feet deep, twelve feet long, and three feet across. Give or take: no one had exactly used a tape measure.

It was basically one long slit trench. The trench had been covered with an entire side of one of the Nutella train’s steel boxcars. Sam had cut it free and Dekka and Orc had hauled it the miles from the train crash site.

Sam had then burned five two-foot holes in the steel.

And that was where Blake and Bonnie came in. Alone neither of them had any special talent for building, but somehow the two of them joined had a strange sort of genius, recognized by Edilio, their direct supervisor. Together (with some help from Edilio) they had taken on the job of creating five outhouses perched above those holes. This they had done by taking shipping crates, removing the tops, and sawing out a sort of doorway. The end result was an open-topped wooden crate with a narrow door covered with a shower curtain to provide some privacy.

The open top had the disadvantage that the heads of tall people could be seen. The advantage, however, was that the smell of the septic tank wasn’t trapped in a closed

space.

The individual outhouses had benches made of desk tops brought from the Air National Guard base. Sam had burned holes in each of these, and Blake and Bonnie had thoughtfully attached actual toilet seats to these.

There was something pleasant—once you got used to it—about relieving yourself under the stars or sun. Except for the lack of toilet paper.

Blake and Bonnie solved this problem—partly—by selling various leaves, official reports and records from the Air National Guard facility, and out-of-date reference books.

And, of course, the two Bs were responsible for keeping the facility clean. This wasn't terribly hard usually, because Bonnie in particular had no reluctance to call someone out for making a mess.

And the hours weren't bad. Since absolutely no one wanted their jobs, Blake and Bonnie were given plenty of time off. And since they were seven and six years old, respectively, they spent their time off swimming, collecting rocks, and playing a more or less continuous game of war that involved various action figures, the severed heads of Bratz dolls and interesting insects.

That was what they were doing, playing war in the sandpit they'd excavated a hundred feet or so away from the Pit. In fact, they were arguing over whether a battered Bratz head had or had not gotten the drop on a group of three mismatched beetles.

Two of the outhouses were occupied: number one by Pat and number four by Diana. Diana was there frequently as a consequence of being pregnant.

Blake grabbed the Bratz doll head angrily and said, "Okay, if you won't play by the rules—" This happened about six times a day. There weren't really any rules.

Bonnie was just about to hotly deny that she was cheating, when her face smeared. Like her face was a still-wet painting and someone had dragged a brush through it.

Blake stared at the most familiar face in his world and saw it flatten, like it was suddenly just two-dimensional. And something that was transparent, but not somehow invisible, pierced her through.

Bonnie jerked to her feet like a puppet on a string. Her eyes went wide and her face smeared again as her mouth dripped down her chin.

A finger made of air, as big as a tree, swept over her, came back to touch her, and then disappeared.

Bonnie gave a single terrible spasm, then stopped moving, fell over, and landed atop her army.

Blake stood staring at something that was no longer Bonnie. No longer anything he had ever seen before. What lay there in the dirt had one arm and half a face, and the rest—no more than two feet long—looked exactly like a rotted dead log.

Blake started screaming and Diana and Pat moved as fast as they could, but Blake was not one to just stand and scream; he took action. He grabbed the log with half a human face by its one arm and threw it as hard as he could toward the Pit.

It didn't go far, so he grabbed it again, screaming all the while at the top of his lungs, and dragged it toward the number five as Diana and Pat both shouted for him to stop, stop, stop, but he couldn't stop; he had to get rid of it, this thing, this monster that had replaced his friend.

Diana almost reached him. But not quite.

Blake threw the thing into the hole of the number five outhouse.

“What is going on?” Pat demanded, rushing up.

Blake was silent.

“He had some kind of . . .” Diana began. She made a face, then added, “I don’t know what it was.”

“It was a monster,” Blake said.

“Jeez, dude, you scared me half to death,” Patrick said. “I mean, enjoy your game or whatever, but don’t be screaming when I’m doing my business.” He stomped off down the hill toward the lake.

Diana didn’t yell at Blake. “Where’s the other one of you? What’s her name? The girl?”

Blake shook his head dully. A veil went down over his eyes. “I don’t know,” he said. “I guess she’s gone.”

Orc sat reading.

That fact, the sight of Orc sitting on a rock with a book in his hands, was still inexplicable to Howard.

Orc and Howard had gone with Sam to Lake Tramonto during the Big Split. Sam was a pain in the butt, but he wasn’t likely to decide to throw you through a wall, like Caine might.

The only problem with the lake was that most of the drinking and drugging population had stayed in Perdido Beach. Howard operated a whiskey still at Coates, but traveling from Coates to the lake was not exactly an easy trip. And Howard couldn’t do it with more than about a dozen bottles in a backpack.

Orc could carry far more, of course. But Orc wasn’t helping anymore. Orc was reading. He was reading the Bible.

Orc drunk was depressed, dangerous, unpredictable, and occasionally murderous. But Orc sober was just useless. Useless.

Orc had been given the job of guarding Sinder’s little farm. Mostly this involved sitting on a rock outcropping and reading.

Sinder’s farm wasn’t much bigger than a good-size backyard, a wedge-shaped piece of land that had once been a streambed back when rain still fell in the mountains and sent streams to replenish the lake. Orc had helped them dig a web of shallow canals that brought lake water in to water the neat rows.

Sinder and Jezzie spent all day, every day, planting and tending. Orc spent as much time. In fact, he had set up a little tent just beside the rock and he slept there most nights.

Howard had spent a couple of nights there as well, trying to keep alive his friendship with Orc, trying to get Orc past this whole newfound sobriety thing.

It wasn’t that Howard liked Orc drunk. (Orc had no money, so whatever he drank came straight out of Howard’s profits.) It was just that sober, Bible-reading Orc was useless to Howard. Useless for intimidation and debt collection, and useless for hauling booze.

“What’s ‘meek’ mean?” Orc asked Howard. Then he spelled it, because he wasn’t sure if he was saying it right. “M-E-E-K.”

"I know how to spell 'meek,'" Howard snapped. "It means wimpy. Weak. Pathetic. Pitiful. A sucker. A victim. A stupid, Bible-reading, monster-looking fool, that's what it means."

"Well, it says here they're blessed."

"Yeah," Howard said savagely, "because that's the way it always works out: wimps always win."

"They're gonna inherit the earth," Orc said. But he seemed doubtful about it. "What's that mean, 'inherit'?"

"You are sucking the life right out of me; you know that, Orc?"

Orc shifted and turned his book to get better light. The sun was going down.

"Where are the girls? Farmer Goth and Farmer Emo?"

"Went to get Sam." Orc grunted.

"Sam? Why didn't you tell me, dude?" Howard glanced around for a place to hide his backpack. He was on a delivery run. And while Sam didn't go out of his way to try to shut down Howard's business, he could get it into his head to confiscate Howard's product.

"I think 'inherit' means take over, like," Orc said.

Howard slung his pack behind a bush and stepped back to see if it was still visible. "Yep. Take over. The meek. Just like rabbits take over from coyotes. Don't be an idiot, Orc."

Howard would never have insulted Orc back in the old days. Back when Orc was Orc. Even now he saw Orc's eyes narrow—they were one of the few remaining human parts of him. Orc was a slag heap of living gravel with a patch of human skin where his mouth and part of one cheek were.

Howard almost wished Orc would get up and pound him. At least he'd be Orc again. Instead Orc narrowed his eyes and said, "You know, there's a lot more rabbits than there are coyotes."

"Why are the girls getting Sam?" Howard glanced back toward the marina, the center of life at the lake. Sure enough, Sam, Jezzie, and Sinder were coming along at a quick walk.

"Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for justice," Orc read in his slow, laborious way.

"You want to ask me what that means, Orc?" Howard snapped. "Because I think justice may not be something you want to see so much."

Orc's face wasn't capable of showing much emotion. But Howard could see that the shot had hit home. In a drunken rage Orc had accidentally killed a kid back in Perdido Beach. No one but Howard knew about it.

"What's that?" Howard asked, pointing. He had just noticed a discoloration of the dome behind Orc.

"That's why they went for Sam."

At that moment Sam and the girls came up. Sam nodded to Howard and said, "Orc, how's it going?"

Sam went straight to the barrier and stood looking at the black peak thrusting up behind Orc's rock.

"Have you seen this anywhere else?" Sam asked Sinder.

"We never go anywhere else," Sinder said.

“I appreciate the time you put in,” Sam said. But he wasn’t paying any attention to Sinder or Jezzie. He walked along the barrier toward the lake.

Howard fell in beside him, relieved that Sam hadn’t spotted his backpack.

“What do you think it is?” Howard asked.

“There. Another one.” Sam pointed at a much smaller dark bump rising from the dirt. He marched on and they reached the lake’s edge. Here again was a low, undulating ridge of black stain.

“What the . . .,” Sam muttered. “You see anything like this, Howard?”

Howard shrugged. “I probably wouldn’t notice it. Anyway, I don’t walk by the barrier that much.”

“No,” Sam agreed. “You just go back and forth to your still at Coates.”

Howard felt a sudden chill.

“Of course I know about your still,” Sam said. “You know it’s on the other side of the line. It’s Caine’s territory. He catches you over there, you won’t like it, unless you’re sharing your profits with him.”

Howard winced and decided to say nothing.

Sam stood looking at the stain. “It’s growing. I just saw it grow. Just now.”

“I saw it, too,” Sinder said. She looked to Sam for reassurance. Weird, Howard realized: he, too, was looking to Sam for reassurance. As much as he and Sam had been enemies at times, and still were, more or less, he wanted Sam to have some quick answer to this stain thing.

The troubled look on Sam’s face was not reassuring.

“What is it?” Howard asked again.

Sam shook his head slowly. His tanned face looked suddenly so much older than his barely fifteen years. Howard had a vision of Sam as an old man, hair gray and thin, face creased with deep worry lines. It was a face marked by all the pain and worry Sam had endured.

Howard had the sudden, ridiculous urge to offer Sam a drink. He looked like he could use it.

SEVEN

36 HOURS, 19 MINUTES

ASTRID STOOD GAZING down at the lake from the heights to the west. The barrier went straight into the lake, of course, cutting it roughly in half. The lake's shoreline bulged out so that she could no longer keep following the barrier without going out of her way. Anyway, soon it would be too dark to see the stain. Time to turn toward the human habitations.

The sun was down and a small, far-off bonfire was burning in a circle of tents and trailers. Astrid couldn't see the kids around the fire, but she could see shapes occasionally crossing in front of the flames.

Now that she was here she could no longer even pretend to suppress her emotions. She was going to see Sam. Others, too, and she would no doubt have to endure stares and greetings and probably insults.

All that she could handle. But she was going to see Sam. That was the thing. Sam. Sam, Sam, Sam.

"Stop it," she told herself.

A crisis was coming. She had a duty to help her friends understand it.

"Weak," she muttered.

The suspicion had been growing in her head that she was just coming up with an excuse to see Sam. At the same time she suspected that she was looking for an excuse to back off and avoid her duty to help.

It occurred to Astrid that in days gone by she might have prayed for guidance. It brought a wistful smile to her lips. What had happened to that Astrid? Where had she gone to? Astrid hadn't prayed since . . .

"Put aside childish things," she quoted mentally. A Bible quote, which was ironic, she supposed. She shifted her pack and slipped her shotgun off her sore right shoulder onto her left. She started toward the fire.

On the way she worked out a simple method for measuring the spread of the dark stain on the barrier. If someone had a functioning digital camera it would be easy enough. She ran the math in her head. Maybe five sample locations. Calculate the progression day by day and she would have pretty good data.

Numbers still gave her pleasure. That was the great thing about numbers: it required no faith to believe that two plus two equaled four. And math never, ever condemned you for your thoughts and desires.

"Who's there?" a voice cried from the shadows.

"Take it easy," Astrid said.

"Who is it or I shoot," the voice said.

"It's Astrid."

"No way."

A boy, probably no older than ten, stepped out from behind a bush. He had a rifle leveled, with his finger near but not directly on the trigger.

"Is that you, Tim?" Astrid asked.

"Whoa. It is you," the boy said. "I thought you were dead."

"You know what Mark Twain said? 'Reports of my death have been greatly

exaggerated.”

“Yep. That’s you, all right.” Tim shouldered his weapon. “I guess you’re okay to go on in. I’m not supposed to let anyone pass unless I know them. But I know you.”

“Thanks. Good to see you well. Last time I saw you, you had the flu.”

“Flu’s all gone now. Hope it doesn’t ever come back.”

Astrid walked on, and now the trail was clearer and easier to follow, even as evening crept closer.

She passed a few tents. An old-fashioned Airstream trailer. Then she reached the circle of tents and trailers that ringed the bonfire. She heard kids laughing.

She approached nervously. The first to see her was a little girl, who nudged the older girl beside her. Astrid instantly recognized Diana.

Diana looked at her without showing the least surprise and said, “Well, hello, Astrid. Where have you been?”

Conversation and laughter died, and thirty or more faces, each lit orange and gold, turned to look.

“I’ve been . . . away,” Astrid said.

Diana stood up and Astrid realized with a shock that she was pregnant.

Diana saw the look on Astrid’s face, smirked, and said, “Yes, all kinds of interesting things have happened while you were away.”

“I need to see Sam,” Astrid said.

That drew a laugh from Diana. “No doubt,” Diana said. “I’ll take you.”

Diana led the way to the houseboat. She still moved with unself-conscious grace despite the bulge. Astrid wished she moved like that.

“By the way, you didn’t happen to see a kid, a girl, on your way here, did you? Her name is Bonnie. About seven, I think.”

“No. Is someone missing?”

Edilio was sitting in a folding chair on the top deck, keeping watch over the scattered tents, trailers, Winnebagos, and boats. He had an automatic rifle on his lap.

“Hi, Edilio,” Astrid said.

Edilio jumped up and clambered down to the dock. He swung his rifle out of the way and threw his arms around Astrid. “Thank God. It’s about time.”

Astrid felt tears forming. “Missed you,” she admitted.

“I guess you’re here to see Sam.”

“Yes.”

Edilio nodded to Diana, dismissing her. He drew Astrid up onto the boat and then into the empty cabin. “There’s a little problem with that,” Edilio said in a whisper.

“He doesn’t want to see me?”

“He’s, um . . . He’s out.”

Astrid laughed. “I assume from your conspiratorial look you mean he’s up to something dangerous?”

Edilio grinned and shrugged. “He’s still Sam. He should be back by morning. Come on; let’s get you something to eat and drink. You can sleep here tonight.”

The pickup truck crept down the road. Crept for many reasons: First, it saved gas. Second, they were driving with the lights out because headlights would be visible a long way off.

Third, the road from the lake down to the highway was narrow and only sketchily paved.

And fourth: Sam had never really learned to drive.

Sam was behind the wheel. Dekka was beside him. Computer Jack was in the cramped space behind the front seat, wedged in and not happy.

“No offense, Sam, but you’re going off the road. Off the road! Sam! You’re going off the road!”

“No, I’m not; shut up,” Sam snapped as he guided the huge truck back onto the road, narrowly avoiding overturning in the ditch.

“This is how I’m going to die,” Jack said. “Crammed in like this in a ditch.”

“Oh, please,” Sam said. “You’re strong enough to tear your way out even if we did crash.”

“Do me a favor and rescue me, too,” Dekka said.

“We’re fine. I have this down now,” Sam said.

“Coyotes will totally eat us,” Jack said. “Tear our guts open and . . .” He fell silent.

Sam glanced in the rearview mirror and saw Jack mouth the word “sorry.”

Dekka sighed. “I hate when you guys do that. Stop treating me like I’m going to fall apart. Not helpful.”

Saving Dekka’s life from the infestation of bugs had meant cutting her open. Lana had been there to heal her, but Dekka had not come through unscathed. She put on a good act, but Dekka was no longer the fearless, indestructible girl she had once seemed to be.

That and Brianna’s obvious rejection of her had left her withdrawn, defeated. Hopeless.

“I hope Brianna’s okay,” Jack said. “She shouldn’t be running around in the dark.”

“As long as she sticks to the road and takes it slow she’ll be all right,” Sam said, hoping to forestall any further conversation about Brianna. Jack was extremely intelligent in areas having to do with technology. But he could be completely, steadfastly clueless when it came to humans.

Sure enough, he stepped right in it.

“Brianna’s been weird lately,” Jack said. “Ever since we came up to the lake. She’s like, all . . .”

Sam refused to ask him to continue.

Dekka shot a sidelong look at Sam and said, “She’s like all what, Jack?”

“Like all . . . I don’t know. Like she wants to . . . you know . . .”

“No, I don’t know,” Dekka growled. “So if you’ve got something to say, spit it out.”

“I don’t know. Like, be friendly with me. Like, she made out with me the other day.”

“Poor you,” Dekka said in a voice that would have frozen a more sensitive person into a block of ice.

Jack spread his hands. “I was busy. She could see I was busy.”

At that point Sam decided it might be a good idea to weave off the road and knock into a fence post.

“Sam! Sam, Sam, Sam!” Jack yelled. He jerked in fear, which, because of his ridiculous strength, pushed the seat so hard Sam was smacked into the wheel.

“Ow!” Sam stepped on the brake. “Okay, that’s enough. Do either of you two want to drive? No? Then shut up. Jeez, my head is bleeding.”

The truck moved again and soon the wheels went from gravel to the smooth pavement of the highway. Sam drove a quarter mile down the highway, spotted a landmark, and parked on the shoulder of the road.

“Cut across here. Right?” Sam asked.

Dekka peered out, nodded. “Yeah, this looks right.”

They climbed out and stretched. It was still half a mile to the shore. Half a mile across a zeke field.

The zekes hadn’t bothered anyone since the humans and the worms had worked out the arrangement of tossing blue bats and other inedible—to humans—animals into the fields to feed the worms. But just in case, Dekka had some baggies of fish entrails and bits and pieces of raccoon and deer tendons and the like in a pack. She emptied one of these out at her feet and instantly the zekes seethed up out of the ground and swarmed over the food. But left the three of them unharmed.

“The stuff we get used to,” Jack said, and shook his head.

Sam said, “Listen, guys, you’ll hear about it soon enough: there’s something hinky going on with the barrier.”

“Kinky?”

“No, hinky. Weird.” Sam told them what he had seen.

“Maybe it’s Sinder’s powers causing it,” Jack suggested.

Sam nodded. “Possible. So tomorrow we’re going to have to explore a bit, see if the same thing is going on anywhere else.”

They had crossed the fields and now had to make it through a strip of weeds and sea grasses that ran along the top of the bluff.

It had been a while since Sam had seen the ocean. Not since they’d gone to the lake. It was black, painted with only the faintest glimmers of starlight. The moon was not out yet. The sound of the ocean had long been muted: there were no real waves in the FAYZ. But even the soft *shush . . . shush . . . shush* of water lapping on gritty sand touched something in Sam’s heart.

They had miscalculated their location by a few hundred yards and had to walk north along the sand in order to find the crushed container. The steel box—a shipping container with *maersk* written down the side—had fallen from a great height when Dekka lost control of it hundreds of feet in the air.

The contents—long, heavily constructed crates—had spilled out onto the sand. One of the crates had popped open. Sam decided to use a bit of battery power and flicked on a flashlight. Tail fins were clearly visible.

He flicked the light off. Paused.

Something not right.

“No one move,” Sam said. He played the light around on the sand. “Someone smoothed the sand.”

“Say what?” Jack asked.

“Look how flat and neat the sand is here. It’s like when they drag the beaches at night and in the morning all the footprints and everything are gone.”

“You’re right,” Dekka said. “Someone’s been here and then covered their tracks.”

No one spoke for a few minutes as each thought through the implications.

“Caine could easily lift these things and move them,” Sam said.

“So why are they still here?” Jack asked. Then he answered his own question. “Maybe they took the other missiles and just left this one. We should check the seals.”

Sam took slow, cautious steps closer. He aimed the light’s beam at bright yellow tape that sealed each crate. The tape had been carefully sliced and then pressed back into place.

“They’re gone,” Sam said flatly. “Caine has them.”

“Then why leave the one?” Jack asked.

Sam took a shallow breath. “Booby trap.”

EIGHT

36 HOURS, 10 MINUTES

“YOU CAN’T LET him get away with this!” Penny shrieked.

Caine wasn’t having it. “You stupid witch,” he yelled back. “No one told you to let it go that far!”

“He was mine for the day,” Penny hissed. She pressed a rag to her nose, which had started bleeding again.

“He tore his own eyes out. What did you think Quinn would do? What do you think Albert will do now?” He bit savagely at his thumb, a nervous habit.

“I thought you were the king!”

Caine reacted without thinking. He swung a hard backhand at her face. The blow did not connect, but the thought did. Penny flew backward like she’d been hit by a bus. She smacked hard against the wall of the office.

The blow stunned her, and Caine was in her face before she could clear her thoughts.

Turk came bursting in, his gun leveled. “What’s happening?”

“Penny tripped,” Caine said.

Penny’s freckled face was white with fury.

“Don’t,” Caine warned. He tightened an invisible grip around her head and twisted it back at an impossible angle.

Then Caine released her.

Penny panted and glared. But no nightmare seized Caine’s mind. “You’d better hope Lana can fix that boy, Penny.”

“You’re getting soft.” Penny choked out the words.

“Being king isn’t about being a sick creep,” Caine said. “People need someone in charge. People are sheep and they need a big sheepdog telling them what to do and where to go. But it doesn’t work if you start killing the sheep.”

“You’re scared of Albert.” Penny followed it with a mocking laugh.

“I’m scared of no one,” Caine said. “Least of all you, Penny. You live because I let you live. Remember that. The kids out there?” He waved his hand toward the window, vaguely indicating the population of Perdido Beach. “Those kids out there hate you. You don’t have a single friend. Now get out of here. I don’t want to see you back here in my presence until you’re ready to crawl to me and beg my forgiveness.”

Penny said two words, the second of which was “you.”

Caine laughed. “I think you meant ‘——you, Your Highness.’”

He lifted Penny up with a slight motion of one hand and tossed her out through the open door and into the hallway.

“She could be trouble, Your Highness,” Turk said.

“She’s already trouble,” Caine said. “First Drake, now Penny. I’m surrounded by psychos and idiots.”

Turk looked hurt.

“One thing, Turk. You ever see me freaking out, like Penny is pulling something on me? You shoot the witch. We clear on that?”

“Absolutely,” Turk said. “Your Highness.”

“You get that you’re the idiot, right, Turk?”

“Um . . .”

Caine stormed off, muttering, “I miss Diana.”

Quinn was still vibrating with rage by the time he made his way to Clifftop. Rage. But fear, too. In getting Cigar out of Penny’s grip he had made a very dangerous enemy. Maybe two. Or even three, depending on where Albert came down.

Walking through the carpeted hall, feeling his way in the dark, Quinn realized with surprise that he was hearing voices. From a room at the far end of the hall from Lana’s oceanfront room he heard children playing.

He stopped and listened.

“You lose; you totally lose, Peace.”

“Because you cheated, you little thief!”

“Guys, keep it down, huh?” That last voice Quinn recognized as Virtue, who was often called Choo.

Sanjit had moved his siblings into Clifftop? When had that happened? The whole bunch of them, all the island kids, had moved to the lake with Lana. But after a few days she’d returned. Clifftop had become a part of Lana. It was where she felt safe.

Quinn realized with a stab of jealousy that Lana had okayed the island kids moving in here. No one argued with Lana. And until now she had placed an absolute ban on anyone sharing even a tiny corner of her Clifftop redoubt.

He knew that Lana was sort of seeing Sanjit, the new kid. But letting him move his whole family into Clifftop?

There had been a time when Quinn thought Lana and he might . . . But then events and realities had killed that daydream. Quinn was just a working guy, a fisherman. Lana was the Healer. As such she was the most protected, respected, even revered person in the FAYZ. Not even Caine would dream of messing with Lana.

And as intimidating as all that was, there was more: Lana was as tough as a spiked baseball bat.

She had seemed far, far above Quinn.

Patrick heard him and set up a loud and sustained barking.

Quinn knocked even though it seemed superfluous. The peephole went dark. The door was opened by Sanjit.

“It’s Quinn,” he yelled over his shoulder. “Come on in, man.”

Quinn stepped in. In the weird glow of a small Sammy sun the transformation of Lana’s room was shocking: it was clean.

Really clean. With the bed made and the coffee table clear. The usual overflowing ashtray was nowhere to be seen—or smelled.

Even Patrick looked as if he’d been bathed and brushed. He ran over and began rubbing himself against Quinn, probably looking to pick up some pleasant fish smell to replace all the odors that had been rudely shampooed away.

Sanjit, a slim Indian-looking kid with an infectious smile and long black hair, noticed Quinn’s surprise but said nothing.

Lana came in from the balcony. She at least had not changed much. She still had a huge semiautomatic pistol stuck in a thick belt. She still had the same pretty but not beautiful looks. And her expression was still somewhere between vulnerable and

forbidding, like she might just as easily break down in tears or shoot you in the stomach.

“Hi, Quinn, what is it?”

There was nothing embarrassed or ill at ease in her tone. If she knew that Quinn was feeling jealous she gave no sign of it.

Not what I’m here for, Quinn told himself, feeling guilty to be letting his own feelings gain any hold when the picture of poor Cigar was still so fresh in his mind.

“It’s Cigar,” Quinn said. “He’s at Dahra’s.” He quickly told her what had happened.

Lana nodded and grabbed her backpack. “Don’t wait up,” she told Sanjit.

Quinn swallowed hard on that. Sanjit was actually living with Lana? In the same room? Was Quinn misunderstanding this? Because that was sure what it sounded like.

Patrick fell in beside Lana, sensing an adventure.

Down the hallway, then down the stairs to ground level, Lana led the way through the pitch-black lobby and out into the night, bright by contrast.

“So,” Quinn said, letting the word hang there between them.

“I got lonely,” Lana said. “I get nightmares. It helps having someone there sometimes.”

“It’s not my business,” Quinn muttered.

Lana stopped and faced him. “Yeah, it’s your business, Quinn. You and I . . .” She didn’t quite know how to finish that, so she just shifted to a gruffer tone and said, “But it’s no one else’s business.”

They walked on quickly.

“Who would I tell?” Quinn asked rhetorically.

“You ought to have someone to tell,” Lana said. “I know. Sounds weird coming from me.”

“A little bit.” Quinn was trying to nurture his resentment, but the truth was, he liked Lana. Had for a long time. He couldn’t stay mad at her. Anyway, she deserved some peace in her life.

“It still reaches me sometimes,” Lana said.

Quinn knew she meant the Darkness, the thing that named itself the gaiaphage.

“What does it want from you?” Quinn asked. Even talking about the gaiaphage cast a shadow on him, made his breathing heavy and his heartbeat too loud.

“It wants Nemesis. It’s looking for him.”

“Nemesis?”

“Man, you don’t get any of the good gossip, do you?”

“I’m mostly hanging with my crews.”

“Little Pete,” Lana explained. “Nemesis. It wants him night and day, and sometimes it’s like that voice is screaming in my head. Sometimes it’s bad. Then I need someone to, you know, bring me back.”

“But Little Pete’s dead and gone,” Quinn said.

Lana laughed a hard, pitiless laugh. “Yeah? Tell the voice in my head, Quinn. The voice in my head is scared. The gaiaphage is scared.”

“That’s probably a good thing. Right?”

Lana shook her head. “Doesn’t feel good, Quinn. Something big is happening. Something definitely not good.”

“I saw . . .” He winced; he should be telling Albert first. Too late. “The barrier. It seems like it’s changing color.”

“Changing color? Changing to what color?” Lana asked.

“Black. It may be turning black.”

NINE

35 HOURS, 25 MINUTES

SO FAR PETE had experimented only a little with his new game. It was a very complicated game with so many pieces. So much he could do.

There were avatars, about three hundred of them, which was a lot. They hadn't seemed very interesting until he looked very close at them and saw that each one was a complex spiral, like two long spiral ladders joined together, then twisted and compressed so that if you looked at the avatar from a distance you didn't see anything but a symbol.

He had touched a couple of the avatars, but when he did that they blurred and broke and disappeared. So maybe that wasn't the right thing to do.

But the real question was: what was the point of the game? He didn't see any score.

All he knew was that it was all inside the ball. The game did not see outside the ball. It was all inside, and there was the Darkness glowing at the bottom, and the ball itself, and neither of them was affected by the game. He had tried to move the Darkness but his controls had no effect on it.

In some ways it really wasn't a very good game.

Pete picked an avatar at random, and zoomed in on it until he could see the spirals inside spirals. They were beautiful, really. Delicate. No wonder his earlier moves had destroyed the avatars; he had just been scrambling up the intricate latticework.

This time he would try something different. And there, flitting magically from place to place, was the perfect avatar.

Taylor was enjoying the best of both worlds. Using her power she could "bounce" from the island to the town to the lake. All in all it was the most useful power imaginable. Brianna could keep her super-speed and her worn-out sneakers and the broken wrists she got when she fell, and the rest of it.

Taylor just had to picture a place where she'd been, and pop! There she was. In the flesh. So once Caine had arranged for Taylor to visit the island—San Francisco de Sales Island, formerly owned by Jennifer Brattle and Todd Chance—she could bounce back anytime.

Which meant that Taylor slept in a fabulous bedroom in a fabulous mansion. She could have also worn Jennifer Brattle's amazing wardrobe, but she was too small in a number of dimensions.

But if she ever got lonely, she could just picture Perdido Beach and be there.

It made her very useful. Which was how she ended up working for both King Caine and Albert. Caine wanted information on Sam and what was happening at the lake. And Albert wanted some of that, plus information on Caine.

Taylor owned the gossip of the FAYZ. She was the TMZ of the FAYZ.

Or maybe the CIA of the FAYZ.

But either way, life was good for a smart girl with the power to simply pop from place to place. And just as important: pop right back out.

At the moment she was lying in her bed. The room she was in had been called the

Amazon room because of the leafy green color of the walls and the jaguar-print bedclothes. There were a lot of bedrooms in the mansion, and amazingly some still had clean sheets.

Clean sheets! The equivalent of living in a palace compared to life in the rest of the miserable FAYZ, where you were lucky to have a mattress no one had peed on recently.

She was in bed munching on slightly stale saltines—she had to be careful about raiding the pantry; Albert had inventoried it—and watching an old *Hey Arnold!* on DVD. The fuel for the generator, too, was controlled and very limited, but occasional electricity was part of her salary.

Suddenly Taylor had the feeling someone else was in the room. It made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. “Okay, who is there?”

No answer. Could it be Bug? She would know if Bug had been brought out to the island.

Nothing. She was letting her imagination—

Something moved. Right in front of her. For just a second the TV screen had blurred. Like something transparent but distorting had moved in front of it.

“Hey!” She was poised, ready to bounce out of here in a heartbeat. She listened to the room. Nothing. Whatever had been there was gone now. Or maybe had never been there to begin with; that was most likely. She was imagining things.

Taylor reached for the remote control and saw that her skin was gold. Her first reaction was that it was a trick of the light from the cartoon. But after a few seconds she decided, no. No, this was weird.

Taylor climbed out of bed and went to the window. In the moonlight her skin was still gold.

Crazy. Not real.

She searched in the dark and found a candle. She clumsily thumbed a lighter and brought fire to the wick.

Yes. Her skin was gold.

Carrying the candle, she went to the bathroom to look at herself in the mirror.

She was gold. From head to toe. Her black hair was still black, but every square inch of her skin was the color of actual yellow gold.

Then she leaned close to look at the reflection of her own eyes. And that was when she screamed, because the irises were an even deeper gold.

“Oh, my God,” she whispered.

Shaking, she switched out of her bed shirt into jeans and a T-shirt. Because maybe she was just hallucinating, so she needed to have someone else look at her.

Taylor pictured Lana’s hotel, the hallway.

She bounced.

The pain was instant and unbearable. Like nothing she had ever felt or imagined. Her left hand and the outer meat of her left calf felt as if they were pressed against red-hot steel.

Taylor screamed and thrashed and the pain only grew worse. She was hanging from her hand and her leg, just hanging, not standing on anything, just hanging from . . . She screamed again as she realized she was not at Clifftop. She was in the forest, hanging from a tall tree. Her left hand and the outer edge of her left calf had

materialized in the tree.

In the tree.

She dangled, screaming, right arm and left arm reaching, grabbing, wild and out of control. Her golden flesh shining dully in the moonlight.

And the pain!

It had to be a dream. This couldn't be real. She hadn't bounced here. No, it was just a horrible nightmare. She had to bounce away, even if it was a dream, bounce back to her bedroom.

Taylor strained to visualize her room. Pushed back the pain for just a second . . . just . . .

Taylor bounced.

The hand was gone. Neatly cut off at the wrist. No blood, just a sudden ending. Taylor could not see her calf. Nor could she feel it.

She was not in her bedroom. She was on a car in the driveway of Clifftop.

On the car. Both of her legs were in the car, but she was on it, on the dusty roof of a Lexus. She had materialized with her legs sticking through the roof.

Taylor bellowed in pain and terror.

Her flailing caused her to topple over. The stumps of her legs didn't do a very good job of holding her in place. She rolled once, fell the four feet to the pavement, landed on her chest.

Shaking with fear, she fumbled for and reached the door handle and used it to pull herself up into a seated position. Her legs ended in neat stumps, just above the knees. Just like her left hand.

No blood.

But so much pain.

Taylor screamed and fell back and lost consciousness.

Astrid had found the sight of a visibly pregnant Diana disturbing.

It was strange enough to see a fifteen-year-old girl pregnant in any context. In the FAYZ it was far more jarring. The FAYZ was a trap, a prison, a purgatory maybe. But a nursery?

Each week that had gone by from that first day, the number of kids alive in the FAYZ had gone down. Always down, never up. The FAYZ was a place of sudden, horrifying death. Not a place of life.

And who had changed all that? A cruel, sharp-tongued girl and a boy who had never been anything but evil.

Astrid had taken a life. Diana was bringing one into the world.

Astrid sat on the sticky plastic cushions around the houseboat's tiny dining table. She put her elbows on the table and held her head in her hands.

Edilio came in, nodded at Astrid, and poured himself a glass of water from the jug on the counter. He was being discreet, not asking her questions, not wanting, probably, to scare her off.

"You like irony, Edilio?" Astrid asked him.

For a moment she thought she'd embarrassed him by using a word he didn't understand. But after a long, reflective pause Edilio said, "You mean like the irony of an illegal from Honduras ending up being what I am?"

Astrid smiled. "Yeah. Like that."

Edilio gave her a shrewd look. "Or maybe like Diana having a baby?"

That forced a laugh from Astrid. She shook her head ruefully. "You are the most underestimated person in the FAYZ."

"It's my superpower," Edilio said dryly.

Astrid invited him to sit down. He laid his gun down carefully and slid into a seat opposite her.

"Who would you say are the ten most powerful people in the FAYZ, Edilio?"

Edilio raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Really?"

"Yes."

"Number one is Albert," Edilio said. "Then Caine. Sam. Lana." He thought about it for a moment longer and said, "Quinn. Drake, unfortunately. Dekka. You. Me. Diana."

Astrid folded her arms in front of her. "Not Brianna? Or Orc?"

"They're both powerful, sure. But they don't have the kind of power that moves other people, you know? Brianna's cool, but she's not someone who other people follow. Same with Jack. More so with Orc."

"You notice something about the ten people you named?" Astrid asked. Then she answered her own question. "Four of the ten have no powers or mutations."

"Irony?"

"And Diana's importance isn't about her power. It's about her baby. Diana Ladris: mother."

"She's changed," Edilio said. "So have you."

"Yeah, I'm a bit more tanned," Astrid said evasively.

"I think it's more than that," Edilio said. "The old Astrid would never have just disappeared like you did. Wouldn't have stayed out there all on her own."

"True," Astrid acknowledged. "I was . . . I was doing penance."

Edilio smiled affectionately. "Old-school, huh? Like a hermit. Or a monk. Holy men . . . women, too, I guess . . . going off to the wilderness to make peace with God."

"I'm not a holy anything."

"But you made peace?"

Astrid took a deep breath. "I've changed."

"Ah. Like that?" Her silence was confirmation. "Lots of people, they go through bad times, they lose their faith. But they come back to it."

"I didn't lose my faith, Edilio: I killed it. I held it up to the light and I stared right at it and for the first time I didn't hide behind something I'd read somewhere, or something I'd heard. I didn't worry about what anyone would think. I didn't worry about looking like a fool. I was all alone and I had no one to be right to. Except me. So I just looked. And when I looked . . ." She made a gesture with her fingers, like things blowing away, scattering in the wind. "There was nothing there."

Edilio looked very sad.

"Edilio," she said, "you have to believe what's right for you, what you feel. But so do I. It's hard for someone who has had to carry the nickname 'Astrid the Genius' to admit she was wrong." She made a wry smile. "But I found out that I was . . . not happier, maybe; that's not the right word. . . . Not about happy. But . . . honest. Honest with myself."

“So you think I’m lying to myself?” Edilio asked softly.

Astrid shook her head. “Never. But I was.”

Edilio stood up. “I have to get back out there.” He came to stand beside her, put his arms around her shoulders, and she hugged him, too.

“It’s good to have you back, Astrid. You should get some sleep.” He nodded. “Use Sam’s bunk.”

Astrid felt weariness rise up and almost close her eyes where she sat. A nap. Just a brief one. She made her way to Sam’s bunk and flopped down.

The bed smelled of salt and Sam. The two smells had always been connected in her mind.

She wondered who he had found to be with. Surely someone by now. Well, good. Good. Sam needed someone to take care of him, and she hoped he’d found that.

She felt around, looking for a pillow. She hadn’t had a pillow in a long, long time, and now the idea of one seemed incredibly luxurious.

Instead of a pillow her hand touched sheer, silky fabric. She pulled it to her and ran the fabric against her cheek. She knew it. It was her old nightgown, the filmy white thing she used to wear back in the days when she didn’t need to sleep with her clothes on and a shotgun nestled to her breast.

Her old nightgown. Sam kept it with him, in his bed.

TEN

34 HOURS, 31 MINUTES

“I’M GOING TO risk some light,” Sam said.

“I think some light would be a great idea,” Dekka said.

Sam raised his hands, and a ball of light, like a pale greenish sun, began to form in midair. It created more shadows than illumination. So he leaned to his right as far as he could without moving his feet and hung a second light in midair. The two lights banished some of the shadows.

“Okay, everyone kneel down real slowly and check all around your feet,” Sam instructed.

“Aaahh!” Jack yelled.

“Don’t move!”

“I’m not moving, I’m not moving, my foot is underneath a wire, I’m not moving, Oh, God, I’m going to die!”

Sam formed a third light down by Jack’s feet. Now he could easily see the taut wire crossing the toe of Jack’s boot.

“Dekka, are you clear?” Sam asked.

“I think so. Anyway, I can see where the wire runs now.”

“Okay, then move back to a safe distance.”

“Any idea what a safe distance would be?”

“Far,” Sam said. “Okay, Jack, just stand still. I’m going to scoop the sand out from under your foot. That’ll take the pressure off the wire.”

Sam used his two index fingers to begin very, very delicately scooping sand. Then he used two fingers from each hand.

Jack’s shoe dropped half an inch. Then a bit more.

“Okay, now just move your foot back.”

“You sure?”

“I’m right here next to you, aren’t I?” Sam snapped.

Jack moved his foot. Nothing blew up.

“Now we all just back away.”

“Hey, what are you guys doing?” It was Brianna atop the bluff. “What’s with all the light? I thought we were being all—”

“Stay right there!” Dekka yelled.

“Okay, jeez, you don’t have to yell.”

Sam explained what was going on. “We can’t leave this thing booby-trapped. Some innocent person could stumble across this place. We either have to disarm it or blow it up.”

“Since I’m the tech guy, and disarming a booby trap is a sort of tech problem,” Jack said, “I vote we blow it up from a safe distance.”

“Oh, come on, Jack, don’t be a wimp,” Dekka teased.

“Breeze,” Sam called up to her. “Find us a rope or a long string.”

Brianna blurred out of view.

“Okay, let’s all go down to the water,” Sam said.

They did not have to wait long. In five minutes Brianna was vibrating to a stop

next to them.

“I don’t guess you can outrun an explosion, right?” Sam asked doubtfully.

Jack rolled his eyes and sighed his condescending geek sigh. “Seriously? Brianna runs in miles per hour. Explosions happen in feet per second. Don’t believe what you see in movies.”

“Yeah, Sam,” Dekka said.

“In the old days I always had Astrid around to humiliate me when I asked a stupid question,” Sam said. “It’s good to have Jack to take over that job.”

He’d said it lightheartedly, but the mention of Astrid left an awkward hole in the conversation.

Brianna said, “I can’t outrun an explosion, but I’ll tie the string around the wire.”

She zipped over to the wire and zipped back holding the loose end. “Who gets to yank the string?”

“She who ties the string pulls it,” Sam said. “But first—”

BOOOOM!

The containers, the sand, pieces of driftwood, bushes on the bluff all erupted in a fireball. Sam felt a blast of heat on his face. His ears rang. His eyes scrunched on sand.

Debris seemed to take a long time to fall back down to earth.

In the eventual silence Sam said, “I was going to say first we should all lie flat so we didn’t get blown up. But I guess that was good, too, Breeze.”

He looked toward the south. From where he was standing he couldn’t exactly see Perdido Beach. There were no lights except for his eternal Sammy suns, and they would be behind curtains at night.

Down there in town his brother, Caine, was . . . doing what exactly? That was the question. Had this been Caine’s idea, this booby trap? Had he heard or seen the explosion and was he now rejoicing, believing Sam had been killed?

What would Caine do if he thought Sam was dead? Would he come against the lake? Could Albert stop him?

Caine wouldn’t dare attack the lake as long as Sam was alive. As long as Sam was alive and could join forces with Albert, Caine would be careful.

But he wondered how long it would be before Caine moved against Albert and Sam. Would Caine really let Diana have his child and stay with Sam?

It did occur to Sam for just a fleeting moment that Caine might not be the one who had taken the missiles. But there was really only one other possibility. A ridiculous possibility.

Ridiculous.

No, Caine had the missiles. Which meant the four-month-long peace was coming to an end. It was dark, and no one was looking at him, so Sam didn’t feel too guilty about the fact that he was smiling.

Cigar felt hands touching him.

Maybe. Maybe hands. Maybe the paws of a monster who would sink terrible claws into him and rip the flesh from his arm.

He screamed.

Maybe. He couldn’t be sure. Had he ever stopped screaming?

He heard a far-off wail, a hopeless, helpless sound. Was it coming from him?

"I've never been able to grow an organ back," Lana's voice said. "Last time I tried . . . Let's just hope you don't end up with whip eyes."

He knew her voice. He knew she was there beside him. Yes. That was her touch on him. Unless she was the creature that smiled before chewing your fingers off and then ate its way up your arms, blood spurting around its grinning, needle-toothed mouth, laughing at his pain, chewing him, ripping until he screamed and screamed and his screaming throat became a roaring animal, a lion's mouth roaring out of his throat. . . .

"Look! Something's happening."

Cigar didn't recognize that voice. A boy's voice, wasn't it?

"Who are you?" Cigar cried out.

"It's Lana."

"Who are yoooooooo?"

"I think he means me. It's me, Sanjit."

There were snakes in Cigar's dried-blood eye sockets. He could feel them. They were writhing like mad.

"Nerves," Sanjit said.

"You might be feeling something," Lana said.

"Aaaaahhhhhh!" Cigar cried. He tried to claw at his eyes but his hands were pinned. Helpless. He'd had his arms chewed off, hadn't he? He didn't have arms anymore. So how had he clawed the roaches out of his eyes if he had no arms? Answer that, Bradley. His real name, Bradley.

Answer that.

And if you don't have arms how did you light those cigars, those big fat cigars and puff until the ends were glowing red and so hot and then plunge those red-hot tips into the empty holes of your eye and then shriek in agony and beg God, "Kill me, kill me, kill me"?

"The nerves are regrowing. Unbelievable," Sanjit said.

"He's trying to claw his eyes again," Lana said.

"Yeah," Sanjit agreed. "This can't ever happen again. That witch has to be stopped."

"It was Caine's doing," Lana said angrily. "He knows what Penny is like. She's a mental case. She's evil. She was always twisted, but after her injuries . . . something snapped in that girl."

"My eyes!" Cigar screamed.

Something. A bar of faint, distant light. Like the earliest hints of sunrise, like the blackness was just a little bit less black.

"Something is happening," Sanjit said. "Look! Look!"

"My eyes!"

"Not yet, dude, but something is growing. Little white balls, no bigger than BBs right now." Sanjit put his hand on Cigar's chest and dug his ripping, tearing, stiletto fingers into Cigar's heart and . . .

No. No. That wasn't real. That wasn't real.

The light bar, that faint glow was growing. Cigar stared at it, willing it to be real. He needed something to be real. He needed something to not be a nightmare.

"Cigar," Sanjit said in a kind voice. "It looks like the gouging and the cuts are healing up. And it seems like tiny little eyes are forming."

But then Lana's more astringent voice said, "Don't get your hopes up too much."

Her hands. On his temples. On his brow. Slowly, slowly she probed toward the black sockets.

"No, no, no, noooooo!" he wailed.

Lana's fingers slid back.

Lana was real. Her touch was real. The light he could see was real. He tried so very hard to hold on to that.

"We're going to cover your eyes with a cloth, okay?" Sanjit said. "Your eyeballs are jerking around and it may be that the light from the Sammy sun bothers them."

An eternity, during which he slid in and out of consciousness, in and out of screaming nightmares. At times he was on fire. At times his skin crisped like bacon. At times scorpions burrowed into his flesh.

All the while, Lana kept her hands on his face.

"Listen to me," Lana said at last. "Can you hear me?"

How much time had passed? The madness was not past, but it was diluted, weakened. The screams still threatened to tear his throat, but he could hold them off; he could mount some resistance, at least.

"We've been here all night," Lana said. "So whatever you've got is what you've got. I can't do any more."

"I'm here, too, brother. It's me, Quinn." Quinn laid his calloused hand on Cigar's shoulder and it made him want to cry. "Listen, dude, however it turns out, you've got a place with your crew. You're one of us."

"We're going to take the cloth off now," Sanjit said.

Cigar felt the cloth slide away.

Quinn gasped.

Cigar saw something that looked very much like Quinn. But a Quinn with a storm of purple-and-red light around his head. Quinn enveloped in what looked like the beginning of a tornado.

Cigar saw Sanjit behind him. He glowed softly, a steady silvery light.

Then he saw Lana. Her eyes were beautiful. Shifting rainbows. Sudden, piercing shafts like bright moonlight. She outshone both Quinn and Sanjit. She was a moon to their stars.

But wrapped around her was a sickly green tendril, like an infinitely long snake that writhed and probed at her, seeking a way into her head.

And that was all that Cigar saw. Because everything around the three kids was blank, empty darkness.

There was no teasing or even conversation on the trip back to the lake. Sam drove slowly. Jack slept, snoring from time to time, but not so loud that it bothered Sam.

Dekka stared out of the window. They had waited until dawn—no point risking another drive through the dark. After all, the need for secrecy was long gone.

Sam had no doubt that Caine had the missiles.

No real doubt. Despite the nagging voice in the back of his head that told him that if Caine had the missiles he'd have long since used them to move against the lake.

No. That was stupid. Caine was probably just biding his time. Waiting.

Brianna came running up alongside the truck and made the signal for *Roll down*

your window.

“You need me anymore?” Brianna asked. “Otherwise I’ll go catch some z’s.”

“No, I’m good, Breeze.”

But she didn’t zoom off; she kept pace. The truck was moving at no more than twenty to thirty miles an hour, so it was a pleasant walking speed for Brianna.

“You’re not letting Caine keep those things, are you?” Brianna asked.

“Not tonight, huh? I’m really beat. I don’t want to think about it. I just want to crawl into my bunk and pull the covers over my head.”

Brianna looked as if she was going to argue, but then she gave a theatrical sigh, winked at Sam like she had already read his inner thoughts, and zoomed away down the road.

Sam noticed that Dekka refused to look at her. He thought of talking to her about it, but he was talked out. He could barely keep his eyes open.

And yet, there it was again, that feeling of not quite seeing something. He felt eyes on him. Something watching him from out there in the black desert night.

“Coyotes,” he muttered. And he almost believed it.

They got back to the lake just as the faintest light of dawn shone from the false sun of the FAYZ. They got nice sunrises on the lake—if you could get past the fact that the “sun” was an illusion crawling up a barrier that was no more than half a mile away across the water.

Sam was stiff and tired. He crept onto the houseboat, careful not to wake anyone, and sidled down the narrow passage to his bunk. The shades were drawn and of course there were no lights, so he felt his way to the edge of his bed and crawled across it on hands and knees to find his pillow.

He collapsed on his back.

But even at the edge of sleep he was aware of something different about the bed.

Then he felt soft breath on his cheek.

He turned and her lips were on his. Not gentle. Not soft. She kissed him hard, and it was like he’d been awakened by an electric power line.

She kissed him and slid on top of him.

Their bodies did the rest.

At some point in the hours that followed he said, “Astrid?”

“Don’t you think you should have made sure of that about three times ago?” Astrid said in her familiar, slightly condescending tone.

They said many things to each other after that, but nothing that involved words.

OUTSIDE

MARY TERRAFINO HAD come through the barrier four months ago. She had leaped from a cliff inside the **FAYZ** at the exact moment of her fifteenth birthday.

She had landed. Not on the sand and rocks beneath the cliff, but two miles away from the barrier. She had appeared in a dry gulch and would have died but for the two dirt bikers who were racing across bumps and drops, yelling and roaring along and definitely not looking for what they found.

The bikers had not called for an ambulance. They had called animal control. Because what they thought they had seen was a terribly mangled animal. It was an understandable mistake.

Mary was in a special ward at the UCLA hospital down in Los Angeles. The ward had two patients: Mary and a boy named Francis.

The doctor in charge was a woman named Chandiramani. She was forty-eight and wore her white coat over a traditional sari. Dr. Chandiramani had a tense but proper relationship with Major Onyx. The major was supposedly the liaison with the Pentagon. In theory he was there only to offer Dr. Chandiramani and her team any necessary support.

In reality the major clearly thought he was in charge of the ward. He and the doctors often clashed.

It was all very polite, with never a raised voice. But the Pentagon's priorities were somewhat different from those of the doctors. The doctors wanted to keep their two horribly damaged patients alive and comfortable. The soldiers needed answers.

Major Onyx had arranged to have equipment installed in the room, and in both adjacent rooms, that definitely had nothing to do with Mary's medical condition. Dr. Chandiramani had pretended not to understand any of it, but the doctor had not always confined her studies to medicine. In earlier life she had made a serious start at studying physics. And she knew a mass spectrometer when she saw one. She knew that this room, and Francis's room, were effectively inside of a sort of super-sensitive mass spectrometer. What other instruments the major had packed into the walls and ceiling and floor she could only guess.

Francis was alive. But no way had yet been found to communicate with him. There were brain waves. So he was conscious. But he had no mouth or eyes. He had one appendage that might be an arm, but it was in a continuous state of spasm, so even if the fingers had not been oddly jointed claws he would not have been able to use either a keyboard or a pencil.

Mary had somewhat more potential. She had a mouth and it appeared to have some limited functionality in terms of speech. They'd had to remove some of the grotesque teeth that had grown through her cheeks. And they had performed other surgeries to repair her tongue and mouth and throat to the best of their abilities.

The result was that Mary could speak.

Unfortunately she had only screamed and leaked tears out of the smear that was her only eye.

But now they had found the right mix of sedatives and antiseizure meds, and Dr.

Chandiramani had finally agreed to allow Major Onyx and an army psychologist to question the girl.

The first questions were overly broad.

“What can you tell us about conditions inside?”

“Mom?” she had asked in a voice that was barely a whisper.

“Your mother will come later,” the psychologist said in a soothing voice. “I am Dr. Greene. With me is Major Onyx. And Dr. Chandiramani, who has been taking care of you these last months since you escaped.”

“Hello, Mary,” Dr. Chandiramani said.

“The littles?” Mary asked.

“What does that mean?” Dr. Greene asked.

“The littles. My kids.”

Major Onyx had close-cut black hair, a dark tan, and intense blue eyes. “Our information is that she took care of the little children.”

Dr. Greene leaned closer, but Dr. Chandiramani could see him fighting the nausea that people always felt seeing Mary. “Do you mean the little children you took care of?”

“I killed them,” Mary said. Tears flowed from her one tear duct and ran down the seared, boiled, lobster red skin.

“Surely not,” Dr. Greene said.

Mary cried aloud, a sound of keening despair.

“Change topic,” Dr. Chandiramani said, watching the monitor.

“Mary, this is very important. Does anyone know how this all started?”

Nothing.

“Who did it, Mary?” Dr. Chandiramani asked. “Who created the anom—the place you called the FAYZ?”

“Little Pete. The Darkness.”

The two doctors and the soldier looked at one another, puzzled.

The major frowned and whipped out his iPhone. He tapped it a few times. “FAYZ Wiki,” he explained. “We have two ‘Pete’ or ‘Peters’ listed.”

“What are the ages?” Dr. Chandiramani asked.

“One is twelve; one is four. No, sorry, he would have turned five.”

“Do you have children, Major? I do. No twelve-year-old would be happy to be called ‘Little Pete.’ It must be the five-year-old she’s talking about.”

“Delusional,” Dr. Greene said. “A five-year-old did not create the anomaly.” He frowned thoughtfully and scribbled a note. “Darkness. Maybe she’s afraid of the dark.”

“Everyone’s afraid of the dark,” Dr. Chandiramani said. Greene was getting on her nerves. So were the major and his horrified stare.

The monitor above Mary’s bed suddenly beeped urgently.

Dr. Chandiramani reached for the call panel and yelled, “Code blue, code blue,” but it was unnecessary, because nurses were already rushing in through the door.

At the same time Major Onyx’s smartphone began chiming. He didn’t answer it, but he did open an app of some sort.

A tall, thin doctor in green scrubs swept in behind the nurses. He glanced at the monitor. He put his stethoscope in his ears and asked, “Where is her heart?”

Dr. Chandiramani pointed to the unlikely place. But she knew it was useless. All lines on the monitor had gone flat. All at the same time. Which was not how it happened. Heart, brain, everything suddenly and irreversibly dead.

“You’ll find the other one’s gone, too,” Major Onyx said calmly, consulting his phone. “Francis. Something pulled his plug, as well.”

“Are you going to tell me what you’re talking about?” Dr. Chandiramani snapped.

The major jerked his head, indicating that the other doctor and the nurses should get out. They didn’t argue.

Major Onyx closed the app and put his phone away. “The people who were ejected when the dome was created? They came out clean. So did the twins. The rest, the ones who’ve appeared since? They’ve always had a sort of . . . umbilical cord . . . connecting them to the dome. J waves, that’s what we call them. But don’t ask me what they are, because we don’t know. We can detect them, but they are not something encountered in nature.”

“What does ‘J wave’ stand for?” the doctor asked.

Major Onyx barked out a laugh. “Some smart-ass physicist at CERN called them ‘Jehovah waves.’ According to him they might as well come from God, because we sure don’t know what they do or where they come from. The name stuck.”

“So what just changed? Did something happen with these J waves?”

The major started to answer but, with a visible effort, and a last appalled look at Mary, stopped himself. “The conversation we just had? Never happened.”

He left and Dr. Chandiramani was alone with her patient.

Four months after her ghastly appearance, Mary Terrafino was dead.

ELEVEN

26 HOURS, 45 MINUTES

SAM WOKE TO a feeling of utter, profound, incredible relief.

He closed his eyes as soon as he opened them, afraid that being awake would just invite something terrible to appear.

Astrid was back. And she was asleep with her head on his arm. His arm was asleep, completely numb, but as long as that blond head was right there his arm could stay numb.

She smelled like pine trees and campfire smoke.

He opened his eyes, cautious, almost flinching, because the FAYZ didn't make a habit of allowing him pure, undiluted happiness. The FAYZ made a habit of stomping on anything that looked even a little bit like happiness. And this level of happiness was surely tempting retaliation. From this high up the fall could be a long, long one.

Just yesterday he'd been bored and longing for conflict. The memory shocked him. Had that really been him grinning in the dark at the prospect of war with Caine?

Surely not. He wasn't that guy. Was he?

If he was that guy, how could he suddenly do a 180 and now feel so different? Because of Astrid? Because of the fact of her in his bed?

Without moving he could see the top of her head—her hair looked as if someone had cut it with a weed whacker—part of her right cheek, her eyelashes, the end of her nose, and farther down a long, shapely, much-scarred and bruised leg entwined with his own leg.

One of her hands was on his chest, just over his heart, which was starting to beat faster, so fast and so insistently he was afraid the vibration might wake her. Her breath tickled.

Sam's mind was happy to let this go on forever. His body had a different idea. He swallowed hard.

Her eyelash flickered. Her breathing changed. She said, "How long can we go before we have to talk?"

"A while longer," he said.

The while longer eventually came to an end. Astrid finally pulled away and sat up. Their eyes met.

Sam didn't know what he expected to see in her eyes. Maybe guilt. Remorse. Loathing. He saw none of those things.

"I forget," Astrid said, "why was I so against doing that?"

Sam smiled. "I'm not about to remind you."

She looked at him with a frankness that embarrassed him. Like she was taking inventory. Like she was storing images away in memory.

"Are you back?" Sam asked.

Astrid's gaze flicked away, evasive. Then she seemed to think better of it, and she met his gaze squarely. "I have an idea. How about if I just tell you the truth?"

"That would be good."

"Don't be so sure," she said. "But I'm out of practice lying. I guess living alone kind of made me intolerant of BS. Especially my own."

Sam sat up. "Okay. Let's talk. First, let's jump in the lake for a minute."

They made their way on deck and plunged off into the chilly water.

"People will see us," Astrid said, smoothing her hair back and revealing the tan line on her forehead. "Are you ready for that?"

"Astrid, by now not only everyone at the lake, but everyone in Perdido Beach and probably whoever is out on the island knows all about it. Taylor's probably been here and gone, most likely Bug, too."

She laughed. "You're suggesting gossip actually moves at speeds that are impossible."

"Gossip this juicy? The speed of light is nothing compared to the speed this will move at."

"Move at?" she mocked. "Your preposition is dangling."

Several bits and pieces of leering jokes came to Sam's mind, but Astrid had gotten there quicker and she shook her head and said, "No. Don't. That kind of joke would be beneath even you."

It was good to have her back.

They climbed aboard and towed off. They dressed and came out onto the top deck with breakfast: carrots, yesterday's grilled fish, and water.

Astrid got down to business. "I came back because the dome is changing."

"The stain?"

"You've seen it?"

"Yeah, but we thought maybe it was because of what Sinder's doing."

Astrid's eyebrows rose. "What is Sinder doing?"

"She's developed a power. She can make things grow at an accelerated rate. She has a little garden right up against the barrier. We're experimenting a little, eating just a little of the vegetables, seeing if there's any kind of . . . you know, effect."

"Very scientific of you," Astrid said.

He shrugged. "Well, my scientist girlfriend was off in the woods. I had to do my best."

Had she just reacted to the word "girlfriend"?

"Sorry," he said quickly. "I didn't mean to . . ." He wasn't sure what he hadn't meant to do.

"It wasn't the word 'girlfriend,'" Astrid said. "It was the possessive. The 'my.' But I realized that was stupid of me. There's no better way to say it. It's just that I haven't been thinking of myself as anyone's anything."

"No girl is an island."

"Seriously? You're misquoting John Donne? To me?"

"Hey, maybe I've spent the last four months reading poetry. You don't know."

Astrid laughed. He loved that laugh. Then she grew serious. "The stain is everywhere I looked, Sam. I traveled along the barrier. It's everywhere, sometimes just a few inches visible, but I saw areas where it rose maybe twenty feet or so."

"You think it's growing?"

She shrugged. "I know it's growing; I just don't know how fast. I'd like to try to measure it."

"What do you think it is?" he asked.

She shook her head slowly, side to side. "I don't know."

He felt as if a hand was squeezing his heart. The FAYZ punished happiness. He had made the mistake of being happy.

“Do you think . . . ,” he began, but he couldn’t quite get the words out. He changed it to, “What if it keeps growing?”

“The barrier has always been a kind of optical illusion. Look straight at it in front of you and you see a blank, nonreflective gray surface. A nullity. Look higher up and you see an illusion of sky. Day sky, night sky—but never a plane. The moon waxes and wanes as it should. It’s an illusion but it’s also our only source of light.” She was thinking aloud. The way she sometimes did. The way he had missed.

“I don’t know, but this seems like some kind of breakdown. You know how sometimes a movie projector—like the one we had at school, remember?—will get dimmer and dimmer until pretty soon you’re squinting to see anything?”

“You’re talking about it going completely dark?” He was relieved that his voice did not betray him with a tremor.

Astrid started to reach to touch his leg and stopped herself. Then she twined her fingers together, giving them something else to do. She wasn’t meeting his gaze but looking slightly past him, first to his left, then to his right.

“It’s possible,” she said. “I guess, yes. I mean, that was my first thought. That it’s going dark.”

Sam took a deep breath. He wasn’t going to freak out; he was sure of that. But the only reason he was confident was that he, himself, had the power to create light. Pitiful little Sammy suns and blinding beams, not bright yellow suns or even moons. But he himself would have light. He wouldn’t have to be completely in the dark.

He couldn’t be in the dark. Not in the total dark.

He realized his palms were damp and he wiped them on his shorts. When he glanced up he knew Astrid had seen, and that she knew what he was feeling.

He tried out a wry grin. “Stupid, huh? All we’ve been through? And I’m still scared of the dark?”

“Everyone’s afraid of something,” Astrid said.

“Like I’m a little kid.”

“Like you’re a human being.”

Sam looked around at the lake, at the sun sparkling on the water. Some kids were laughing, little kids playing at the water’s edge.

“Complete darkness.” Sam said it to hear it, to see if he could accept it. “Nothing will grow. We won’t be able to fish. We’ll . . . We’ll wander in the dark until we die of hunger. Kids will figure that out. They’ll panic.”

“Maybe the stain will stop,” Astrid said.

But Sam wasn’t listening. “It’s the endgame.”

Sanjit and Virtue found Taylor that morning when they went outside for some exercise: Sanjit running back and forth, circling around a huffing and puffing Virtue, who was definitely not much of a runner.

“Come on, Choo, this is good for you.”

“I know,” Virtue said through gritted teeth. “But that doesn’t mean I have to enjoy it.”

“Hey, we have a nice view of the beach and the—” Sanjit stopped because Virtue

had disappeared behind a car. He doubled back and saw his brother bent over something, and then he saw the something he was bent over.

“What the . . . Oh, God, what happened to her?”

Sanjit knelt next to Virtue. Neither of them touched her. The girl with skin the color of a gold bar and both lower legs and one hand simply gone. Cut off.

Virtue held his breath and put his ear close to Taylor’s mouth. “I think she’s still alive.”

“I’ll get Lana!” Sanjit raced back inside, down the hallway to the room he shared with Lana. He burst inside yelling, “Lana! Lana!”

He found himself staring at the bad end of her pistol. “Sanjit, how many times do I have to tell you not to surprise me!” Lana raged.

He said nothing, just took her hand and drew her along with him.

“She’s definitely breathing,” Virtue said as they ran up. “And I found a pulse in her neck.”

Sanjit looked at Lana as though she might understand what this meant. A girl with golden skin suddenly minus a hand and both legs. But Lana was just staring with the same horror he felt.

Then he saw the flash of suspicion, the hard, angry look she got when she felt the distant touch of the gaiaphage. Followed, as it usually was, by her jaw tightening, muscles clenching.

Moved by a grim instinct, Sanjit peered through the dirty windows of the car. “I found her legs.”

“Get them,” Lana said. “Virtue? You and I can carry her inside.”

“We’re still going out? After what they did to Cigar?” Phil was outraged. He wasn’t the only one.

Quinn said nothing. He didn’t trust himself to say anything. There was a volcano inside him. His head was buzzing from lack of sleep. The sight of Cigar, with those creepy, frightening marble-size eyeballs hanging from snakelike tendrils of nerve inside black crater eye sockets . . .

He had clawed his own eyes out.

He’s one of mine, Quinn thought, and the phrase went over and over in his head. One of mine.

Cigar had done wrong—a terrible wrong. He deserved punishment. But not to be tortured. Not to be driven insane. Not to be made into a monstrous creature that no one would be able to look at without stifling a scream.

Quinn climbed into his boat. His three crew members hesitated, looked at one another, and climbed in after him. The other three boats all did likewise.

They cast off and shipped oars and began to make their way out to sea.

Two hundred yards out, a distance where people onshore could still easily see them, Quinn gave a quiet order.

“Oars in,” he said.

“But there’s no fish this close in,” Phil objected.

Quinn said nothing. The oars came in. The boats rocked almost imperceptibly on the faint swell.

Quinn watched the dock and the beach. It wouldn’t be long before someone

reported to Albert and/or Caine to tell them the fishing fleet was not fishing.

He wondered who would react first.

Would it be Albert or Caine?

He closed his eyes and pulled his hat down low. "I'm going to get some sleep," he said. "Use the oars only to keep us in position if needed. Let me know if anyone comes."

"You got it, boss."

Albert heard about Quinn first. Both Caine and Albert had spies—sometimes the same kids—but Albert paid better.

Albert had around-the-clock bodyguards now. He had come very, very close to dying after the remains of the Human Crew had broken into his house, robbed and shot him.

Caine had executed one of the villains, a kid named Lance. Another one, Turk, had been reprieved and now worked for Caine. It was a message from Caine to Albert, his keeping Turk around. It was a threat.

Albert's previous bodyguard had been killed by Drake.

Now he hired a total of four. They each worked an eight-hour shift, seven days a week. The fourth guard was on call, living at Albert's new compound. Whenever Albert stepped outside of the gate he would have whichever guard was on duty, plus the on-call guard. Two tough kids, both heavily armed.

But even that wasn't enough for Albert's security. He had taken to carrying a gun himself. Just a pistol, not a long gun, but it was a nine-millimeter in a brown leather holster, a serious, dangerous gun. He had learned how to shoot it, too.

And as a final line of security Albert had made sure that everyone knew he would pay whoever brought proof of a plot against him. It would always pay better to side with Albert.

Unfortunately that still left Caine. The self-anointed king.

Albert knew he could never take Caine on in a fight. So he made sure he knew exactly what Caine was up to. Someone very close to Caine worked secretly for Albert.

And yet, despite all this preparation, Albert had let this new problem sneak up on him.

It was a good long walk from Albert's edge-of-town compound to the marina. He hurried. He had to resolve this before Caine did. Caine had a temper. People with tempers were bad for business.

What Albert saw from the end of the dock was not good. Four boats and fifteen kids doing nothing. In his head Albert ran the numbers: maybe three days' worth of food, just two days' worth of blue bats. If the bat supply stopped, then there was no safe way to harvest the worm-infested fields.

"Quinn!" Albert shouted.

He was furious to see that three kids were on the beach, eavesdropping. Didn't they have anything better to do?

"Hi, Albert," Quinn called back. He seemed distracted. And Albert was sure that he'd seen Quinn motion for someone to stay down.

"How long is this supposed to go on?" Albert asked.

“Until we get justice,” Quinn said.

“Justice? People have been waiting for justice since the dinosaurs.”

Quinn said nothing and Albert cursed himself for indulging in sarcasm. “What is it you want, Quinn? I mean in practical terms.”

“We want Penny gone,” Quinn said.

“I can’t afford to pay you any more,” Albert shouted back.

“I didn’t say anything about money,” Quinn said, sounding puzzled.

“Yeah, I know: justice. Usually what people really want is money. So why don’t we get down to it?”

“Penny,” Quinn said. “She leaves town. She stays gone. When that happens we fish. Until it happens, we sit.” He sat down as if to emphasize his point.

Albert bit his lip in extreme frustration. “Quinn, don’t you know that if you don’t work this out with me you’ll be dealing with Caine?”

“We don’t think his powers reach this far,” Quinn said. He seemed, if not smug, then at least determined. “And we kind of think he likes to eat, too.”

Albert considered. He ran some numbers in his head. “Okay, look, Quinn. I can up your share by five percent. But that’s as much as I can do.” He made a hand-washing gesture, signaling that it was a take-it-or-leave-it.

Quinn pulled his hat—nearly unrecognizable as having once been a fedora but now stained, cut, scratched, torn, and twisted—down over his eyes and kicked his feet up on the gunwale.

Albert watched him for a while. No, there would be no bribing Quinn.

He took a deep breath and blew it out, releasing his frustration. Caine had created a problem that could bring everything crashing down. Everything Albert had built.

No Quinn, no fish; no fish, no crops. Simple math. Caine would not give in—he wasn’t the type. And Quinn, who had once been such a reliable coward, had grown and matured and become what he was now: useful.

One of them had to go, and if the choice was between Caine and Quinn, the answer was simple.

The tricky part was in delivering the news to Caine. The trap he had long since laid for King Caine was ready and waiting. Albert only wished there was some way to get Penny at the same time. Enough with both of them, they were both pains in his butt: Albert was trying to run a business.

Maybe it was time to tell Caine that some very interesting toys were sitting in crates on an unfrequented beach.

It might just be time to kill the king.

In the interests of business.

TWELVE

25 HOURS, 8 MINUTES

CAINE.

I'm writing this because I don't really have a choice. You'll probably figure I'm up to something. So when I'm done writing this I will read it out loud in front of Toto and Mohamed. Mo will be able to tell you that Toto testifies I'm telling the truth.

Something is happening to the barrier. It is turning black. We're calling it the stain. We're trying to figure out how fast this stain is spreading. No information yet. But it's possible this thing will just keep growing. It's possible the whole barrier will go dark. And we will all be in total darkness.

I'm sure you can figure out just how bad that will be if it happens.

If the FAYZ is going dark, I'll do my best to hang so-called Sammy suns around. They aren't very bright but they'll hopefully keep people from going completely nuts until we can figure out—

Sorry, I had to stop myself there. I was starting to sound like I had a plan. I don't. If you do I'd like to hear it.

In the meantime I'm sending a copy of this to Albert and asking if the two of you will allow me to go to Perdido Beach to create at least a few lights.

—Sam Temple

He read the letter aloud, as he had promised to do. Toto muttered, "That's true," a couple of times. Mohamed waited while Sam wrote out a copy for Albert. He took both and stuck them in his jeans pocket.

"Listen, Mo, one more thing. Tell Caine—tell my brother—that I was expecting him to use those missiles of his against us. And I was ready for a war. But we are past that now."

"Okay."

"Toto, have I written and spoken the truth?"

Toto nodded, then added, "He believes it, Spidey."

"Good enough, Mo?"

Mohamed nodded.

"Walk fast," Sam said. Then in a mordant tone he added, "Enjoy the sunshine."

"Get me a knife," Lana said when they had what was left of Taylor laid out in an unoccupied hotel room.

Sanjit had carried her legs, one in each hand, and laid them on the bed beside her.

"Knife?" It was just Lana and Sanjit now; Virtue was watching the rest of the family. He had no stomach for this. And no one wanted the little kids to come in and see this horror.

Lana didn't explain, so Sanjit handed her his knife. She looked at the blade for a moment, then at Taylor, who was now breathing a little more audibly, a thready, uncertain sound. Lana pushed Taylor's shirt up a little and drew the blade across her abdomen. The cut was shallow and bled only a little.

“What’s that for?” Sanjit didn’t doubt Lana, but he wanted to know, and to keep up a flow of conversation to keep from thinking about Taylor.

“I tried to regrow eyeballs and got BBs. The time before that when I tried to regrow an entire limb I didn’t get quite what I expected,” Lana said.

“Drake?”

“Drake. I just want to test my powers on Taylor before . . .” She fell silent as she touched the wound she had made.

The wound was not closing. Instead it was bubbling, like someone had poured peroxide into it.

Lana drew back. “Something is not right.”

Sanjit saw her brow furrow deeply. She seemed almost to be cringing away from Taylor. “The Darkness?” Sanjit guessed.

Lana shook her head. “No. Something . . . something else. Something wrong.” She closed her eyes and rocked back slowly on her heels. Then, like she was trying to surprise someone, she twisted her head to look behind her.

“I would tell you if someone was sneaking up behind you.”

“It’s not the Darkness,” Lana said. “Not this. But I can feel . . . something.”

Sanjit was inclined by his nature to be skeptical. But Lana had told him everything about her desperate battles with the gaiaphage. He could understand how even now she could feel the creature’s mind reaching for hers, its voice calling to her. Things that he’d have dismissed as impossible in the old world—things that were impossible—happened here.

But this was something different, or so she said. And her eyes were not filled with the barely suppressed rage and fear she showed when the Darkness reached her. Now she seemed puzzled.

Suddenly Lana grabbed Sanjit’s arm, yanked him closer, and felt his forehead with her palm. Then she released him and placed her palm on Taylor’s forehead.

“She’s cold,” Lana said, eyes gleaming.

“She’s lost a lot of blood,” Sanjit said.

“Has she? Because it looks to me as if all her injuries are sealed off.”

“Then what would make her so cold?” Because now Sanjit had noticed it, too. He touched the severed legs, then Taylor’s forehead, then his own. Taylor’s legs were the same temperature as her torso.

Room temperature.

“Sanjit, turn away,” Lana said. She was already pushing Taylor’s T-shirt up and Sanjit hastily looked away.

Next he heard Lana unzipping Taylor’s jeans.

“Okay,” Lana said. “Nothing you shouldn’t see.”

Sanjit turned back and gasped. “She’s . . . Okay, I don’t know what she is.”

“I forget exactly what all the signs are of a mammal,” Lana said, voice level. “But there was something about giving birth to babies and then nursing them. And being warm-blooded. Taylor no longer has any of that . . . those . . .” She shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts. “Taylor’s not a mammal anymore.”

“Hair,” Sanjit said. “Mammals have hair.” He touched Taylor’s hair. It felt like a sheet of rolled-out Play-Doh.

“So she’s a freak?” Sanjit suggested.

“She was already a freak,” Lana said. “And none of the freaks have ever developed a second power. Or stopped being human. Even Orc seems to be human beneath that armor of his.”

“So the rules are changing,” Sanjit said.

“Or being changed,” Lana said.

“What do we do with her? She’s still alive.”

Lana didn’t answer. She seemed to be staring at the space a few inches in front of her face. Sanjit reached for her, to touch her arm, remind her she wasn’t alone. But he stopped himself. Lana’s wall of solitude was going up, shutting her off in the world she shared with forces Sanjit could not understand.

He let her be, just kept his position close by. It made him feel very isolated. His gaze was drawn irresistibly to the monstrous parody of Taylor.

Taylor’s mouth snapped open. A long, dark green, forked tongue flicked out, seemed to taste the air and withdraw. Her eyes remained blessedly closed.

Sanjit felt himself back on the streets of Bangkok. One of the beggars he’d known back in Bangkok had a two-legged dog he kept on a leash. And the beggar himself was legless and his hands were formed into two thick fingers and a stub of thumb.

Other street kids had called him a two-headed monster, as if the man and the dog were a single malformed creature. Sometimes they would throw rocks at the beggar. He was a freak, a monster. He made them afraid.

It’s not the monsters who are so completely different that are scary, Sanjit reflected. It’s the ones who are too human. They carry with them the warning that what happened to them might happen to you, too.

A part of Sanjit was telling him to kill this monstrous body. There was no way to help her. It would be an act of charity. Taylor, after all, was just one manifestation of a consciousness that would go on forever. Samsara. Taylor’s karma would determine her next incarnation, and Sanjit would earn good karma for a charitable deed.

But he’d also heard people of his religion say, *You can never take a life because if you do you interrupt the proper cycle of rebirth.*

“Do you ever have feelings you can’t really explain?” Lana asked.

Sanjit was startled out of his own thoughts. “Yes. But what do you mean?”

“Like . . . like feeling that a storm is coming. Or that you’d better not get on a plane. Or that if you turn the wrong corner at the wrong time you’ll come face-to-face with something awful.”

Sanjit did take her hand now and she didn’t refuse him. “Once I was to see a friend in the market. And it was as if my feet were refusing to move. Like they were telling me, ‘No. Don’t walk.’”

“And?”

“And a car bomb went off.”

“In the market where you didn’t want to go?”

“No. Ten feet away from the place where I was standing when my feet told me not to move. I ignored my feet. I went to the market.” Sanjit shrugged. “Intuition was telling me something. Just not what I thought it was telling me.”

Lana nodded. Her face was very grim. “It’s happening.”

“What’s happening?”

She fidgeted and dropped his hand. Then she smiled wryly and took his hand back,

holding it between hers. “Kinda feels like a war is coming. It’s been coming for a long time.”

Sanjit broke out a grin. “Oh, is that all? In that case all we have to do is figure out how to survive. Haven’t I told you what ‘Sanjit’ means? It’s Sanskrit for ‘invincible.’”

Lana actually smiled, something so rare it broke Sanjit’s heart. “I remember: you can’t be vinced.”

“No one vinces me, baby.”

“Darkness is coming,” Lana said, her smile fading.

“You can’t tell the future,” Sanjit said firmly. “No one can. Not even in this place. So: what do we do with Taylor?”

Lana sighed. “Get her a room.”

THIRTEEN

25 HOURS

IT WASN'T POSSIBLE to draw on or mark the surface of the dome. So Astrid gave Sam a plan and Sam asked Roger—he liked to be called the Artful Roger—to build ten identical wooden frameworks. Like picture frames exactly two feet by two feet.

The frameworks were mounted on poles, each exactly five feet high.

Then Astrid, with Edilio for security, and Roger to help carry, walked along the barrier from west to east. They paced off distances of three hundred paces. Then, using a long tape measure, they measured off a hundred feet from the base of the barrier. There they dug a hole and set up the first frame. Another three hundred paces, then another carefully measured hundred feet, and another frame.

At each frame Astrid stepped back to a precisely measured ten paces. She took a photograph through each frame, carefully thumbing in the day and time and approximately how much of the area inside the frame appeared to be covered by the stain.

This was why Astrid had come back. Because Jack might be smart enough to think of measuring the stain, but then again he might not think of it.

It was not that Astrid was lonely. It was not that she was just looking for an excuse to go to Sam.

And yet, look what had happened when she did, finally, go to Sam.

Astrid smiled and turned away so Edilio wouldn't see it and be embarrassed.

Had this been her desire all along? To find some excuse to go running back to Sam and to throw herself on him? It was the kind of question that would have preoccupied Astrid in the old days. The old Astrid would have been very concerned with her own motives, very much needing to be able to justify herself. She had always needed some kind of moral and ethical framework, some abstract standard to judge herself by.

And, of course, she had judged other people the same way. Then, when it had come down to survival, to doing whatever it took to end the horror, she had done the ruthless thing. Yes, there was a certain crude morality at work there: she had sacrificed Little Pete for the greater good. But that was the excuse of every tyrant or evildoer in history: sacrifice one or ten or a million for some notion of the common good.

What she had done was immoral. It was wrong. Astrid had set aside her religious faith, but good was still good, and evil was still evil, and throwing her brother into the literal jaws of death . . .

It wasn't that she doubted she had done wrong. It wasn't that she doubted she deserved punishment. In fact, it was the very idea of forgiveness that made her rebel. She didn't want forgiveness. She didn't want to be washed clean of her sin. She wanted to own it and wear it like a scar, because it was real, and it happened, and it couldn't be made to unhappen.

She had done something terrible. That fact would be part of her forever.

"As it should be," she whispered. "As it should be."

How strange, Astrid thought, that owning your own sins, refusing forgiveness, but vowing not to repeat them, could make you feel stronger.

"When do we check back?" Edilio asked her when they were finished installing.

Astrid shrugged. “Probably better come back tomorrow, just in case the stain is moving faster than it appears to be.”

“What do we do about it?” Edilio asked.

“We measure it. We see how much it advances in the first twenty-four hours. Then we see how much it advances in the second and third twenty-four-hour periods. We see how fast it grows and whether it’s accelerating.”

“And then what do we do about it?” Edilio asked.

Astrid shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“I guess I’ll pray,” Edilio said.

“Couldn’t hurt,” Astrid allowed.

A sound.

The three of them spun toward it. Edilio had his sub-machine gun off his shoulder, cocked, and the safety off in a heartbeat. Roger sort of slid behind Edilio.

“It’s a coyote,” Astrid hissed. She had not brought her shotgun, since she was carrying half of the measuring frames. But she had her revolver and drew it.

It was almost immediately clear that the coyote was not a threat. First, it was alone. Second, it was barely able to walk. Its gait was shuffling and it seemed lopsided.

And something was wrong with its head.

Something so wrong that Astrid could hardly encompass it. She stared and blinked. Shook her head and stared again.

Her first thought was that the coyote had a child’s head in its mouth.

No.

That. Wasn’t. It.

“*Madre de Dios*,” Edilio sobbed. He ran to the creature now just twenty feet away and so terribly visible. Roger put a comforting hand on Edilio’s shoulder, but he looked sick, too.

Astrid stood rooted in place.

“It’s Bonnie,” Edilio said, his voice shrill. “It’s her. It’s her face. No,” he moaned, a long, drawn-out wail.

The creature ignored Edilio, just kept walking on two coyote front legs and twisted furless legs—bent human legs—in the back. Kept walking as though those empty, blue, human eyes were blind, and those shell-like pink human ears were deaf.

Edilio wept as it kept moving.

Astrid aimed her revolver at the creature’s heart, just behind the shoulder, and fired. The gun kicked in her hand and a small, round, red hole appeared and began leaking red.

She fired again, hitting the creature in its canine neck.

It fell over. Blood pumped from the thing’s neck and formed a pool in the sand.

Once again, the avatar broke apart.

Pete had tried to play with the bouncy avatar and it had broken apart, changed color and shape, and stopped.

He had tried to play with another avatar and it had melted into something different.

Was this the game?

It wasn’t very fun.

And he was beginning to feel bad when the avatars fell apart. Like he was doing a

bad-boy thing.

So he had imagined the avatars all back the way they started.

Nothing happened. But things always happened when Pete wanted them really hard. He had wanted the terrible sirens and screams to stop and the world not to burn up and he had created the ball he now lived in.

He had wanted other things and they had happened. If he wanted something badly enough it happened. Didn't it?

Well, now he was feeling sick inside and he wanted the avatars to go back and be right again. But they didn't.

No, Pete corrected himself. He'd always been afraid when the big sudden things happened. He couldn't just wish them and make them happen. He'd always been scared. Panicked. Screaming inside his overloaded brain.

He wasn't afraid now. The frenzy that used to take him over couldn't touch him now. That was the old Pete. The new Pete wasn't scared of noises and colors and things that moved too fast.

The new Pete was just bored.

An avatar floated by and Pete knew it. Even without the stabbing bright blue eyes, without the shrieking voice. He knew her. His sister, Astrid. A pattern, a shape, a coil of strings.

He felt very lonely.

Had he ever felt lonely before?

He felt it now. And he longed to reach out, and with just the smallest touch, to let her know he was here.

But, oh, so delicate, those avatars. And his fingers were all thumbs.

The joke made him laugh.

Had he ever laughed before?

He laughed now. And that was enough for a while, at least.

Albert had made the decision early on to play Caine's ridiculous game of royalty. If Caine wanted to call himself king, and if he wanted people to call him "Your Highness," well, that didn't cost Albert a single 'Berto.

The truth was Caine did keep the peace. He enforced rules, and Albert liked and needed rules.

There had been very little shoplifting at the mall, the ironically named stalls and card tables that were the market outside the school.

There had been fewer fights. Fewer threats. Albert had even seen a decline in the number of weapons being carried. Not much of a decline, but every now and then you could actually see a kid forgetting to carry his nail-studded baseball bat or machete.

Those were good signs.

Best of all, kids showed up for work and they put in a full day.

King Caine scared kids. And Albert paid them. And between the threat and the reward, things were running more smoothly than they ever had under Sam or Astrid.

So if Caine wanted to be called king . . .

"Your Highness, I'm here with my report," Albert said.

He stood patiently while Caine, seated at his desk, pretended to be absorbed in reading something.

Finally, Caine looked up, affecting an expression of unconcern.

“Go ahead, Albert,” Caine said.

“The good news: Water continues to flow from the cloud. The stream is clean—most of the dirt and debris and old oil and so on has been washed away. So it’s probably drinkable down at the beach reservoir as well as directly from the rain. Flow rate is twenty gallons an hour. Four hundred and eighty gallons a day, which is more than we need for drinking, with enough left over to water gardens and so on.”

“Washing?”

Albert shook his head. “No. And we can’t have kids showering in the rain as it falls, either. Kids are washing their butts in what will end up being drinking water once we open the reservoir.”

“I’ll make a proclamation,” Caine said.

There were times Albert almost couldn’t resist the impulse to laugh. Proclamation. But he kept a straight, impassive face.

“Food is not as good,” Albert went on. “I made a graph.” He drew a nine-by-twelve poster board from his briefcase and held it so Caine could see it.

“Here’s food production over the last week. Good and steady. You see a drop today because we have nothing from the fishing crews. And this dotted line is the food supply over the next week, projected.”

Caine’s face darkened. He bit at his thumbnail, then stopped himself.

“As you know, Cai—Your Highness . . . sixty percent of our vegetables and fruit comes from worm-infested fields. Eighty percent of our protein comes from the sea. Without Quinn we have nothing to feed the worms. Which means picking and planting basically stop. To make matters worse, there’s a crazy story going around about one of the artichoke pickers being turned into a fish.”

“What?”

“It’s just a crazy rumor, but right now no one is harvesting artichokes.”

Caine cursed and shook his head slowly.

Albert put away the graph and said, “In three days we’ll have major hunger. A week from now kids will start dying. I don’t have to tell you how dangerous things get when kids get hungry.”

“We can replace Quinn. Get other kids out in other boats,” Caine said.

Albert shook his head. “There’s a learning curve. It took Quinn a long time to get to be as good and efficient as he is. Plus he has the best boats, and he has all the nets and poles. If we decided to replace him, it would be probably five weeks before we would get production back up to nonstarvation levels.”

“Then we’d better get started,” Caine snapped.

“No,” Albert said. Then added, “Your Highness.”

Caine slammed his fist down on the desk. “I’m not giving in to Quinn! Quinn is not the king! I am! Me!”

“I offered him more money. He isn’t looking for more money,” Albert said.

Caine jumped up from his chair. “Of course not. Not everyone is you, Albert. Not everyone is a money-grubbing . . .” He decided against finishing that thought, but kept ranting. “It’s power he wants. He wants to bring me down. He and Sam Temple are friends from way, way back. I should have never let him stay. I should have made him go with Sam!”

“He fishes in the ocean, and we’re on the ocean,” Albert pointed out. This kind of outburst irritated Albert. It was a waste of time.

Caine seemed not to have heard. “Meanwhile Sam’s sitting up there with that lake stocked with fish, and his own fields, and somehow he has Nutella and Pepsi and Cup-a-Noodles, and what do you think happens if kids here start thinking we have no food?” Caine was red in the face. Furious. Albert reminded himself that Caine, while an out-of-control ego-maniac, was also extremely powerful and dangerous. He decided against answering the question.

“We both know what happens,” Caine said bitterly. “Kids leave town and head for the lake.” He glared at Albert as if it was all Albert’s fault. “This is why it’s no good having two different towns. Kids can just go where they want.”

Caine threw himself back in his chair but banged his knee on the desk. With an angry sweep of his hand he threw the desk crashing into the wall. The impact was hard enough to knock the ancient pictures down, all those ego shots of the original mayor. The desk left a long, triangular dent in the wall.

Caine sat chewing his thumbnail and Albert stood thinking of all the more useful things he could be doing. At last Caine used his powers to scoot the desk back into place. He seemed to need something to lean on in a dramatic fashion, because that was what he did, placing his elbows on the table, forming his fingers into a steeple, an almost prayerful position, and tapping the fingertips thoughtfully against his forehead.

“You’re my adviser, Albert,” Caine said. “What do you advise?”

Since when had Albert become an adviser? But he said, “Okay, since you ask, I think you should send Penny away.” When Caine started to object, Albert, finally evincing his impatience, raised his hand. “First, because Penny is a sick, unstable person. She was bound to cause problems, and she’ll cause more. Second, because what happened to Cigar turns everyone against you. It’s not just Quinn: everyone thinks it’s wrong. And third, if you don’t and if Quinn stands firm, this town will empty out.”

And if you don’t, Albert added silently, I will suddenly learn about a cache of missiles up the coast. And you, King Caine, will go to take them.

Caine’s prayerful hands fell flat on the desk. “If I give in, everyone will think . . .” He took a shaky breath. “I’m the king. They’ll think I can be beaten.”

Albert was actually surprised. “Of course you can be beaten. Your Highness. Everyone can be beaten.”

“Except for you, right, Albert?” Caine said bitterly.

Albert knew he shouldn’t let himself be baited. But the cheap shot rankled. “Turk and Lance shot me,” he said, with his hand on the doorknob. “I’m only alive because of luck and Lana. Believe me: I stopped thinking I was unbeatable.”

And made plans, he thought, but did not say.

FOURTEEN

24 HOURS, 29 MINUTES

THEY WATCHED MOHAMED leave.

Then, when she was sure Sam had at least a couple of minutes to think clearly, Astrid told him what they had found in the desert. “Edilio’s bringing it in so we can take a look at it. I came straight back. When they get it here I’ll see what I can learn.”

Sam seemed barely to pay attention. His eyes were drawn toward the barrier. He wasn’t alone. The stain was clearly visible to kids as they worked. The kids out in the fields probably wouldn’t notice, but the ones still here in the town around the marina couldn’t avoid seeing it.

They came in ones or twos or threes to ask Sam what it meant. And he would say, “Get back to work. If you need to worry, I’ll let you know.”

Each time he said it—and it must have been two dozen times—he used the same gruff but ultimately reassuring voice.

But Astrid knew better. She could feel the tension bleeding from his every pore. She saw the way the corners of his mouth tugged downward, the way his forehead formed twin vertical worry lines between his eyes.

He didn’t need some new thing to worry about. So the awful freak monster thing she and Edilio had found, that would have to wait. Because all Sam had time for right now was the mesmerizing advance of the stain. His imagination was torturing him. She could see it in the way his hands would form into fists, tighten and then release, but the release was forced, conscious, and accompanied each time by a deliberate exhalation.

He was seeing a world of total darkness.

So was Astrid. And though it made no sense she worried about her tents. The ropes needed tightening periodically or they would start to sag. And the fabric of the tent itself needed checking, because small tears got bigger fast, and beetles and ants were very good at finding such openings.

She recalled once waking up in the tent to find a steady stream of ants crossing right over her face and picking at a morsel of food she’d let fall. She had jumped up and run for the water, but not before the ants panicked at her panic and bit her a dozen times.

She could smile at the memory now. At the time it had made her cry at the weirdness and sadness of her stupid life.

But she had learned from that. And there had never again been so much as a crumb of anything edible in her tent.

And what about the time she found a snake in her boot? Lesson learned there, too.

If no one picked her blackberries, the birds would get them.

She went on this way for a while, fully aware of the fact that she was nostalgic over things that had usually been pretty miserable, realizing that she was as trapped as Sam in waiting, waiting, waiting for doom.

The image of the coyote with the human face and legs came suddenly to mind. It knocked the breath out of her.

BANG. BANG. She could hear the sound of the gun better in memory than she had

at the time. At the time she'd been numb. Now she recalled, too, the way the gun bucked. The way the abomination bled out in the sand.

The way the little girl's face relaxed in death and the blind eyes filmed over.

What terrible thing was happening? Why couldn't she figure it out? Why couldn't she help Sam to pull off one more impossible victory?

One of the great reliefs about living on her own had been the fact that she had no expectations to meet. She didn't have to be Astrid the Genius, or Astrid the Mayor, or Astrid Sam's girlfriend, or Why-won't-she-shut-up Astrid.

All she'd had to do was get enough food to eat each day. A huge accomplishment that was all hers.

Sam had binoculars to his eyes. He checked the barrier. Then swung them inland.

"Mo's on his way," he said. He shifted slightly. "So is Howard, out in front of him by a quarter mile. He's just . . . Okay, now I can't see him." He lowered the binoculars. "Figures. Howard's heading to his still to bring back one more shipment of booze."

Astrid made a wry smile. "Life goes on, I guess."

Sam frowned. "You were telling me something. Earlier."

"Get back to work. If I need you to worry, I'll let you know."

"Very funny." He almost smiled.

He looked suddenly very young. Well, he was, Astrid supposed. So was she. But they'd forgotten about all that in this world where they were the elders. He looked like a kid, a teenager, a boy who ought to be yelling happily as he ran into the surf with his board.

That image made her hurt. A tear welled. She pretended to have a speck of dust in her eye and wiped it away.

He wasn't fooled. He put his arms around her and drew her close. She couldn't look at him for fear of crying. She couldn't see the fear in him and not want to just hold him like he was a little boy.

"No," he whispered. "You have to open your eyes, Astrid. I don't know how many more times I'll see them."

Her cheek was wet when she pressed it to his.

"I want to make love to you again," he said.

"I want to make love to you, Sam," she answered. "We're scared."

He nodded and she saw his jaw clench. "Inappropriate, I guess."

"Human," she said. "Most of human history people huddled, scared in the dark. Living in little huts with their animals. Believing the woods around them were haunted by spirits. Wolves and werewolves. Terrors. People would hold on to each other. So that they wouldn't be so afraid."

"I have to ask you to do something dangerous soon," Sam said.

"You want me to go out and check the measurements again."

"I know we were thinking tomorrow morning. . . ."

She nodded. "I think it's growing faster than that. I think you're right. I think we need to know whether we'll have a sunrise tomorrow."

His face was bleak. He wasn't looking at her, but past her. He looked like he wanted to cry but knew it was futile.

Once again she saw him as he must have been once upon a time, long, long ago. A big, good-looking boy out in the waves, trading jokes with Quinn, giddy that they

were skipping school. Happy and carefree.

She imagined him drawing strength from the sun beating down on his brown shoulders.

The FAYZ had finally found the way to beat Sam Temple. Without light he would not survive. When the final night came with no prospect of dawn, he would be done.

She kissed him. He did not kiss her back, just gazed at the growing stain.

Once upon a time, long, long ago, Sinder had been very fond of black. She had painted her fingernails black. Dyed her brown hair jet-black. Donned clothing that was either black or some secondary color chosen to accentuate the black.

Now her color was green. She loved green. Carrots were orange and tomatoes were red, but each lived within green. The green turned light into food.

“How cool is photosynthesis?” Sinder called to Jezzie, who was a half dozen rows away, down on her knees, searching with deadly focus for weeds, bugs, or disease that might endanger her beloved plants. An overprotective mother had nothing on Jezzie. The girl hated weeds with a burning passion.

Jezzie didn’t answer—she frequently didn’t when Sinder turned loquacious. “I mean, I remember learning about it in school, but, man, who cared? Right? Photo-wuh? But I mean, it turns light into food. Light becomes energy becomes food and becomes energy again when we eat it. It’s like . . . You know . . .”

“It’s a miracle,” Orc rumbled.

“No,” Jezzie said, “it would be a miracle if it didn’t also work for weeds. Then it would be a miracle.” She’d found a root of something she didn’t like and was pulling on it, grunting with the effort.

“I could pull that for you,” Orc said.

“No, no, no!” both girls cried. “But thanks, Orc.”

Orc did not wear shoes, but if he had they’d probably have been size twenty. Extra, extra, extra wide. When he stepped into the garden things had a tendency to be crushed.

Sinder liked to get down low and look at her plants from close up. From one side she would see the miraculous leaves outlined against the backdrop of the lake and the marina area. From the other side she would see them almost like mounted specimens against the pearly gray blankness of the barrier.

Now she was looking at the feathery structure of a carrot top against the blank black of the stain. It had the odd effect of making the leaf seem like a work of abstract art.

She looked up from the plant and saw the stain suddenly shoot upward. What had been a ragged, undulating wave of black extending only a dozen or so feet above her head blossomed like one of her charges to become a terrible black bloom thirty, fifty, a hundred feet high before it slowed and stopped.

She hoped Jezzie hadn’t seen it. But when her friend stood up there were tears running down her cheeks.

“I feel bad inside,” Jezzie said simply.

Sinder nodded. She glanced at Orc, but he was absorbed in reading. “Me, too, Jez. Like . . .” She didn’t have the words for what it was like. So she just shook her head.

Jezzie wiped dirt from her brow and managed to actually transfer more dirt there.

She was looking down toward the marina. Sinder followed her gaze and saw Sam and Astrid holding each other close on the top deck of the White Houseboat.

Jezzie said, “At first when I heard she was back I thought it was a good thing. I thought Sam would be happy. You know: he’s been lonely.”

It was a fact of life in the FAYZ that kids cut off from TMZ and Facebook and the ins and outs of Hollywood and reality shows focused much of their gossip hunger on the closest thing they had to celebrities: Sam, who most people liked and everyone worried about; Diana, who most people didn’t like but whose baby everyone worried about; the baby itself, in particular betting about its gender and possible powers; news of Caine from Perdido Beach; affectionate speculation about Edilio and the nature of his friendship with the Artful Roger; theories about Astrid with passionate disagreement as to whether she was a good person and good for Sam, or alternately a sort of Jadis, the White Witch from Narnia; and, of course, the whispered-about, much-speculated-about relationship (or lack of same) between Brianna and Jack and/or Brianna and Dekka.

Remarks about Sam’s state of mind were no more unusual than speculation about Lindsay Lohan or Justin Bieber had once been. Except that every person at the lake felt his or her own fate was all too closely tied to Sam Temple.

“He doesn’t look good,” Jezzie said. Sam was a tiny, distant figure from where she stood. And Sinder might have pointed that out on some other day. But the truth was that something about the way Sam held Astrid was wrong.

Sinder looked out across her garden, the plants she knew as individuals, many with names she and Jezzie had given them. And she saw the line of stain push slowly now, slowly but relentlessly, toward the sky.

Drake found the light almost unbearable. The setting sun stabbed his eyes with jagged pain. How long since he had seen the sun? Weeks? Months?

There was no time down in the gaiaphage’s lair, no rising or setting moon, no mealtime, bath time, wake-up time.

The coyotes were waiting for him in the ghost town below the mine entrance. Pack Leader—well, the current Pack Leader, if not the original—licked a scab on his right front paw.

“Take me to the lake,” Drake said.

Pack Leader stared at him with yellow eyes. “Pack hungry.”

“Too bad. Take me.”

Pack Leader bared his teeth. The coyotes of the FAYZ were not the runts that coyotes had been back before the FAYZ. They weren’t as big as wolves, but they were big. But it was easy to see that they were not well. Their fur was mangy. There were bare patches on all of them where scraped gray-and-red flesh showed through. Their eyes were dull. Their heads hung low and the tails dragged.

“Humans take all prey,” Pack Leader said. “Darkness says don’t kill humans. Darkness does not feed pack.”

Drake frowned and counted the pack. He saw seven, all adults, no pups.

As if reading Drake’s mind, Pack Leader said, “Many die. Killed by Bright Hands. Killed by Swift Girl. No prey. No food for pack. Pack serves Darkness and pack goes hungry.”

Drake barked out a disbelieving laugh. “Are you bitching out the gaiaphage? I’ll whip the skin off you!”

Drake unwrapped his tentacle arm, which had been wound around his torso.

Pack Leader retreated a few dozen feet. The pack might be weak with hunger but they were still far too quick for Drake to catch. He felt uneasy. The gaiaphage would not listen to excuses. Drake had a mission. He had been to the lake before, but never alone. He knew he could follow the barrier, but the barrier itself was a long way off. If he wandered around lost he might be spotted. The success of his mission lay in stealth and surprise.

And then there was the problem of Brittney. Had the gaiaphage told her what to do? Would she do it? Would she know how to find the way without the coyotes as guides?

“How am I supposed to feed you?” Drake demanded.

“Darkness say to coyote: don’t kill human. Did not say don’t eat dead human.”

Drake laughed with a certain delight. This Pack Leader was definitely a smarter animal than the original one. The gaiaphage had ordered the beasts not to kill humans for fear they might unknowingly kill someone useful: Lana, or even Nemesis. But Drake knew which humans were expendable.

“You know where I can find a human?” Drake asked.

“Pack Leader knows,” Pack Leader said.

“Okay, then. Let’s get you boys some dinner. Then we go get Diana.”

Astrid found Edilio just coming back down from the Pit. The Artful Roger and Justin, the little kid Roger looked after, were with him, but Edilio sent them both away when he spotted Astrid.

“I got that thing, that . . . whatever it was. Up under a tarp. You want to look at it now?” Edilio asked.

“No. I’m sorry you had to do that. It couldn’t have been very pleasant.”

“It wasn’t,” Edilio said flatly.

“Listen, it looks like the stain is accelerating. Sam wants me to check the frames early.”

“I saw it growing. Faster. A lot faster,” Edilio said. “But I understand if Sam wants more information.” He blew out a weary breath and drank from a water bottle.

“Don’t come yourself,” Astrid said. “Just send one of your guys.”

Edilio made an incredulous face. “And tell Sam something happened to you because I wasn’t there?”

Astrid treated it as a joke and laughed.

But Edilio didn’t join in. “Sam’s all we’ve got. You’re all Sam’s got. Come on, it’ll be a quick, easy walk without having to carry those frames.”

The plan had been to allow twenty-four hours before checking the frames. The idea had been that a frame that was 10 percent stain might grow to 20 percent stain and that then Astrid could calculate the rate of growth.

But now that the plan was revealed as absurdly optimistic. All the frames were 100 percent filled with black. There was no chance of an accurate calculation: it had grown too far, grown too fast. And the rate of acceleration could only be increasing exponentially.

She stood looking up, craning her neck to see the tallest black finger yet. It stretched three hundred feet up the side of the dome.

As she watched, it grew. She could see it moving.

Then, from a low point in the stain, a new black tendril shot up as fast as a car on the freeway. It just seemed to explode up-ward. Up and up, and she tilted her head back to see it, and up farther and farther.

The stain crossed the line between blank pearly gray and sunlight. Then it slowed. But that slim black finger violated the sky like graffiti on the Mona Lisa. It was vandalism. It was ugliness.

It was the future written clearly for Astrid to see.

FIFTEEN

22 HOURS, 16 MINUTES

MOHAMED HAD SET out from the lake on the tedious walk to Perdido Beach as soon as he could get a water bottle and a little food in his belly.

He carried a pistol and a knife, but he wasn't really worried. Everyone knew he was under Albert's protection. And no one messed with Albert's people.

For most of the time since the coming of the FAYZ, Mohamed had lain low, stayed out of the way of all the big wheels who were busy killing and being killed.

As crazy as things were in the FAYZ, the smart move was to just do the minimum to get food and shelter. And not even shelter some of the time.

He was thirteen, a man. He was thin and starting to get taller, a growth spurt that had left his shorts too short and his shoes too tight. His family had just moved to Perdido Beach when his mother got a job at the power plant. The school was supposed to be better than the one he'd been at in King City. His dad still worked there, working ten hours a day at the family's Circle K, selling gas and cigarettes and milk to a mostly Hispanic population. It was a really long commute, and some nights his dad hadn't come home, which made everyone feel strange and abandoned.

But that was the way it was, his father had explained. A man worked. A man did what he had to do to take care of his family. Even if it meant he saw less of them.

Sometimes Moomaw—Mohamed's paternal grandmother—would talk about going back to Syria. But Mohamed's father would shut that down right away. He had left Syria when he was twenty-two and didn't miss it at all, not even a little, no, sir. Yes, he'd been a medical student there and sold hot dogs to farmhands now, but it was still better.

Was it tough sometimes being the only Muslim at the Perdido Beach school? Yeah. He'd been pushed around by Orc a few times. Kids made fun of him for praying. For refusing the pepperoni pizza at lunch. But pretty soon Orc had lost interest and most kids didn't even think twice about where his parents came from or how he prayed.

Fortunately Mohamed's family had never been all that strict about the dietary laws. He hadn't eaten pork since the coming of the FAYZ, but he would have in a heartbeat if anyone had some. He'd eaten rat, cat, dog, bird, and fish and slimy things he didn't have a name for. He'd have jumped all over a pepperoni pizza if anyone had one. Staying alive was not a sin: Allah saw all; Allah understood all.

Someday this would all end; Mohamed was sure of that. Or tried to be. Someday the barrier would come down and his father and mother and brothers and sister would be waiting for him.

How would he get along with his brothers? They would ask him all the questions his parents wouldn't. They'd ask him what he had done. They'd ask him if he represented. They'd ask him if he had stood up or wimped out. That was what brothers were like, at least his.

Whenever the barrier came down there would be all kinds of people talking to the media and telling all kinds of stories. And pretty quick people would realize they hadn't just all sat around catching up on their homework.

People would realize it had been more like a war. And then all those questions.

Were you scared, Mohamed? Were you picked on? Did you ever run into all these insane freaks we hear about on TV?

Did you ever kill anyone? What was it like?

He hadn't killed anyone. He'd had a couple of fights; one of them was pretty bad. He'd had a nail driven into his butt cheek and broken his wrist.

Mohamed figured he'd change that story a little. Nail in the butt sounded funny. It hadn't been, but if he ever got out, yeah, he'd change that story.

As for freaks, the only one he'd spent any time with was Lana. She had healed his butt and his wrist.

So, yeah, don't diss all the freaks, not to Mohamed.

When it came time for the Big Split, Mohamed had been forced to commit, one way or the other. He had gone to Albert and asked his advice. Until then Mohamed had stuck to working in the fields, but Albert had seen something in him.

Albert had liked him for the fact that he had no real friends. No family inside the FAYZ. He liked the way Mohamed had managed to stay under the radar. All those things—plus Mohamed's basic intelligence—made him just right for the job Albert had for him: representing AlberCo at the lake.

Mohamed still had no friends. But he had a job. An important one. Albert would want to know details of Astrid's return. He'd want to know that she was measuring some kind of stain on the dome. Maybe he'd want to know about some weird, mutant animal Astrid had supposedly killed. And he would definitely want to hear what Mohamed knew about the secret mission Sam and Dekka had gone out on.

Mohamed walked down the familiar, dusty road.

He walked alone.

Howard was already en route to Coates. He had a long day of work ahead of him. Hopefully his contractors would have run some corn and assorted other vegetables and fruits up to Coates and locked them in the rat-proof steel cupboards in the kitchen.

Howard would have to chop the produce up as small as he had patience for, then carry it to the still. He had a little firewood in place, hopefully enough to get the cooker started. Then while the batch was cooking he would have to hack around the woods looking for fallen trees, which he would then have to cut.

All of this used to be Orc's job. Orc could haul a lot of bottles. Orc could haul a lot of firewood. Orc swinging an ax was a whole different story from Howard's doing it. Orc was like two swings and snap, the log would be cut through. For Howard the same job could take fifteen minutes.

This bootlegging thing was getting to be a lot less fun. It was a lot more like real work. In fact, Howard realized with a sudden shock, he was now working harder than just about anyone else. Kids picking veggies in the fields didn't even work like Howard did.

"Gotta get Orc to be normal again," Howard muttered to the bushes. "Boy needs to take a drink or six and start feeling it again."

After all, Orc and him were friends.

Drake stood atop the rise. He'd just returned after a Brittney episode and was surprised to find that she had kept moving along with the coyotes.

“Human,” Pack Leader said.

Drake followed the direction of the animal’s intense gaze. A kid—Drake couldn’t tell who it was—was down below, walking steadily along the dirt-and-gravel road. “Yep,” Drake said. “There’s your lunch.”

SIXTEEN

22 HOURS, 5 MINUTES

“SO. WHAT IS it?” Sam asked.

The “it” in question had been carried to a picnic table not far from the Pit. A plastic tarp had been spread out over and under it—after all, kids still used these tables sometimes. The picnic area was inconveniently far from town but still had a nice view of the lake.

“It’s a coyote, mostly,” Astrid said. “With a human face. And back legs.”

He glanced at her to see if she was really as calm as she seemed. No. She was not calm, but Astrid could do that, seem totally in control when she was freaking out inside.

She’d managed to seem calm when she came back from her quick trip with Edilio. She’d been calm when she said, “The sun may come out tomorrow. But it may not. And unless something changes that will be the last sunrise.”

And he had put on a pretty good show of looking calm himself. He’d given Edilio orders to come up with a list of places where he could hang a Sammy sun. They’d had a very calm discussion of other ways to prepare: start food rationing, test the effect of Sammy suns on growing plants—after all, maybe his own personal light could trigger photosynthesis. Move to more use of nets for fishing; maybe a hovering Sammy sun would bring fish to the surface.

Plans they all knew were bull.

Plans that were about nothing but prolonging the agony.

Plans that would fall apart as soon as the kids in Perdido Beach realized the only light they were likely to see was up here at the lake.

Sam was going through the motions. Pretending. Putting on a brave face to delay the inevitable total social meltdown.

In the back of his mind the gears spun like mad. Solution. Solution. Solution. What was it?

Astrid had laid out a large chef’s knife, a meat cleaver—borrowed from a seven-year-old who carried it for protection—and an X-Acto knife with a less-than-perfect blade.

“It’s beyond creepy,” Sam said.

“You don’t have to be here, Sam,” she said.

“No, I love watching autopsies of disgusting mutant monsters,” Sam said. He felt like throwing up and she hadn’t even started.

Solution. Solution. Solution.

Astrid was wearing pink Playtex gloves. She rolled the creature onto its back. “You can see the line where the human face stops and the fur starts. There’s no human hair, just coyote. And look at the legs. There’s no blurring. It’s a clean line. But the bones inside? Those are coyote bones. It’s articulated like a coyote leg covered with human skin and probably muscle, too.”

Sam had run out of useful things to say or energy to say them. He was fighting the surge of bile into his throat, hoping not to puke. A sudden gust of wind bringing the smell of the Pit did not help. Plus the creature itself smelled. Like wet dog and urine

and sticky-sweet decay.

And throughout it all: solution. Where was the solution? Where was the answer?

Astrid took the cleaver and slammed it into the creature's exposed belly. It made a six-inch cut. There was no bleeding; dead things didn't bleed.

Sam braced himself to burn anything that suddenly emerged, *Alien*-like, from the cut. But nothing popped or squirmed out. He had terrible memories of what he'd had to do with Dekka. He'd burned her open to get the bugs out of her. It had been the most gruesome thing he'd ever done. And now as Astrid used the big knife to saw away and widen the cut, it was all coming back.

Astrid turned away from the smell to compose herself. She pulled out a rag and tied it over her mouth and nose. Like that would help. She looked like a very pretty bandit.

Incredibly a second line of thinking was forcing its way into his consciousness. He wanted her. Not here, not now, but soon. Soon. The endless, hopeless brain merry-go-round that sang the solution song sang a much nicer tune, too. Why couldn't he just crawl into his bunk with Astrid and let someone else break his soul searching for a nonexistent solution?

Astrid now cut vertically, opening the animal up along its length. "Look at this."

"Do I have to?"

"You can see organs attached to each other that just don't fit. It's bizarre. The stomach is the wrong size for the large intestine. It's like a really bad plumber tried to attach different-size pipes together. I can't believe this thing lived as long as it did."

"So it's a mutant?" Sam asked, anxious to reach some kind of conclusion and then bury the carcass and do his best to forget about it and get back to the twin thought streams of "solution" and "sex."

Astrid didn't answer. Her silent staring went on and on. At last she said, "Every mutant so far has been survivable. You shoot light out of your hands and never get burned. Brianna runs at a hundred miles an hour but her knees don't break. The mutations haven't harmed anyone yet. In fact, the mutations have been survival tools, really. Like the goal was to build a stronger, more capable human being. No. No, this is something different."

"Okay. What?"

She shrugged, pulled off her gloves, and tossed them onto the open wound. "This is bits of human—probably the missing girl—and coyote. Mix and match. Like someone just randomly took parts from one and swapped them for parts from the other."

"Why would—" Sam began.

But Astrid was still talking, to herself more than to him. "Like someone tossed two different DNAs into a hat and drew out this and that and tried to fit them together. It's . . . it's stupid, really."

"Stupid?"

"Yeah. Stupid." She looked at him as if she was surprised to be talking to him now. "I mean, it's something that makes no sense. It serves no purpose. It's obvious it wouldn't work. Only an idiot would think you could just randomly plug pieces of human into a coyote."

"Wait a minute. You're acting like this is someone doing it. A person. How do you

know it isn't just something natural?" He thought about that for a moment, sighed, and added, "Or at least what passes for natural in the FAYZ."

Astrid shrugged. "What's happened so far? Coyotes evolved limited powers of speech. Worms developed teeth and became aggressive and territorial. Snakes grew wings and developed a new form of metamorphosis. Some of us developed powers. So far there's been a lot of strange, but not a lot of stupid. This, though, this"—she aimed her finger at the carcass of the monstrosity—"is just stupid."

"The gaiaphage?" Sam asked, feeling in his gut it was the wrong answer.

Astrid held his gaze for a moment but her brain was somewhere else. "Not stupid," she said.

"You just said it was—"

"I was wrong. It's not about stupid. It's ignorant. Clueless."

"Is there—" He wasn't surprised when she interrupted him as if he hadn't even been talking.

"Unbelievable power," Astrid said. "And absolute ignorance."

"What does that mean?" Sam asked.

Astrid wasn't listening. She was slowly turning her head, eyes aimed all the way to the right, as if she thought someone was sneaking up on her.

It was so compelling that Sam followed the direction of her gaze. Nothing. But he recognized the movement: how many times in the last months had he done the same himself? A sort of paranoid, sidelong glance at something that wasn't there?

Astrid shook her head slowly. "I'm . . . I have to go. I'm not feeling well."

He watched her walk away. It was irritating, to put it mildly. Infuriating.

In the old days he'd have called her out on it, demanded to know what she was thinking.

But he sensed that what he had with Astrid was fragile. She was back, but not all the way back. He didn't want to start a battle with her. There was a war coming, no time for battles with someone he loved.

But her abrupt departure had the effect of leaving him with only one thread to follow, one thing to think about: the solution.

The solution that did not exist.

Penny lived alone in a small house on the eastern edge of town. From her upstairs bedroom window she could see just a narrow slice of the ocean and she liked that.

She wanted to move into Clifftop. But Caine had denied that request. Clifftop was Lana's to do with as she pleased. Even when Lana had moved to the lake—temporarily, as it turned out—Clifftop had remained a no-go zone.

"No one messes with Lana," Caine had decreed.

Lana, Lana, Lana. Everyone just loved Lana.

Penny had spent some time with her when Lana fixed her shattered legs. It had taken a long time, in fact, because there were so many breaks in the bones. Penny found Lana stuck-up. It was certainly a relief to have her legs fixed, and it was very nice not to have that pain, but that didn't mean Lana had a right to act all high-and-mighty and above it all.

And have an entire massive hotel all to herself. Deciding who could come or go.

It bothered Penny that Lana had that kind of respect. Because Penny knew she

could leave Lana crawling and crying and tearing her eyes out like Cigar had done.

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Five minutes alone with Little Miss Healer. See how she liked it. See how high-and-mighty she was then.

The only problem was that Caine would kill Penny. Caine felt nothing for Penny. She had hoped after Diana took off . . . But no, there was no disguising Caine's look of contempt whenever he saw Penny.

Even now, even with all Penny's power, Caine was still the big man, the popular guy, the good-looking guy who would spit on someone like Penny, with her scraggly hair and awkward, bony arms and flat-as-a-board chest. Even now life was all about who was hot and who was not.

But Caine wasn't the only boy around.

There was a soft knock at the back door. Penny opened it for Turk.

"Were you careful?" she asked.

"I went way out of the way. Then I jumped a couple of fences." He was breathing hard and sweating. She believed him.

"All that just to see me?" Penny asked.

He didn't answer. He flopped down in one of the easy chairs, sending up a cloud of dust. He leaned his gun against the side of the chair. Then he pulled off his boots, making himself comfortable.

Suddenly a scorpion crawled onto his arm. He yelled, swatted at it frantically, jumped out of his chair.

Then he saw the smile on her face.

"Hey, don't do that to me!" Turk cried.

"Then don't ignore me," she said. She hated the pleading sound in her own voice.

"I wasn't ignoring you." He sat back down, carefully inspecting for scorpions—as if it had been real.

Turk wasn't the smartest guy, Penny acknowledged with a sigh. He was no Caine. Or Sam. Or even Quinn. Maybe they could ignore Penny, and not even treat her like a girl, and curl their lips in disgust at her, but not Turk. Turk was just a dumb punk.

Penny felt a surge of fury so strong she had to turn away to hide it. Overlooked, ignored, forgotten Penny.

She was the middle of three girls in her family. Her older sister was named Dahlia. Her younger sister was named Rose. Two pretty flower names. And a plain old Penny in between.

Dahlia was a beauty. As early as Penny could remember their father had loved Dahlia. He had dressed Dahlia up in all kinds of outfits . . . feathers, silky underwear . . . and taken hundreds of pictures of her. Right up until Dahlia started to develop.

And then, when their father lost interest in Dahlia, Penny had naturally assumed she would be the one, the beloved, the admired one. She assumed she would be the one posing, bending this way and that, showing and concealing, making little coy faces or scared faces, depending on what her father needed.

But her father had barely noticed Penny. Instead he'd moved past her to pretty little Rose.

And soon it was Rose starring in the pictures her father uploaded to the internet.

It was a few years before Penny came to understand that what her father did was against the law.

Then she had waited until her father was at work and she had taken his laptop with her to school and shown the pictures to some of the kids. A teacher had seen and called the police.

Her father had been arrested. Penny's mother started drinking more than ever before. And all three girls had been sent to live with Uncle Steve and Aunt Connie.

Surprise, surprise, poor little victimized Dahlia and Rose—poor, pretty little Dahlia and Rose—had gotten all the sympathy and all the attention.

Their father hanged himself in his jail cell after other inmates had beaten him.

Penny had put Drano in Rose's cereal, just to see how pretty she would be with her throat burned out. And then Penny was shipped off to Coates.

In two years at Coates she had not heard from her sisters. Or her aunt and uncle. Her mother had written her once, an incoherent, self-pitying Christmas card.

Penny was as ignored at Coates as she had always been. Until she began to develop her power. It came late to her. After the first big battle in Perdido Beach, when Caine had walked off into the wilderness with Pack Leader.

When he returned at last, ranting and seemingly insane, Penny kept her secret to herself. She knew better than to show Drake. Drake was ruthless: he would have killed her. Caine was softer, smarter than Drake. When at last Caine came back to something like sanity, Penny started to show him what she could do.

And still she was ignored in favor of Drake and, worst of all, that witch Diana. Diana, who never loved Caine, who always criticized him, had even betrayed him and fought with him.

In that terrible moment standing at the edge of the cliff on San Francisco de Sales Island, when Caine could save only one of them, Diana or Penny, he had made his choice.

Penny had endured pain like nothing she could have ever imagined. But it cleared her mind. It strengthened her. It obliterated what faint echoes of pity were still left in her.

Penny was no longer ignored.

She was hated.

Feared.

No longer ignored.

"You have anything to drink?" Turk asked.

"You mean water?"

"Don't be stupid; you know I don't mean water." Water was no longer in short supply. The eerie cloudburst Little Pete had created still rained down. There was a stream running right down the street, all the gutters carefully blocked so that the stream ran all the way down and out through a gap in the wall to form a pool in the sand of the beach.

Penny fetched a bottle from her kitchen. It was half-full of whatever vile liquid Howard brewed. It smelled like a dead animal, but Turk took a long, long drink.

"Want to make out?" Turk asked.

She slinked toward him, unconsciously mimicking the things she'd seen Dahlia and Rose do.

Turk made a face. "Not like that. Not like you."

Penny felt it like slap in the face.

“Like you were the other time. You know, in my head. Make it like the other time.”

“Oh, like that,” she said flatly. Penny had the power to send horrifying visions. But she also had the power to create beautiful illusions. They were one and the same. It was one of the ways she had driven Cigar over the edge. She’d found a picture of his mother and made him see her . . .

Now, for Turk, she made a vision of Diana.

And a while later she spoke, using the vision of Diana still to say, “Turk, the time has come.”

“Mmm?”

“Caine humiliated me,” Penny said with Diana’s voice.

“What?”

“He’s the only one who can stop me,” Penny said. “He’s the only one who can humiliate me like that.”

Turk was dumb but not that dumb. He pushed her away.

She became herself again.

“One of these days he’ll kill you, Turk,” Penny said. “Remember what he did to your friend Lance?” She drew a long arc in the air and punctuated it with a “Splat!”

Turk looked nervously around. “Yeah, I remember; that’s why I am totally loyal to the king. He’s the king and I don’t mess with him.”

Penny smiled. “No, you just fantasize about his girlfriend.”

Turk’s eyes widened. He swallowed anxiously. “Yeah, well, what about you?”

Penny shrugged.

“Anyway, she’s not even his girlfriend anymore,” Turk said.

She stayed silent, waiting, knowing he was so very weak, so very fearful.

“What are you even talking about, Penny?” Turk cried. “You’re crazy.”

Penny laughed. “We’re all crazy, Turk. The only difference is I know I’m crazy. I know all about me. You know why? Because sitting there with my legs broken and wanting to scream every single minute, eating the scraps Diana brought me, that kind of clears out your mind and you start seeing things the way they are.”

“I’m out of here,” Turk yelled, and jumped up. He made it two feet before Caine was standing right in his path. Turk stepped back, one leg collapsing, barely caught himself from falling.

The Caine illusion disappeared.

“Just let me go, Penny,” Turk said shakily. “I’ll never tell anyone. Just let me go. You and Caine . . . whatever, okay?”

“I think you’ll end up doing what I want you to do,” Penny said. “I’m done being ignored and I’m all done being humiliated.”

“I’m not going to kill Caine. No matter what you say.”

“Kill? Kill him?” Penny shook her head. “Who said kill? No, no, no. No killing.” She pulled a prescription bottle from her pocket, twisted it open, and shook six small, pale, oval pills into her palm. “Sleeping pills.”

She slid the pills back into the bottle and closed it again.

“I got the pills from Howard. He’s very useful. I told him I was having a hard time sleeping and I paid him with . . . Well, let’s just say that Howard has his own fantasies. Which, by the way, you would not believe.”

“Sleeping pills?” Turk said in a shrill, desperate voice. “You think you’re going to

take Caine down with sleeping pills?”

“Sleeping pills,” Penny said, and nodded with satisfaction. “Sleeping pills. And cement.”

Turk’s face was drained of color.

“Find a way to get him here. To me, Turk. Bring him to me. Then it will be just the three of us running things.”

“What do you mean, three?”

Penny smiled and with Diana’s lips said, “You, me, and Diana.”

Howard smelled them before he saw them. The coyotes smelled of rotten meat.

He quelled the urge to run in panic when Pack Leader slouched onto the road ahead of him. He couldn’t outrun a coyote. But the coyotes hadn’t attacked anyone in a long time. The rumor was that they had been warned off by Sam. That was what people said, that Sam had laid down the law and threatened to go medieval on the whole coyote population if they messed with anyone.

The coyotes were scared of Bright Hands. Everyone knew that.

“Hey,” Howard said with all the bluster he could summon, “I’m a good friend of Bright Hands. You know who I mean? Sam. So I’m just going to walk on.”

“Pack hungry,” the coyote said in his slurred, high-pitched, mangled speech.

“Hah, very funny,” Howard said. His mouth was dry. His heart was pounding. He swung his heavy pack down. “I don’t have much food, just a boiled artichoke. You can have that.”

He reached into the pack, fumbling noisily among empty bottles, searching for the feel of metal. He found it, closed his hand around the heavy knife, and pulled it out. He waved it in front of him and yelled, “Don’t do anything stupid!”

“Coyote not kill human,” Pack Leader said.

“Yeah. Yeah, you’d better not. My boy Bright Hands will burn you mangy dogs down!”

“Coyote eat. Not kill.”

Howard tried a couple of times to speak but the words would not come. His bowels were suddenly watery. His legs were shaking so hard he feared they would collapse. “You can’t eat me without killing me,” he said finally.

“Pack leader not kill. He kill.”

“He?”

Howard felt a prickling on the back of his neck. Slowly, horror draining the strength from his muscles, he turned.

“Drake,” he whispered.

“Yeah. Hi, there, Howard. How’s it going?”

“Drake.”

“Yeah, we did that already.” Drake unwrapped the whip hand. He looked more wolfish than the coyotes that now emerged from cover to form a circle around Howard.

“Drake, man, no, no. No, no, no. You don’t want to do this, Drake, man.”

“It’ll only hurt for a while,” Drake said.

His whip snapped. It was like fire on Howard’s neck.

He turned and ran in sheer panic, but Drake’s whip caught his leg and sent him

facedown into the dirt. He looked up to see one of the coyotes looking at him with greedy intensity and licking his muzzle.

“I’m useful!” Howard cried. “You must be up to something; I can help you!”

Drake straddled him and slowly, almost gently wrapped his tentacle arm around Howard’s throat and started squeezing.

“You might be useful,” Drake allowed. “But my dogs gotta eat.”

Howard’s eyes bulged. His whole head felt like it would explode from the pressure of blood. His lungs sucked on nothing.

Mohamed saw the circle of coyotes.

He ducked quickly behind a scruffy bush that wouldn’t really hide him if anyone was looking. But it was all the cover he could find. He had come across a slight rise in the road and, reaching the top, was practically on the coyotes before he saw them.

Then he realized he was seeing more than just coyotes. Drake.

Mohamed took a sharp breath, and the ears of the closest coyote—maybe a hundred yards away—flicked.

There was something . . . no, someone . . . on the ground. Drake had his whip hand around someone’s neck. Mohamed couldn’t see who it was.

Mohamed had a pistol. And a knife. But everyone knew Drake couldn’t be killed with a gun. If he tried to play hero, he would just get himself killed, too.

There was no right answer. No way to stop what he was witnessing. There was only surviving.

Mohamed backed away, crawling like a crab on hands and knees. Once he was out of sight of the bloody horror he got to his feet and ran back toward the lake.

He ran and ran without stopping. He had never run so far or so fast in his life. He reached the blessed, blessed lake, pushed past kids who said a pleasant, “How’s it going?” and ran for the houseboat.

Sam was on the deck, sitting with Astrid. Mohamed registered the fact that he had set out to tell Albert she was here and realized how completely he didn’t care about telling Albert anything.

He leaped aboard the boat, spun as though half-convinced the coyotes had followed him, and fell panting and gasping on the deck. Sam and Astrid both came to him. Astrid pressed a water bottle to his parched lips.

“What is it, Mo?” Sam asked.

Mohamed couldn’t answer at first. His thoughts were a tangle of images and emotions. He knew he should think about controlling the situation, at least find some kind of way to put himself in a better light, but he didn’t have the heart for it.

“Drake.” Mohamed gasped. “Coyotes.”

Sam was suddenly very still. His voice dropped in volume and register. “Where?”

“I was . . . on the road toward PB.”

“Drake and the coyotes?” Astrid prompted.

“They were . . . They had someone. On the ground. I couldn’t see who. I wanted to stop them!” Mohamed said this last in a pleading voice. “I had a gun. But . . . I . . .”

Mohamed looked at Sam, tried to meet his gaze, looking for something: Understanding? Forgiveness?

But Sam wasn’t looking at him. Sam’s face was like stone.

“You would have just gotten yourself killed,” Astrid said.

Mohamed grabbed Sam’s wrist. “But I didn’t even try.”

Sam looked at him as if he had just remembered Mohamed was there. His cold gaze flickered and became human again. “This isn’t your fault, Mo. You couldn’t have stopped Drake. The only one who could have stopped him is me.”

SEVENTEEN

20 HOURS, 19 MINUTES

“**SOUND THE ALARM,**” Sam ordered.

The alarm was a big brass bell they’d taken from one of the boats and mounted atop the two-story marina office.

Edilio ran to the tower, climbed up and up, and began ringing the bell.

A part of Sam’s mind was curious how well everyone would behave. They had practiced this three times before. When the bell rang certain kids were to run to the fields and alert kids there.

Each tent or trailer had an assigned boat to go to—either to the houseboats or sailboats, or onto smaller boats, anything bigger than a rowboat.

Edilio rang the bell and the few kids standing nearby looked around baffled.

“Hey!” Sam yelled. “This is not a drill; this is the real thing! Do it the way Edilio taught you!”

Brianna appeared in her usual startling way. “What’s up?”

“Drake,” Sam said. “But before you worry about him, make sure we’re getting everyone back from the fields. Go!”

Dekka came at a run. Slower than Brianna. “What is it?”

“Drake.”

Something electric passed between them and Sam had to stop himself from laughing out loud. Drake. Something definite. Something real. An actual, tangible enemy. Not some vague process or mysterious force.

Drake. He could picture him clearly in his mind’s eye.

He knew that Dekka was doing the same.

“He’s been seen with a pack of coyotes. It looks like they killed someone. Howard, most likely.”

“You think he’s on his way here?”

“Probably.”

“How soon?” Dekka asked.

“Don’t know. Don’t even know for sure he’s coming this way. As soon as Brianna’s free I’ll send her to scout.”

“No mercy this time,” Dekka said.

“None,” Sam agreed. “Do your thing.”

Dekka’s “thing” was basically being Dekka. She was respected to the point of awe by younger kids. Everyone knew she had been right up close with the most gruesome kind of death. She’d also been the one who saved the littles when Mary took the poof. And, of course, everyone knew how highly Sam thought of her.

So her place during the drills had been standing by the dock while everyone rushed to the boats. She was the antipanic presence. You just could not freak out when Dekka was eyeballing you.

Kids were just beginning to stream in from the fields, trotting along with all the food they could carry, watched over by a flitting Brianna.

The kids who had been in camp were already emptied out of the trailers and tents and had begun to take their places on the boats at the dock.

As soon as the boats had all their assigned passengers they cast off and rowed or poled or just drifted out onto the lake.

Orc came into view accompanying Sinder and Jizzie, all three weighed down with vegetables. Sam debated sharing his suspicions with Orc and decided against it. He might need Orc's strength and near indestructibility. He couldn't have the boy-monster charging off on his own.

In thirty minutes most of the population was in the motley collection of sailboats, motorboats, cabin cruisers, and houseboats that formed the Lake Tramonto armada.

In an hour all eighty-three kids were in seventeen different craft.

Sam looked out at the lake with some satisfaction. They had planned for this day, and amazingly enough, the plan had worked. All his people were on the water. The water they were on was drinkable, so there was no question of thirst. The lake provided a reasonable amount of fish, and all their stores of food were likewise in the boats.

And the kids could quite easily survive out there on the boats for a good week, maybe even two, without much problem.

If you ignored the fact that accidents would happen. And stupidity would happen.

And if you ignored the fact that the whole world might be dark very soon.

And that something was scrambling kids and coyotes together like they were making an omelet.

The only boat that didn't pull out was the White Houseboat. Sam, Astrid, Dekka, Brianna, Toto, and Edilio met on deck, out where anxious kids peering from the surrounding mismatched watercraft could see them. (Sinder, Jizzie, and Mohamed had been packed off to other boats.) It was important to send the signal that they had things under control. Sam wondered how long that illusion would last.

"Okay, first things first," Sam said looking at Brianna.

"I got it," she said. She had her runner's backpack. The one with a sawed-off double-barreled shotgun sticking through the bottom, turning the pack into a holster.

"Wait!" Sam yelled before she could disappear. "Find. Look." He pointed his finger at her and leaned forward, making sure she heard. "And come back."

Brianna made a fake wounded expression and said, "What, you think I would go and pick a fight? Me?"

That earned a laugh from everyone but Dekka, and the sound of that laugh was reassuring to the scared kids in the boats.

Brianna blurred out and Sam heard a cheer go up from multiple boats.

"Go, Breeze!"

"Yeah, the Breeze!"

"Breeze versus Whip Hand!"

Sam looked at Edilio and said, "Just what Brianna needs: a boost for her ego." Then he said, "Anyone have any idea who was killed? Who's missing?"

Edilio shrugged. He stood up, went to the side, and yelled to the boats. "Hey! Listen up. Is anyone missing?"

For a while no one had any suggestions. Then Orc, on the bow of a sailboat, and so heavy that the entire boat was two feet lower in the water at the front than at the back, said, "I haven't seen Howard. But he's always . . . you know . . . going off by himself."

Sam met Edilio's gaze. Both of them had already guessed it was Howard.

Sam saw Orc stand up, shifting the entire boat and in the process scaring Roger, Justin, and Diana, who were out there with him. He went below.

"It's good you're back," Sam said to Astrid. "Orc trusts you. Maybe later . . ."

"I don't think Orc and I—" she began.

"I don't care. I may need Orc. So you may have to talk to him," Sam snapped.

"Yes, sir," she said with only a trace of sarcasm.

"Where's Jack?" Edilio asked, looking peevish. "He's supposed to check in."

"On his way," Dekka answered, and pointed with her chin. "I see him. He's just dawdling."

"Jack!" Sam bellowed.

Jack was a hundred yards away. His head jerked up. Sam stuck his fists on his waist and glared impatience. Jack started running in his powerful, bounding way.

As soon as he reached the dock Edilio demanded to know what he thought he was doing. "You're supposed to be armed and you're supposed to be at the Pit."

"What's going on?" Jack asked sheepishly. "I was asleep."

"Brianna didn't wake you up?" Sam asked.

Jack looked uncomfortable. "We're not talking."

Sam pointed angrily at the boats bobbing on the lake. "I got five-year-olds getting two-year-olds where they're supposed to be, but one of my two certified geniuses is asleep?"

"Sorry," Jack said.

"He is," Toto confirmed.

Sam ignored him. He was pumped full of adrenaline. Ready to forget about the disgusting mutation under the tarp. Ready to forget, for the moment, at least, that this might be the last real day they had. Ready to forget his worries about Caine and the missiles. Ready to push all those intractable problems and unanswerable questions aside, because now—now, finally—he had a straight-up fight.

Astrid took his shoulder and pulled him aside. He didn't want a conference with Astrid: he had things to do. But he couldn't quite say no. Not without listening first.

"Sam. This means your letter isn't getting to Caine or Albert."

"Yeah. So?"

"So?" Her incredulity was so sharp it made him take a step back. "So? So the lights are still going out, Sam. And we're still facing a possible disaster. And you don't know what Caine or Albert might do."

"That's for another day," he said, chopping the air with his hand to cut off debate. "We have a slight emergency here."

"Where is that ninny Taylor, anyway?" Astrid said angrily. "If she doesn't show up, then send Brianna to get that note to Caine and Albert."

"Brianna? Pull her off hunting for Drake? Good luck."

"Then send Edilio and a couple of his—"

"Not now, Astrid. Priorities."

"You're choosing the priority, Sam. You're doing the easy thing instead of the smart thing."

That stung. "The easy thing? Drake suddenly shows up after being off the radar for four months? Don't you think maybe it's all one thing? Drake, the stain, whatever your 'ignorant' force is?"

“Of course I suspect it’s all one thing,” Astrid said through gritted teeth. “That’s why I want you to get some help.”

He held up one fist and began running down a list, raising a finger with each bullet point.

“One, Breeze locates him. Two, Dekka, Jack, and I converge. Three, whether he is Drake or Brittney, we cut him up, burn him in detail, piece by piece, and sink any ashes into the lake inside a locked, weighted metal box.”

He closed his fingers back into a fist.

“We’re putting an end to Drake once and for all.”

Drake heard the peeling of the bell. It was a distant sound but edgy and penetrating. He felt the urgency behind it. He guessed what it meant.

He cursed the coyotes, and not quietly, either. “They found the mess you left back on the road. Now they’ll be ready for us.”

Pack Leader offered no comment.

How soon before they sent Brianna after him? Soon. If she found them she would take out the coyotes in a few bloody seconds. And then she would keep him from advancing.

He had fought the Breeze before. She couldn’t kill him, but she could slow him down. She had chopped limbs from him. That kind of damage took time to repair.

And, of course, she would bring Sam. Sam and his little helpers. This time maybe Sam wouldn’t be put off by the emergence of Brittney. Maybe this time Sam would burn him inch by inch, as he had started to do once—

“Aaaarrgh!” Drake shouted. He raised his tentacle and snapped it down, making a loud crack.

The coyotes watched impassively.

“I need to hide,” Drake said. It was a shameful thing to admit. “I have to hide until night comes.”

Pack Leader tilted his head and in his mangled speech said, “Human hunter sees. Does not smell or hear.”

“Brilliant observation, there, Marmaduke.” It was true: Brianna was not a coyote. She couldn’t smell him or even hear him unless he was pretty loud. He just needed a way to stay out of sight. “Okay, get me a place where I won’t be seen until dark.”

“High place with deep cracks.”

“Let’s make it quick, before they get around to sending your friend Swift Girl after us.”

The coyotes did not dawdle. They took off at a quick lope, moving with a sort of relentless fluidity around obstacles. It was uphill at first until they topped a rise. There Drake saw the barrier within a quarter mile.

He stopped and stared.

It was as if his master was reaching up from far underground with black claws. Like he was reaching to grab and then envelop this unnatural world with thousands of fingers.

It should have been inspiring. But it made Drake uneasy. This was the same black stain he had seen begin to spread into the gaiaphage itself.

It was a reminder that maybe not everything was right with the Darkness. It was a

reminder that this mission was not born out of the gaiaphage's ambition alone, but out of fear.

"Move," Pack Leader urged anxiously. They were partially silhouetted atop the bluff. Drake ducked low. He could see the lake spread out below. If he could see, he could also be seen.

Drake hurried along behind Pack Leader, disappearing quickly amidst a maze of fallen rock and rain-etched bluff.

He had to suck in his breath to squeeze through the crack they'd found for him. One of the advantages of hanging out with coyotes: no one knew the terrain better.

There was no room to sit, barely room to stand. But Brianna wouldn't find him; he was confident of that.

And he could see a narrow slice of the lake, a few boats, and a sliver of the sky. Night was coming on.

OUTSIDE

NURSE CONNIE TEMPLE swallowed the Zoloft. It worked better than Prozac for her, left her less tired.

She chased it with most of a glass of red wine. Which would make her feel tired.

She turned on the TV and clicked without any real interest through the movies on demand. She wasn't in her trailer. She was at the Avania Inn in Santa Barbara. It was where she regularly met Sergeant Darius Ashton.

They had started going out months earlier. He had shown up at one of the Friday cookouts. And soon after that they had realized that they would need to keep their relationship secret.

Connie heard the familiar knock. She let Darius in. He was short, only a couple of inches taller than she was herself. But he had a thick, hard body decorated with tattoos and scars he'd brought home from Afghanistan.

He had a six-pack of beer in one hand and a sheepish grin. Connie liked him. She liked the fact that he was smart enough to know that part of the reason she was with him—not all, just part—was that she was using him for information. He had lost most of the sight in one eye, so Darius was never going back to combat. His current assignment was to Camp Camino Real. He had been assigned to maintenance. He had no direct access to anything classified, but he heard things. He saw things. He hated his job, and if he couldn't be a combat soldier he was determined to leave the service when his enlistment was up.

Basically Sergeant Darius Aston was killing time. He liked killing that time with Connie.

Connie sat on the bed drinking red wine. Darius drank his third beer and flopped in the chair with his feet up on the end of the bed, toes occasionally playing with hers.

"Something is up," he said without preamble. "I hear the colonel threatened to resign."

"Why?"

Darius shrugged.

"Is he out?" Connie asked.

"Nah. The general choppered in. They had a chat that could be heard from some distance. Then the general choppered out, and that was that."

"And you have no idea what it was about?"

He shook his head slowly. He hesitated before he went on, and Connie knew there was something big coming. Something he was leery of telling her.

"My sons are in there," Connie said.

"Sons? Plural?" He looked sharply at her. "I've only heard you talk about your boy Sam."

She took a deep pull at the wine. "I want you to trust me," she said. "So I'm telling you the truth. That's how trust works. Right?"

"That's what I hear," he said dryly.

"I had twins. Sam and David. I guess I liked the biblical names back then."

"Good strong names," Darius said.

“They were fraternal, not identical. Sam was a few minutes older. He was the smaller one, though, by seven ounces.”

She started again and was surprised to find that her voice betrayed her with a wobble. She powered through it, determined not to get weepy. “I had postpartum depression. Pretty bad. You know what that is?”

He didn’t answer but she saw that he did not.

“Sometimes a woman, after she gives birth, her hormones go seriously off-kilter. I knew this. After all, I’m a nurse, although not much lately.”

“So there are pills and all,” Darius suggested.

“There are,” she confirmed. “And I kept it together. But early on I formed this . . . this fantasy, I suppose. That something was wrong with David.”

“Wrong?”

“Yes. Wrong. I don’t mean physically. He was a beautiful little baby. And smart. It was so strange, because I worried that I would prefer him to Sam because he was bigger and so alert and so beautiful.” Darius set aside his now-empty beer. He popped another.

“Then the accident. The meteor.”

“Heard about that,” Darius said with interest. “Like, twenty years ago, though, wasn’t it?”

“Thirteen years ago.”

“Must have been something to see. A meteor smashes a nuclear power plant? People must have freaked.”

“You could say that,” Connie said dryly. “You know they still call Perdido Beach ‘fallout alley.’ Naturally they told us everything was fine. . . . Well, they didn’t tell me that. In fact, what they told me was that my husband, the father of my two little boys, was the only person killed.”

Darius sat up, tilting his head, and leaned in. “The fallout?”

“No, the actual impact. He never suffered. Never even knew what was coming. He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Killed by a meteor.” Darius shook his head. Connie knew he had seen death in Afghanistan.

“After that the depression came back. Worse than ever. And with it this conviction, this powerful belief that there was something wrong with David. Something very, very wrong.”

The memory of those days swept over her, making it impossible to speak. The madness had been so real. What had begun as a symptom of postpartum depression came to be something like a psychotic symptom. Like there was a voice in her head, whispering, whispering that David was dangerous. That he was evil.

“I was afraid I might harm him,” Connie said.

“Harsh.”

“Yeah. Harsh. I loved him. But I was afraid of him. Afraid of what I would do to him. So.” She took a deep, shaky breath. “I gave him up. He was adopted immediately. And for a long time he disappeared from my life. I gave all my attention to Sam and told myself I had done the right thing.”

Darius frowned. “I’ve read through the Wiki. There’s no David Temple. I would have noticed because of the last name.”

Connie smiled slightly. "I never knew who had adopted him. I never knew where he was. Until one day I was at work, at Coates. I wasn't even employed there at the time; I was filling in while their regular nurse was on maternity leave. And this boy was brought in. I knew immediately. Never any doubt. I asked him his name. He said he was Caine."

"How had he turned out? I mean, you had this idea he was going bad. . . ."

Connie lowered her head. "He was still beautiful. And very smart. And so charming. You should have seen the girls flock to him."

"He got his looks from his mom," Darius said, trying to be gallant.

"He was also cruel. Manipulative. Ruthless." She spoke the words with great care, considering each one. "He scared me. And he was one of the first to begin the mutation. The same time as Sam, actually, but Sam was a totally different person. Sam lashed out with his power, lost control of himself, and was devastated by it. But Caine? He used his power without the slightest concern for anyone but himself."

"Same mother, same father, and so different?"

"Same mother," Connie said, her voice flat. "I was having an affair. I never had a DNA test, but it is possible that they had different fathers."

She could see that this shocked Darius. He didn't approve. Well, why should he? She didn't approve of herself.

The room suddenly felt cold.

"I'd better get going," Darius said. "You cooking some ribs on Friday?"

"Darius. I told you my secret," Connie said. "I gave you everything. What is it you aren't telling me?"

Darius stopped at the door. Connie wondered if he would ever come back. He'd seen a side of her he had never expected.

"I can't tell you anything," Darius said. "Except that the military loves acronyms. Just saw a new one the other day I didn't recognize on some vehicles that came into camp. NEST. Sounds innocent, huh?"

"What's NEST?"

"Look it up. See you Friday if I can."

He left.

Connie opened her laptop and tied into the hotel's wi-fi. She opened Google and typed in NEST. It took a few seconds to find that NEST stood for Nuclear Emergency Support Team.

They were the scientists, technicians, and engineers who were called in to deal with a nuclear incident.

A nuclear response team.

And the colonel threatening to quit.

Something was going on. Maybe some controversial new experiment. Something dangerous. Something involving a possible radiation spill.

Which may have been how this whole thing had started to begin with.

EIGHTEEN

18 HOURS, 55 MINUTES

FULL NIGHT.

Sam had recalled Brianna when the sun went down. The darkness was deadly to her. One stumble and she'd be a bag of broken bones.

Brianna raged and demanded to be turned loose again. But she knew better. Sam sent her below to take one of the unused bunks and get some sleep. Mere seconds later he heard her snoring.

The guards were changed. Edilio sat blinking sleep away. Dekka brooded. Sam hadn't seen Astrid in a while. He assumed she was down in his bunk. Maybe she was mad at him. Probably. And maybe he deserved it. He'd been curt with her.

He wanted to go down there and be with her. But he knew if he gave in to that need, if he found peace and forgetfulness, he might not have the strength to come out again.

The light was dying. But the moon—or an illusion of it—was rising. This was not yet true darkness. But it was coming.

"Where is he?" Sam wondered for the millionth time. He scanned the beach, already dark. He scanned the woods and the bluff. Drake could be in either place. Beneath those dark trees. Or somewhere up in those rocks.

He sank into a canvas chair.

"You awake enough to keep your eyes open?" he asked Dekka.

"Catch some z's, Sam."

"Yeah," he said, and yawned.

Astrid was waiting for him.

He said, "Sorry I snapped at you before."

She didn't say anything but kissed him, holding his face with her hands. They made love slowly, silently, and when they were finished, Sam drifted into sleep.

When Cigar looked at Sanjit he saw a dancing, twirling, happy creature that looked like a greyhound walking erect. The one called Choo looked like a sleepy gorilla with a slow-beating red valentine of a heart.

Cigar knew he wasn't seeing what other people saw. He just didn't know whether what he was seeing was a result of having his new eyes, or whether it was madness that turned everything so strange and incredible.

Strange eyes. Strange brain. Some combination of the two?

Even objects—the beds, the tables, the steps at Clifftop—had an eerie glow, a vibration, a streaming light as though, rather than being fixed in place, they were moving.

Mad eyes, mad brain.

Memories that made the screams rise in his raw throat.

When that happened Sanjit or Choo or the little one, Bowie, who looked like a spectral white kitten, would come to him and speak soothing words. At those times he seemed to see something like dust in a strong beam of sunlight, and that . . . that . . . he didn't know what to call it, but that . . . stuff . . . would calm the panic.

Until the next panic.

There was another thing, very different from the sparkly sunlit dust, that reached tendrils through the air, passing through objects, rising sometimes like smoke from the floor and other times like a slow, pale green whip.

When Lana came the green whip would follow her, reaching to touch her, sliding away, reaching again, insistent.

And sometimes Cigar felt it was looking for him. It had no eyes. It couldn't see him. But it sensed something . . . something that interested it.

When it came close to him he would have visions of Penny. He would have visions of himself doing terrible, sickening things to her.

Making her suffer.

He wondered if the rising smoke, the slow green whip, this stuff, could give him power over Penny. He wondered if he said yes—Yes, reach me; here I am—if then he would be able to get revenge on Penny.

But Cigar's thoughts never lasted for very long. He would put together pictures in his head; then they would fly apart like an exploding jigsaw puzzle.

At times the little boy would come.

It wasn't easy to see the little boy. The little boy always stayed just to the side. Cigar would sense his presence and look toward him, but no matter how quickly he moved his head, Cigar could never see the little boy clearly. It was like seeing someone through a narrow opening in a door. It was a glimpse, and then the little boy would be gone.

More madness.

If you had inhuman eyes and a shattered mind, how could you ever know what was real and what was not?

Cigar realized he had to stop trying. It didn't matter, did it? Did anyone ever really see what was there around them? Were regular eyes so perfect or normal minds so clear? Who was to say that what Cigar saw wasn't as real as what he had seen in the old days?

Weren't regular eyes blind to all sorts of things? To X-rays and radiation and colors off beyond the visible spectrum?

The little boy had put that thought in his head.

There he was now, Cigar realized. Just outside of view. A suggestion of a presence. Right there where even Cigar could not see.

Cigar's thoughts fell to pieces again.

He stood up and made his way to the door that vibrated and pulsed and called to him.

There was a knock on Penny's door.

Penny did not fear a knock at the door. She opened it without even checking the peephole.

Caine stood framed by silvery moonlight in the door.

"We have to talk," Caine said.

"It's the middle of the night."

He came in without waiting for an invitation. "First things first: if I see anything I don't like, even so much as a flea, anything that comes from your sick imagination,

Penny, I won't hesitate. I'll throw you through the nearest wall. And then I'll drop the wall on top of you."

"Hello to you, too. Your Highness." She closed the door.

He was already sitting, flopping down in her favorite chair. Like he owned the place. He had brought a candle. He lit it with a Bic and set it on the table. So very Caine: he would arrange to be dramatically lit, even though candles were rarer than diamonds in the FAYZ.

King Caine.

Penny swallowed the rage that threatened to boil over. She would make him crawl. Make him scream and scream!

She said, "I know why you're here."

"Turk said you were ready to get real, Penny. He said you wanted to negotiate some terms. Fair enough. So spit it out."

"Look," Penny said, "I screwed up with Cigar. And I know what happens if the food supply dries up. I'm not as pretty as Diana, but that doesn't mean I'm stupid."

"Okay," he said cautiously.

"So, like I told Turk to tell you, I'm going to leave town. I already packed a few things." She gestured to a backpack lying in one corner. "I just don't think it should look like you made me go, because then it's like Quinn won. I think I should make it be like I just chose on my own to leave."

Caine stared at her, obviously trying to figure out what she was up to.

Penny showed a little anger then. "Hey, I'm not happy about it, all right? But I'll get by. Believe it or not I can survive without you, King Caine."

"Take all the food you want," he said.

"How generous of you," she snapped. "The deal is I leave, but you have to make sure I don't starve. Once a week I'll meet Bug out on the highway, right by the overturned FedEx truck. If I need something he brings it. That's my demand for leaving and making it easy for you."

Caine relaxed a bit. He tilted his head sideways and looked at her, considering. "Fair enough."

"But we have to talk about how to make it look good. Let's face it, Caine: you and I can still be useful to each other in the future, right? So I need you to stay in charge. Better than the alternative."

"What do you have in mind?"

She sighed. "Right now I have in mind some hot cocoa. Taylor brought me some from the island. Have a cup with me and we'll work something out."

Caine didn't ask why Taylor would have brought her something as precious as cocoa from the island. Taylor no doubt used Penny's fantasy-making powers for something.

Penny saw the look of distaste on his face as he worked it out. She went to the kitchen, to the little Sterno stove she used to heat the water and the cocoa.

She lit the Sterno.

Caine did not follow her into the kitchen.

He was still sitting there with a puzzled look on his face when she handed him the cup.

They each sipped.

“So I guess if I’m leaving and making it look like it’s not your fault, we should maybe act like we’re fighting,” Penny said.

“It would have to be where people can overhear. But not right out in public, because that’ll look phony,” Caine said. And sipped again at his cocoa. “Kind of bitter,” he said, grimacing at the cup.

“I have a little sugar I could add.”

“You have sugar?”

She fetched it. Two sugar cubes, and she plopped them into his cup. He swirled it around to stir the sugar in.

“You’re right about one thing, Penny,” he said. “You’re useful. Crazy, but useful. No one has sugar, but you do.”

She shrugged modestly. “People like to get away, you know? Think about something more fun than just life and work and all.”

“Yeah. Still: actual sugar? That’s worth a lot.”

“I guess you know I have a crush on you,” Penny said.

“Yeah, well, no offense, but it doesn’t go both ways,” he said.

It took all her self-control not to lash out at him, to cause his skin to burn and bubble.

“Too bad,” Penny said. “Because I can be anyone . . . in your imagination.”

“Do me a favor; don’t give me any details,” he said. “Now . . .” He yawned. “Let’s lay plans here. I’ve had a long couple of days, and I want to get this over with.”

So Penny made a suggestion.

And Caine countered with another.

And she smiled and made a small objection.

And he yawned. A long, long yawn.

“You look tired, Caine. Why don’t you close your eyes and rest a few minutes.”

“I can’t . . .” He started to say, but yawned again. “Talk later. In the morning.”

He tried to stand up. He barely rose, then sagged back. He blinked and stared at her.

She could practically see the wheels turning slowly, slowly in his brain. He frowned. Forced his eyes open and said, “Did you . . . ?”

She didn’t bother answering. She was bored with the game and sick of playing nice.

“I’ll kill you,” he said. He raised one hand, but it wavered in the air. She got up quickly and stepped aside. She came around behind him.

He tried to turn but he couldn’t do it. Could not get his body to respond.

“Don’t worry, Your Highness. In fact, I don’t think you’ll be able to worry at all pretty soon. In addition to the Ambien I mixed in some Valium.”

“I’ll . . . k . . . ,” he said, and breathed heavily, unable to go on.

“Nighty-night,” Penny said. She picked up a heavy snow globe from the knickknack shelf, where it had no doubt been a prized possession of whoever had owned this house. The snow globe had a little Harrah’s casino inside. A tacky keepsake.

She smashed the globe against the back of Caine’s head. He slumped forward.

The glass shattered, lacerating his scalp but also slicing her thumb.

She looked at the blood on her hand.

“Worth it,” she snarled.

She wrapped a towel around the cut on her hand, then brought in a large wooden salad bowl and a pitcher of water.

Then she dragged the heavy bag of cement from the closet.

NINETEEN

17 HOURS, 37 MINUTES

SILENT AS A shadow Astrid crept from the bunk. It was so hard to leave the warmth of his body. He was a magnet and she was an iron filing, drawn almost irresistibly back to him.

Almost irresistibly.

She crept out into the hallway. Brianna was snoring. It almost made Astrid giggle to realize that she snored at normal speed, like anyone else.

She found her old clothes. She dressed in the shadows. T-shirt, multiply patched jeans. Boots. She checked her backpack. Shotgun shells still there. She would refill her water bottle from the lake. Some food would be good, but Astrid had long since adjusted to extended periods of hunger.

Hopefully this trip wouldn't take too long. If nothing happened, she could make the walk to Perdido Beach in what, five hours? She sighed. Walk to Perdido Beach through the night or crawl back into bed with Sam and let him wrap his strong arms around her and entwine her legs with his and . . .

"Now or never," she whispered.

She had the letters. The ones Mohamed had failed to deliver. She folded them and stuck them into her front pocket, where they couldn't possibly fall out or be dropped.

The whole plan rested on what she found when she went up on deck. The houseboat was still moored at the dock—a symbolic defiance—but someone would be on watch.

She emerged on the dock side. Maybe whoever was on the top deck wouldn't notice. Maybe she could just walk away.

"Freeze," a voice said. Dekka.

Astrid cursed under her breath. She had made it about six feet down the dock. She was well within Dekka's range, which meant Astrid had zero chance of getting away. Dekka would cancel the gravity beneath her feet, and it was hard to run while floating in the air.

Dekka stepped to the edge of the top deck and then off into space. She canceled gravity for a split second, just enough to allow her to make the drop silently.

"Heading out for a snack run?" Dekka asked dryly. "Pick me up a pack of Ho Hos."

"I'm going to Perdido Beach," Astrid said.

"Ah. You're going to be the big hero and deliver Sam's letter."

"Minus the 'big hero' snark, yes."

Dekka jerked her thumb toward the land. "Drake's out there. And the same coyotes that ate Howard for lunch. No offense, honey, but you're the brains, not the muscle."

"I've learned a few things," Astrid said. Without taking her eyes off Dekka's she swung the butt of her shotgun up and sideways. The wood stock caught Dekka on the side of her face. Not enough to knock her out, but enough to make her drop to her knees.

Astrid moved quickly to get behind Dekka and take advantage of her momentary weakness. She shoved Dekka facedown on the rough planks.

“Sorry, Dekka,” she said, and wrapped a length of rope around her wrists. She stuffed an old sock in Dekka’s mouth. “Listen to me, Dekka. We need Caine, Caine needs us, so this has to happen. And I’m not necessary here.”

Dekka was already straining against the rope and starting to spit the gag out of her mouth.

“If you wake Sam up, he’ll send Brianna after me.”

That quieted Dekka’s struggles.

“I know this sucks, and later you can punch me back,” Astrid said. “Give me twenty minutes before you get Sam. Tell him you were knocked out. You’ll have a nice bruise to show him. He’ll believe you.”

Astrid stood back. Dekka wasn’t struggling. “Tell Sam I said I need to do this. Tell him I won’t stop until I get it done.”

Dekka had managed to spit out the gag. She could yell now and all would be lost. Instead she said, “Cut into the woods; stay away from the bluff. For my money Drake’s in those caves and cracks in the bluff. Breeze cleared the woods pretty well.”

“Thanks.”

“Anything else you want me to tell Sam?”

Astrid knew what she was asking. “He knows I love him.” Then with a sigh she said, “Okay: tell him I love him with all my heart. But tell him also that this battle isn’t on him alone. I’m in this, too.”

“All right, blondie. Good luck. And hey: shoot first; think about it later, huh?”

Astrid nodded. “Yeah.”

She walked quickly away. A part of her was cruelly disappointed that she’d been able to get past Dekka. If she’d been stopped, she would have gotten some credit for making a brave effort. And she’d be back with Sam instead of walking, tense and fearful, toward the line of the woods.

Diana hadn’t thought she’d be able to sleep out on a sailboat. It wasn’t like there were waves, but she still had powerful memories of the days of morning sickness. And she was not happy about anything that might upset the delicate peace she’d achieved with her stomach.

But she had fallen asleep on one of the narrow, cushioned bench seats in the stern of the sailboat.

On the boat were Roger and Justin and one of Justin’s friends, a little girl with the interesting name of Atria. They were asleep. Or at least they were quiet, which, from Diana’s point of view, was just as good.

Diana had watched Roger earlier with the two littles. She wondered if she would ever manage that kind of patience and playfulness. Roger had found some chalk somewhere and had kept the kids calm by drawing funny characters on the deck. Justin and Atria seemed to think it was all a sort of picnic.

The other occupant of the boat was Orc. He had decided his place was up on the front deck, the bow or whatever they called it. His weight lifted the stern so it was at an angle that threatened to spill her out of her seat. But she wrapped one arm around a chrome upright and the other arm uncomfortably around a cleat, tucked a blanket up close to her chin, and sure enough she fell asleep.

But it was one of those strange sleeps. Not complete unconsciousness, but a sort of

drifting, smiling, pleasantly cloudy sleep that hovered right on the edge of consciousness.

She could hear voices, but she didn't understand them or want to.

She could feel the lift and fall of the boat when Orc moved, or when another drifting boat jostled theirs.

It was in this state that Diana heard the voice. It was a voice at once new and familiar. It resonated up from her belly.

She knew it was a dream. At this point the baby—even if it was a little advanced for its age—didn't have a functioning brain, let alone the power to formulate words and thoughts and sentences.

Baby was warm. . . .

Baby was in the dark. . . .

Baby was safe. . . .

A dream, a pleasant fantasy invented by her subconscious. She smiled.

What are you? her dreaming mind asked.

Baby . . .

No, silly, I mean are you a boy or a girl?

Diana felt confusion coming from the dreamed baby. Well, of course, that would make sense. After all, this was a dream, and this conversation was a fantasy, with both voices coming from her own subconscious, and since she didn't know the—

He wants me. . . .

Diana's hazy dream suddenly filled with storm clouds. The smile was gone. Her jaw muscles clenched.

He whispers to me. . . .

Who? Who whispers to you?

My father . . .

Diana's heart skipped beats, then thudded hard to make it up.

Do you mean Caine?

My father says I must come to him. . . .

I asked you a question: do you mean Caine?

"Do you mean Caine?" Diana was awake. Her skin was goose pimpled. "Do you mean Caine?"

She was breathing hard. Drops of sweat stood on her forehead. She felt clammy all over.

Other kids were staring at her. She could see white eyes in the almost pitch-black.

She had been shouting.

"I had a dream," she whispered. Then, "Sorry. Go back to sleep."

She couldn't look at them. She couldn't have them looking at her.

"Do you mean Caine?" Diana whispered.

No voice answered. But it didn't matter. Diana had felt the answer. Had known the answer all along.

No . . .

Diana pulled her ratty blanket around her and went up on deck. She needed fresh air as an antidote to her overactive imagination. Probably hormones were to blame. Her body was all weird now.

She saw Orc. He sat with his back to her. His few remaining human characteristics

were invisible from this angle. But there was still something human in the slump of his massive gravel shoulders. His head hung so low it was barely a bump.

“Aren’t you cold out here?” Diana asked. Stupid question. She wasn’t even sure Orc could feel cold.

Orc didn’t answer. Diana took a few steps closer. “I’m sorry about Howard,” she said. She searched for something kind to say about that thief and drug dealer. It took too long, so she said nothing.

Diana wondered if Orc had been drinking. Orc drunk could be dangerous. But when he spoke at last his words were clearly enunciated. “I looked in the book and didn’t find nothing.”

“The book?”

“It don’t say blessed are the weaselly little guys.”

Oh, that book. She had nothing to say and now she was regretting starting things with Orc. Her cot was suddenly seeming attractive. And she had to pee.

“Howard was . . . unique, I guess,” she said, wondering what she meant even as she spoke the words.

“He liked me,” Orc said. “Took care of me.”

Yeah, Diana thought, made sure you stayed drunk. Used you. But she kept that to herself.

As if Orc had read her thoughts he said, “Not saying he wasn’t a bad person a lot of times. But so am I. We all do bad stuff. Me worse than most.” Diana flashed on memories of her own. Things she’d done and now couldn’t bear to think about. “Well, maybe like people say, he’s in a better place.”

That sounded stupid to her. But wasn’t that what people said? Anyway, where exactly was a place worse than this? Howard had been choked to death and then had the flesh gnawed from his bones.

“I worry because maybe he’s in hell,” Orc said. The words sounded tortured.

Diana cursed softly, under her breath. How had she gotten herself into this? Really: had to pee. “Orc, God is supposed to be forgiving, right? So probably he forgave Howard. I mean, that’s his job, right? Forgiving?”

“If you do bad stuff and don’t repent, you go to hell,” Orc said, like he was begging for a refutation.

“Yeah, well, you know what? If Howard’s in hell, I guess we can all have a big get-together soon enough.” She turned to go.

“He liked me,” Orc said.

“I’m sure he did,” Diana snapped, wearying of the conversation. “You’re a big, lovable teddy bear, Orc.” Plus a thug and a murderer, she added silently.

“I don’t want to start up drinking again,” Orc said.

“Then don’t,” Diana said.

“But I ain’t ever killed anyone sober.”

Diana had run out of time. She raced down the stairs, found the pot they were all sharing, squatted, and sighed with relief.

The boat rocked wildly. One of the kids yelled a sleepy, “Hey!”

Diana went back up on deck and saw that Orc was gone. The small rowboat that had been tied to one of the boat’s cleats was thirty yards away, moving swiftly toward shore, driven by superhumanly powerful thrusts of the oars.

Caine was still asleep. Penny wasn't sure how long it would take him to wake up. But she was in no hurry.

No hurry at all. Not now.

She sat watching him. He was in a very uncomfortable position, really. He sat slumped forward on the couch. His hands were wrist-deep in the bowl. The cement had dried pretty quickly.

King Caine.

He wouldn't be clawing at his eyes, at least. Not with five gallons—the content of the bowl—of cement on his hands. He would barely be able to stand up.

She considered him. The big-deal four bar. The most powerful freak in Perdido Beach, one of just two four bars.

Helpless.

Brought down, all the way down, by bony, unattractive little Penny.

She fetched scissors from the kitchen. He shifted a little and moaned something as she cut the shirt apart and removed it.

Much better. A much more vulnerable look. After all he had been through, he still had a very nice chest. The muscles stood out in his flat stomach.

But before she could show him off, he needed one more thing. The idea she had in mind made her laugh with delight.

There was a roll of aluminum foil in the kitchen. She found it, rolled it out, and set to work by candlelight.

Drake had watched everything from the high ground out past Sinder's garden. It made him happy to see that Sam and all his little charges were cowering in boats. It was a testament to Drake's power.

But unfortunately it made it very hard to get to Diana. There was no way even to know where she was. She could be on any of dozens of boats.

All during the evening he had cowered up here as every half an hour or so a whirlwind blew past. Brianna.

Each time Drake would sink back against the rocks. The coyotes would turn their ears toward the sound and lie perfectly still. They feared Swift Girl.

But Brianna had not seen them. And now it was deepest night, and Swift Girl wasn't so swift in the dark.

And then Drake had had some luck. Diana herself, wrapped in a shawl or something, had stepped into view on one of the boats. The one with Orc sitting in the bow.

Even by dim starlight he knew her. No one else moved like Diana.

Of course. He should have thought of that. Sam would make sure she had a strong protector, so of course she would be on the boat with Orc.

The sight of her made his whip twitch. He unwrapped it from encircling his waist. He wanted to feel the power in it as he gazed down at her.

She would be brave at first. Say what he might about Diana, she was not soft or weak. But the whip would change her attitude. Nothing that would harm the baby. But that still left Drake plenty of possibilities.

If he could just figure out how to get to her. And past Brianna. And Orc.

He glanced at the big houseboat, the only thing still attached to the dock. It was

farther away, and the angle was bad for seeing anything other than the top deck. Dekka had been on watch there. Now she was gone. But Drake knew perfectly well the houseboat had been left there as a lure for him. They wanted him to be stupid enough to attack.

He felt a sudden flash of rage. Sam, oh, so very clever, moving all his vulnerable people out onto the boats. He hadn't seemed so clever when Drake had whipped the flesh from him and Sam had cried out in pain and tears had streamed from his eyes.

...

A low growl of pleasure came from Drake's lips. It made the coyotes nervous.

Then two things happened: Orc climbed heavily down into a comically small rowboat.

Perfect! Let Orc bring the boat in. Drake would wait until the behemoth was clear and then he could take the boat out to collect Diana.

The only problem was the second thing that was happening: Drake was feeling the queasy sensation he got when Brittney emerged.

He snapped his whip in frustration. But that whip had already shriveled to a third of its usual length.

Drake quickly bit his index finger, drawing blood. He found a flat surface of rock and in the few seconds he had left he scrawled the word "sailbo—"

TWENTY

17 HOURS, 20 MINUTES

SAM WOKE SUDDENLY and knew something had happened.

He lay amid the twisted blanket for a few seconds trying to gather together the threads of unconscious perception. Movements, sounds, hazy notions of murmured conversation.

Then he got quickly to his feet. He pulled on his clothing and stepped out into the main hallway. He was heading for the stairs when he stopped, turned, and saw confirmation: Astrid's backpack was gone.

He pushed back a sliding closet door. Her shotgun was gone as well.

At that moment Dekka came down the stairs. She was startled to see him up. He was sure he saw a guilty look cross her face before being suppressed.

"She took the letters," Sam said flatly.

"She knocked me out," Dekka said. She pointed at the bruise on the side of her head and turned her face so he could see it by the light of the small Sammy sun.

Sam's lips curled into a feral snarl. "Right. Astrid. Knocked you out."

"She popped me with the butt of her shotgun."

"I can see that. I also know what it takes to beat you down, Dekka."

She flared angrily, but he knew it was the truth, and she knew that he knew.

"I'm sending Brianna after her."

"Astrid's right: we need PB to know what's happening, and we need to work together with them. Someone needs to take that letter to Albert and Caine."

"Not Astrid," Sam snapped. He started to push past her to where Brianna lay snoring, blissfully unaware.

Dekka stepped in front of him. "No, Sam."

Sam stepped up to her, so close they almost touched. "You don't tell me no, Dekka."

"If you send Brianna after her, one of two things: Breeze finds her and drags her back. And Astrid will hate you for it. Or Breeze hits a rock at seventy miles an hour and ends up dead or busted up."

Sam started to say something angry. Instead his voice broke. "Drake's out there!" He tried to say more but the words couldn't get past the lump in his throat, so he pointed, jabbing his finger furiously toward the land.

"She's doing the right thing," Dekka said. "And you can't send the girl I love to die in order to rescue the girl you love."

Sam felt his lip quiver. He wanted to be furious, but raw emotion was making him weak. He swallowed hard and shook his head once, angrily shaking off the upwelling fear and loss. "I'll go after her. I'll bring her back."

"No, boss." It was Edilio. He stepped out from behind Dekka. "Kids wake up tomorrow morning and see you gone without even an explanation, that's it, man. You gotta look strong and stay strong. You have the light, Sam, and that's all that will keep people together."

"You don't understand," Sam pleaded. "Drake is sick. He hates Astrid. You don't know what he can do."

“Drake hates everyone,” Edilio said.

Suddenly Sam found his anger. “You don’t understand a damned thing, Edilio; you don’t have anyone, you don’t have anyone you need or love or care about, it’s just you.”

He regretted the words as soon as he spoke them. But it was too late.

Edilio’s usually warm, sad eyes narrowed and went cold. He pushed his way around Dekka and stood face-to-face with Sam. He stabbed his finger in Sam’s face. “There’s a lot you don’t know, Sam. There’s a lot I don’t tell you. I know who I am,” he said with a ferocity to match Sam’s own anger. “I know what I do, and what I am to this place. I know what I am to you, and how much you depend on me. You may be the symbol, and you may be the one everyone turns to when something goes bad, and you are the big badass, but I’m the guy doing the day-in, day-out work of running things. So I don’t make this about me.”

He practically spit the word “me.”

“I don’t live my life so everyone pays attention to me. I do my job without making me the story, and without people having to wonder what’s going on with me.”

Sam blinked. He felt awash in feelings, none of which made any sense together. In the tornado of fear and fury he felt shame. Everything Edilio had said was true.

Edilio wasn’t finished. It was as if he’d held way too much inside and now that the dam had burst it was going to come out. “You and Astrid, you’re making a spectacle of yourselves. Kids are scared to death and what they’re seeing is you and Astrid having a great time. I’m not judging what you’re doing, that’s not my business, but you’re putting your personal life first and you can’t do that: you are Sam Temple. All these people look to us, to you and Dekka and me—and Astrid now that she’s back—and what do they see? You and Astrid rocking the houseboat every time you get a chance, and Dekka snapping at everyone because Brianna isn’t a lesbian and doesn’t want to be her girlfriend. The only one keeping his personal business personal is me. And you’re going to get nasty about it?”

He turned away and angrily shouldered Dekka aside.

“You two get it together, because we got problems enough,” Edilio said, and stomped away.

Brianna continued to snore.

Moonlight picked Orc out of a pile of jumbled rock. Astrid wondered if Sam knew that Orc had gone ashore. She wondered if she needed to send word.

No. This was the more important mission. She had to get to Perdido Beach. Maybe Caine and Albert knew what was coming. But maybe not. If the kids in town weren’t prepared they would panic and then they would all be lost.

An image came to mind, unbidden, unwelcome: a picture of kids in absolute darkness walking lost in the desert. They would walk until a hungry zeke, or a coyote, or Drake caught them. And those would be the luckier ones. Most would die an excruciating death of hunger and thirst.

Astrid steered clear of Orc. He was searching for someone or something. It had to be Drake, which could only be a good thing from her point of view.

She tried to think of something other than the image her mind had conjured of slow death by starvation in absolute darkness.

She needed to think.

Darkness wasn't the end state, was it? Surely something was causing the barrier to darken. The stain had a reason if not a purpose. It meant something. But what?

Most likely it was linked to the gaiaphage, that unknowable evil. The FAYZ's own personal Satan.

No one knew much about it. Lana didn't like to talk about it. Little Pete had been in contact with it, manipulated by it. The chimera that called itself Nerezza had been its creature. It had co-opted Caine at one point, or so the story went, but Caine had broken free.

Astrid began to jog, careful to watch the path beneath her feet. As soon as she was well away from the lake she planned to stay just off the gravel road. She wasn't sure if that was the smart thing to do or very stupid. But she reasoned that anyone looking for her would first check the main roads.

It would take her longer this way. But no one would expect her—of all people—to go overland through rough terrain.

Well, they didn't know her. In the last four months she had become quite comfortable with rough terrain.

She loped along, glorying in the sense of power from overcoming fear. Yes, it was dark. Yes, evil forces were on the loose. But she would outrun them or outthink them or if necessary outfight them.

If she couldn't do any of those, then she would endure.

A pang of guilt stabbed her without warning. She should have made her case to Sam and tried to get him to agree. She shouldn't have just run off on her own.

He would never have agreed.

She was doing the right thing. For once she was deciding to act. Not to manipulate or convince. But to act.

With luck she would reach Perdido Beach by morning.

And with a bit more luck she would be back with Sam by tomorrow night.

Brittney knew what she was to do. Mostly. The god that named itself gaiaphage had told her what she and Drake were to do. But the gaiaphage had not given her the power to keep Drake's memories as her own. Each time she emerged it was into a situation that might be totally unexpected.

In this case she recognized the crack in the bluff and knew she was hiding from Brianna. But now it was night and that was a surprise.

Almost as big a surprise as the fact that when she peered out she saw Orc looming huge no more than fifty feet away from the opening.

Brittney froze. The coyotes were already as quiet and still as statues.

Orc was slowly laboring up the hill, searching as he went in a steady, methodical way that was like nothing she'd ever seen from her former jailer.

He was meticulously scanning the ground, stomping through bushes, shoving boulders aside. Orc would not find them anytime soon, and the coyotes would show Brittney another hiding place if need be, but there was something disturbing in the way Orc was searching. Methodical. Calm. Dangerous.

The coyotes would be no use against Orc. And Brittney would be helpless. Orc was powerful. He could rip her into pieces. Those massive gravel hands could tear her

apart as easily as she might tear a piece of bread.

He couldn't kill her, or Drake; so it seemed. But even now, as far from her old life as it was possible to get, Brittney felt sick with dread at what Orc could do. She might not feel pain like she once had. But she would feel something.

Orc moved on, lumbering past, a starlit beast. She did not understand why he wanted her, or wanted Drake, but she was sure that was his purpose.

Her hand brushed against a smooth rock face and she felt something wet.

"Whip Hand made blood," Pack Leader said.

"It's too dark to see," Brittney said. "Do you—" No, that was stupid. Pack Leader did not read. But still, he might know something. She didn't have to ask.

"Rock that lives came from there." Pack Leader couldn't point, but he could aim his eyes. Through the gap in the rock Brittney could see what might be a small rowboat. She inched forward, silent, afraid of a massive stone hand reaching down from above. Inch by inch, until she was standing outside of the cave. She stood perfectly still. Listened. She heard the monster moving rocks, but the sound was not close at hand.

The moon shone down on the forlorn rowboat. It had painted trim—possibly green, impossible to tell for sure.

She scanned the boats at anchor, bobbing gently at the end of ropes or in some cases seemingly just drifting randomly. A sailboat caught her eye. It had trim that was very much like that on the rowboat.

"We must go," Brittney told Pack Leader. "I'll take Orc's—Rock That Lives—boat. You'll wait on shore to fight off anyone who comes along."

Pack Leader's soulless, intelligent eyes stared at her. "Pack hide from Swift Girl and Rock That Lives."

"No," Brittney said. "We cannot hide any longer."

"Swift Girl kills many coyotes."

"You'll have to take your chances. The Darkness commands."

Pack Leader's tail flicked. "Bright Hand is there." He pointed his muzzle at the houseboat. "Rock That Lives is close. Pack Leader does not see Whip Hand. Does not see Darkness."

Brittney gritted her teeth. So that was it. The coyotes were calculating the odds and not liking what they saw. Cowards.

"Are you dogs?" Brittney taunted.

But Pack Leader was unmoved. "Pack almost gone. And only three pups."

"If Drake was here, he would whip the fur off you!"

"Whip Hand is not here," Pack Leader said placidly.

"Fine. Then wait here. I'll go alone."

Pack Leader did not argue. Neither did he agree.

Brittney began to pick her way quietly, cautiously down toward the shore. She stayed under the cover of rocks when she could and hunched down low when she had no choice but to cover open ground.

She kept a sharp eye on the houseboat. She didn't need Drake's memories to know that was where Sam would be. And she listened carefully for Orc.

The last fifty yards there was no cover, nothing she could do to hide as she crossed the pebbly shore to the rowboat. She crouched and looked hard at the houseboat. She

saw no one on the top deck. That didn't mean eyes weren't watching from the houseboat's windows. But if she could only barely see them it stood to reason they could see her only if they were staring in her direction.

Once the boat started moving . . .

She rushed to the rowboat and crouched in its shadow, eyes on the houseboat. If she tried to move the boat, she would be caught. Maybe Drake could have done it, moving swiftly in a way that she could not. But she had no idea how to row a boat and was likely to make noise.

If she tried to swim, it would be even worse. She knew how to swim, but she knew only the crawl, and the splashing would draw every ear in the small fleet.

Then Sam and his people would hear and they would catch her and Sam would burn her to ashes.

She would fail Drake. She would fail the gaiaphage.

Then: a flash of genius. Brittney almost laughed out loud.

She breathed, but she did not need to breathe.

Brittney began picking up small rocks and stuffing them in her pockets. She tied off the bottom of her shirt, as tight as she could make it, then dropped more rocks down the front of her shirt, using her arms to hold them all in like a pregnant woman's belly.

Weighed down, she walked into the water. As the water rose around her she kept her gaze on the sailboat. She walked directly toward it, fixing the direction in her mind.

The water rose over her waist, over her chest, to her mouth and nose. And then it closed over her head.

She was almost completely sightless in the water. The only light was from the moon, and it seemed to reach only a few feet into the lake.

Brittney focused all her energy on walking in a straight line. The rocks controlled her buoyancy, but still she tended to float just a little, which made holding to a straight line very hard.

Freezing water filled her lungs. She could tell that it was cold, but the cold did not bother her. What did bother her was the certainty that she was off course. How many steps should she take? How far out was the sailboat? It had seemed like perhaps two hundred steps, but she had lost count after stumbling and losing some of the rocks that held her down.

No choice now but to surface. She opened the bottom of her shirt and let the rocks fall free. Her feet came up off the stony lake bottom and she floated upward.

It took a very long time. She was not very buoyant.

All the while she looked around and saw nothing until she was near the surface. Then she saw a rope slanting down into the darkness below.

She swam underwater, silent, no bubbles issuing from her mouth. She gripped the rope and began to pull herself upward, careful not to yank on that line.

She came up face-first. The twisted wires of her braces glinted with moonlight. A boat—a boat with a tall mast and what might be green trim—was directly above her.

Brittney wasn't sure whether it was proper to say a prayer of thanks to the gaiaphage. Maybe that was just for her old God. But she smiled in the renewed belief that she had purpose, and that she was serving her master well.

TWENTY-ONE

15 HOURS, 12 MINUTES

ASTRID'S PLAN WOULD have been brilliant.

Except that in distancing herself from the road for safety she managed to get lost.

This quasi-desert was not her familiar woods. And the funny thing about a road was that from a distance you couldn't actually see it at night unless you were seeing streetlights or car lights.

The FAYZ had neither.

So the gravel road disappeared from view, and although she was sure she was paralleling it, she seemed now to be in much less austere countryside than that which the road passed through.

The moon had set and the stars provided far too little light to see by. So she had gone slower and slower. And then she had tried to turn a sharp right angle to intersect the road. But the road was not there. Or if it was there it was much farther off than she had imagined.

"Stupid," she told herself. So much for the newly competent Astrid. She'd managed to lose herself in just a couple of hours.

As much as she hated to admit it, the only wise movement now was to stand still and wait for dawn. If dawn came. That thought sent a thrill of fear through her stomach. Even by starlight she was helpless. In total darkness she could wander forever. Or more accurately, wander until thirst and hunger killed her.

She wondered which would do it first. People assumed it was thirst. But she'd read in a book somewhere that hunger—

"Not helpful," she said aloud, just for the reassurance of hearing her own voice. "If . . . when . . . the sun comes up I'll be able to locate the ridges and hills and maybe even see a bit of ocean."

So she found a patch of ground with some tall grass and sat down carefully.

"Bad start," she admitted. Lost in the wilderness. How long had Moses and the Hebrews managed to stay lost on the Sinai Peninsula before stumbling into the land they were to reconquer? Forty years?

"A pillar of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night. And they still couldn't find their way out of the Sinai," Astrid muttered. "I'll settle for one last day of sunlight."

At some point sleep carried her off to unsettling dreams. And when she woke at last she knew that her one wish was not to be granted.

Looking up, she could make out a circle of deepest, darkest blue just beginning to lighten on the eastern edge and push the stars away.

Beneath that midnight blue was black. Not the black of night with stars and the Milky Way and distant galaxies, but the absolute blank, flat black of the stain.

The sky no longer stretched from horizon to horizon. The sky was a hole in the top of an upended bowl. The sky was the circle at the top of a well. And before the day was done the sky would be altogether gone.

Caine woke. His head was pounding. A headache so painful he thought he might pass out from the sudden onslaught of pain.

Then he felt something else. It felt like cuts. Itchy and sharp at once, all around his head.

He reached to touch it. But his hands would not move.

Caine's eyes opened.

He saw the gray cement block, shaped like a bowl. It rested on the coffee table. His hands were in the block to the wrists.

Fear struck. Panic.

He fought to control it but he couldn't. He cried out.

"No, no, no, no!"

He tried to pull back, tried to free his hands, but they were absolutely held fast by the concrete, which itched and squeezed his skin. He had done this to people; he had ordered this done and he knew the results; he knew what it did; he knew the cement could not just be broken off; he knew he was trapped, powerless.

Powerless!

He jumped to his feet, but the cement block weighed him down so that he stumbled forward and banged his knee against the sharp edge of the concrete. Pain in his knee, but nothing next to the panic, nothing compared to the awful pain in his head.

He whimpered like a scared child.

With all his strength he lifted the cement block. It banged against his thighs, but yes, he could lift it; he could carry it.

But not far. He set it down but missed the table, so that it slammed onto the floor, bending him over into an upside-down U.

Had to get a grip. Had to not panic.

Had to figure out . . .

He was at Penny's house.

Penny.

No.

Sick, terrible dread filled him.

He looked up as well as he could and there she was, walking toward him. She stopped just inches from his bowed head. He was staring at her feet.

"Do you like it?" Penny asked.

She held an oval mirror down so that he could look at it and see his face. His head. The streams of dried blood that had run from the crown she'd made of aluminum foil and then stapled to his head.

"Can't be a king without a crown," she said. "Your Highness."

"I'll kill you, you sick, twisted maggot."

"Funny you should mention maggots," she said.

He saw one then. A maggot. Just one. It was squirming up out of the concrete block. Only it wasn't coming from the cement; it was coming from the skin of his wrist.

He stared at it. She'd put maggots in with his hands!

A second one was coming out now. No bigger than a grain of rice. Eating its way through his skin, coming out of . . .

No, no, it was one of her illusions. She was making him see this.

They would burrow into his flesh and—

No! No! Don't believe it!

It wasn't real. The cement was real, nothing else, but he could feel them now, not one or two, but hundreds, hundreds of them eating into his hands.

"Stop it! Stop it!" he cried. There were tears in his eyes.

"Of course, Your Highness."

The maggots were gone. The feeling of them digging into him was gone. But the memory persisted. And even though he knew absolutely that they were not real, the sense memory was powerful. Impossible to dismiss.

"Now we're going on a walk," Penny said.

"What?"

"Don't be shy. Let's show off that washboard stomach of yours. Let's let everyone see your crown."

"I'm not going anywhere," Caine snapped.

But then something dropped onto his left eyelash. He couldn't bring it into focus. But it was small and white. And it writhed.

His resistance crumbled.

In the space of minutes he had gone from king—the most powerful person in Perdido Beach—to slave.

With a desperate heave he lifted the block and staggered toward the door.

Penny opened it and her step faltered.

"It's still night," Caine said.

Penny shook her head slowly. "No. I have a clock. It's morning." She threw him a haunted, troubled look, as if she suspected him of some trick.

"You look scared, Penny," he said.

That brought the hard look back to her face. "Get going, King Caine. I'm not afraid of anything." She laughed, suddenly delighted. "I don't have fear. I am fear!"

She liked it so much she repeated it, cackling like a mad creature. "I am fear!"

Diana stood on the deck of the sailboat. One hand was on her belly, rubbing it absentmindedly.

She saw the leaders—Sam, Edilio, Dekka—all standing on the White Houseboat looking at the place where the rising sun should be.

My baby.

That was her thought. My baby.

She didn't even know what it meant. She didn't understand why it filled her mind and simply shoved aside every other thought.

But as she gazed in growing horror at that dark sky all Diana could think was, My baby.

My baby.

My baby.

Cigar wandered, not really knowing where he was. Nothing looked like it should look. In his world, things—houses, curbs, street signs, abandoned cars—were merest shadows. He could make out their edges, enough to avoid walking into them.

But living things were twisty phantasms of light. A palm tree became a narrow, silent tornado funnel. Bushes beside the road were a thousand crooked fingers twisting

together like the hands of a cartoon miser. A seagull floated overhead looking like a small, pale hand waving good-bye.

Was any of it real?

How was he to know?

Cigar had memories of days when he was Bradley. He could see things in his memory that were so different: people who looked flat and two-dimensional. Like they were pictures in an aged magazine. Places that were so brightly lit the colors were all washed out.

Bradley. Have you cleaned your room yet?

His room. His stuff. His Wii. The controller was in the messed-up covers of his bed.

We have to get going, Bradley, so do me a favor and just clean up your room, okay? Don't make me have to yell at you. I don't want to have that kind of day.

I'm doing it! Jeez! I said I'd do it!

Ahead of him someone who looked like a fox. Funny-looking. Moving faster than him, moving away, looking back with sharp fox eyes and then running away.

Cigar followed the fox.

More people. Wow. It was like a parade of angels and prancing devils and dogs walking erect, and ooh, even a walking fish with gossamer fins.

Red dust floated up from them, thickening as more of the kids came together. The red dust began to pulse, like a heart, like a slow strobe.

Cigar felt fear squeeze his heart.

Oh, God, oh, no, no, no. Fear. The red dust, it was fear, and look, it was coming from him, too, and when he looked close it wasn't particles of dust; it was hundreds and thousands of tiny, twisty worms.

Oh, no, no, this wasn't real. This was one of Penny's visions. But the red dust flowed over the heads and sank down into the mouths and ears and eyes of all the prancing, twirling, skipping, running, mad assembly.

Then Cigar felt its presence. The little boy.

He turned to see it but it wasn't behind him. Or in front. Or on either side. It was somewhere no eye could turn to. The little boy was there, though, in the space just to the side, just not quite where his eyes could see, in that sliver of reality that was not where you could see.

But could feel.

The little boy was really not so little. Maybe he was vast. Maybe he could reach down with one giant finger and twist Cigar inside out.

But maybe the little boy was as suspect as everything else Cigar saw.

Cigar followed the crowd that was heading toward the plaza.

Lana stood on her balcony. There was just enough light to see the black stain that had painted most of the sky black. The sky high overhead was actually beginning to turn blue now. Sky blue. The dome was like an eyeball seen from the inside: where it should be white was opaque black, but with a blue iris up above.

It filled her with rage. It was mockery. A fake light in a fake sky as darkness closed in to shut off the last of the light.

She had had the chance to destroy it. The Darkness. She was convinced of it. And

every evil thing that later had flowed from that monstrous entity was on her shoulders.

It had beaten her. It had overpowered her by sheer force of will.

She had crawled to it on hands and knees.

It had used her. Made her a part of it. Made its words come from her mouth. Made her point a gun at a friend and pull the trigger.

Her hand strayed to the pistol in her belt.

She closed her eyes and could almost see the green tendril reaching to touch her mind and invade her soul. Taking a shaky breath she lowered the wall of resistance she had built around herself. She wanted to tell it that she was not beaten yet, that she was not scared. And she wanted it to hear her.

Now again, as had happened from time to time recently, she felt the hunger, the need of the gaiaphage. But she felt something else, too.

Fear.

The bringer of fear was afraid.

Lana's eyes had closed. They snapped open now. A chill went down her spine.

"Afraid, are you?" she whispered.

It needed something. Needed it desperately.

Lana squeezed her eyes tight again, willing herself to do what she had refused to do before: to try to reach back across the void and touch the gaiaphage.

What is it you want so terribly, you monster?

What is it you need?

Tell me so I can kill it and you at the same time.

A voice—Lana could have sworn it was a real voice, a girl's voice—whispered, *My baby.*

Albert watched the crowd of kids all pushing into the plaza. He could feel the fear. He could feel their desperation.

No crops would be picked. The market would never open.

It was the end. And time was short.

Kids brushed past him, stopped, realized who they had bumped into, and one of them said, "What's going to happen, Albert?"

"What does this mean?"

"What are we supposed to do?"

Be afraid, Albert thought. Be afraid, because there's nothing left to do now. So be afraid and then panic, and then spread violence and destruction.

He felt sick inside.

Within hours everything he had built would be gone. He could see it too clearly.

"But you always knew it would come to a bad end," he whispered.

"What?"

"What did he say?"

He stared at the kids. There was a crowd around him now. Crowds were dangerous. He had to keep them calm long enough to make his own escape.

He raised a disapproving eyebrow. "You can start by not freaking out. The king will handle it." Then, with his trademark cool arrogance, he added, "And if he doesn't, I will."

He turned and walked away. Behind him he heard a couple of uncertain cheers, and

some encouraging words.

They'd bought it for now.

Idiots.

As he walked he went over a list in his head. His maid, Leslie-Ann, because she had saved his life. And Alicia, because she could handle a gun but wasn't ambitious. And she was cute. One of his security guys? No. Any one of them might turn on him. No, he'd get that girl they called Pug: she was very strong and too dumb to make trouble.

Just the four of them would take the boat to the island.

That would be enough to keep watch and man the missiles he'd arranged to smuggle onto the island. And to blow anyone else who arrived, uninvited, out of the water.

TWENTY-TWO

14 HOURS, 44 MINUTES

“COME ALONG, KING Caine,” Penny taunted.

Caine dragged the stone between his legs, bent over. The blood from the staples in his head had dried, but from time to time the tiny wounds would start bleeding again. And then the blood would run into his right eye and all he would see was red until he could blink it away.

He would gather his strength sometimes and heft the stone and walk painfully forward. But he couldn't hold it for long.

It was a long, slow, infinitely painful and humiliating walk/crawl to the plaza.

He was exhausted beyond belief. His mouth and throat were parched.

And for a long time he thought it must still be night. The street was dark, but with an eerie quality that wasn't like moonlight. Light seemed to be shining down faintly from above. Like a dull flashlight.

Shadows were eerie. They were the narrow shadows of high noon, but dim. The air itself seemed to have taken on a sepia color, as if he was looking at an old photograph.

Caine noticed Penny craning her neck and staring up at the sky. He blinked the blood out of his eyes and painfully twisted his neck back to see.

The dome was black. The sky was a blue hole in a black sphere.

Caine began to notice kids in the street, all walking toward the plaza. Their voices had that giddy, jumpy sound kids got when they were scared. He watched the backs of heads as they craned to look up at the sky.

People were walking hunched over, like they thought the sky might fall on them.

It was a while longer before the first person noticed Penny and Caine. That kid's cries turned every eye toward Caine.

He didn't know what to expect. Outrage? Joy?

What he got was silence. Kids would be talking, then turn to see him dragging his cement block, and the words would die in their mouths. Their eyes would widen. If there was any pleasure there it was very well concealed.

“What's happening to the sky?” Penny demanded, finally noticing something beyond herself. She glared at the nearest kids. “Answer me or I'll make you wish you were dead!”

Shrugs. Shakes of the head. Backing away quickly.

“Keep moving,” she snarled at Caine.

They were in the plaza now and Penny shoved Caine in the direction of town hall.

“I need water,” Caine rasped.

“Get up the stairs,” Penny said.

“Drop dead.”

And instantly a pair of rabid dogs, their necks bearing massive iron collars, their teeth glowing pink from behind mouths full of rabid foam, attacked him from behind.

He could feel their teeth sinking into his buttocks.

The pain—no, no, he told himself, the illusion, the illusion. But it was too real; it was impossible not to believe it as the dogs ripped at him and he cried out in agony and rage and dragged his burden away, up the first step.

The dogs fell back, but snarled and foamed and barked so loud he felt he might go deaf.

Caine dragged his burden up one step after the next.

At the top, in the very place where he had often addressed crowds as king, he collapsed, shaking with fatigue. He fell onto his imprisoned hands.

After a while someone pushed his head back and he felt a jar touch his lips. He drank the water, gulping it down, choking but not caring.

Caine opened his eyes and saw that the crowd had grown. And it had edged forward. Their faces wore expressions of horror and fear.

He had made enemies during his four months in charge. But what was happening now obliterated all of that. Right now this crowd was scared. Deep-down scared. Eyes went skyward again and again, checking to see if there was still any light, any light at all.

Caine searched the crowd through bleary eyes. He had one hope: Albert.

Albert would not let this stand. Albert had armed guards. He was probably figuring out right now how to save Caine.

But another part of Caine's mind was yammering that there was no way to escape the concrete. He knew: he had inflicted this on freaks early on. And the only reason any of them had been able to escape was that Little Pete had intervened.

Caine hadn't known at the time that it was Little Pete's doing. He had been deaf, dumb, blind, and stupid not to realize the little autistic creep was the real power. And now Little Pete was dead and gone.

Which left breaking the concrete chip by chip with a sledgehammer.

The pain would be unbearable. It would break every bone in his hands. Lana might be able to help, but first would come the pain.

As soon as Albert dealt with Penny.

"Here's your king!" Penny cried in a gloating voice. "See? See the crown I gave him? Do you like it?"

No one answered.

"I said, don't you like it?" Penny screeched.

A couple of the kids nodded or muttered, "Yeah."

"Okay," Penny said. "Okay, then." She sounded unsure what to do next. Her fantasy hadn't gone any further than this. And now, Caine knew, she was trying to figure out how to enjoy her victory.

Her temporary victory.

"I know!" Penny said. "Let's see if King Caine can dance. How about that?"

Again, the stunned and traumatized audience didn't know how to respond.

"Dance!" Penny roared in a voice that disappeared into a squeak. "Dance, dance, dance!"

And suddenly the limestone beneath Caine's feet burst into flames. The pain was instant and unbearable.

"Dance, dance, dance!" Penny cried, jumping up and down. She was waving her awkward arms at the kids, urging them to chant along with her.

As the flames crisped the flesh on his legs Caine kicked and jerked madly in a bizarre parody of dancing.

The flames stopped.

Caine panted, waiting for the next assault.

But now Penny seemed to be out of steam. She slumped a little and looked at him. Their eyes met and he burned hatred at her. But it had no effect. Caine knew she was insane. He'd known all along that she was a psycho, but psychos could be useful.

But this wasn't as simple as Drake's evil ruthlessness. This was madness. He was looking at eyes that were no longer partaking of reality.

She was insane.

He had helped to drive her mad.

And now all her rage, all her jealousy, all the hate that Caine had used for his own purposes was being turned against him.

He was a powerless toy in the hands of a lunatic with the power to make him as crazy as she was herself.

The FAYZ, Caine thought dully. I always knew it would end in madness or death.

For the first time, his thoughts went to the baby inside Diana. His own son or daughter. All that would be left of him when Penny was finished.

It might have gone either way for Penny at that moment. The crowd was nervous and unsure.

"Now I am the queen, and I am the boss in charge," Penny announced. "And I don't have to tell any of you what I can do. Do I?"

No response. Cautious silence.

Then a voice from the back. "Let him go. We need him!"

Caine didn't recognize the voice. Neither, apparently, did Penny.

"Who said that?"

Silence.

Caine could hear Penny panting. She was in a very excited state. Mostly she didn't know what to do next. She had expected . . . something. But she had not expected to be completely overshadowed by this terrible darkness.

"Where is Albert?" Penny demanded petulantly. "I want him here so I can tell him how it is now."

No answer.

"I said, bring me Albert!" she screamed. "Albert! Albert! Come out, you coward!"

Nothing.

But now the crowd was moving from fearful to mad. They didn't like this. They were scared and they had come seeking reassurance. What they were getting instead was a shrieking girl who had disabled the most powerful person in town precisely when they desperately needed someone to do something about the fact that the light was dying.

"Let him go, you stupid witch!"

Caine appreciated that, but the cold, calculating part of his mind was wondering just where Albert was. Albert had half a dozen guys who would shoot Penny if he ordered it. For that matter Albert could say something as simple as, "Everyone who wants a job tomorrow, attack her now."

Where was he?

The top third of the dome was brightening. But that only made it easier to see the tendrils of stain, like a circle of teeth, slowly advancing.

Where was Albert?

Quinn led his boats into the marina.

Last time, maybe, he thought. It made his heart want to break.

He had awakened very early in his camp up the coast—his biological clock ran on fisherman time—and seen that the stain would eat the sun.

They had fished for what they could get in the early hours. But the heart was gone from them. The strike was over whether they wanted it or not: their world was dying, and they had bigger problems than the injustice done, or the loyalty they owed, to Cigar.

Albert and three girls were coming down the dock toward him. The three girls each had a backpack. Albert carried the big ledger book he used to keep track of his businesses.

“Why aren’t you fishing?” Albert asked.

Quinn wasn’t buying that act. “Where are you going, Albert?”

Albert said nothing. How rare, Quinn thought: Albert speechless.

“Not really your concern, Quinn,” Albert said finally.

“You’re running out.”

Albert sighed. To his three companions he said, “Go ahead and get in the boat. The Boston Whaler. Yes, that one.” Turning back to Quinn he said, “It’s been good doing business with you. If you want, you can come with us. We have room for one more. You’re a good guy.”

“And my crews?”

“Limited resources, Quinn.”

Quinn laughed a little. “You’re a piece of work, aren’t you, Albert?”

Albert didn’t seem bothered. “I’m a businessman. It’s about making a profit and surviving. It so happens that I’ve kept everyone alive for months. So I guess I’m sorry if you don’t like me, Quinn, but what’s coming next isn’t about business. What’s coming next is craziness. We’re going back to the days of starvation. But in the dark this time. Craziness. Madness.”

His eyes glinted when he said that last word. Quinn saw the fear there. Madness. Yes, that would terrify the eternally rational businessman.

“All that happens if I stay,” Albert continued, “is that someone decides to kill me. I’ve already come too close to being dead once.”

“Albert, you’re a leader. You’re an organizer. We’re going to need that.”

Albert waved an impatient hand and glanced over to see that the Boston Whaler was ready. “Caine’s a leader. Sam’s a leader. Me?” Albert considered it for a second and shook the idea off. “No. I’m important, but I’m not a leader. Tell you what, though, Quinn: in my absence you speak for me. If that helps, good for you.”

Albert climbed down into the Boston Whaler. Pug started the engine and Leslie-Ann cast off the ropes. Some of the last gasoline in Perdido Beach sent the boat chugging out of the marina.

“Hey, Quinn!” Albert shouted back. “Don’t come to the island without showing a white flag. I don’t want to blow you up!”

Quinn wondered how he would ever reach the island. And how Albert would be able to see a white flag if he did. Unless something changed no one would be seeing anything. It would be a world of universal blindness.

That thought made him think of Cigar. Cigar and his creepy little BB eyes. He had

to locate Cigar. Whatever happened, he was still crew.

He heard a surge of sound from the plaza, voices yelling, and one shrill voice screeching. He knew that screech.

He started toward town, then stopped and waited as his fishermen gathered around him. “Guys, I . . . I, um, don’t know what’s happening. We may never fish together again. And, you know . . . But I’m thinking it’s better if we stick together anyway.”

As an inspirational rallying speech, it was pretty lame. And yet, it worked. He walked toward the sounds of fear and anger with all his people behind him.

Lana kept her hoodie pulled close around her face. She did not want to be recognized by anyone in the crowd. She had come down to town only to see whether Caine would arrange an armed escort for her. She’d found a scene out of some deranged horror novel.

In eerie shadows the crowd of some two hundred kids, armed with spiked baseball bats, crowbars, table legs, chains, knives, and axes, dressed in mismatched rags and remnants of costume, stood facing a prancing, fist-shaking, wild-eyed, barefoot lunatic and a handsome boy with a crown stapled to his scalp and his hands trapped in a block of concrete.

Now they were taking up a chant. “Let him go. Let him go.”

They were chanting for Caine. They were scared to death and now, finally, they really wanted a king. They really wanted anyone who would save them.

“Let him go! Let him go!”

And a second chant: “We want the king! We want the king!”

Sudden screams from those closest to the steps. Lana could see kids falling back, clawing at their faces, crying out.

Penny had attacked!

“Kill the witch!” a voice bellowed.

A club went flying through the air. It missed Penny. A chunk of concrete, a knife, all missed.

Penny raised her hands over her head and screamed obscenities. A chunk of something hit her arm and drew blood.

The kids who’d been struck by her visions panicked and ran from her, but other kids were shoving forward. It was a melee, a tangle of arms and legs and weapons, shouts, orders; and suddenly from the far side came a wedge of disciplined kids moving forward with arms linked, pushing between the steps and the crowd.

Lana recognized the boy at the center of that wedge. She laughed in rueful surprise.

“Quinn,” she said to herself. “Well.”

Penny was staring transfixed at the wound on her arm, but she tore herself away to advance on Quinn. “You!”

Quinn cried out in agony. There was no way to know what Penny was doing to him, but it must have been awful.

Lana had had enough. There were injured kids. There were about to be more injured kids. Her mission to warn Diana wasn’t going to happen.

Lana drew her pistol. “Get out of my way,” she snapped at two kids blocking her path. She moved quickly, unnoticed, down First Avenue, skirting the crowd from the

opposite direction that Quinn had taken.

A panicky riot had broken out at the base of the steps as Penny wreaked all the damage her sick mind could conjure. Kids were attacking one another, seeing monsters where none existed.

Lana flinched as a crowbar rose high and came down with a sickening crunch.

She made it to the church steps and crossed over from there to town hall. Caine glanced and saw her. Penny did not.

Lana leveled the gun at Penny. "Stop," Lana said.

Penny's reddened face grew pale. Whatever visions she was inflicting on the people below her stopped. Kids cried in pain, sobbed from the memories.

"Oh, everyone has to kiss your butt, don't they, Healer." Penny spit that last word. She made her hands into claws and pawed at the air. Her lips were drawn back in a teeth-baring animal snarl.

"If I shoot you, I won't heal you," Lana said calmly.

That caught Penny off guard. But she recovered quickly. She put her head down and started to laugh. It began low and rose a few decibels at a time.

Lana's arm burst into flame.

A noose was flung from the ruined church wall. The rope dropped over her head, landed on her shoulders, and tightened around her throat.

The limestone beneath her feet was suddenly a forest of knives all stabbing up at her.

"Yeah," Lana said. "That won't work on me. I've gone one-on-one with the gaiaphage. He could teach you a few things. Stop it. Now. Or bang."

Penny's laugh choked off. She looked hurt. As if someone had said something cruel to her. The visions ceased as suddenly as if someone had switched off a TV.

"I'm kind of opposed to murder," Lana said. "But if you don't turn and walk away, I'll blow a hole right where your heart is supposed to be."

"You can't . . ." Penny said. "You . . . No."

"I missed killing a monster once. I've always regretted it," Lana said. "But you're a human. Sort of. So you get this chance: walk. Keep walking."

For what felt like a very long time Penny stood staring at Lana. Not with hatred, but with disbelief. Lana saw her very, very clearly: a head resting atop the sights of her pistol.

Penny took a step back. Then another. There was a wild look of defiance, but then it died.

Penny spun on her heel and walked quickly away.

Quinn quietly motioned three of his people to follow her.

A dozen or more kids were screaming now for her blood, demanding she be killed.

Lana stuck her gun back in her waistband.

"I don't think Caine is in any condition," Lana said. Then she raised her voice to be heard. As usual she sounded irritated and impatient. "So here's the way it is: Quinn is boss. For now. Mess with him, and you mess with me. And I will cut you off from healing. You lose a leg, I will stand by and watch you bleed out. Clear?"

It was apparently clear.

"Good. Now I have work to do. Get out of my way." She descended into the gore left in Penny's wake. Quinn came to her side.

“Me?” he said.

“For now. Make sure Penny leaves town. Kill her if you want to, because she’ll be trouble if she lives.”

Quinn made a face. “I don’t think I’m a guy who kills people.”

Lana smiled her exceedingly rare smile. “Yeah, I think I figured that out about you, Quinn. Send one of your people to bring Sanjit down here. He has to reach Sam. So find him a gun. Taylor is done for, and we need to be working with Sam, so it’s communication the old-fashioned way. Being divided will get us all killed.”

“You’ve got it.”

Lana’s smile died. “The Darkness is going after Diana. She has to be warned.”

“Diana? Why?”

“Because she has a baby in her belly. And the Darkness needs to be born.”

TWENTY-THREE

14 HOURS, 39 MINUTES

DRAKE EMERGED.

He had no idea where he was. It was a cramped, damp place that smelled of oil. He moved his head slightly and felt an impact that would have been pain back in the old days. He had bumped against something steel.

He blinked. The light was very dim. It came from a square in the low ceiling. He realized it was the edge of some kind of hatch. Just inches above him.

With his hand and his tentacle he felt around this tiny space. It took some time to make sense of things. The complex metal object. The square of light. The way the floor seemed to move slightly beneath him. The smell of oil.

He was on a boat.

In the engine room.

Barely room to move.

He grinned. Well, well: clever Brittney. Good job. Somehow she had found a way to sneak aboard one of the boats. Probably not the boat where he'd seen Diana. Could she have pulled that off? Simple metal-mouthed Brittney?

No. But a boat. Definitely a boat.

Nice.

Now what? He still had to get to Diana.

Easier said than done. First, he had to know where he was. He spent a good twenty minutes trying to squirm his body in such a way as to bring his head up against the hatch. He couldn't hold the position for long.

He held himself in place by wedging his hand against the engine block, then used the tip of his tentacle to push gently, gently upward on the hatch.

It moved up easily enough. A quarter of an inch. A half an inch. And then he could see a long, very narrow slice of the world beyond. A single spoke of a steering wheel. A bucket. Then a foot.

He lowered the hatch as quietly as he had raised it.

Something had bumped against the side of the boat. He heard a muffled voice, a guy.

Then a second male voice that froze his marrow. Sam.

Sam!

Drake heard sounds of someone clambering up the side. Now he could hear the voices more distinctly.

"T'sup, Roger?" Sam said. "Hey, Justin, hey, Atria. How are you guys holding up?"

The first male voice, presumably "Roger," whoever that was, said, "We're fine. Doing fine."

"Good. Well, I'm just here to hang some lights for you."

"Sammy suns? So . . ." Roger hesitated. "Why don't you kids go play? Old-people talk here." The sound of running feet, but no high-pitched voices. Then, "So it's like that?"

"Well, Roger, we don't know for sure." Sam sounded weary.

Could Drake take him? Right here and now when he was alone, without Brianna or Dekka to add to his power?

No, Drake told himself. He would never get up out of this hatch before Sam started burning him. And his mission was to get Diana, not kill Sam.

“Is it going to be totally dark?” Roger asked in a voice that quavered just a bit.

“Not totally dark,” Sam said reassuringly. “That’s why I’m here. You’ll have plenty of light on board. Is she up or is she asleep?”

They wandered out of earshot at that point, presumably into the cabin. But Drake had heard a female pronoun.

Was it possible? Was Diana on this very boat?

He grinned in the darkness. He would wait and be sure. The opportunity would arise. His faith in the gaiaphage had not failed him yet.

From boat to boat, one after the next, Sam rowed.

At each boat he climbed aboard and crouched to enter whatever cabin they had. In the smaller sailboats or motorboats he installed one or two Sammy suns.

Sammy suns were the long-lasting manifestation of his power. Rather than firing light in a killing beam he could form balls of light, which then burned without heat and hung in the air. They experimented a bit and discovered that the Sammy sun would stay in place relative to the boat when it moved, a rather important consideration.

Some of the boats, like the houseboats, got as many as three or four Sammy suns.

Halfway through the process, Sam realized he was feeling very weary. He’d had this same feeling after battles where he’d had to use his powers. He’d always assumed it was just the depression that followed any fight. Now he was wondering if the use of the power itself had some kind of tiring effect.

Maybe. But it didn’t matter. The Sammy suns were reassuring to kids. No one—least of all Sam—could tolerate the idea of being trapped in perpetual darkness. It was inconceivable. It struck terror right down to his core.

The last Sammy suns were for the big houseboat. Five in all, including an especially large one floating beside the front railing.

They would be in the dark. But they would not be totally blind.

“That helps,” Edilio said, welcoming him back.

“For a while,” Sam said grimly.

“For a while,” he agreed.

He couldn’t help but pick up his binoculars and scan the shore. Orc was still out searching. Good. If they were lucky he might find Drake, and Sam would rush to help.

But he wasn’t really interested in watching Orc. It was Astrid he searched for.

If she made it to Perdido Beach, what was the earliest she could get back? It had to be before the sky closed. If she was trapped out there in the dark, she would have to literally crawl along the road. And not everything needed light to hunt and kill. The darkness might keep Drake at bay, but the coyotes and snakes and zekes . . .

He had to do something. But he didn’t know what. It ate out his insides, that not knowing what to do.

“I could hang Sammy suns along the road,” he said.

“Once we have a deal with Albert and Caine,” Edilio agreed. “But if we do it now,

it will just be a beacon enticing all of Perdido Beach to come. We aren't ready for that."

Sam clenched his mouth shut. He hadn't really expected Edilio to say anything about it. He was just thinking out loud. And he was still mad at Edilio. He needed to be mad at someone, and Edilio was there.

Worse, Edilio did not seem to fear the coming darkness. He was his usual calm, capable self. Normally that was reassuring. But Sam was having a hard time just taking a full breath. He was exhausted from hanging suns and making all sorts of reassuring noises to his people on the boats.

He didn't believe what he was saying. Astrid was out there somewhere. Darkness was coming. The endgame was being played. And he had no plan.

He had no plan.

Sam looked up. The sun was now beginning to appear as it rose above the edge of the stain. Way, way too high in the sky. But the light was welcome. Welcome and heartbreaking when he contemplated the fact that he might never see it again.

The water sparkled. The white hulls brightened. The village, the little campground, and nearby woods lit up.

Edilio was watching one of the boats through his own binoculars. "It's Sinder," he reported. "She wants permission for her and Jezzie to go ashore and harvest their veggies."

"Yeah. It makes sense." He raised his voice to a shout. "Breeze! Dekka! On deck!" Then in a normal speaking voice to Edilio he said, "Sinder will need someone watching her back."

Brianna appeared seconds after the sound of her nickname died. Dekka came up a few moments later.

"It's light enough for you, Breeze," Sam said.

"Yeah, it's Florida in July," Brianna said, rolling her eyes at the strange tea-stained light.

"I thought you wanted to go back out," Sam said tersely.

"Dude. Of course I do. Chill. I was just making a joke."

"Yeah," Sam said, teeth still gritted. His jaw hurt. His shoulders were knots of pain. "Soon as Sinder gets near shore you meet her. Stay on her until she and Jezzie are done."

"I don't have to sit right on top of them," Brianna said with faux innocence. "I mean, I can go in and out, you know? Check on them, run down the road a ways, see what's what. . . ."

Before Sam could answer Edilio said, "We need a strategy, not a lot of people running off in different directions. Astrid's probably in PB by now. If Drake attacks us here, we'll need you, Brianna. But if you run into him without Sam, the best you can get is a draw."

It made perfect logical sense. But it did nothing to address Sam's desperate desire to do. To do. Not to talk, or watch, or worry, but to do.

The mission to grab the missiles had done little to ease his desire for action. Without thinking about it he held his palms up before his face. How long since he had fired the killing light rather than just hanging lights?

He realized Edilio and Dekka were both watching him with solemn expressions.

Brianna was smirking. All three of them had read his thoughts.

“Well, we can eat some big-ass radishes, at least,” Sam muttered lamely.

“All this is just coping,” Dekka said. “None of it is about winning.”

“Drake is here. Somewhere. The gaiaphage is . . . no one knows exactly where,” Edilio said. “We don’t even know what’s happening in Perdido Beach. We don’t know what Albert is up to. We don’t know where Caine stands in all this. We don’t know why Taylor hasn’t bounced in to tell us what is going on.”

“Yeah, I get it,” Sam said bitterly. “Astrid’s right to try to reach Perdido Beach. And meanwhile we’re stuck. Tied down. Flies on one of those sticky strips.”

Sam’s palms felt itchy. He squeezed his fists tight.

There was logic. And then there was instinct. Sam’s instinct was screaming that he was losing a fight with each passing, passive, patient second.

The rising sun cast deep shadows on Astrid’s soul. It was one thing to know it was going to happen. It was a very different thing to see it.

The sky itself was disappearing. This would be the last daylight of the FAYZ.

She looked around, trying to orient herself. The result was near panic. The road from the lake to Perdido Beach went in a southwesterly direction along the western slope of the Santa Katrina Hills. Then it intersected the highway.

But she’d lost sight of the road. And she’d somehow managed to wander into a gap between two hills.

The Santa Katrinas weren’t the biggest hills, though up close they could be imposing. They were dry, of course, without rainfall in the FAYZ. She remembered seeing them from the highway long ago after December rain, when they had suddenly turned green. But now they were just rock and desiccated weeds and stubby, struggling trees.

The road was presumably straight back to the west. But that could be miles, and she might find herself hitting the road no more than a mile or two from Lake Tramonto. That would be humiliating if Sam had sent Brianna out to find her. It would make Astrid’s mission to warn Perdido Beach look a lot less like Paul Revere and a lot more like the harebrained scheme of an incompetent girl.

Already she’d been delayed. The dawn—such as it was—had come. People in Perdido Beach could see it without any help from her.

Which meant that all she could do now was hope to send a message of solidarity and to offer Sam’s services as a light bringer.

Even that relied on speed. She was sure some kids at least would already be on their way out of Perdido Beach.

If she wanted speed, she’d have to go through the hills. If this pass went all the way through in a more or less straight line, then no problem. If it dead-ended against some hill she’d have to climb, that would be a problem.

Astrid set off at a trot. She was very fit after her months living in the woods and could move at this half-run, half-walk pace for hours so long as she had water.

The hills rose on either side. The one on the right began to seem oppressive, steep and glowering. The peak was exposed rock where some long-ago storm or earthquake had stripped the thin topsoil away. And that exposed rock looked like a grim-faced head.

The trail continued to be pretty easy. Once upon a time there'd been running water, but now the narrow streambed was choked with dried-out weeds.

Astrid saw something move up to her right, up the sheer slope of what she was thinking of as Mount Grimface. She didn't stop, but kept moving, looked and now saw nothing.

"Don't get spooked," she told herself. That kind of thing had happened a lot in the forest: a noise, a sudden movement, a flash of something or other. And inevitably she'd been afraid it was Drake. Just as inevitably it had been a bird or a squirrel or a skunk.

Now, though, the sense that she was being watched was hard to shake. As if Mount Grimface really was a face and it was watching her and not liking what it saw.

Ahead the path curved away to the left, and Astrid welcomed the chance to move away from the sinister mountain, but at the same time, as she took that curve, she had an almost overpowering sense that whatever had been watching her was now behind her.

And coming closer.

The urge to break into a full-on run was hard to resist. But she couldn't look as if she was fleeing, panicking.

She came around a blind corner and almost plowed into him.

Astrid stopped. Stared. Screamed.

Screamed so that she forgot to draw her gun until she was already screaming and backing away, and finally out came the shotgun and her fingers fumbled for the trigger. She raised the gun to her shoulder, sighted down the barrel.

She aimed for the eyes. Those awful marble-size eyes in bloody-black sockets.

It was a boy. That fact took a few long beats to penetrate her consciousness. Not some giant monster, a boy. He had strong shoulders and a deep tan. There were cuts on his face, like the claw marks of a wild animal. They seemed fresh. And she saw blood on his fingernails.

His expression was impossible to read—the eyes, those awful chickpea-size eyes—made any emotion impossible to guess.

"Don't move or I'll blow your head off," Astrid said.

The boy stopped walking. The eyes seemed unable to locate her, looking up and left and everywhere but straight at her.

"Are you real?" the boy asked.

"I'm real. So is this shotgun." Astrid heard the quaver in her voice, but her grip on the gun was steady and she was keeping it on target. One squeeze of her right index finger and there'd be a loud noise and that horrifying head would explode like a water balloon.

"Are you . . . Are you Astrid?"

She swallowed hard. How did it know her name? "Who are you?"

"Bradley. But everyone calls me Cigar."

The gun lowered several inches of its own accord. "What? Cigar?"

The boy's mouth made a sort of grin. The grin revealed broken and missing teeth.

"I see you," Cigar said. He stretched out a bloody hand to her, but like a blind person feeling for something he couldn't quite locate.

"Stay back," she snapped, and the gun went to her shoulder again. "What

happened to you?"

"I . . ." He tried another smile, but it twisted into a grimace and then a terrible groan, a cry of agony that stretched on and on before ending in a wild burst of laughter.

"Listen, Cigar, you need to tell me what happened," Astrid insisted.

"Penny," he whispered. "She showed me things. My hands were . . ." He raised his palms to look at them, but his eyes were elsewhere, and a moan came from deep in his throat.

"Penny did this?" Astrid lowered the gun. Halfway. Then, hesitantly, all the way down. But she did not sling it back over her shoulder. She kept her grip tight and her finger resting on the trigger guard.

"I like candy, see, and I did a bad thing and then the candy was in my arm and then I was eating it and oh, it tasted so good, you know, and Penny gave me more, so I ate it up and it hurt and there was blood, maybe, lots of blood, maybe, maybe."

The tiny eyes swiveled suddenly to look past Astrid.

"It's the little boy," Cigar said.

Astrid glanced over her shoulder, just quick, just a glance, almost involuntary because she wasn't ready to lower her guard yet, not ready to turn around. Her head was already turning back toward Cigar when she realized what she had seen.

Seen? Nothing much. A distortion. A twisting of the visual field.

She looked back. Nothing.

Then back to Cigar.

"What was that?"

"The little boy." Cigar giggled and placed his hand over his mouth like he'd said a dirty word. Then in a low whisper, "The little boy."

Astrid's throat was tight. The flesh on her arms rose into goose bumps. "What little boy, Cigar?"

"He knows you," Cigar said, very confidential, like he was telling a secret. "Screaming yellow hair. Stabby blue eyes. He knows you, he told me."

Astrid tried to speak and couldn't. Couldn't ask the question. Couldn't accept what the answer might be. But at last, strangled words came from her mouth.

"The little boy. Is his name Pete?"

Cigar reached to touch his own eye, but stopped. He looked for a moment as if he were listening to something, though there was nothing but the sounds of gentle breeze and grating grasshoppers. Then he nodded eagerly and said, "Little boy says: 'Hello, sister.'"

OUTSIDE

SERGEANT DARIUS ASHTON was very good with a truck engine. This did not mean he was necessarily good with an air compressor. But his lieutenant said a mechanic was needed at a site around the far side of the dome.

“That’s the air base, Lieutenant,” Darius protested. “They don’t have an HVAC mechanic over there?”

“Not one with your security clearance,” the lieutenant said.

“A security clearance for an air conditioner?”

The lieutenant wasn’t a bad guy, young but not arrogant. He said, “Sergeant, I would have thought by now, with your long experience in uniform, you’d know better than to expect everything to make sense.”

Darius couldn’t argue with that. He saluted and turned on his heel. A cheerful female driver, a corporal who knew the drive well, was waiting behind the wheel of a Humvee. Darius loaded his tools in the back. How was he supposed to know what to bring if he didn’t even know what he was supposed to be fixing?

The corporal had done a tour in Kabul, something she and Darius had in common, so they talked about that on the long, circuitous drive. And they talked about this supposedly great new Cuban pitcher who had reached the United States on a raft. The Angels were going to sign him.

The drive went up the highway, then onto a series of gravel side roads. There was another way to reach the Evanston Air National Guard base, but it would mean going all the way to I-5, then back south. This path was bumpy and dusty but it was quicker.

Much of the drive was within sight of the bowl. Darius had gotten used to it. Ten miles high, twenty miles across. It looked like someone had dropped a small, smoothly polished moon down on the Southern California coastline.

But there was no crater, no fracture lines. It hadn’t landed; it hadn’t exploded; it had just suddenly existed. A gigantic terrarium.

“Been here long?” Darius asked, nodding at the dome.

“Just transferred in last month,” the corporal said. “I saw it on TV, like everyone else. But it’s something in person.”

“It is that.”

“Weird thinking there are kids in there.”

They pulled up at a facility that had obviously been recently built. It had all the usual obsessive military neatness and order. A dozen buildings in ruler-straight rows. A barracks, an officers’ quarters, a number of command trailers, a communications building bristling with dishes and antennae.

The base was a hive of activity. Men and women bustling back and forth with very busy expressions on their faces. No one was lounging or grabbing a smoke or chatting on the phone. There was a self-conscious sense of Very Important Stuff Happening.

The facility was ringed with chain link topped with extremely serious-looking razor wire. The gate was guarded by unsmiling military police. IDs were checked against a manifest showing that yes, they were both expected.

One of the MPs accompanied them to one of the trailers. The corporal peeled off

and Darius stepped into a blast of air-conditioning.

A sergeant asked him again for his ID. Then he handed Darius a paper to sign. The paper required him to reveal nothing of the purpose of his visit, of the existence of the facility, of the work there, of any of the personnel assigned there.

There was a great deal of official-ese and some decidedly threatening language.

“You understand, Sergeant, that you are governed by this security protocol?”

“Yes, Sergeant. I do.”

“You understand that any violation will result in criminal prosecution?”

The word “will” had been emphasized, and not subtly.

“I believe I’m getting the message, Sarge.”

The sergeant smiled. “They keep a very tight lid. Report to building oh-one-four. Your driver will know where it is.”

The driver did.

Building 014 was half a mile from the rest of the camp, which put it a full mile away from the dome wall. It was a vast, hangar-style tin structure. Huge and imposing. It was painted the color of the surrounding desert.

Darius hefted his tool bag and was met at the door by an MP. One more ID check. Then Darius stepped inside the hangar.

What he saw made him stare. A half dozen trucks filled with dirt. A tower that looked like it had been assembled from leftover bits and pieces of a suspension bridge or maybe the Eiffel Tower.

The MP took him to a civilian in a construction worker’s helmet and handed him off. The civilian shook his hand and identified himself as “Charlie. Just Charlie. Sorry to drag you out here, but our head HVAC mechanic is on maternity leave, and her assistant managed to break an ankle surfing. You’re not claustrophobic, are you?”

The question surprised Darius. “Why?”

“Because we are going deep. The unit we need you to look at is a blower at kilometer six.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means we’re going two miles down, my friend. Two clicks straight down and four clicks south. Kilometer six.”

Darius felt cold. “That would put you . . . up against the dome. Why . . . I mean, what . . .”

Charlie shrugged and said, “My friend, the first thing you learn working here is don’t ask questions.”

The elevator ride down seemed endless.

And yet quicker than the narrow-gauge train that carried Darius along an impressive and oppressive tunnel, wide enough to accommodate two rail lines with space on either side. The tunnel was shored up at regular intervals with railroad ties.

Kilometer six turned out to be a cavern bigger than the hangar. The far end was formed by the barrier. Here it was black, not pearly gray.

“It was good luck finding this cave,” Charlie said. “Would have been a long, hard job carving it out. You know, usually we’d have a hundred guys down here. But as you can probably smell, the air is getting a bit thick.”

“That’s why I’m here, right?”

In the cave stood a tall scaffolding tilted at a strange, Leaning Tower of Pisa angle.

Darius knew enough about machinery to recognize a drilling platform.

From this spot they were drilling farther still, down below the dome. Not a tunnel for humans. Just a round shaft into which a bomb could be lowered to the lowest point beneath the dome.

Charlie must have seen the look in Darius's eyes. He gripped Darius's arm and pulled him aside. They were alone, but Charlie whispered anyway. "Okay, you're not a fool. You know what's going on here. But you need to know that security watches everyone who comes in or out of this place. I mean, from now on your cell phone will be monitored, and your room may be bugged. Word to the wise."

Darius nodded.

"What really happened to your HVAC guy?"

Charlie laughed mirthlessly. "Opened his mouth in a bar. Thirty minutes later the FBI picked him up as he was getting into his car."

TWENTY-FOUR

14 HOURS, 2 MINUTES

ASTRID HAD MANAGED to get Cigar to follow her off the path. She worried that someone might come along—if she could get lost en route from the lake to Perdido Beach, so could others.

She found a place beside what had been the stream, hidden by a huge, dying rhododendron bush. She asked Cigar to sit down. She helped to move him into position to do so on a dirt ledge that almost formed a bench.

She sat a few feet away, careful to keep her face toward the grim-faced hill. Even now its shadow bothered her in a way she could not define.

Astrid still felt the relentless tick-tock, tick-tock urging her toward Perdido Beach. But it was possible this was even more important.

And anyway, she couldn't leave. Not with what she had heard from Cigar.

"Bradley. I want this to be easy for you. I'm going to ask you questions. All you have to say is yes or no. Okay?"

The tiny eyeballs swerved wildly. But he said, "Okay. Why does he say your hair screams? You're an angel with wings and shiny, shiny, and a long sword with flames and—"

"Just listen, okay?"

He nodded, and revealed a shy grin.

"You did something bad."

"Yes," he said solemnly.

"And they punished you by giving you to Penny for a half hour."

"Half hour." He giggled and his jaw twisted so hard she thought he might dislocate it. Like he was trying to break his own teeth. "Not a half hour."

"They gave you to Penny," Astrid repeated patiently.

"Sunrise sunset."

At first Astrid thought he was talking about the eerie sky. Only gradually did the suspicion grow and take shape. "They put you with Penny for a full day? All day long?"

"Yes," Cigar said, suddenly calm and sounding quite reasonable.

Astrid did not feel reasonable. What kind of creep would sentence this kid to a day with Penny? No wonder he was insane.

It occurred to her then that he had clawed his own eyes out. The image made her need to throw up. But she couldn't do that. No.

"These new eyes," Astrid said. "Are they from Lana?"

"Lana is an angel, too. But it touches her. It tries to take her."

"Yes, it does," Astrid said. "But she's too strong."

"Mighty!"

Astrid nodded. So he had been driven mad by Penny. And Lana had done what she could. And somehow he had ended up wandering lost out of town, all alone.

Which meant things were very bad in Perdido Beach. Cigar was one of Quinn's fishermen, or had been when last she'd heard. "You're one of Quinn's fishermen, aren't you?"

“Yay!” Cigar said, and smiled his lunatic grin while his brow furrowed into deep crevices of anxiety. “Fish. Hah, hah.”

“Now, the little boy . . .”

“Fish! Fish!”

“The little boy,” Astrid persisted. She reached and placed her hand over his. He reacted like he’d been shocked. He yanked his hand back and she feared he might bolt.

“Stay, Cigar. Stay. Quinn would tell you to stay and talk to me.”

“Quinn,” he said, and sobbed and finally screamed. “He came for me. He hit Penny. I couldn’t see it but I heard it—Quinn and bam and waaah and we’re going to Lana I’ll kill you witch.”

“He’s a good guy, Quinn.”

“Yes,” Cigar said.

“He wants you to tell me about the little boy.”

“Little boy? He’s next to you.”

Astrid fought the urge to turn and look. No one was beside her. “I don’t see him.”

Cigar nodded as though he knew this, as though it was a given fact. “He’s a little boy. But he’s big, too. He can touch the sky.”

Astrid choked out the words, “Can he?”

“Oh, yes. Little boy is better than an angel, you know; he has the light so bright it shines through you. Tseeew! Right through you.”

“And his name is Petey?”

Cigar was silent. He lowered his head. Again it was as if he was listening. But maybe he was listening only to the terrible nightmare screams in his own head.

Then, with perfect lucidity that was stranger in its way than all his tics and sudden eruptions and weird gestures, Cigar said, “He was Pete.”

Astrid sobbed.

“That was his body name.”

“Yes,” Astrid said, too paralyzed even to wipe away the tears. “Can I . . . Can he hear me?”

“He can hear . . . anything!” And again the mad cackle, an almost ecstatic sound.

“I’m sorry, Petey,” Astrid said. “I’m so sorry.”

“Little boy is free now,” Cigar said in a singsong voice. “He’s playing a game.”

“I know,” Astrid said. “Petey? You can’t play that game. You’re hurting people.”

Once again Cigar lowered his head to listen. But even though Astrid waited a long time, he said nothing more.

So in a quiet voice Astrid said, “Petey. The barrier is turning dark. Can you stop it? Do you have the power to stop it?”

Cigar laughed. “Little boy is gone.”

And Astrid could feel the truth of it. The sense of something unseen looking at her was gone.

Sanjit did not travel alone. He had intended to, and Lana had said he should, but by the time he got onto the highway heading in the direction of the turnoff to the lake, he was in a gaggle of kids.

People were fleeing Perdido Beach. Sanjit could see at least twenty, arrayed in groups of two or three. A cluster of three had formed around him. Two twelve-year-old

girls, Keira and Tabitha, and a little boy of maybe three with the very grown-up-sounding name of Mason.

Mason was trying to be a good little soldier, but just a half mile out of town he was already stumbling on very tired legs. The girls were hardier—they'd both put in time working the fields, so they were strong and had the stamina for long hours on the road. But Mason was a little kid hauling a backpack filled with his favorite things—some broken toys, a picture book called *Owl Babies*, a framed picture of his family.

The girls pushed their things, as well as some food and water, in a Ralphs grocery cart with one bad wheel. It rattled as they went. Sanjit knew it would never survive the dirt-and-gravel road that led to the lake.

Mason complicated matters further by insisting on wearing a plastic Iron Man helmet that covered his whole head. He had a small paring knife in a woman's white belt.

Lana had impressed on Sanjit a need for speed when she'd handed him the grubby envelope with the note inside. And he knew he could outpace his three fellow travelers. But somehow, having fallen in with them, he couldn't quite bring himself to do it. Instead he ended up hefting Mason onto his back.

"Are you and Lana, like, together?" Tabitha asked.

"Um . . . Yes. I guess you could say that."

"I heard she's mean," Keira offered.

"No," Sanjit protested. "She's tough. That's all."

"You know who's really mean?" Tabitha asked. "Turk. He pushed me once and I fell down and skinned both my knees."

"Sorry that—"

"And then I went to see Lana and she told me to go wash off in the ocean and not bother her." Tabitha lowered her voice and added, "Only she said it meaner, with a bunch of cusswords."

Sanjit resisted the grin that wanted to spread across his face. Yep. That would be Lana, all right. "Maybe she was just busy at the time."

It was good to have some silly gossip to distract them all. And the two girls seemed to have an endless stream: who liked who, who didn't like who, who might like who.

Sanjit didn't know half the people they were talking about, but it was still better than looking up at the sky and watching the stain grow higher and the ragged circle of light grow smaller.

What were they going to do when the light went out?

As if reading his thoughts, or maybe just noticing his worried expression, Keira said, "Sam Temple can make lights."

"With his hands," Tabitha explained.

"Like lamps." Then without prompting Keira patted Mason on his Iron Man helmet and said, "Don't worry, Mase: that's why we're going to the lake."

At which point Mason began to cry.

Sanjit couldn't blame him. Nothing sounded hollower than a reassurance in this place.

Once he delivered his message to Sam he would have to find his way back to Perdido Beach. Would there be any light at all by then? How was he going to get back

to Lana across ten miles of emptiness in the dark?

One thing he was sure of: he would go back.

“I have to poop,” Mason said.

Sanjit let him slide down.

More delay. Less likelihood of any light for the homeward trip.

The sun was already most of the way across the narrowed sky. Sanjit knew he should break away, run for it. He could run the whole way there. He’d deliver his message sooner and he’d get back sooner and . . .

Sanjit saw something moving through the brush off at the limits of his excellent sight. Something low and quick, slinking through brush.

Coyotes.

Lana had offered him a pistol, urged it on him. “I don’t know how to shoot,” he’d said, pushing it back.

“Take it or I’ll shoot you with it myself.”

They had kissed after that. Just a hurried kiss in the shadow of the church as Lana moved between injured kids. And he had plastered on his jaunty smile and tossed off a jaunty wave and taken off.

What if he never saw her again?

Mason finished his business. The coyotes were no longer in view. The sun touched the far edge of the remaining sky.

Caine had waited. Patiently, since circumstances had forced patience on him. Lana helped the victims of Penny’s assault.

Quinn was running around getting the morning’s sparse catch brought in and cooked up over a fire in the plaza. Caine recognized that as a smart move. The smell of broiled fish and the soothing sound of a bonfire would help keep kids from rushing off.

Well, some kids, at least.

Now Quinn was ready for Caine.

“Get me out of this,” Caine demanded.

Quinn said, “It’s not so easy. You should know: you’re the scumbag who invented cementing.”

Caine let that go. He had no choice. For one thing, it was true. For another, he was helpless. And finally, he had wet himself. Hadn’t even noticed when it had happened, but somewhere, during one of Penny’s vicious nightmare attacks, he had done it and now it smelled.

All of which left him in a vulnerable position.

“We’ll have to chip it away a little at a time,” Quinn opined. “Try swinging a full-size sledgehammer and someone’s likely to miss and hit your head or wrists.”

He detailed a couple of the fishermen, Paul and Lucas, to begin the job. They had a small, short-handled sledgehammer and a chisel. That had taken some doing, since both were in use as weapons. The kids who gave them up had to be paid. And no one was taking ’Bertos anymore; it was strictly barter.

“Tell me if this hurts,” Paul said, and brought the hammer down on the chisel held by Lucas.

CLANG!

It hurt. The sharp force of the blow translated into a dull pain that Caine felt in the bones of his hands. Not quite as bad as being hit directly by the hammer, but it was close.

He gritted his teeth. “Keep at it.”

Lana came swaggering over, a lit cigarette dangling from her lips. There were still injured kids crying, but Caine wasn’t seeing many serious cases left. Dahra Baidoo was with her, helping tend the wounded. Dahra looked a little weird to Caine’s eye, like someone sleepwalking, or a mental patient zoned on meds. But what else was new? Crazy was getting to be the norm. And Dahra had better reason than most—she’d borne the brunt of the bug attack here in town.

Lana stepped beside Dahra, put her hand on Dahra’s head, and for a second hugged it against her shoulder. Dahra closed her eyes briefly and looked as if she was about to cry. Then she scrubbed her face with her hands and shook her head almost violently.

Lucas struck a second blow and a three-inch chunk of concrete fell away.

“Caine,” Lana said.

“Yeah, Lana. Want to make some snide crack involving irony and karma?”

Lana shrugged. “Nah. Too easy.” She knelt down beside Caine and then, feeling weary, sat all the way down, cross-legged. “Listen, Caine. I sent Sanjit to warn Sam about—”

“About the wave of refugees on their way? He’ll figure that out soon enough, won’t he? He can make light.” He glared up at the sky, feeling like it was a personal enemy. “In a couple of hours light will be all anyone cares about.”

“That’s not why I sent Sanjit. I was going to go myself before this latest fiasco. I sent him because I think Diana is in danger.”

Caine’s heart missed a beat. The reaction surprised him. As did the catch in his throat when he said, as coldly as he could, “Danger? You mean more than the rest of us?”

CLANG!

All the while Paul and Lucas were chipping away at the concrete. With each hammer fall Caine winced. He wondered if bones were breaking. He wondered how they would get off the last of the cement—the part attached to his flesh. In between the sudden sharp pain there was a constant dull pain and an infuriating itch.

“I can feel its mind sometimes,” Lana said.

He looked sharply at her. “It?”

CLANG!

“Don’t play dumb, Caine.” She touched her hand to his head, where the punctures of the staples still oozed blood. Almost instantly the pain in his head diminished. But nothing helped when the next blow of the hammer and chisel made him feel as if fingers were being broken.

CLANG!

“Ahhh!” he cried.

“You were with it,” Lana said. “I know you still feel it sometimes.”

Caine scowled. “No. I don’t.”

Lana snorted. “Uh-huh.”

He wasn’t going to argue about it. They both knew the truth. That was something he shared with the Healer: too much up-close-and-personal time with the gaiaphage.

And yes, it left scars, and yes, it was sometimes as if the creature could touch the edge of Caine's consciousness.

He closed his eyes and the nightmare came on like a storm-driven wave. It had been all hunger then. The gaiaphage needed the uranium at the power plant. That hunger had been so huge, so frantic, Caine could still feel it as a stifling, heart-throttling, choking feeling.

CLANG!

"AHHHH!" Through grinding teeth he said, "I don't let the Darkness touch me."

The chisel was cutting closer now, with more than half the concrete chipped away. Penny hadn't mixed a very good batch, really. No gravel. It was gravel that gave it hardness. He and Drake had learned that.

"Sorry," Lucas said, not really meaning it.

CLANG!

No, Caine thought, no gentle concern for Caine's well-being. They needed him, but that didn't mean they liked him.

"The sun is setting," Lana remarked almost without emotion. "Kids will lose it. They'll set fires. That's the big worry, probably, that they'll finish Zil's work by burning down the rest of the town."

"If I ever get out of this, I'll stop them," Caine snarled, biting back a cry of pain as the hammer rose and fell again.

"It's going after Diana," Lana said. "It wants the baby. Your baby, Caine."

"What?"

The hammer waited, suspended. This wasn't exactly a private conversation, and Paul was shocked. He snapped out of it and dropped another awful blow.

CLANG!

"Don't you feel it?" Lana demanded.

"All I feel is my fingers being broken!" Caine yelled.

"I'll fix your fingers," Lana said impatiently. "I'm asking you: do you feel it? Can you? Will you let yourself?"

"No!"

"Scared?"

His lips drew back in a snarl. "You're damned right I'm scared of it. I got away from it. You're saying I should open myself up to it again?"

CLANG!

"I'm not scared of it," Lana said, and Caine wondered if she really wasn't. "I hate it. I hate myself for not killing it when I had the chance. I hate it." Her eyes were dark but hot, like smoldering coals.

"I hate it," she repeated.

CLANG!

"Oh. Ohhhh!" He was breathing in short gasps. "I won't . . . What makes you so sure it's going after Diana?"

"I'm not sure. That's why I'm talking to you. Because I thought you might give a damn if that monster is after your kid."

Caine's hands felt lighter. The concrete block had split. There was a wedge about the size of a double slice of pie hanging from his left hand. His hands were still locked together in a crumbly mass that looked like the stone from which a sculptor might

chisel a pair of hands.

Paul and Lucas readjusted their positions, and Caine lifted the hands and carefully, carefully used a piece of concrete to scratch his nose.

“Caine—” Paul said.

“Give me a minute,” Caine said. “All of you. Give. Me. A. Minute.”

He closed his eyes. Pain in his hands, a deep ache of something—or more than one thing—broken. The pain was terrible.

Worse by far: the humiliation.

He’d been outwitted by Penny. Weakness.

He’d been made to bear the torture he and Drake had invented. Weakness.

He sat here now on the steps of town hall, the steps where not two days earlier he’d ruled as king. He sat there now with piss-smelling pants, made to feel weak and small and cowardly by Lana.

He hadn’t been this low since he had walked off defeated into the desert with Pack Leader. Since he had crawled, weeping and desperate, to have his mind messed up by that malevolent, glowing monster.

Lana could let it touch her mind. She was that strong.

He could not. Because he was not.

What did it matter anymore? he wondered. It was the end at last. Darkness would fall and the sun would never rise again and they would wander lost in inky blackness until they starved. The smart ones would just walk into the ocean and swim until they drowned.

What did he, Caine, matter? Let alone Diana. Or the . . . whatever. Baby. Kid. Whatever.

He closed his eyes and he could see Diana. Beautiful girl, Diana. Smart. Smart enough to keep pace with him. Smart enough to play her games with him.

They’d been happy, mostly, on the island. Him and Diana. Good days. Then Quinn had come with a message that he was needed to rescue Perdido Beach.

He had come back. Diana had warned him not to. But he had come back. And he had proclaimed himself king. Because kids needed a king. And because after he saved their stupid lives for them he deserved to be that king.

Diana had warned him against that, too.

And no sooner was he in charge than he’d realized it was Albert who was the real boss. And no one really respected Caine. They didn’t realize how much he did for them.

Ungrateful.

Now they wanted him, but only because they were all scared of the dark.

“We’ll try a smaller hammer now,” Paul said anxiously.

Caine gritted his teeth, anticipating the blow.

CLANG!

“Ahhh!” The chisel had missed. The hardened steel chisel blade skipped and bit into his wrist. Blood poured out over the concrete.

He wanted to cry. Not from the pain but from the sheer awfulness of his life. He needed to use the bathroom. He wouldn’t even be able to lower his own pants or wipe himself.

Lana took his wrist. The bleeding slowed.

“You need to let them keep at it,” Lana said. “It’ll be a lot worse in the dark.”
Caine nodded. He had nothing more to say.
He bowed his head and cried.

TWENTY-FIVE

12 HOURS, 40 MINUTES

SINDER WEPT AS she and Jizzie ripped up their vegetables. It was all over. Their hard work, almost done now. This was the final harvest.

Their little dream of helping to make things better for everyone was at an end. And like all failed hopes it seemed stupid now. They'd been idiots to hope. Idiots.

This was the FAYZ. Hope led to a kick in the face.

Idiots.

They filled plastic trash bags with carrots and tomatoes. And cried silently while Brianna stood watch over them, pretending not to notice.

It was hard for Orc to tilt his head back and look up at the sky. His rocky neck just didn't like to bend that way. But he made the effort as the sun, with shocking speed, was swallowed by the western edge of that toothed hole in the sky.

Straight up, over his head: blue sky. The clear blue sky of a California early afternoon. But below that sky was a blank, black wall. He was only a few hundred feet away from it. He could walk over and touch it if he wanted.

He didn't want to. It was too . . . too something. He didn't have a word for it. Howard would have had a word for it.

Orc was buzzing with a weird kind of energy. He hadn't slept. He had searched through the night, sure that Drake was out here, sure that he could find him. Or if not find him, then at least be here when he showed up.

Then he would rip Drake apart. Rip him into little pieces and eat the pieces and crap them out and bury them in the dirt.

Yeah. For Howard.

No one cared Howard was gone. Sam, Edilio, those guys: they didn't care. Not about Howard. They just cared that something bad was happening. Someone had to care that Howard was dead and gone now. And would never come back.

Orc had to care, that was who. Charles Merriman had to care that his friend Howard was gone.

People didn't know it, but Orc could still cry. They all figured he couldn't. . . . No, that wasn't true; they didn't figure anything. They never saw anything but a monster made out of gravel.

He couldn't blame them.

The only one who saw past that was Howard. Maybe Howard used Orc, but that was okay, because Orc used him, too. People did that. Even people who really liked each other. Good friends. Best friends.

Only friends.

Orc was walking a pattern, back and forth. He walked along from almost the dome to as far as the dock was, then maybe a hundred yards farther out, and back and forth, and another hundred yards out. He'd gone all the way to the far end of the lake and back. But something told him Drake wouldn't go all the way around like that.

No, no, not Drake. Orc knew Drake a little from when Drake was running things for Caine back so long ago in Perdido Beach. Back when Drake was just a creep, but a

regular human creep.

And he'd known Drake in a way while he and Howard had been his jailers. He'd spent a lot of hours listening to Drake rant and rave.

It was Orc's fault Drake had ever gotten away.

Drake could be tricky, sure, but he wasn't like Astrid or Jack or one of those real smart kids. He wouldn't have some big plan. He would just hide until he saw a way.

A way to do what? Orc didn't know. Sam and the others hadn't told him anything about it. Just that Drake had killed Howard and let the coyotes eat him. And that he was out loose.

Orc kept his eyes down for the most part. Easier that way. Plus he was looking for something: a footprint, maybe. Coyote prints if he could find them. But even better would be Drake's footprints.

He'd heard all about how you couldn't kill Drake. You could smash him or cut him up into little pieces and he'd still put himself back together.

Well. That might discourage most people. But while a drunken Orc wore out pretty easy, a sober, determined Orc had plenty of time and plenty of energy. He wouldn't mind just taking Drake apart over and over again. And he didn't feel tired. He felt more awake all the time.

Orc was walking in the gloomy shadow of a rock bluff. There were cracks all in those rocks, and he had decided now to check in every one. One by one. Every crack. Under every rock.

Orc froze. Was that . . . Yeah, that was a footprint. Most of a footprint. The ground was hard, and the only reason the print showed at all was that a gopher or whatever it was that dug holes up here had dug out a bit of fresh dirt.

In that dirt was half a footprint. A bare foot, not a shoe.

Orc stared down at it. He placed his own foot beside it. It made the print seem even smaller. It seemed awful small to be from Drake. Drake was a pretty big dude. This was more like a little kid, or a girl.

He could make out three toes: the little ones. The toes pointed down toward the water.

Orc followed the direction with his gaze. Weird, the light was, weird. The shore of the lake looked strange. Something not right.

Then he was distracted by the sight of Sinder and Jizzie working away in their garden. And there was Brianna, watching him actually, when she should have been watching over Sinder and Jizzie.

He raised a massive arm to wave at Brianna and seconds later she was beside him.

"Hey. Orc. Trade jobs with me. Sam has me babysitting the weepy gardeners there. You could watch them."

"No." He shook his head.

Brianna tilted her head, a little like a bird. Orc remembered her, too, from when he first met her and she was just coming down from Coates with Sam. She'd gotten pretty full of herself since those days.

"You're looking for Drake, right?" Brianna asked. "A little payback for Howard? I get that. Totally. Howard was your boy."

"Don't act like you care," Orc grunted.

"What? Couldn't hear you."

Orc roared, “Don’t act like you care. No one cared about Howard. No one cares he’s dead. Just me.” It was so loud it echoed. Orc snatched up a small boulder and, in violent frustration, threw it.

It flew twenty feet and smashed against the bluff. It set off two things: a small avalanche of pebbles and midsize stones.

And a sudden rush of panicked coyotes.

Orc stared after them. Brianna’s eyes lit up.

She got close to Orc and in a hard whisper said, “I’ll bet those are the coyotes that did the eating. You got a choice: you want me to get them or not?”

Orc swallowed hard. The coyotes were already atop the bluff and in seconds they would be on level ground and running free. He would never catch them.

“Save one for me,” Orc said.

Brianna winked and zoomed away.

Albert had laid the groundwork carefully.

It was very hard for those without Caine-like or Dekka-like powers even to get out of the sea and onto the island. So he’d arranged for Taylor to carry a looped rope out to the island, secure it around a very sturdy tree, and drop the rope over the cliff.

It was right there in plain view. Anyone who went a little way around the western side of the island, past the wrecked yacht, could see it. He’d attached—well, had paid a kid to attach—colorful bits of fabric so that even now, in the eerie brown shadow, the rope was easy to find.

He guided the boat in. There were no waves, just the usual gentle surge. Albert was not a great boat handler, but he’d learned enough, just enough that he could position the boat beside the rope. The rope fell all the way into the water, which meant it was longer—and therefore more expensive—than necessary. But that wasn’t really the point. The rope was where he had arranged for it to be.

The loops made it almost like a ladder. A very awkward ladder that had an unfortunate tendency to push away when you tried to stick your feet in the loops. But once you got started you could climb okay, and especially once the end of the rope had been made fast to the chest in the bottom of the boat.

It was a long climb and Albert regretted not having arrived earlier. He shouldn’t have waited so long. Another hour or two and he wouldn’t have been able to see the ladder, let alone climb it.

He was first up over the lip of the cliff. With a final heave he pushed himself up into the tall grass, rolled out of the way, and, lying on his back, looked up at the sky.

How very strange. Like being inside a soft-boiled egg with the top of the shell chipped away. Sky—normal-seeming sky—but covering only maybe a quarter of the space.

And the growing stain wasn’t night. There were no stars. There was nothing at all. Just blackness.

He stood up and helped the others as one by one they reached the top.

The sea spread for miles before splashing against the black dome. Far away to the south and east was Perdido Beach, lit in sepia, like a crinkly old photo from long ago.

Turning, Albert gazed in quiet satisfaction at the mansion. It was dark, of course. No one was running the generator, which meant Taylor wasn’t here.

She was Albert's one concern. Taylor could pop in and out whenever she liked. This would be useful for him—Taylor could let him know what was going on in Perdido Beach and the lake.

On the other hand, Taylor was hard to control. Which was why he'd brought a small sack of combination locks. One would go on the pantry, one on the cover of the generator's switch. Only Albert would know the combinations, so only Albert would control the food and the lights. That would chill Taylor's independence a bit.

He ordered the girls to pull up the rope and coil it well back from the cliff's edge. Then he scanned the sea between Perdido Beach and the island. No sign of boats. Which meant most probably no one was coming anytime soon.

But they would. Sitting terrified in the dark, hungry and desperate, kids would see a distant point of light. They would realize it was the island, and that light meant hope.

So just as soon as they had rested a little, had a bite to eat and a look around, Albert would get them busy hauling a couple of the missiles up to the top floor of the mansion. Because whenever that boat came, it, too, would have a light. A single point of light in the darkness.

Albert sighed. He had survived. But he had given up everything. All of Alberco. All he had accomplished. All he had built.

He would miss the challenge of the business.

"Come on, guys," Albert said. "Come see our new home."

Drake was pretty sure Brittney had emerged at least once while he was down in this cramped, oily engine room. But he was back now and Brittney had not moved.

Maybe she was getting smarter.

He listened for Sam's voice. He heard nothing. That didn't prove Sam was gone. But it meant Drake could take a small risk.

With his tentacle arm he edged the hatch up a quarter of an inch.

The light was definitely different. Strange. Like it was shining through a bottle of Coke or something. Unnatural.

Unsettling.

He pushed the hatch just a bit higher. There was a foot. Not moving. Just there, toes in his direction. He shifted. A second foot. Someone was seated right there, just a couple of feet away. Aimed in his direction.

Problem or opportunity?

That was the question.

The hatch came down suddenly, slammed back into place by running feet.

"Hey, you guys, be careful!"

Diana's voice! He'd recognize it anywhere.

"Justin, you're going to break your neck!"

Drake closed his eyes and let the pleasure of it wash over him. She was right there. And from the sound of it there were little kids on board.

Perfect.

Absolutely. Perfect.

Beyond the highway, out in the emptiness at the edge of the desert, Penny stepped on a broken bottle.

It was the bottom of a bottle, the base of what must have been a wine bottle. Green glass. Jagged. A sliver punched up through her calloused sole into the meat of her heel.

“Ahhhh!”

It hurt!

Tears came into Penny’s eyes. Blood gushed from her foot, puddling in the sand. She sat down hard and pulled her foot to her and saw the cut. Lana would have to—

Bandages. Band-Aids.

“Owww! Owww!”

Penny started crying aloud. She was hurt and no one would help her. And what would happen to her when it was dark?

It was all so unfair. So unfair. So wrong.

She’d been on top for not even a few minutes. She’d had Caine right where she wanted him, but no one liked her, and all they did was hate on her, and now her foot was hurt and bleeding.

But not as bad as when her legs were broken. Not as bad as that. And she had survived that, hadn’t she? She had survived and she had come out on top. She wondered how Caine liked having his hands in a block of cement. If they tried to take it off, they would break his hands like her legs had been broken.

Only Lana would help him, wouldn’t she?

She should have taken care of Lana when she had the chance. The Healer might be almost immune to Penny’s power, but would she be immune to a gun? Penny should have had Turk kill the Healer. Yeah, that was what she should have done.

The shadows weren’t lengthening; the light wasn’t really coming from one place. It was like she was down in a well with sun shining up high somewhere directly above, so the light had to bounce down to reach her.

Soon it would be dark.

Then what?

Diana got heavily to her feet just as Justin went tearing past again, full of giddy high spirits and energy.

Atria had wound down. She was in the bow now, reading.

Justin tripped and fell headlong, a projectile aimed right at Diana’s giant belly.

But he didn’t hit.

The little boy flew forward, mouth open, arms stretching out defensively; then he stopped, yanked back, and hit the deck hard.

Diana was moving toward him, worried, when she saw the tentacle wrapped around his ankle. She froze. It made no sense. The tentacle was coming up from the floor!

No. A hatch.

And in a flash the hatch was thrown back and Drake pushed himself awkwardly up.

Diana shot wild looks in every direction, searching for a weapon. Nothing.

Drake was out of the engine space. Standing on the deck. Grinning at her.

She knew she should scream, but her breath was gone. Her heart was hammering with no rhythm, just thudding wildly in her chest.

Drake lifted the boy off the deck with effortless strength, carried him over the side,

and plunged him under the water.

Diana stared at him with horror. How could he be here? How was this possible?

“What. No snarky remark, Diana?”

Diana saw legs kicking below the surface of the water. Drake twisted his tentacle just a bit so that the little boy’s face was visible. So that she could see his wide, white eyes. So that she could see that he was screaming away the last of his air, an explosion of suicidal bubbles.

“Let him go,” Diana said, but with no force, because she knew Drake wouldn’t listen.

“There’s a dinghy tied up. Climb your fine butt down into it, Diana. Once you’re in, I let the kid up. Not before. So I’d hurry if I were you.”

Diana sobbed just once, a sudden sharp exhalation.

She could see the fear in the boy’s eyes. The pleading.

If she hesitated, he would drown. And Drake would still be here.

Diana rushed to the bow. She climbed over the rail and dropped awkwardly into the boat. “I’m in!” she cried. “Let him go.”

Drake sauntered down the length of the sailboat. He kept his whip arm in the water. He was dragging the boy through the water, keeping him submerged.

Atria saw now and screamed.

There was a rush of feet coming from below. Roger emerged on deck, panting. Drake smiled at him.

“I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure,” he said. Then he lifted Justin up out of the water. The little boy was silent, eyes closed, pale as death.

Roger’s expression turned murderous. With a roar he ran at Drake. Drake swung Justin like a wet wrecking ball and smashed Roger so hard he went over the side.

When he reached the bow he met Diana’s tearful gaze. He dumped Justin, like a sack of garbage, in the dinghy.

“I think he’s taking a nap,” Drake said, and hopped down into the boat.

Diana knelt over Justin. His eyes were closed. His lips were blue. When she touched his face he felt as cold as death.

Long-lost memories came now. Was it a video they’d shown in some class? In some different world?

It was hard for Diana with her belly to bend over low enough to put her mouth over the little boy’s lips. She had to lift his head to her and she was barely strong enough to do it.

She breathed into his mouth. Pause. Breathe again. Pause.

Drake untied the rope and settled in at the oars. He wrapped two feet of his tentacle arm around the right oar.

Breathe. Pause. Breathe.

Pulse, she should check for a pulse. Diana pressed two fingers against the boy’s neck.

Drake had started singing. It was the song from the Pirates of the Caribbean ride at Disney World.

Something. A flutter in the little boy’s neck.

Breathe. Pause. Breathe.

He coughed. Coughed again and spit up water. Diana pulled him into a sitting

position.

“Well, just look at you, Diana: you saved his life,” Drake said. “You want to keep his life?” He waited as though he actually expected an answer. When she said nothing he went on, “If you want to keep him alive, you won’t open your mean little mouth. One sound from you and I’ll drown him like a puppy.”

Already the dinghy was near shore. No more than twenty more pulls of the oars.

Diana shot a glance back at the houseboat. She saw Dekka on the top deck, but she wasn’t looking this way. She was looking up at the shrinking sky.

No Sam. No Edilio.

“Yeah, kinda sucks, huh?” Drake said cheerfully. “Anyway, Dekka couldn’t do anything. Not from that distance.”

Diana scanned the onrushing shore. No one.

Wait. Sinder. She was dragging a massive sack of something down the shore. Jizzie was behind her.

Drake saw the hope in her eyes. He winked. “Oh, don’t worry: we’ll stop and talk to them. We’ll tell them you’ve decided on a little vacation. Say you’re going back to Caine.”

Could Drake be that stupid to believe that anyone would buy that story? To imagine that Sinder and Jizzie would stand calmly discussing things with Whip Hand?

Maybe. Who knew what Drake had been up to? Who could tell how much his psychopathic mind had deteriorated?

He was singing again, more or less in time with the oars.

“What do you want, Drake?” Diana demanded, trying to put on a brave front.

Drake smiled. “Did I ever thank you for sawing off my arm, Diana? I was mad at the time. But if you hadn’t done that for me, I wouldn’t be Whip Hand.”

“I should have sawed through your neck.” Diana spit the words.

“Yeah,” he said, meeting her furious, terrified gaze without flinching. “You should have. You really should have.”

OUTSIDE

SERGEANT DARIUS ASHTON saw the signs that in his absence his quarters had been entered. Nothing most people would notice, but he was by long habit a very organized man. He had a small room in the NCO barracks, no bigger than a walk-in closet, really. The bunk was narrow and the army-issue blanket was so tight you could bounce a quarter off it. The pillow squared just so. And now there was just the slightest indentation where someone had sat on the edge of the bed and then tried to smooth it.

“Pff, that will not cut it,” he said dismissively. “Not in this man’s army.”

He moved next to his footlocker. Yep. They’d been careful, but it had been searched.

The question was, where had they put the bug? They’d surely tap his cell phone—that was a given—and they’d use the phone’s GPS to keep track of his location. But had they placed a bug in here as well?

He turned off the tracking feature for his phone. They’d still be able to see what towers his signal reached, but that was a far less accurate way to track him. The GPS would narrow his location to a few feet. Tracking the tower signals would only put them within a mile of his location.

With that done, he turned to searching for a bug. It didn’t take long to find it. It was a small room without a lot of options. The bug was in the base of the lamp. Someone had drilled a very tiny hole in the base to allow better reception by a mike no thicker than a piece of angel hair pasta.

Well. Okay, then.

So, he would have to be very careful.

He’d already decided to tell Connie. He was under orders. He had signed the secrecy document. But Sergeant Darius Ashton had been in the army long enough to know that the bigger the secret, the more likely it was to be FUBAR.

And this—setting off a nuclear weapon underneath a bunch of kids who were fighting for their lives—that was FUBAR. Not to mention wrong.

If word got out, the American people wouldn’t let it happen. He was an American soldier. He obeyed the chain of command from his lieutenant to his captain to the colonel to the general and on up to the president of the United States.

But no American soldier was required—or could ever be legally required—to kill American citizens on American soil. No way. No. That was not what he promised to do when he raised his hand and was sworn in as a soldier.

I, Darius Lee Ashton, do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and that I will obey the orders of the president of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. So help me God.

Thing one: defend the Constitution. He was no constitutional law scholar, but he was pretty sure it did not call for nuking a bunch of kids in California.

And the obeying orders part? It said according to the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Which quite definitely did not say that an American soldier should get into the

business of killing American kids.

No.

At the same time, Darius was not interested in spending the rest of his life in a windowless cell at Fort Leavenworth. That would be the hard part: to do the right thing and manage not to get caught doing it.

He lay back on his bunk and gave it some thought. Time was short. He was morally certain of that. There was way too much activity out there. Those boys were in a hurry.

If he left his cell phone here and went out they'd know he was up to something. They would have to see his cell phone move. Texts, email, all of that would be intercepted. This would have to be old-school. Face-to-face. And if it all went to hell later, he'd have to have left no evidence whatsoever.

He tried to recall everything he knew about Connie Temple. What would she be doing right now? Where would she be? What was today? Thursday? No. It was Friday.

Too early for Connie to be cooking ribs. But not too early for her to be shopping for the Friday-night cookout.

It was a long shot.

But if Connie Temple was cooking ribs then there were only two places she could buy them. Fortunately the Vons grocery and the Fat N' Greezy rib stand were in the same strip center.

Darius stuck his phone in his pocket. He stopped by a buddy's room on the way out, said he was going to drive down to Vons for some munchies and beer. His buddy told him to pick up some Cheetos. The spicy ones.

It was a twenty-minute drive to Vons. And since it was a straight shot down the highway he was pretty sure he wasn't being followed. They had no reason to suspect him, anyway, and they had lots of other people to watch.

He passed Connie's trailer on the way. Her silver Kia was not in its usual spot.

Unfortunately it was also not in the Vons parking lot.

Darius killed some time filling his tank at the Chevron. He had a good view of the parking lot.

He drove through McDonald's for a coffee.

After that all he could do was wait. An hour he could explain. Two hours? That would be pushing it.

Then he spotted the solution: the movie theaters. Three movies showing, all of them crap, but he'd seen one of them. Perfect. He went to the theater and bought a ticket using a credit card. He went inside and bought fifteen dollars' worth of popcorn and candy.

As soon as the previews started he ditched the junk food and let himself out through one of the side exits. He was careful to keep his ticket stub.

Outside he almost instantly spotted the silver Kia.

There would be security cameras inside Vons, which was where Connie went. So he moved his own car until it was parked beside Connie's. And waited.

She came out with a cart half-full of plastic bags. She didn't notice him sitting there until she was behind the wheel of her car. Then he rolled down the window.

She did the same.

He looked at her. "I'm putting my life in your hands, Con," he said.

“What are you talking about?”

“Life in prison if I get caught and convicted.”

Her brow furrowed. It made her look older. Which was fine with him; he liked a woman who looked like a woman.

“What is it, Darius?”

“They’re going to nuke the dome.”

TWENTY-SIX

11 HOURS, 28 MINUTES

THE ARTFUL ROGER shouted from the deck of the sailboat. Edilio heard and knew instantly that something had gone terribly wrong.

Roger was waving furiously, directing Edilio to look toward the shore.

Edilio felt his heart drop into his stomach. A rowboat moved quickly toward the land. Edilio raced downstairs, grabbed Sam's binoculars, and raced back up with Sam and Dekka breathless in his wake.

Edilio jabbed the binoculars into his eye sockets. The boat was inches from shore, scraping along the gravel. There was no mistaking the tentacle arm that jerked Diana rudely up and tossed her onto the ground.

"It's Drake," Edilio said. "He's got Diana. And Justin."

Drake, as if magically hearing his name, turned toward him, raised one of the oars, and waved at Edilio.

Then he smashed the oar down, breaking it in half. Now he had the jagged wooden stump of it in his tentacle. He pointed it at Justin's throat. The little boy was crying. Edilio could see the tears streaming down his face.

With his hand Drake made a mocking *come and get me* move.

The message was clear. And Edilio had no doubt Drake would do it.

"Where is Breeze?" Sam raged. "Edilio. Fire a round!"

Edilio didn't hear or at least didn't connect those words with any action. He swiveled to look at Roger. Roger looked like he'd been gutted.

Edilio raised one hand in a fist for Roger to see. So that Roger would know that Edilio understood and had not lost hope.

Sam pulled Edilio's pistol out and fired three rounds into the air.

If Brianna were anywhere close, she would hear and know what it meant.

Drake hurried up the bluff with Diana stumbling ahead and Justin trying pitifully to help her. In seconds they would be out of sight.

Sam cursed Brianna for a reckless, irresponsible idiot. Dekka was already running down the dock. But there was zero chance of her catching Drake, not at this distance.

Sam spun to race after her. He might not catch up, either, but Edilio knew he couldn't just stand there.

"Sam, no!" Edilio snapped.

Sam missed a step, then stopped. He looked at Edilio, puzzled.

"We're scattered. And we can't risk you. You die and the light dies with you."

"Are you out of your mind? You think I'm going to let Drake come in here and take Diana?"

"Not you, Sam. Dekka, yes. Orc, yes. He's out there, too. And send Jack as well. Anyone but you."

Sam looked like he'd been punched. Like someone had knocked the wind out of him. He blinked and started to say something and stopped.

"You aren't replaceable, Sam. Figure it out, okay? It's going dark and you make light. So this isn't going to be your battle. Not now. It's on the rest of us to step up."

Edilio licked his lips and looked miserable. "Me, too. My place is here. I can't take

Drake on. I'd just be another victim." He glanced back at Roger, who held out his hands in a gesture of incomprehension that Edilio interpreted easily.

Why aren't you going after Justin?

Why are you and Sam standing there doing nothing?

Edilio could see that the whole population was up on deck on the various scattered boats. They'd all heard the shots. They all stared hard at their leaders now, at Sam and Edilio. Some noticed Dekka laboring along the shoreline, trying to reach the place where Drake had come ashore. They pointed at her and then looked back, frowning at Sam and Edilio.

Staring at their suddenly powerless leaders.

Edilio spotted Jack on a motorboat. He was too far away to be able to hear, but Edilio pointed straight at him.

Jack mimed a *who me?* gesture.

Sam emphasized Edilio's order by stabbing his finger unmistakably in the direction of Jack. Then he swept his arm to point at the shore.

Jack reluctantly trudged to the back of the boat and there came the coughing start-up of an outboard engine.

Edilio raised the binoculars again to look at Roger. He was in pain. Helpless.

He forced himself to look away, to follow Jack as he headed to shore, to sweep along the bluff and find Dekka levitating herself over rises.

And there, coming toward her, Orc.

Edilio felt a small breath of hope.

Orc, Jack, and Dekka. Could they do it?

The coyotes trotted with the relentlessness of motion that marked them as successful predators.

Brianna spotted them maybe half a mile away.

"Heh."

Then beyond them, at the limits of her sight, a second group. The rest of the pack. Or a different pack? It didn't matter, really: all coyotes were kill-on-sight. In fact, it had gotten so they were pretty rare.

Take out this nearer pack. Then take a quick look-see for Drake before Sam even noticed she was gone.

One of the coyotes spotted her. The result was a very gratifying panic. She made out four of them. They were tearing away at top speed.

The light was pretty bad. And the terrain was pretty rough. So she couldn't crank it up to anything like full speed. But that was okay: a coyote might break twenty-five, thirty miles per hour. But even Brianna's low gear was twice that.

She ran up beside the nearest of the coyotes. It glanced at her with death in its dumb eyes.

"Yeah," Brianna said. "All dogs go to heaven. Coyotes go the other way."

She swung her machete.

The body took two steps, tripped over the head, and tumbled into the dirt.

Two of the coyotes decided to stand side by side and make a stand. They were panting, tongues lolling, already worn out. One had a ruff matted with dried blood.

"Hey, doggies," Brianna said.

She danced forward and they snapped at her. But it was no contest. She decapitated one. His mate, the one marked by dried blood that had probably once given life to Howard Bassem, turned tail and ran and Brianna severed her spine.

“I never liked Howard,” Brianna said to the body. “But I like you even less.”

She had trouble finding the fourth animal. It had probably decided to cower and hide. In the dim light it was hard to see. Everything was brown on brown, even the air itself, it seemed.

She waited patiently, watching.

But if the coyote waited her out, it could probably get away when the final darkness came.

Anyway, if time was short, she had a more important target. Coyotes were mere accessories: Drake was the main goal.

Brianna took off at the cautious pace of a galloping thoroughbred, pursued by a sense of guilt and worry about what Sam would say if she came back with nothing but three dead coyotes to show for it.

She'd have to get Drake. That would stop Sam's com-plaining.

Where were the coyotes? Drake had expected them to close in with him as soon as he reached the bluff. They should have been waiting there.

No coyotes.

Not good. They had abandoned him. Which meant they were abandoning his master as well. Like rats deserting a sinking ship.

Not for the first time Drake felt the sharp edge of fear. Maybe the stupid dogs were right to go rogue. Maybe the gaiaphage's power was waning. Maybe he was serving a failing master.

Well, not if Drake succeeded. Then the gaiaphage's gratitude would be even greater.

He had to move fast. Fast! Once night came he would be safe, maybe, but until then . . .

Drake feared two things. One was that Brittney would emerge just when Drake needed to be able to fight.

The second was Brianna.

So far she wasn't in sight. But that was the thing about Brianna: she could show up in a real hurry.

Night would be the end of Brianna's usefulness. Even this weak iced-tea light was dangerous to Swift Girl. But he wouldn't be able to stop worrying about her until true darkness came.

And then there was the problem of finding his way back to the gaiaphage. The coyotes could have done it with smell and their own innate sense of navigation, but he was no coyote.

“Let us go, Drake,” Diana said. “We're just slowing you down.”

“Then move faster,” he said, and snapped his whip, cutting through her shirt and painting a red stripe on her back. That was nice. That was good. No time to really enjoy it. But yeah, that was good.

She had cried out in pain. That was good, too. But that wasn't his job. No, he had to warn himself: he'd made that error before. He'd let himself be distracted by his own

pleasures.

This time he had to come through. He had to deliver Diana to his master.

“You’ll move or I’ll see if the little kid likes old Whip Hand.”

He heard a noise and glanced over his shoulder, flinching in the expectation of a machete suddenly zooming at him at the speed of a motorcycle.

He should have finished Brianna back at Coates. She had just been an annoying nobody then. He’d barely known she was alive. Now she was his living nightmare. He should have finished her.

Nasty little brat. The memory of her taunts was still a red wound in his psyche. He hated her. Like he hated Diana. And that frosty prig, Astrid.

He loved the memory of humiliating Sam, but even now the memory of his triumph over Astrid gave him a warm glow all over. He could hate guys, he could want to destroy them, he could enjoy making them suffer, but it was never as deep and intense as it was with girls. No, girls were special. His hatred for Sam was a cool breeze compared to the seething, hot rage he felt for Diana. And Astrid. And Brianna.

The three of them: so arrogant. So superior.

He reached with his whip and snagged Diana’s ankle, tripping her and causing her to land hard on her belly.

It scared him. He could have hurt the baby. The consequences of that he could not bear to think about.

Justin turned and clenched his fists and yelled, “Leave her alone!”

Drake smirked. Brave little kid. When Brianna came he’d find some way to use him as a shield. See how tough Brianna was when it meant cutting her way past a little kid.

Where was she?

Where was the so-called Breeze?

Diana stopped moving. She turned to face him, defiant. “Why don’t you just kill me and get it over with, Drake? It’s the closest you’ll ever come to pleasure, you sick piece of—”

“*Move!*” he roared.

Diana flinched but did not run. “Scared, Drake?” She narrowed her eyes. “Scared of Sam?” She tilted her head to one side, judging him. “Oh, no, of course not. It’s Brianna, isn’t it? Of course, a woman-hater like you? What was it with you and females, by the way? Find out your mom was a whore or something?”

The explosion shocked even him. He shrieked in sudden rage, red-hot, bloodlust rage. He flew at her, smashed her with his fist, knocked her to the ground, and stood over her with his whip raised.

“Justin! *Run!*” Diana screamed as the whip came down.

The little boy yelled, “No!” But then he broke and ran as hard as his short legs could go.

Drake snapped his tentacle at the boy but missed by inches.

His roar of fury was a pure animal sound. A veil of red came down over his vision.

“Hey!” a voice cried.

Drake had to hear it again before he could even focus his eyes on the source.

Computer Jack bent his knees and leaped what had to be fifty feet. Drake had not witnessed this before. The red mist was receding. He was vaguely aware that Diana

was crawling away.

“Hey!” Computer Jack yelled. He landed just a hundred yards away. Justin was running toward him.

The jumping thing: that was a problem. He could move faster than Drake, especially a Drake driving Diana like a reluctant cow through a darkening desert.

Drake walked straight toward Jack. “Hey, Jack, long time, dude. What are you doing out here?”

“Nothing,” Jack answered defensively.

“Nothing? Just going for a walk, huh?” Drake kept shortening the gap between them.

“Let Diana and Justin go,” Jack said. His voice was shaky. Just then Justin reached him and threw himself at Jack’s legs, holding on in terror.

Drake broke into a run. Straight at Jack.

Jack pushed Justin away. The whip tore the air and slashed at Jack’s neck. It missed and hit his shoulder instead.

Jack cried out in pain.

Drake never hesitated but swiftly wrapped his tentacle around Jack’s neck and squeezed tight. To his amazement Jack just tensed his muscles and resisted all of Drake’s strength. It was like trying to choke a tree trunk.

Then Jack snatched at the whip, trying to get hold of it. Drake was too quick, but just barely. He danced back but tripped, took two clumsy backward steps, and barely kept his feet.

Had Jack attacked right then, right at that moment, he would have had a chance. But Jack was no fighter. He’d grown stronger, not meaner. Drake saw his hesitation and grinned.

He moved instantly back on the attack, whirling his whip arm over his head, slashing and slashing as Jack backed up, backed up, and then again, Drake ran straight at him.

He whipped Jack across the chest. The arm. And then, a sudden vicious cut to Jack’s neck.

Blood sprayed from Jack’s throat.

He put his hand to his neck, pulled it away, and stared in utter disbelief at a hand not just touched with but drenched in blood.

That throat. It couldn’t be choked, but it could be cut.

Justin lay whimpering beside him as Jack sank to his knees in the dirt.

Drake wrapped his whip around the little boy and simply flung him in the direction of Diana.

Then, leaving Jack on his side bleeding into the dirt, Drake said to Diana, “All right, that was fun for all of us. Now get moving before I lose my happy mood.”

Orc and Dekka were similar in that neither of them was very fast. Jack had been able to bound ahead. It had been, to Dekka’s eyes, a surprisingly brave thing to do. Maybe even reckless. Maybe even a little stupid.

But brave.

She didn’t want to like Jack. But Dekka valued one virtue above all others, and Jack had shown it.

Now they found him lying on his side in mud made from his own blood.

“He has a pulse,” Dekka said. She didn’t need to feel for it. She could see it.

“Huh,” Orc said. “Drake.”

“Yeah.” She had her palm pressed against the pumping wound in Jack’s neck. “Tear his shirt off for me.”

Orc easily ripped the T-shirt, like he was tearing tissue paper, and handed it to her. She kept her palm in place but pushed the shirt beneath it, pressing it into the cut.

The blood did not stop flowing.

“Come on, Jack, don’t die on me,” Dekka said. To Orc she said, “It’s an artery or something. I can’t stop it. What am I supposed to do? It won’t stop! You’re stronger than I am; push against it!”

Orc did as he was told. He mashed the bloody rag against Jack’s throat. The pulsing stopped but the pressure seemed to make Jack’s breathing raspy and labored.

Dekka looked around, frantic, like she was expecting to suddenly spot a first-aid kit. “We need needle and thread. Something.” She cursed furiously. “We have to get him back to the lake. At least someone there can sew him up. We have to go fast. Right now.”

“What about Drake?” Orc demanded.

“Orc, you have to carry him. I can’t keep him from bleeding out. We get him back there. Then we go after Drake.”

“It’ll be dark soon.”

“We can’t let him die, Orc.”

Orc stared in the direction Drake had gone. For a moment Dekka wondered if he would go off after him. And a part of her—a part she wasn’t proud of—wished Jack would just die, because he was probably going to anyway and Drake was going to get away.

“I’ll take him,” Orc said. “You go after Drake. Only don’t fight him until I catch up.”

“Believe me, I’ll be happy to wait for reinforcements,” she said. And silently realized that by herself she could not possibly beat Drake.

She began trotting after Drake, his footprints—and two other sets—still barely visible in the fading light.

Sanjit was now part of a growing crowd of frightened, hesitant kids. He fumed at the delay. Nothing was going right. He should have reached the lake by now. And darkness, real, serious, *this is it* darkness was coming down fast.

The second coyote pack struck without warning after the noisy, disorganized gaggle had turned off the highway and onto the gravel road that led to the lake.

There were hills to the right, and in the distance to the west a dark line of trees that someone told Sanjit was probably the edge of the Stefano Rey National Park.

The two twelve-year-old girls, Keira and Tabitha, and the boy, Mason, were not the immediate targets. Neither was Sanjit. The coyotes came bounding straight down the road as if sent from the lake. Straight down the road, five of them, bypassed a few larger kids, and suddenly converged on a two-year-old girl.

The first Sanjit knew of it were the screams as the coyotes began their rushing attack. He started running. He drew the pistol Lana had given him but there was no

way to get a clear shot. Kids in panic were rushing back toward him. Others scattered left and right, screaming, screaming, calling one another's names.

The lead coyote bit the child's arm. She cried. The coyote dragged her off her feet and started hauling her off the road. He lost his grip and the child was up and running.

The coyotes, almost casual, formed a semicircle, ready to take her down for good.

"Get out of the way!" Sanjit yelled. "Get out of the way!"

Screams were general now. Dust kicked up. Slanting tea-colored light cast lurid shadows of fleeing children and the yellow canines.

A second coyote grabbed the child by her dress and began hauling her away.

Sanjit fired in the air.

The coyotes flinched. A couple trotted away to a safe distance. The one with the little girl in his teeth did not.

Sanjit was just a few feet away now, could see blood, could see the coyote's yellow teeth and intelligent eyes.

He aimed the gun from just a few feet and fired.

BAM!

The coyote let go of the girl and ran off. But not far. Not far at all.

Sanjit reached the girl just as her sister did. The girl was bloody but alive. And screaming, everyone screaming and crying. Kids had their cudgels and blades out, too late, bristling with fearful threat.

The coyotes danced eagerly, a pistol shot away. But Sanjit knew he had no chance of hitting one.

"Get moving!" Sanjit yelled harshly. "If we're still out here, when night comes we're all dead."

The group of maybe two dozen kids, all huddling close together, moved down the road as hungry coyote eyes watched and tongues lolled, waiting for fresh meat.

Brianna had been down the road as far as the hills. When she saw kids coming toward Perdido Beach she knew Drake hadn't passed that way.

Which meant he might have retreated toward the air national guard base. So she ran there and looked around. And found nothing.

Which left her baffled. Surely she would have seen him if he were close to the lake. Surely he hadn't come along the road. And he wasn't at the base or anywhere between those three points.

She was tired and frustrated. And worried about Sam yelling at her. Which just sent her off toward Coates, because she couldn't come back empty-handed. She was the Breeze: she was the anti-Drake, at least in her own mind. And if he was out and about, running free, she was the one to find him and take him down.

But she hadn't found him. She had found kids leaving Perdido Beach all babbling about the sky dying, and she'd found that rabbits were proliferating near Coates, and she'd found a dropped jar of Nutella on the line between the lake and the air base and had promptly eaten it.

But no Drake.

The sky was so weird. The light so wrong. That blank blackness all around, rising from the horizon to make a new, jagged horizon, it was all wrong.

And if it really did turn dark and stay dark? Then what? Then what for the Breeze?

She would be stumbling around in the dark like everyone else. She would go from being important to being just another girl.

Sam wouldn't even need her. He wouldn't ask her to meetings. She wouldn't be his go-to person. The mighty Brianna. Swift Girl. The most dangerous person in the FAYZ after Sam and Caine.

She had to get some altitude; that was it. Get the larger view while there was still a view to get.

She raced toward the Santa Katrina Hills. She blew right past two sets of footprints, registered them belatedly, then raced back to find them again.

They were quite clear. A pair of boots. And a pair of sneakers. Both leading from the hills in the general direction of Perdido Beach. Neither was big enough to be Drake. And he wouldn't be heading that way.

Brianna glanced anxiously at the sky. She couldn't stay out here. And she couldn't go back to Sam with empty hands. It would be the end of her. She had disobeyed orders before, but now to be such a failure, nothing but a few dead coyotes . . . and a failure when her powers might be almost useless . . .

She was nothing if she was not the Breeze.

She dashed to the top of the nearest hill, a scraped-bald thing maybe two thousand feet tall. She could make out the lake, shimmering strangely in the unnatural light. Turning the other way she could see the ocean. The road was hidden from view.

What to do?

Then she saw what looked like a person walking. To the north. It was hard to be sure because of the light and the narrowness of the gap between two hills. But she thought she saw a single person moving.

Brianna said a prayer that it might be Drake. She had a plan for dealing with him. A plan that would make Sam proud. She was going to slice and dice him and use her speed to spread the parts all around the FAYZ.

Hah! See if Drake could put himself back together then.

It would be great. If.

TWENTY-SEVEN

10 HOURS, 54 MINUTES

DIANA'S LEGS ACHED. Her bare feet were bloody. Justin was trying to help her but there was no way to ease the pain of bare soles on sharp stone.

Anytime she slowed or stumbled Drake would snap his whip, and the pain of that was so much worse.

She couldn't imagine that she would make it to the gaiaphage alive.

Diana knew that was the objective. Drake had taken to gloating about it. She'd had plenty of opportunity to think of snide remarks. But each one came at the cost of another slice in her flesh. Or worse yet, Justin's. So she stumbled along in silence.

"Don't know what he wants with you," Drake said, not for the first time, "but whatever he leaves is mine. That's all I know. Make some of your witty remarks to the gaiaphage. Hah. Try that."

He was still looking over his shoulder constantly. Diana had come to think of it as Breezanoia—a terrible fear of Brianna.

"She can come zooming up all she wants," Drake said. "See if she can cut me without cutting the brat. See if she can do that."

Drake was spiraling down almost as fast as Diana herself. His fear was palpable. And not just fear of Brianna. The dying of the light scared him, too.

"Gotta get there before dark," he muttered more than once.

Diana realized that once absolute night fell Drake would be as lost as anyone. And then how would he keep control of Diana and Justin?

No comfort. They could get away from Drake. Maybe. And then what?

Diana's hand went to her stomach. The baby kicked.

The baby. The three-bar baby. The baby was what he wanted, of course. Diana had no doubt about that. The dark creature wanted her baby.

When she could take her mind off the agony in her feet and legs and back, when she could suspend for a brief few seconds the crushing fear that bore down on her, Diana tried to understand. What did it want with her baby?

Why was this happening?

She missed her step, stumbled, and landed hard on her knees. She cried out in pain, and then screamed as the lash landed across her back.

In a rage she flew at him. Her fists punched and her fingernails tore but he was far too quick. He punched her in the face. It was not a slap. It was a full, hard punch. Her head swam and she saw stars.

Just like a cartoon, she thought. Then she fell straight back.

When she came to she found Justin next to her, holding on to her and crying.

Brittney was seated a few feet away.

The circle of blue sky was the color of new denim, and smaller, noticeably smaller than it had been. The sky was a black, featureless bowl.

"You're pregnant, aren't you?" Brittney asked almost shyly.

It took Diana a few moments to make sense of things. Drake was not here. Drake couldn't be here so long as Brittney was.

Whip Hand was not here.

Diana climbed quickly to her feet. "Come on, Justin, we're out of here."

"I found some rocks," Brittney said. She held up a good-size rock in each hand. "I can hit you with them."

Diana laughed in her face. "Bring it, zombie freak. You're not the only one who can find a rock."

"Yes, that's true," Brittney said. "But it won't hurt me when you hit me. And you can't kill me." Then, as an afterthought she added, "Anyway, I'm not a zombie. I don't eat people."

"Why are you doing this, Brittney? You were the one fighting us at the power plant. You were on Sam's side. Or don't you remember that?"

"I remember," she said.

Diana's mind was turning at top speed. If she told Justin to run back toward the lake, how far would he get before the darkness closed in? Which was worse? To wander alone in the dark until he fell off a cliff or was scented by a coyote or wandered into a zeke field or . . . or . . . or . . .

"Then what happened to you? Why are you helping Drake? You should be fighting him every time you get the chance."

She smiled and Diana saw the broken wire sticking out of her braces. "I can't ever fight Drake, you know. We're never together."

"Exactly. So whenever he's gone you can—"

"I'm not doing this for Drake," Brittney said earnestly. "I'm doing this for my lord."

"Your . . . Your what? Your what? You think God wants you to be doing this? Did you go stupid on top of being undead?"

"We each must serve," Brittney recited, like a lesson she'd learned a long time ago.

"And you think Jesus wants you to do this? This? Threaten a pregnant girl with a rock? That's your religious theory? Jesus wants you to help a sadistic mental case to turn me over to a monster? I must have missed that part of the Bible. Is that part of the Sermon on the Mount?"

Brittney looked at her, very serious, and waited until Diana had run out of breath, if not scorn.

"That was the old God, Diana. That God was before. He doesn't live in the FAYZ."

Diana felt like choking the girl. And if it would do any good she would, and gladly. She wondered if she could stun Brittney long enough to get away. Surely a big rock would at least stun her.

But unfortunately everyone knew the story of what had happened when Brianna fought Drake. She had sliced him up like a butcher with a hog. And yet, he had survived. The same would be true of Brittney. And Diana didn't have a machete.

"God is everywhere," Diana said. "You were a church girl; you must know that."

Brittney's eyes were bright, eager, as she leaned forward. "No. No. I don't have to follow an invisible god anymore. I can see him! I can touch him! I know where he lives, and what he looks like. No more little children's stories. He wants you. That's why we came for you." She made a chiding face. "You should be excited."

"You know what? I'm ready for Drake to come back. He's evil, but at least he's not an idiot."

Diana stood up. So did Brittney.

“Justin,” Diana said.

“Yes?”

“See the place where the hills end? The lake is just past that. Start running.”

“Are you coming?” Justin cried.

“Right behind you. Now, *run!*”

Brittney didn’t come after Diana, although Diana swung on her again. Brittney ran after Justin.

She caught him easily. Diana tried to grab Brittney, but a pregnant girl running in the sand . . .

Brittney hugged Justin to her with one arm. In her free hand she held a sharp rock very close to Justin’s chattering, fearful mouth. It was a heartbreaking parody of maternal protectiveness.

Diana remembered again who Brittney had once been. The brave, decent girl who refused to disappoint Sam and Edilio.

It was Diana, along with Caine and Drake, who had made this Brittney. They and, of course, the Darkness. What a fatal little group they had proved to be. Look at the damage they had done, she and Caine and Drake. And the gaiaphage.

Now here they were on their way to a reunion. Diana, and Drake, and the gaiaphage. And Caine’s role would be played by his son or daughter.

She had wanted so badly to escape it all. For that briefest moment she believed she had changed Caine. And that was when they had created the baby inside her.

“Keep walking,” Brittney said, actually stroking Justin’s face with the stone. “Please.”

It was not Drake. The distant figure Brianna had seen was not Drake. It was Dekka. And Brianna had raced up within shouting distance with her machete out before she realized.

She skidded to a halt.

Dekka was covered in blood from hand to elbow, with sprays of it across her face.

“Where have you been?” Dekka demanded without so much as a hello.

Brianna sheathed her machete and decided against answering. “What’s with the blood?”

“It’s your boyfriend’s,” Dekka grated.

“My what?”

“Jack. He went after Drake by himself. Drake cut his throat.”

Brianna stared at her. “Are you nuts? Jack went after Drake? Jack doesn’t do things like that.”

“He does when there’s no other choice,” Dekka said.

Dekka kept looking past her. Brianna kept doing the same. The world was ending, Jack was hurt, maybe dying, maybe dead already, and they were being awkward.

“Drake has Diana and Justin. He’s heading toward the mine shaft, toward the gaiaphage.”

Brianna shook her head, feeling like she was missing something. “Who is Justin?”

“Where were you? You were supposed to be within earshot. Sam shot off some rounds and no Brianna.”

“I was looking for Drake,” Brianna said defensively.

Dekka glared pure fury at her. “You don’t love Jack. You don’t even care about him, do you? You haven’t even asked how he is.”

Brianna actually took a step back. “Why are you hating on me?”

Dekka’s jaw actually dropped. It would have been almost funny, if it wasn’t Dekka. “Are you that clueless? How do you not understand how irresponsible you are? Right now Orc is running back to the lake with his hands barely holding Jack’s blood in. And Drake is probably whipping Diana across the desert.”

Brianna shook her head violently. “That’s not my fault! That’s not on me! I was out looking for Drake.”

Suddenly Dekka’s bloody fist was flying straight for Brianna’s nose. Brianna easily sidestepped and Dekka stumbled forward.

Brianna was too astonished to hit back.

Dekka wasn’t finished. She actually kicked at Brianna. This unbalanced her completely and she fell heavily on her side.

Suddenly Brianna found herself in a column of floating sand. She tried to run but there was no solid ground beneath her. Gravity was suspended.

That did it. Brianna yanked out her sawed-off shotgun and leveled it at Dekka. “Put me down or I’ll shoot you!”

Dekka had gotten to her feet. “You would do it, too, wouldn’t you?” She waved her hand angrily and Brianna dropped two feet back to earth.

“Do you ever think about anything besides yourself?” Dekka yelled. To Brianna’s amazement there were tears in Dekka’s eyes. She wiped them away so violently it was like she was slapping herself. She left a smear of blood, like red paint.

“Hey, I’m sorry or whatever,” Brianna said hotly. “What do you want me to say? I hope Jack’s okay. And I’ll kill Drake if I get the chance. What do you want from me?”

Dekka’s face was an ugly mask of emotion, unreadable to Brianna. Aside from it being obvious that Dekka was mad about something.

“Four months and you haven’t even said anything to me,” Dekka said.

“I’ve talked to you,” Brianna said. But she looked away as she said it, suddenly even more uncomfortable. She could deal with anger. Need was something different.

“I told you—” Dekka began before her voice choked off. She took a few seconds to master it. Then, unable to meet Brianna’s eyes, she said, “I thought I was done for. I mean, I don’t scare easy. The pain . . .” That stopped her again; then she shook her head angrily, like she was pushing through it. “It was bad, that’s all. And I was dying. I should have died. But I didn’t want to die without telling you.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Brianna said, shifting from side to side and just about unable to resist the desire to go tearing off at a hundred miles an hour.

“I told you I loved you.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And you said nothing. Nothing. For four months.”

Brianna shrugged. “Look, okay, look.” She swallowed hard. “Look, besides me you’re the bravest, toughest chick in the FAYZ,” Brianna said. “I mean, I always thought we were like sisters, you know? Like badass sisters.”

Dekka’s eyes, so hot and furious, went blank. For a long time she just looked at nothing. At the space beside Brianna. Finally Dekka sighed. “Like sisters.”

“Yeah, but like rocking-the-tough-chick-thing sisters.”

“But . . . you don’t . . .”

This was a Dekka Brianna wasn’t prepared for. She looked smaller. She looked like a big rag doll with half the stuffing gone. Darkness was coming on fast now. Shadows were deeper, and the shadows were just shadows of other shadows.

Dekka squared her shoulders. Seemed to be arguing with herself. Finally: “You’re not gay. You don’t like girls.”

Brianna frowned. “I don’t think so.”

“Do you like boys?” Dekka asked, her voice strained.

Brianna shrugged. Every part of this made her uncomfortable. “I don’t know, jeez. I made out with Jack a couple of times. But that’s because I was bored.”

“Bored.”

“Yeah. And it didn’t help that much.”

“You’re not in love with Jack?”

Brianna barked out a surprised laugh. “Jack? Computer Jack? I mean, I like him okay. He’s nice. I mean, he’s sweet. And if I’m reading a book I don’t understand he can always explain stuff. He’s smart. But he’s not—” And there she stopped herself.

To Brianna’s surprise that drew an incredulous laugh from Dekka. “This is you, isn’t it? The real you.”

Brianna squinted. What kind of question was that?

“All this time . . .” Dekka didn’t finish the thought. “Why didn’t you just tell me?”

“What?”

Dekka balled her fists up. “I swear to God I’m going to kill you if you keep playing dumb!”

“I like boys, okay? I think. I guess. Probably. I mean, I’m just thirteen! Jeez! I know it’s the FAYZ and all, but I’m really just . . . a kid.”

Brianna blushed. Why had she said that? She wasn’t a kid. She was the Breeze. She was the most dangerous person . . . okay, third most dangerous person . . . not a kid, though. Not like a little kid.

Well, she was fast, but she couldn’t snatch words back. Jack probably dying. The light going out. Maybe it was just okay to say stuff.

A sharp intake of breath from Dekka. “You are, aren’t you?”

Dekka said softly. “I forget.” She repeated it sadly. “I forget.”

“I mean, it’s like, you know, I have a crush on Sam or whatever, like every other girl—well, except you, I guess—but it’s not like that. It’s like . . . you know . . .” She tapered off lamely. Then added, “I just like being The Breeze. Capital ‘T,’ capital ‘B.’”

All the anger was gone from Dekka. “I forget, Brianna. I mean, I see you do stuff that’s so crazy brave. . . . And I see how Sam depends on you. How everyone does. And I see you run into a fight with Drake and, wow, I mean, I look at you and you’re, like, everything I ever wanted in a girlfriend. And I forget you’re still just a kid.”

“I’m not that young,” Brianna said, now really wishing she could take some of it back.

Dekka sighed a deep, long sigh.

“I mean, maybe in a couple of years,” Brianna said, definitely feeling like she was coming out on the worse end of this conversation.

Dekka laughed. “No, Brianna. No. A crush on Sam? Making out with Jack? Nope. Nope. I was letting my own . . . I was seeing what I wanted to see. That’s what I was

doing. I wasn't seeing you."

"But you and me. We're cool?"

Dekka was crying again, but this time she wiped the tears away with a laugh. "Breeze, how could we not be cool? We are definitely the badass sisters."

"What do we do now? I can't run very fast in the dark."

"Yep. But we still go after Drake. He's got Diana, and we can't leave her to him. He hates women, you know."

"Yeah. I did notice that about him." Brianna felt energy flowing through her again. The tiredness, the frustration, they were gone. And the coming darkness? Well, she could still swing a very, very fast machete. "The boy hates chicks, right? Let's go give him a good reason to."

Astrid walked holding Cigar's hand. Sometimes it would freak him out and he'd be convinced she was going to eat him. His mind was gone. Or if not gone forever, then gone for now. Gone until he somehow got help.

But he could see what she could not. He could see her brother. She had sensed it from the start when she had seen the coyote with the human face. Not stupid, but ignorant, heedless. Something or someone with staggering power and no idea how to use it.

Little Pete was an unseen, almighty god who played ignorant, heedless games with the helpless creatures in the FAYZ.

Maybe the stain was his, too.

Maybe he was the one shutting down the light.

Well, it would figure, wouldn't it? Sooner or later the game had to end.

She walked on tired feet toward Perdido Beach, knowing now that it was a hopeless effort.

They were all mere humans, after all. And the closest thing they had to a god was a reckless, indifferent child.

TWENTY-EIGHT

10 HOURS, 35 MINUTES

“**THAT’S THE BEST** I can do,” Roger said. The lower half of his face and the front of his shirt were covered with blood. The deck was smeared with it.

Sam looked down at Jack, covered with a blanket. They couldn’t move him. They couldn’t really do much for him unless they found a way to bring Lana to him.

Roger had started with green thread. At first that was all anyone could find. That was what he had used to sew up the artery or vein or whatever it was that lay slit and exposed by the angry slash in Jack’s neck.

The outer part of the wound was sewn up with white thread, though formerly white was more like it. It was red now.

They had smeared a little of their precious stock of Neosporin on the wound and covered it with a bandage torn from an old flag. Jack’s neck was red, white, and blue, though the bandage was soaking through with seeping blood as well.

Roger was the unofficial nurse. Mostly because he seemed nice and was good with kids. He had taken on the job of sewing up Jack’s neck.

He’d said it was like trying to sew a piece of pasta. A piece of pasta that pulsed and sprayed blood.

“Thanks, Roger,” Sam said. “You absolutely stepped up, dude.”

“He’s so pale,” Roger said. “Like a piece of chalk.”

Sam had nothing to say about that. Lana could save Jack. But she was far away, and soon there would be almost no way to even contact her.

Where was that little bimbo Taylor? They needed her.

He had stopped being mad at Brianna, because now he was just too worried about her. If she was out there running around after Drake, Sam would kill her. Hug her first. Then kill her.

This couldn’t be. It just couldn’t. Poor Jack, who had maybe not always been the most stand-up guy in the world but who had never had a mean bone in his geeky body. And Breeze missing. And Diana. Howard dead. Orc . . . somewhere.

And Astrid.

It was all coming apart in his hands. He was watching his whole world bleed out like Jack.

“We’ve got Astrid, Dekka, Diana—and I hope Brianna—all out there in the desert with Drake,” Sam said. “Orc’s on his way back out. And in an hour they’ll all be in absolute darkness.”

“And Justin,” Roger said, making a point of it.

“And Justin,” Sam agreed.

Edilio wiped his face with his hand, a sign of nervousness in the usually impassive Edilio.

Suddenly Sam remembered the first time he’d run into Edilio after the coming of the FAYZ. It had been up at Clifftop. Edilio had been trying to dig under the barrier. Practical, even then.

“Look,” Sam pressed. “People here have lights. It’s not much, but they have something; they can at least see. What chance do those kids out there in the desert

have?”

“Drake’s probably reached the mine shaft by now,” Edilio said.

“No,” Roger said sharply. “No. Don’t do that. Don’t just write Justin off like that.”

Sam saw shame on Edilio’s face. “I’m sorry, babe; you know I love that little guy. I didn’t mean it like that.”

Edilio reached for Roger, then, with a darting sideways glance at Sam, stopped himself.

Roger had made an identical move, and also stopped after an abashed glance at Sam.

Sam stood very still, and for a few very awkward seconds no one spoke.

Finally Sam said, “Edilio, I have to go after them.”

“We can’t risk you, Sam. What if you’re killed? What if there’s no more light, and you’re it; you’re the only thing between us and total darkness?”

“Then we’re all dead anyway, Edilio.” Sam spread his hands in a helpless gesture. “We barely stay alive in this place as it is. In total darkness? A few Sammy suns won’t save us.”

“Look, we have to keep people calm. That’s what’s most important.”

It was a job that suddenly got a lot harder as a gaggle of a dozen kids came pelting madly down the slope past the Pit.

“Help us! Help! Help us!”

The coyotes knew their prey were getting close to safety. That was Sanjit’s conclusion as he watched them begin closing in.

The crowd on the road had grown. Kids had huddled closer together as the darkness deepened. Kids who had started out later ran till they were falling down, desperate to catch up.

Those who had begun with a lead began to doubt the wisdom of being out front. So front and back had joined middle and now they were a mob of thirty kids, spilling off the road, moving as a cluster, walking as fast as they could, crying, whining, complaining loudly, demanding. . . . Demanding of whom, Sanjit couldn’t guess.

This was officially a fiasco, he knew. One of those efforts that was doomed from the start. His little mission to tell Sam what was happening in Perdido Beach, to hand him Lana’s request for lights in Perdido Beach, all a waste of time.

Too late. And unnecessary, anyway, since the crowd of refugees would have gotten the same point across.

A stupid, wasted effort.

He didn’t blame Lana for sending him. It never occurred to him to blame her. He was head over heels, lost, lost, lost in love with her. But she would agree—if he ever saw her again—that it had not worked out very well.

He could barely see a hundred feet to either side of the road. The gloom that had been weirdly tea colored had now deepened and shifted in the spectrum. The air itself seemed a dark blue. There was an element of opacity to the light that remained. Like it was foggy, but of course it wasn’t.

A hundred feet was enough to see the coyote pack. Their lolling tongues. Their intelligent, hyperalert yellow eyes. The way their ears stood up and swiveled to each new sound.

As soon as it was dark they would come. Unless the kids reached the lake before that happened. Sanjit could read anxiety in their avid expressions and the way they paced back and forth.

“Everyone just stay together and keep moving,” he urged.

Somehow he was in charge. Maybe it was that he was the only one with a gun. Others had the usual assortment of weapons, but his was the only gun.

Or maybe it was his association with the revered Lana. Or the fact that he was among the three oldest kids.

Sanjit sighed. He missed Choo. He missed all his brothers and sisters, but especially Choo. Choo was the pessimistic one, which allowed Sanjit to be the perky optimist.

One of the coyotes had had enough and started trotting purposefully toward the crowd of kids.

“Don’t do it!” Sanjit yelled, and aimed the pistol. Zero chance of hitting the animal from here, in this light, with his total lack of skill. But the coyote stopped and looked at him. More curious than afraid.

Sanjit knew the animal was sizing the situation up. In the math of a coyote the smart move was to kill as many as the pack could. Meat didn’t have to be fresh for them; they could drag the bodies away at their leisure and eat for weeks.

Then the coyote spoke. The voice was a shock, guttural, slurred like a shovel dragged through wet gravel. “Give us the small ones.”

“I will absolutely shoot you!” Sanjit said, and walked forward, holding the gun with both hands, self-consciously emulating a hundred TV cop shows.

“Give us three,” the coyote said without the slightest evidence of fear.

Sanjit said something rude and defiant.

But someone else yelled, “It’s better than all of us getting eaten!”

“Don’t be stupid,” Sanjit snapped. “They just know we’re close to the lake. Trying to distract us so—” The horrible reality of his own words came to him.

Too late.

He spun and shouted, “Look out!” Three of the coyotes, unobserved as the people all fixated on Pack Leader, attacked the rearmost kids.

There were screams of pain and terror. Screams that made Sanjit feel as if his own flesh were being torn.

Sanjit ran toward the back, but this was the signal for Pack Leader and two others to attack the front.

Everyone bolted, kids knocking one another down, stepping on one another, being knocked down in turn to cries and screams and pleas and the awful growls of the coyotes as they went after slow, defenseless children.

Sanjit fired. *BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!*

If the coyotes even noticed, they gave no sign.

He saw Mason going down beneath two growling beasts. The older girls were already far up the road. Keira turned, stared, her mouth wide in horror, and ran away.

Sanjit jumped in the air and landed with both feet on one of the coyotes. The animal rolled away and was on its feet again while Sanjit was still absorbing the landing. A kid or a coyote, he didn’t see which, knocked him down and a coyote was on him in a heartbeat, fangs snapping in his face.

BLAM!

The coyote's right eye exploded outward and the beast collapsed atop Sanjit.

Two coyotes were fighting over Mason, like dogs fighting over a toy. Dead. Dead by now, dead.

He aimed, but badly, hands shaking, chest heaving.

BLAM!

One of the coyotes ran off with a child's leg in its mouth.

Kids from the front, other kids from the back were being torn at by the coyotes. And the crowd, the herd—because that's what they were now, a terrified herd no different from antelope panicked by a lion attack—ran as fast as they could.

There was nothing Sanjit could do.

Pack Leader stood with his legs braced wide. Something awful was in his jaws. He stared at Sanjit and growled.

Sanjit ran.

Diana glanced up at the sky. It was a habit now. A fearful habit.

It was a sphincter at the top of a black bowl. A fitting commentary on the *FAYZ*, Diana thought. A giant sphincter.

Justin held on to her as they walked, and she to him.

Which is worse? she wondered. To reach the mine shaft before darkness falls? Or not?

She had dragged her feet and stalled every step of the way on the theory that whatever the gaiaphage wanted, she was for the opposite. But then Drake reemerged and any slight delay meant pain.

He drove them forward with his whip. Like some ancient slave master. Like some long-ago Egyptian beating a Hebrew, or a not-so-long-ago overseer whipping a black slave.

But she saw that he, too, glanced up at the sky. He, too, was afraid of the coming darkness.

They had reached the ghost town. There wasn't much to it anymore. Some sticks and boards. Suggestions of places where a saloon and a hotel and a stable might once have been. There was a better-maintained building set apart from the others, and it was from this building, through a creaky door, that Brianna stepped.

Diana almost fainted with relief.

"Hey, guys," Brianna said. "Out for a walk?"

"You," Drake hissed.

"Weren't you expecting me?" she asked. She made an embarrassed face. "Wasn't I invited?"

Drake snapped his whip and wrapped it around Justin. He jerked the terrified boy through the air and held him over his head.

"Move and I smash his brains out," Drake said.

"And then what?" Brianna asked in a silky whisper.

"Then Diana."

"Yeah, I don't think so, Drake Worm Hand; I don't think you brought her all this way to kill her." Then, to Diana: "What do you think, Diana? Has he told you what he wants?"

She was stalling. Diana knew it, but did Drake? And if someone as headlong and impetuous as Brianna was stalling for time it meant she had an ally. Someone obviously slower than herself.

“It’s my baby he wants,” Diana said.

Brianna made a fake astonished face. “Is that true, Drake? Is it because you love babies?”

Drake shot a look to the path that led from town up the hill and to the mine shaft. He was only a few hundred yards away from the opening. He would be confident about finding his way that far in the dark. But he couldn’t be sure that Brianna would care about Justin. Even slowed down by darkness, Brianna could probably outrun him and cut him up.

“If you trip in the dark, Brianna, it’ll be all over for you. Trip at a hundred miles an hour, hit a rock? It’ll kill you. If it doesn’t, I will.”

He still held Justin aloft.

“Let me down,” the boy cried pitifully. “Please let me down. I’m scared up here.”

“Hear that, Brianna? He’s scared. He’s scared I might let him down too fast. Ouchie.”

Brianna nodded like she was considering this. Stalling. She took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. Stalling.

Diana saw her eyes dart to her right. Who was coming? Who was she waiting for? Brianna must have passed them on her way here. She must have chosen not to take Drake on alone and instead moved to block his path while reinforcement was on its way.

That indicated someone a bit wiser than her. Sam. Or maybe Dekka. Not Orc. Sam or Dekka, they were the only two who could help Brianna in a fight with Drake and be smart enough and carry enough influence to convince her to wait like this.

Diana dared to hope. If it was Dekka, she could stop Justin from falling. If it was Sam maybe, at long last, he would rid the universe of Whip Hand.

There came a sound.

Coming from the gloom on the ghost town’s long-forgotten main street.

Diana saw the wicked smile of triumph on Brianna’s face.

Brianna drew her machete.

And from the darkness walked—limped—a small, barefoot girl in a sundress.

OUTSIDE

“PROFESSOR STANEVICH?”

“Yes.” The voice was clipped. Annoyed. Heavily accented. “Who are you? This is a private number.”

“Professor Stanevich, listen to me, please,” Connie Temple begged. “Please. We appeared on CNN together once. You probably don’t remember. I’m one of the family members.”

A pause on the other end. She was at an ancient, graffiti-tagged pay phone outside a gas station minimart in Arroyo Grande. She couldn’t use her own cell phone for fear of betraying Darius. She hadn’t used Stanevich’s office phone number for fear that it, too, might be tapped.

“How did you get this number?” Stanevich asked again.

“The internet can be very useful. Please listen to me. I have information. I need you to explain something to me.”

Stanevich sighed heavily into the phone. “I am with my children at the Dave and the Buster. It is very noisy.” Another sigh, and sure enough, Connie could hear the sounds of video games and clattering dishes. “Tell me your information.”

“The person who gave me this information is in very serious trouble if it gets back to him. The army has dug a secret tunnel; it’s on the eastern edge of the dome. It’s very deep. And security is very, very tight.”

“They are presumably drilling to see the extent of this recent change in the energy signature—”

“No, Professor, with all due respect. There are nuclear response teams here. And the tunnel they’ve drilled is thirty-two inches in diameter.”

Nothing but the sounds of Dave & Buster’s.

Connie pressed on. “They don’t need a shaft that size to send down a probe or a camera. And my source says there is a rail descending.”

Still no response. Then, when she was sure he’d decided to hang up: “What you are suggesting is impossible.”

“It’s not impossible, and you know it. You’re one of the people who warned that breaching the dome might be dangerous. You’re one of the reasons people are so scared of this thing.” Connie held her breath. Had she pushed too far?

“I was discussing various theoretical possibilities,” Stanevich huffed. “I am not responsible for the nonsense from the media.”

“Professor. I want you to discuss the theoretical possibilities of this. Of a nuclear weapon . . . Please. If it will release the children, then that’s one thing. But—”

“Of course it will not release the children.” He snorted a laugh into her ear. “It will do one of two things. Neither of them involves peacefully releasing the children inside.”

“The two things. What are they?” A highway patrol car pulled in and she gripped the phone hard. The car slid into a parking place. The patrolman looked at her. Recognizing her from TV?

“It depends,” Stanevich equivocated. “There are two theories of the so-called J

waves. I won't bore you with the details—you wouldn't understand anyway."

The patrolman got out. Stretched. Locked his car and went into the minimart.

"A nuclear device would release a great deal of energy. Which might overload the dome, might blow it up. Think of it as a hair dryer, let us say, yes, a hair dryer that runs on one-hundred-and-ten-volt electricity. And suddenly it is plugged into ten thousand volts."

He sounded as detached as if he was lecturing a room full of undergraduates. Pleased with his hair dryer analogy.

"It would be blown apart. Combust."

"Yes," Connie said tersely. "Wouldn't that also blow up everything nearby?"

"Oh, certainly," Stanevich said. "Not the device itself, you understand, not if it is buried deep. But a twenty-mile-wide sphere that suddenly overloads? It would likely obliterate everything inside. And perhaps, depending on various factors, destroy an area around the dome."

Connie's stomach was in her throat. "You said two possibilities."

"Ah," Stanevich said. "The other is more interesting. It may be that the barrier is not overloaded. It may be that it can convert the energy. It may take the sudden release of energy and essentially store it. Soak it up like an incredibly efficient battery. Or, let us say, a sponge." He made a dissatisfied sound. "It's not a perfect analogy. No, far from it. Ah, here it is: the barrier's energy signature is changing, yes? Weakening. So imagine a starving man who at last gets a good, healthy meal."

"If this happens, the absorbing thing. What does that do to the barrier? Maybe it makes it easier to get through."

"Or it strengthens it," Stanevich said. "Alters it in ways we cannot yet predict. It will be fascinating, though. More than one PhD dissertation will result."

Connie hung up the phone. She walked quickly to her car.

Her head was buzzing. Stanevich was as much an ass as when he'd been on CNN with her. But now his willingness to speculate was welcome, even if the details were horrifying.

There was time to stop this. She would make a public stink. She just had to figure out how to do it. Talk to the media, surely, but how to best bring pressure on the army and the government to stop this reckless madness?

She drove up the 101 and practically ran into a column of army vehicles coming toward her. Trucks. Flatbeds loaded with trailers.

Two miles from Perdido Beach she saw the flashing lights of police cars. A roadblock. They were diverting traffic off the highway, onto a side road, and sending it back south.

Connie pulled onto the shoulder and stopped, breathing hard. Of course they saw her. She couldn't outrun them; the CHP would pull her over and wonder why she had run, and then there would be explanations demanded.

She pulled up to the roadblock. Highway patrol and army MPs were running the roadblock together. She knew the MPs.

She leaned out of the window. "Hey, what's up?"

"Mrs. Temple," the corporal said, "there's been a bad chemical spill up the road. A truck carrying nerve agent."

Connie stared into the young face of the corporal. "That's your story?"

“Ma’am?”

“This road’s been closed for almost a year. And your story is that some trucker carrying deadly chemicals did what? Took a wrong turn and crashed?”

The MP’s lieutenant stepped up. “Mrs. Temple, it’s for your own safety. We’re pulling everything back until we figure out how to contain the spill.”

Connie laughed. This was their cover story? Was she supposed to believe them? It would be a strain to even pretend to believe them.

“Just take the side road here,” the lieutenant said, and pointed with a sort of karate-chop hand. Then, in a voice that was at once compassionate and hard, he added, “It’s not optional, ma’am. You know the Oceano County Airport? That’s the rendezvous. I’m sure the soldiers there will fill you in on all the details.”

TWENTY-NINE

10 HOURS, 27 MINUTES

SAM LEAPED FROM the top deck straight down onto the dock and raced toward the onrushing refugees.

None too gently he pushed them aside and ran on through, up past the Pit, up to the gravel road, up to where he could hear snarling and a gun being fired.

Sanjit plowed into him and for a second Sam didn't know who he was. He held him out at arm's length, said, "Stay out of the way," and took off for the scene of slaughter.

That he was too late was apparent. The coyotes weren't killing at this point; they were feeding and dismembering.

He raised his palms and a beam of searingly intense green-white light shot forth. The beam caught part of a body and the head of a coyote. The coyote's head ballooned like a time-lapse video of a burning marshmallow.

Sam swept the beam up the road to where coyotes were already racing away, dragging bodies or pieces of bodies along through the dirt. He caught a second coyote in the hindquarters, which erupted in flame. The coyote howled in pain, fell, tried to keep running with just its two front legs, and lay down on its side to die.

The rest were out of range by then, some even abandoning their meat.

Sanjit came running up to stop beside a heaving, panting Sam.

A boy, maybe twelve, unrecognizable but alive and crying pitifully, lay in two pieces in a bush off the road.

Sam took a deep breath, marched to him, took careful aim, and burned a neat hole in the side of his head. Then he widened his beam and played it over the corpse until there was nothing but ashes.

He shot an angry look at Sanjit. "Anything you have to say about that?"

Sanjit shook his head. He couldn't form a complete thought. Sam wondered if he'd be sick. He wondered if he himself would be.

"If it was me," Sanjit began, and ran out of words.

That blunted Sam's anger. But only a little. This was his fault. It was his job to protect. . . . Why hadn't he sent Brianna off months ago to exterminate the last coyotes? Why hadn't he thought to send a patrol up the road to meet the inevitable refugees?

He now faced the task of cremating the rest of the dead. There was no way he could let brothers and sisters and friends see what the coyotes had left behind. These mangled, barely recognizable slabs of meat could not be what loved ones carried with them in memory for the rest of their lives.

"Why are you here?" Sam demanded as he began his grisly work. "Did you bring these kids here?"

"Lana sent me."

"Explain." He didn't know Sanjit well. Just knew that he had pulled off something close to a miracle in flying a helicopter from the island to Perdido Beach.

"Bad stuff in Perdido Beach," Sanjit began. "Penny somehow managed to cement Caine. They're going to try to free him, but last I saw Caine he was crying and having

his cemented hands beaten on with a hammer.”

Sam’s reaction surprised him: his first feeling was worry, and even outrage, on Caine’s behalf.

Caine had been an enemy from the start. Caine was responsible for battle after bloody battle. He had come close to killing Sam on more than one occasion. Maybe, Sam reflected, he was reacting to the fact that Caine was, after all, his brother.

But no. No, it was that Caine was strong. And however much of a power-mad jerk he was, Caine would have tried to keep some kind of order. He would have—probably—worked to avoid panic. Always for his own reasons, but still . . .

“So, Albert’s in charge,” Sam said thoughtfully, and burned a foot resting almost comically upright.

“Albert bailed,” Sanjit said. “Quinn talked to him as he was heading to the island with three girls.”

This was worse news than the incapacitation of Caine. A lot worse. There were three major powers in the FAYZ: Albert, Caine, and Sam. Three people whose combination of power and authority and skills might have kept things together for a few days or a week until . . . until some kind of miracle happened.

Albert, Caine, and Sam. That was the foundation of the stability and peace of the last four months.

“Did you see Astrid?” Sam asked.

“Astrid? No. I don’t even know if I would recognize her; I’ve only seen her once, months ago.”

“She went to warn you guys about the stain. And offer my . . . my light-hanging services.”

“Well, I guess I’m relieved that I’m not the only one off on a wild-goose chase.”

Sam looked sharply at him. There was some steel in this kid. He had been the last one to run from the coyotes. And judging by the fat pistol in his hand and the discarded weapons lying along the road, he’d been the only one to really give them a fight.

And he hadn’t quibbled when Sam did the hard but merciful thing.

“Sanjit, right?” Sam said. He held out his hand.

Sanjit took it. “I know who you are, Sam. Everyone does.”

“Well, you’re with us for now.” He jerked his head up at the sky.

“I have a family,” Sanjit said. “I have to get back.”

“Brave is good,” Sam said. “Stupid is another thing. Those coyotes don’t need light to find you. You’re a friend of Lana’s, right?”

Sanjit nodded. “Yeah. We live at Clifftop with her.”

“The Healer has you living with her?” he asked incredulously. “I’m learning all kinds of things today.”

“I guess she’s my girlfriend,” Sanjit said.

Sam fired at what looked like a chunk of hamburger wearing a part of a T-shirt.

“If you’re with Lana, then your family is as safe as anyone. You getting killed won’t help them. You’re with us now. Just one thing: talk freely to Edilio, but no one else. Clear? If kids hear that Albert has bailed . . .” He shook his head. “I thought better of Albert than that.”

It left a bad taste in his mouth, Albert running away. No doubt it made good

business sense. But the word “treason” was on the tip of his tongue.

Backstabber.

Coward.

Astrid was on her way to offer an alliance with a beaten and humiliated “king” and a cowardly “businessman.”

He shoved away the image of the coyotes finding her before she could reach town. There were thoughts too painful to allow.

He had to think, and think clearly, not let his mind be seized and paralyzed by lurid images of Astrid brought down in some lonely place by coyotes, or zekes, or Drake.

He squeezed his eyes shut.

“Are you okay?” Sanjit asked.

“Okay?” Sam shook his head. “Nope. I’m not. The guys I was counting on to be with me aren’t. It was already hopeless. Now?”

“Lana’s still there,” Sanjit said. “And Quinn.”

“Quinn?” Sam frowned. “What’s he got to do with anything?”

“Lana put him in charge. He’s got his people with him.”

Sam nodded, distracted. He was seeing a chessboard in his mind. Most of the pieces he might have played, the powers that might have helped, his bishop and knights and rooks, were all down or missing. Dekka, Brianna, Jack, Albert, possibly Caine, all down or missing. His steady knight, Edilio, would have to watch over the lake. Which left Sam with pawns.

On the other side Drake. Maybe Penny. The coyotes.

And the opposing king, the gaiaphage, who was so well protected he might be impossible to reach, let alone destroy.

“What was that TV show?” Sam asked, rubbing his face to clear away the smoke of burning bodies. “The one where they vote you off the island?”

“*Survivor?*”

“Yeah. ‘Outwit, Outplay, Outlast.’ Right?”

“I guess,” Sanjit said doubtfully.

“Outwitted and outplayed. That’s me, Sanjit. You just joined the losing team. I’ve got nothing left. And pretty soon? I’ll be blind.”

“No. Not you, Sam. You’re the only one who won’t be.”

“Sammy suns?” Sam laughed derisively. “They might as well be candles.”

“In the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king,” Sanjit said.

“In the dark the one guy with a candle is an easy target,” Sam countered.

One thing was crystal clear to Sam: his job was not to sit here and protect his charges at the lake. That was a losing move. That was him waiting for the enemy to gather its forces to come for him. Maybe he’d been outwitted and outplayed. He had not yet been outlasted.

Without another word to Sanjit he headed back to the lake.

Diana saw Penny and her knees gave way. She sat down hard in the dirt. She couldn’t breathe.

No, she mouthed soundlessly.

Penny looked at Drake first. At his terrible tentacle. At the little boy suspended in the air. She glanced curiously at Brianna, like she wasn’t quite sure who she was.

Then she looked at Diana, and her eyes widened with pleasure. Her smile started small and grew and grew and became a laugh of pure delight. She clapped her hands together.

“Too good,” Penny said. “Too, too good.”

Diana’s mind had stopped working. Thoughts would not form. Reactions would not take shape. Fear took her. A low keening sound came from deep in her throat.

This was no longer about pain: terror was here.

Drake shot a look at Penny. “Who are you?”

“I’m Penny,” she said. “You used to push me out of your way back at Coates. I was nobody to you.”

“You have a beef with me?” Drake asked, just a little worried.

Penny smiled. “Oh, you were just a jerk, Drake. Nothing special. Whereas Diana . . .” She laughed her demented, delighted laugh. “I absolutely love Diana. She took such good care of me on the island.”

“Leave me alone,” Diana heard herself beg, like hearing someone else, not like the words were coming from her, because she had no words in her brain; she could see what was coming; she knew what was coming.

God save me, Diana begged, God save me, save me, save me.

“How’s the baby, Diana?” Penny asked, her voice slithering, her eyes bright. “Do you want a boy or a girl?”

And suddenly the baby woke up, and its claws came out like the claws of a tiger, and its insect face with saber mandibles ripped at her insides, tearing through the flesh of her belly, tearing out of her, a wild animal, nothing human there, but no, that wasn’t true; it had Caine’s face, his face but smeared across a soulless ant face and the claws and the pain, and she screamed and screamed.

Diana was facedown in the dirt. Penny’s bare feet—one of them crusted with bloody mud—were in front of her.

There was no monster baby.

Her belly had not been torn open.

Diana cried into the dirt.

“Cool, huh?” Penny said.

“What did you do to her?” It was Drake, fascinated.

“Oh, she just saw something. She saw her baby as a monster. And she saw it rip her apart from the inside. Felt it, too,” Penny said.

“You’re a freak?” Drake asked.

Penny laughed. “The freakiest of the freaks.”

“Don’t hurt the baby,” Drake warned. He tossed Justin aside, ready to take this interloper on if necessary. The boy landed hard but without breaking anything.

Penny was not intimidated by Whip Hand. “What’s in there?” She indicated the narrow path leading up to the mine shaft.

Drake didn’t answer. His whip was ready to slash at her. But he hesitated, unsure if she was friend or foe.

“I’ve felt it since I got close,” Penny said, looking past Drake up at the path. “I was just wandering. Going nowhere. And then, little by little, I realized I was going somewhere.” She said this in a singsong voice. “I was going here.” Then, like a person waking out of a dream, she said, “It’s that thing Caine went to, isn’t it? The Darkness.

The thing that gave you that Whip Hand.”

Drake said, “Would you like me to introduce you?”

“Yes. I would,” Penny said very seriously.

Diana had stolen tear-distorted glances at Brianna, who seemed content to let this go on, so long as it ate up more time. Now Brianna spoke. “I don’t think you two are going anywhere.”

She flew at Drake.

But Diana had been there at times when Brianna moved at top speed. When she moved at top speed you didn’t see her arms or legs; you didn’t see her draw her deadly machete. Diana saw those things now and knew that the Breeze had slowed.

But she was still fast.

The machete swung and Drake’s whip was cut in half. Five feet of flesh-colored tentacle lay in the dirt like a dead python.

Brianna spun, came back around fast, but with her eyes carefully down on the ground, cautious, distracted, and suddenly she cried out, skidded, leaped across something Diana could not see.

Penny had struck!

Drake picked up his severed tentacle and pushed the two stump ends together. He looked less furious than peevisish. The injury was at worst a temporary inconvenience.

Brianna was jumping around like a crazy person, leaping from place to place, focused like mad on every move, arms windmilling for balance.

“What is she doing?” Drake asked.

Penny laughed. “Trying not to fall into the lava. And her friend, Dekka? The one she was expecting to show up? She’s out there somewhere. . . .” She jerked her head back toward the night-dark desert. “Trying to get her little brain back to reality.”

Diana saw wary concern on Drake’s face. It was beginning to occur to him that perhaps Penny might be more than he could handle. “Let’s go. The gaiaphage is waiting.”

“Do you think I’m cute?” Penny asked him.

Drake froze, stood stock-still, and now the look on his face was more than just wary.

“Yeah,” Drake said. “Yeah. You’re cute.”

His tentacle had grown back, the stumps melding quickly together, smoothing as if he was made out of clay and an invisible hand was pinching the edges together, then rolling the whole thing like a Play-Doh snake. He raised the whip high and snapped it in front of Diana’s face.

“Now move,” he said.

Diana watched Brianna, still leaping desperately, trapped in some illusion of danger.

And she saw the little boy, Justin, crawl ahead of her into the darkness.

Dekka lay sobbing in the darkness. She could barely see her hands in front of her face.

She didn’t know what had happened to her. Just that in an instant she had been frozen, completely immobile. Paralyzed.

She’d been covered in a translucent white goo, like clay or Silly Putty. And it had coated every single inch of her body. It had pushed its way into her ears. Like invisible

fingers were poking it in there, filling her right up to the eardrums.

So that she could hear nothing but the beating of her own heart.

So that she could hear the gristle in her neck as she squirmed helplessly.

The white putty was pushed into her nose. So deep, up into her sinuses. She had to breathe through her mouth, but as soon as she opened her mouth the white stuff filled her mouth and pushed its way into the space between her teeth and her cheeks, under her tongue, then down her throat. She gagged but it didn't matter; the stuff filled her mouth and throat and she could feel it cold and dense and heavy in her lungs.

She screamed but no sound came out.

In some panic-free corner of her mind, some small remnant of Dekka knew this wasn't real. It couldn't be real. She knew it was Penny who had done this, who had filled her mind with this vision.

But she could not breathe. Could. Not.

She was buried alive in it, buried alive, and her brain screamed in a way that her body no longer could.

Had to be an illusion. Had to be a trick. But did it really? Was she so sure it wasn't real in this nightmare world?

She couldn't breathe, but she realized, too, that she wasn't dying. Her heart still beat. She was covered and filled with the white stuff, and she should be dying but she wasn't.

Then she felt the white stuff harden. It wasn't putty anymore but fast-drying clay. Already her teeth bit on something as hard as porcelain.

Then the bugs were inside of her.

The bugs.

Not real—she knew that in some tiny, cowering corner of her mind—couldn't be real; the bugs had been eliminated. They'd been made nonexistent. So there was no way they could be inside her again, no way they could be swarming through her guts and no Sam to cut them out and let them out; she was trapped inside this porcelain tomb and they were inside her again.

She screamed and screamed and screamed.

Suddenly, all of it was gone.

She was on dirt. Air was in her nose. Her eyes opened.

A girl had stood there and said, "That's a new one for me. Did you like it?"

And Dekka, trembling like a leaf ready to fall, said nothing. Just breathed. Breathed.

"Don't come after me," Penny had said.

And Dekka had not.

THIRTY

10 HOURS, 4 MINUTES

“RING THE BELL,” Sam said.

Edilio nodded at Roger, who ran off to ring the bell atop the marina office.

“What are you going to do?” Edilio asked.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were gay?” Sam demanded.

Edilio looked like he’d been punched. But he recovered quickly, to go to an expression that was half-wary, half-embarrassed. “You got enough stuff to deal with.”

“That’s not something I have to ‘deal with,’ Edilio. My girlfriend lost, the world ending, having to go out there after Drake, that’s stuff I have to deal with. Me finding out you’ve got someone to care about like that? How is that something I have to deal with?”

“I don’t know, I just . . . I mean, it took me a while to kind of figure it out. You know.”

“Does everyone except me know?” Sam asked. He realized this was a stupid concern; this was hardly the time to worry about seeming out of touch. But no one had been closer to him than Edilio, almost from the first day. It bothered him to think everyone knew something he didn’t. It hurt his feelings.

“No, man,” Edilio reassured him. “No. And it’s not about me being, you know, ashamed or whatever. It’s that . . . look, I have a lot of responsibility. I have to have people trust me. And some kids are still going to call me a faggot or whatever.”

“Seriously? We’re about to be plunged into eternal darkness and you think those kids out there are going to worry about who you like?”

Edilio didn’t answer. And Sam had the feeling maybe Edilio knew more than he did on the subject. He let it go.

“I gotta tell you the truth, man,” Sam said, shaking his head slowly, side to side, as he spoke. “I don’t see a way out of this. I don’t even see the starting point for a way out of this. I don’t expect us to survive this.”

Edilio nodded. Like he knew this. Like he was ready for it to be said.

“So in case this is it, Edilio, in case I go out there and don’t come back, I want to say thank you. You’ve been a brother to me. My true brother.” Sam carefully avoided looking at Edilio.

“Yeah, well, we’re not done for yet,” Edilio said gruffly. Then, more pointedly, “So you’re going?”

“Everything you said before is right,” Sam said. “We can’t afford me getting killed. Not in the short run. But once I turn on some lights we’re still done for if we don’t find a way to turn this around. We can’t grow crops or fish or survive living in the dark. Next thing that happens is people will start setting fires. Perdido Beach will burn all the way down next time. The forest will burn. Everything. Kids won’t live in the dark.”

He was interrupted by the loud ringing of the bell. When it was finished he said, “I’m not the only one scared of the dark, Edilio. Anyway, this is just part of something bigger. Something is happening. I don’t know what, but something big and . . . and final. So, yeah, short-term I’m important. But if I want to be important long-term, I

need to go out there and find a way.”

“You going to talk to everyone?” Edilio asked.

“Yeah.”

Barely visible in the darkness, mere shadows on the water, the boats rocked and drifted lazily. The Sammy suns shining through portholes were the only light. Bodies could be seen only when they passed before one of those lights.

“Then make sure you tell them the truth.”

“Toto!” Sam yelled down. “Get up here.”

When Toto was on deck Sam lit a Sammy sun just over his head. Like a gloomy spotlight. It revealed him, Edilio, and Toto.

“Toto’s here so you know I’m telling you what I believe is true.” Sam shouted to be heard across the water. “First: I don’t think we have to worry about Drake here at the lake. He’s gone—for now, at least.”

Toto said, “He believes it,” but in a whisper.

“Speak up,” Edilio said.

“He believes it!”

“So you’re all coming back ashore. We have kids who’ve come here from Perdido Beach. They’ve lost people on the way here, and we’re going to take them in and care for them.”

Some grumbling and a couple of defiant, shouted questions came out of the dark.

“Because good people help people who need to be helped. That’s why,” Sam yelled back. “Listen. Things are bad in Perdido Beach. It seems Caine is out of business. And so is Albert.”

“He believes it!”

“So that’s bad. Astrid is . . .” Emotion clenched his throat but he pushed forward. He had nothing to hide, he realized. It wasn’t like anyone didn’t know he was worried about her. “She’s out there in the dark somewhere. And so are Brianna and Dekka and Orc. Jack, well, we don’t know if he’ll make it.”

“True,” Toto said. Then, louder, “True!”

“Drake has Diana and Justin, who is just a little kid, and we don’t know for sure what Drake is up to. Whatever it is, I believe it’s connected to this stain that is blotting out the light.”

Toto just nodded and no one seemed to care.

Sam looked up. The stain was no longer blotting out the light. It had finished its work. The small circle of darkening blue had turned flat black.

“So, I don’t have some big plan. I just don’t.” He repeated it, feeling amazed that it was true. “I have a reputation as the guy who comes up with a way out of trouble. Well, I don’t have that now.”

Someone was crying, loudly enough to be heard. Someone else shushed him.

“That’s okay. Cry if you want to cry, because I feel like crying with you.”

“Yes,” Toto said.

“You can be sad and you can be scared. But we built this place and kept ourselves going by hanging in there together. Right?”

No one answered.

“Right?” Sam demanded more insistently.

“Damn right,” a voice called back.

“So we hang together still. Edilio is here. You listen to Edilio.”

“But you’re the leader!” a different voice cried, and others seconded it. “We need you! Sam!”

Sam looked down, not pleased, really, but maybe a little gratified. At the same time, though, he was beginning to realize something. It took a few moments to form coherently in his mind. He had to check it against what he knew, because at first it seemed wrong.

Finally he said, “No. No. I’m a lousy leader.”

There was a pause before Toto said, “He believes it.”

Sam laughed, amazed that he really did believe it. “No, I’m a lousy leader,” he repeated. “Look, I mean well. And I have powers. But it’s Albert who kept people fed and alive. And up here it’s Edilio who really runs things. Even Quinn, he’s a better leader than me. Me? I get pissed off when you need me, and then I pout when you don’t. No. Edilio’s a leader. I . . . I don’t know what I am, except for being the guy who can make light shoot out of his hands.”

He stepped back, out of the direct glow of the Sammy sun, baffled by the unexpected turn his speech had taken. He had meant to tell everyone to stick together and be disciplined. He had ended up feeling like a fool, taking a momentous occasion to just make an idiot of himself.

Edilio spoke up. He had a softer voice. And still had a trace of his Honduran accent. “I know what Sam is. Maybe, like he said, he’s not a great leader. But he’s a great fighter. He’s our warrior; that’s what he is. Our soldier. So what he’s going to do, Sam, what he’s going to do is go out there into the dark and fight our enemies. Try to keep us safe.”

“He believes it,” Toto said unnecessarily.

“Yeah,” Sam whispered. He looked down at his hands, palms up. “Yeah,” he said louder. Then, still to himself: “Well. I’ll be damned. I’m not the leader. I’m the soldier.” He laughed and looked at Edilio, his face nothing but shadows in the light of the Sammy sun. “It takes me a while to figure things out, doesn’t it?”

Edilio grinned. “Do me a favor. When you find Astrid, repeat that to her, word for word, the part about how it takes you a while. Then remember her exact reaction and tell me.”

Then, serious again, Edilio said, “I’ll take care of these people here, Sam. Go find our friends. And if you run into Drake, kill that son of a bitch.”

The sky closed.

Darkness. Absolute, total darkness.

Astrid heard her own breathing.

She heard Cigar’s hesitant footsteps. Slowing. Stopping.

“We aren’t far from Perdido Beach,” Astrid said.

How strange what absolute black did to the sound of words. To the sound of her own heart.

“We have to try to remember the direction. Otherwise we’ll start walking in circles.”

I will not panic, she told herself. I will not let the fear paralyze me.

She reached for Cigar. Her hand touched nothing.

“We should hold hands,” Astrid said. “So we don’t get separated.”

“You have claws,” Cigar said. “They have poison needles in them.”

“No, no, that’s not real. That’s a trick your mind is playing on you.”

“The little boy is here,” Cigar said.

“How do you know?” Astrid moved closer to the source of his voice. She thought she was quite close to him. She tried to call on other senses. Could she hear his heartbeat? Could she feel his body warmth?

“I see him. Can’t you see him?”

“I can’t see anything.”

She should have brought something to use as a torch. Something she could burn. Of course, showing light out here in the open would make her visible to people and things she didn’t want seeing her.

It was just that the pressure of the dark—and that was how it felt, like pressure, like it wasn’t an absence of light, but like it was black felt or something hung in drapes all around her—was hemming her in. Like it was a physical obstruction.

Nothing had changed except that light had been subtracted. Every object was exactly where it had been before. But that wasn’t how it felt.

“The little boy is looking at you,” Cigar said.

Astrid felt a chill.

“Is he talking?”

“No. He likes quiet.”

“Yes. He always did,” Astrid said. “And darkness. He liked the dark. It soothed him.”

Had Petey made all of this happen? Just to get his blessed silence and peace?

“Petey?” she said.

It felt ridiculous. She was talking to someone she couldn’t see. Someone who probably wasn’t there. Someone who, if he existed at all, was not human, not anything physical or tangible.

The irony made her laugh out loud. She’d just given up talking to one perhaps unreal spiritual entity. Now here she was doing it again.

“He doesn’t like when you laugh,” Cigar said, shushing her.

“Too bad,” Astrid said.

That brought silence. She could hear Cigar breathing, so she knew he was still there. She didn’t know whether he was still looking at Petey. Or something that was supposed to be Petey.

“He was in my head,” Cigar whispered. “I felt him. He went inside me. But he left.”

“Are you saying he took you over?”

“I let him,” Cigar said. “I wanted him to make me be like I used to be. But he couldn’t.”

“Where is he now?”

“He’s gone now,” Cigar said sadly.

Astrid sighed. “Yeah. Just like a god, never there when you need one.”

She listened hard. And smelled the air. She had an impression, barely an impression, that she could tell in which direction the ocean lay.

But she also knew that the land between where she was and the ocean was largely

fertile fields seething with zekes. Zekes that had probably not been fed in some time.

There were fields between her and the highway, but once she got to the highway she would be able to follow it toward town. Even in the dark she could stay on a concrete highway.

Sam wanted to follow the road from the lake down to the highway, because that was where Astrid would be. Most likely. Despite none of the refugees having seen her on their way from Perdido Beach to the lake.

But finding Astrid was not the right move. Not yet. She would slow him down, even if he found her. And she wasn't a soldier. She wasn't Dekka or Brianna or even Orc. They could help him win a fight; Astrid could not.

But oh, Lord, how he wanted her now. Not to make love but just to have her there in the darkness beside him. To hear her voice. That above all. The sound of her voice was the sound of sanity, and he was entering the valley of shadow. Walking into pure, absolute darkness.

He walked until he was out of the faint circle of light cast by the numerous Sammy suns of the lake. Then he hung a new light, taking solace from the sphere as it grew in his hands.

But the light reached only a few feet. Turning back as he walked on, he could see it. But it cast only a faint light, a light whose photons seemed to tire easily.

Into the darkness. Step. Step.

Something was squeezing his heart.

His teeth would fragment if he bit down any harder.

"It's just the same as it was," he told himself. "Same but darker."

Nothing changes when the light goes out, Sam. His mother had said that a thousand times. *See? Click. Light on. Click. Light off. The same bed, the same dresser, the same laundry you've strewn all over the floor . . .*

Not the point, that younger Sam had thought. The threat knows I'm helpless in the dark. So that's not the same.

It's not the same if the threat can see and I can't.

It's not the same if the threat knows it doesn't have to hide, but can make its move.

Useless to pretend the darkness isn't any different.

It's different.

Did something bad happen to you in the dark, Sam? They always wanted to know. Because they assumed all fear must come from a thing or a place. An event. Cause and effect. Like fear was part of an algebra equation.

No, no, no, so not getting the point of fear. Because fear wasn't about what made sense. Fear was about possibilities. Not things that happened. Things that might.

Things that might . . . Threats that might be there. Murderers. Madmen. Monsters. Standing just a few inches from him, able to see him, but his eyes useless. The threats, they could laugh silently at him. They could hold their knives, guns, claws right in his face and he wouldn't be able to see.

The threat could be. Right. Here.

His legs already ached from tension. He glanced back at the lake. He had been climbing and it was below him now, a sad collection of stars like a dim, distant galaxy. So very far away.

He couldn't look back for long because the possibilities were all around him now.

The light of day showed you the limits of possibility. But walk through the dark, the absolute, total darkness, and the possibilities were limitless.

He hung a Sammy sun. He didn't want to leave it behind. It was light that revealed stones. A stick. A dried-out bush.

It was almost better not to bother. Seeing anything just made the darkness seem darker. But the lights were also a sort of bread-crumb trail, like Hansel and Gretel. He would be able to find his way home.

Hopefully as well, he'd be able to see whether he was veering left or right.

But the lights had one other effect: they would be seen by whatever else was out here.

In the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king. But in the darkness the one man holding a candle is a target.

Sam walked on into the dark.

Quinn had brought everyone into the plaza with grilled fish. The fire still burned, but lower and lower.

Lana had healed all who needed it.

For now there was quiet.

Kids had broken into Albert's place and come back with some of his hoard of flashlights and batteries. Quinn had quickly confiscated them. They were worth far more than gold, far more even than food.

Some of Quinn's crew were using the light of a single flashlight and a number of crowbars to tear apart the pews in the church and bring them out to keep the fire going.

No one was leaving. Not yet.

The orange-red glow cast a faint, flickering wash of color on the limestone of town hall, on the long-abandoned McDonald's, on the broken fountain. On grim young faces.

But the streets leading away simply disappeared. The rest of the town was invisible. The ocean, occasionally faintly audible over the sound of snapping wood and muted conversation, might as well be a myth.

The sky was black. Featureless.

All of the FAYZ was just this bonfire now.

Close to the fire sat Caine. People left plenty of room for him. He smelled. And he still cried out in pain as a new pair of kids—the third pair—chipped away at his hands by firelight. They were down to the small stuff now. The very painful, small strokes that often drew blood.

Every now and then Lana would come by to heal a cut or two so that the blood didn't render the concrete too slippery for the chisel.

Quinn was there at the moment when a firm blow separated Caine's hands so that they were no longer attached to each other.

"The palms first," Caine ordered, still somehow commanding, despite everything.

They used needle-nose pliers to pry pieces off. Skin came away, too. Each time they asked him if it was okay, and each time he gritted his teeth and said, "Do it!"

His hands were being skinned. Piece by piece.

Quinn could barely stand to watch it. But he had to admit one thing: Caine might

be a thug, an egomaniac, a killer, but he was no coward.

Lana pulled Quinn aside a little way, into the dark beyond the reach of firelight. Down Alameda Avenue until Quinn could see nothing. Not even the hand in front of his face. "I wanted you to see just how dark it is," she said.

She was inches from him. He could see nothing.

"Yeah. It's dark."

"Do you have a plan?"

Quinn sighed. "For total darkness? No, Lana. No plan."

"They'll burn buildings if the fire goes out."

"We can keep the bonfire going for a while. We'll feed the whole town in, piece by piece if we have to. And we have water. Little Pete's cloud is still producing. It's the food."

They both had too many memories of hunger. Silence.

"We're bringing all the food in. From storage at the Ralphs, from Albert's compound. People didn't have much in their homes. Add it all up and we've got maybe two days' short rations. Then it starts."

"Starvation."

"Yeah." He didn't know what the point of this conversation was. "Do you have a plan?"

"It won't take two days, Quinn. You feel what this darkness does to you? The way it closes in around you? All of a sudden kids realize they're in this big fishbowl. Fear of the dark, fear of being closed in. Most will be okay for a while, but it's not about 'most.' It's about the weakest links. The kids who are already about as messed up as they can be."

"Anyone goes nuts, we'll deal with him," Quinn said.

"And Caine?"

Quinn said, "You're the one who put me in charge, Lana. I hope you didn't think I had some magic answer."

A third breathing sound could be heard. "Hi, Patrick. Good boy."

Quinn heard her fumbling around in the dark, looking for his ruff, finding it, then scratching it vigorously.

"They'll start going crazy," Lana said. "Absolutely crazy. When that happens . . . ask Caine for help."

"What's he going to do?" Quinn asked.

"Whatever it takes to keep people under control."

"Wait a minute. Whoa." He had an instinct to grab her arm. But he didn't know where her arm was. "Are you telling me to turn Caine loose on anyone who gets out of line?"

"Can you stop some bunch of kids if they decide to steal the food for themselves? Or go nuts and start burning things?"

"Lana. Why does it matter?" he asked. He felt the energy draining from him. She had asked him to take over. Now she was telling him to use Caine like a weapon. For what? "What does anything matter, Lana? Can you tell me that? Why should I hurt some kid for losing his mind when anyone could lose their mind?"

Lana said nothing. She said nothing for so long, Quinn began to wonder if she had left silently. Then, in a voice so low it didn't even sound like her: "In the dark like this

I can feel it. So much closer. It's more real to me than you are because I can see it. I see it in my head. There's nothing else to see, so I see it."

"You're not telling me why I should hurt anyone, Lana."

"It's alive. And it's scared. It's so scared. Like it's dying. Like that kind of scared. I see . . . I see images that don't really mean anything. It's not really reaching for me anymore. It doesn't have time to reach for me anymore. It's the baby it wants. All its hopes are on the baby."

"Diana's baby?"

"It doesn't have the baby yet, Quinn. Which means it's not over yet. Even here in the dark, with all of us so scared. It's not over. Believe that, okay? Believe that it's not over."

"It's not over," Quinn said, feeling and probably sounding puzzled.

"Those kids back there, if they start to panic they'll hurt themselves. I won't be able to find them and help them, so they'll die. And see, that's what I'm not going to let him do. The gaiaphage, I mean. I can't kill him, I can't keep him from getting the baby. What I can do, and what you can do, too, Quinn, is keep as many of us alive as possible, for as long as possible. Maybe because it's the right thing to do. But also . . . also . . ." He felt her touch his chest, fumble from there to find his shoulder, then down to take his hand and hold it with a surprisingly strong grip. "Also because I'm not letting him win. He wants us all dead and gone, because as long as we live, we're a threat. Well, no. No. We're not going to give up."

She let go of his hand.

"It's the only way I have left to fight him, Quinn. By not dying, and by not letting any of those kids back there die."

THIRTY-ONE

8 HOURS, 58 MINUTES

PENNY HAD NEVER felt like this before. She'd never experienced a sense of awe. Never even known what people were talking about when they went on and on about some sunset or the sweep of stars in a clear night sky.

But now she was feeling something.

She couldn't see. It was as black as if her eyes had been gouged out. (A thought that made her smile at memories of Cigar.) And yet she knew where she was going.

Her cut foot no longer mattered. When she stubbed her toe on a rock it didn't matter. That she had to feel her way along the narrow path with her hands out like a blind person, it didn't matter, none of it, because she could feel . . . feel something so great, so, so magnificent.

She'd never been here before, but it was a homecoming anyway.

She laughed out loud.

"You can feel it, can't you?"

Penny was startled by the voice. It was coming from where Drake had been but it was a girl's voice. Of course: Brittney.

"I feel it," Penny confirmed. "I feel it."

"When you get closer you'll hear his voice inside you," Brittney said. "And it's not some dream or something; it's real. And then, when you get all the way down to the bottom, then you can actually touch him."

Penny thought that sounded weird. Not that she had a big problem with weird. But Brittney was not Drake. Drake she could respect. The Whip Hand—and even more, the will to use it—made Drake powerful.

And attractive, too, as she remembered from former days. She hadn't ever paid that much attention to him back then because Caine was the one for her. Caine had the dark good looks and the brain—so smart. Drake had been a very different boy: like a shark. He looked like a shark, with dead eyes and a hungry mouth.

Well, she'd been wrong about Caine. Caine was totally under the thumb of that witch Diana. Drake, though, he sure didn't love Diana. In fact, he hated her. He hated her as much as Penny did.

Maybe Drake was better-looking after all. Anyway, good luck to Diana trying to steal him away like she had Caine.

Brittney was bringing up the rear. Then Penny. Diana and Justin stumbled and wept and fell down in front, feeling their clumsy way along.

Unfortunately Penny could not sustain the illusion that had paralyzed Brianna from this distance. It would have faded by now. Which meant Brianna was free to come after them.

Penny grinned in the dark. Good luck catching them. Let Brianna come back in range again. Her speed was useless now. She was nothing now. The Breeze? Hah. If she came within range, Penny would make her run, run real fast, run until her legs broke. Hah!

"He'll speak to me; he'll speak to you," Brittney said in a singsong voice. "He'll tell us what to do."

“Shut up,” Penny snapped.

“No,” Brittney chided in a voice dripping with sincerity. “We mustn’t fight amongst ourselves.”

“We mustn’t?” Penny mocked her. “Shut up until Drake comes back.” Then, not happy with the silence from Brittney, silence that sounded like disapproval, Penny said, “I don’t take orders from anyone. Not you. Not Drake. Not even the whatever you call it.” But she licked her lips nervously as she said it.

“The gaiaphage,” Brittney said. She laughed, not cruelly, but with a knowing condescension. “You’ll see.”

Penny was already “seeing.” Not that she could see anything, not even a finger held right up to her eye, but she could feel the power of it. They had reached the entrance to the mine shaft. The darkness, already absolute, was now tight around them.

It was easier to find their way, just to feel for the timbers along the side. But harder to breathe.

A low moan escaped from Diana.

Penny had a fleeting impulse to give her something to be scared of. But that was the problem: fear was the very air they were breathing now.

“There are some hard places,” Brittney warned. “There’s a big, big drop. It will break your legs all up if you fall.”

Penny shook her head, a gesture no one could see. “No way. No way. Done that, not doing it again.”

Brittney’s voice was silky. “You could always leave.”

“You think I . . .” Penny had to struggle to take the next breath. “You think I won’t?”

“You won’t,” Brittney said. “You’re going to the place you always wanted to be.”

“No one tells me—” Penny snarled. But the defiance died in midsentence. She tried again. “No one . . .”

“Careful,” Brittney said smugly. “This next section is all jumbled-up rock. You’ll have to crawl over it.” Then, in that weird singsong voice she got from time to time, she said, “Crawl on our knees, on our knees we crawl to our lord.”

Brianna was breathing hard without moving.

The darkness, it was her kryptonite. Couldn’t use super-speed when you couldn’t see where you were going.

So dark. It was actually worse than the images Penny had put in her head. Those had been cool in a way. This, though, this was just nothing.

Just nothing nothing nothingness.

Well, not total nothing, now that she thought about it. When she held the machete up in front of her face there was the tangy smell of steel. She drew her shotgun and there was the feel of the short stock and the smell of gunpowder residue.

She could imagine the muzzle flash. It would be loud.

Bright, too.

Now there was a thought. She had what? Twelve rounds?

Yeah. Interesting.

There were sounds, too. She could hear them all up the path. Probably at the mine shaft entrance by now.

Brianna could feel the dark presence of the gaiaphage. She wasn't immune to that dark weight on her soul. But she wasn't paralyzed by it. She felt the gaiaphage, but it didn't frighten her. It was like a warning, like a terrible deep voice saying, "Stay away, stay away!" But Brianna didn't scare worth a damn. She heard the warning; she felt the malice behind it; she knew it wasn't a fake or a joke; she knew it represented a force of great power and deep evil.

But Brianna wasn't wired the way most people were. She'd known that about herself—and about other people—for some time. Since even before the FAYZ, but much more now since she had become the Breeze.

She remembered once when she was young. How old was she then? Maybe three? Her and some older kids, that boy and his stupid sister who used to live three houses down. And they said, "We're going to sneak into the old restaurant that burned up."

It was a big old Italian restaurant. It looked half-normal from the outside except there was yellow police tape across the charred front door.

The two kids, she had no idea what their names were, tried to get little Brianna to be spooked. "Oh, look, that's where some guy burned up. His ghost is probably haunting this place. Boo!"

She hadn't been scared. Actually she'd been disappointed when she realized there was no ghost.

Then came the rats. There must have been two dozen of them, at least. They came scurrying out like they were being chased, rushing from the burned-out kitchen into the smoke-stinking dining room where the three kids were and the Olafsons—that was their name, Jane and Todd Olafson; no wonder she didn't remember it—those two had screamed and run for it. The girl, Jane, had tripped and cut her knee pretty badly.

But Brianna had not run. She'd stood her ground with her talking Woody doll in one hand. She remembered one of the rats had stopped and cocked its rat face to look at her. Like it couldn't believe she wasn't running. Like it wanted to say, "Hey, kid, I'm a huge rat: why aren't you running?"

And she had wanted to say, "Because you're just a stupid rat."

She felt her way step by step now. Way too slow for a normal person, let alone the Breeze.

"Oh, I feel you, old dark and scary," she muttered. "But you're just a stupid rat."

Sam could look back and see a string of ten lights behind him. The line they made wobbled a bit but it was basically straight. Of course, he could no longer see the lake or its firefly lights.

He wondered about all the others out in this terrible darkness. Some maybe had flashlights going slowly dim. Some might have built fires. But many were just walking into darkness. Scared. But not stopping.

Walking into darkness.

His feet were going up a hill. He allowed it. Maybe he would see something from higher up. It was strange. He wished Astrid was here to talk to about how strange it was to move like this, blind, feeling a hill but not seeing it, not knowing was he near the top or not even close?

Everything was about feel now. He felt the slope with his ankles rather than seeing it with his eyes. He felt it in his forward lean. When the angle increased he was caught

by surprise and stumbled. But then it would lessen and that, too, would catch him by surprise.

He hung a Sammy sun. It took him a while to make sense of his immediate surroundings. For one thing, there was an old rusted beer can.

For another he was less than six feet from what might be a sheer drop. It might have killed him if he'd gone off. Then again, maybe it was only a two-foot drop. Or six. He stood at the edge and listened hard. He could almost hear the emptiness of that space. It sounded big. It felt huge. And maybe he could develop those senses someday. But not now, not right now at the edge of a one- or ten- or hundred-foot drop.

He picked up the rusted beer can and dropped it over the edge.

It fell for perhaps a full second before it hit something.

And then it fell some more.

Stopped.

Sam breathed and the sound of his own breath seemed dramatic in the darkness.

He was going to have to backtrack down this hill. Or risk taking a long fall. He turned carefully, slowly, a one-eighty. He was pretty sure that the lake was blocked from view by the bulk of the hill. But he wasn't absolutely sure. A single point of light appeared. It was as small as a star, much dimmer, and orange, not white.

A single distant point of barely visible light. Probably a bonfire in Perdido Beach. Or out in the desert. Or even out on the island. Or maybe it was just his imagination.

The sight of it wrung a sigh from Sam. It didn't make the dark less dark; it made the dark seem vast. Endless. The tiny point of light served only to emphasize the totality of the darkness.

Sam started back down the hill. It took all his willpower to turn left when he reached the lowest light on the hill and move toward the ghost town.

Or where he thought, hoped, pretended the ghost town might be.

“Aaaahhh, aaaaahhh, aaaahhhh.”

Dekka cried into the dirt. A despairing sound. She cried and gasped in air mixed with dirt and cried again.

Penny had taken her most terrible fear—that the bugs could return—and she had doubled it. Dekka would rather die than endure it. Rather die a thousand times. She would beg for death before she would live through it again.

She heard someone crying and then screaming and then babbling, all three mixed up together, all of it coming from her own mouth.

Trapped and eaten alive.

Eaten from the inside out, forever, no end, trapped inside seamless white stone, alabaster, a tomb that went inside her, immobilized her so that she couldn't even lash out, couldn't move as they ate her insides . . .

Never let it happen again.

Never.

Would kill herself first.

She clutched dirt in her hands, squeezed it like she was holding on to reality. The dirt ran through her fingers and she gathered more and again it got away and she grabbed at more and more, needing something to hold on to, and something to hurt. Needing to feel her body move and not be in that terrible blank white stone prison.

She was just a girl. Just some girl. Just this girl with the stupid name of Dekka. She had fought enough. And what for? For emptiness. For loneliness. All of it came to here. To this nothing. To clutching at sand and jibbering like a crazy person, beaten.

Die here, Dekka. It's okay if you do. It's okay to just lie here in the dark and let your eyelids close, because there's nothing more to see, Dekka; do you hear me? Do you, Dekka, because there's nothing for you but fear. And death is better because death is the end of fear, isn't it?

Quiet. Peace.

It wouldn't be suicide. That was the thing you could never do, right? Never kill yourself. But let yourself go? Where was the sin in that?

"You want me to explain how I could wish for that, God? Tell you what, hit the back button and play the last hour . . . no, no, the last, what's it been, almost a year?"

"Not even enough. Come on, God, you want to see, right? Have a good laugh. See what you did to me. Make me brave and then break me. Make me strong and leave me weeping in the dirt.

"Make me love and then . . . and then . . ."

"Just kill me, okay? I give up. Here I am. You can see in the dark, right, God? Don't you have night-vision goggles? You know, the ones that make everything green and glowing? Well, strap them on, oh, Lord, oh, God, oh, big-bearded guy in the sky, you strap on your goggles like some divine commando, and you look down at me, okay? You take a good long look at what you did.

"See? See me here facedown in the dirt?"

"Can you hear me? Can you hear the sounds my brain is pushing out of my mouth, all that nonsense? I sound like a madwoman pushing a shopping cart down the street, don't I?"

"Can you smell me? Because when the fear had me I made a mess all over myself. Fear does that, you know; did you know? Well, probably not, being God and all and not afraid of anything.

"Just. One favor. Okay? Just kill me. Because as long as I live she might do it to me again, she might cover me like that, and it might squeeze me like it did, and then I might feel those . . . I might know what they were doing, you know, because it's not like I didn't see them pouring out of my guts as Sam cut me open.

"So, I beg of thee, all right? Oh, most high Lord: kill me. Do I have to beg? Is that it? You get off on that? Okay. I beg you to kill me."

"I don't want to kill you."

Dekka laughed. In her fevered mind she thought for a second there she'd heard an actual voice. The voice of God.

She waited, silent.

Something was there. She could sense it. Something close.

"Is that you, Dekka? It sounds like you."

Dekka said nothing. The voice was familiar. It probably did not belong to God.

"I was out here. I heard you crying and yelling and praying and all," Orc said.

"Yeah," Dekka said. Her lips were coated with dirt. Her nose was blocked by it. Her body was damp with sweat.

She couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Like you was wanting to die."

He couldn't see that she was facedown in the dirt. He couldn't see that she was finished. Beaten.

"You can't kill yourself," Orc said.

"I can't . . ." Dekka began, but then she couldn't form any more words without spitting the dirt out of her mouth.

"If you kill yourself, you go to hell."

Dekka snorted, a derisive sound, as she spit dirt. "You believe in hell?"

"You mean, like, it's a real place?"

Dekka waited while he thought it out. And suddenly she wanted to hear the answer. Like it mattered.

"No," Orc said at last. "Because we're all children of God. So he wouldn't do that. It was just a story he made up."

Despite herself Dekka was listening. It was hard not to. Talking nonsense was better than remembering. "A story?"

"Yeah, because he knew our lives would be really bad sometimes. Like maybe we'd be turned into a monster and then our best friend would get killed. So he made up this story about hell, so we could always say, 'Well, it could be worse. It could be hell.' And then we'd keep going."

Dekka had no answer to that. He had completely baffled her. And she was almost angry at him, because baffled was a different thing from despairing. Baffled meant she was still . . . involved.

"What are you doing out here, Orc?"

"I'm going to kill Drake. If I find him."

Dekka sighed. She stuck out her hand and eventually encountered a gravelly leg. "Give me a hand up. I'm a little shaky."

His massive hands found her and propped her up. Her legs almost gave way. She was drained, empty, weak.

But not dead.

"Are you okay?"

"No," she said.

"Me neither," Orc said.

"I'm . . ." Dekka stared into the darkness, not even sure she was looking in his direction. She paused until a sob subsided. "I'm afraid I won't ever be me again."

"Yeah, I get that, too," Orc said. He sighed a huge sigh, like he'd walked a million miles and was just so weary. "Some of it is stuff I did. Some of it is stuff that just happened. Like the coyotes eating on me. And then, you know, what happened after that. I never wanted to remember that. But none of it goes away, not even when you're really drunk or whatever. It's all still there."

"Even in the dark," Dekka said. "Especially in the dark."

"Which way should we go?" Orc asked.

"I doubt it matters much," Dekka said. "Start moving. I'll follow the sound of your footsteps."

"Aaaahhh," Cigar screeched. His hand in Astrid's squeezed with incredible strength.

It was not the first time he'd suddenly cried out. It was a fairly regular thing for him. But in this case there were other sounds. A rush of wind, a stink like rotting meat,

and then a snarl.

Cigar was torn away from Astrid.

She instinctively dropped into a crouch. A coyote missed its attack as a result and rather than closing its jaws around her leg just plowed into her with enough force to knock her on her back.

She fumbled in the dark for her shotgun, felt something metallic, not sure which way it was pointing, fumbled, and was brushed aside by a rushing coyote, fur over muscles.

They could hunt in the dark, but the close-in killing work was harder without sight.

Astrid rolled over, flat, stretching her arm, trying to find the shotgun. One finger touched metal.

Cigar was screaming now in that despairing, beaten voice of his. And the snarling was intensifying. The coyotes were frustrated, too, it seemed, unable to pinpoint their prey, snapping blindly where their ears and nose told them the prey would be.

Astrid rolled toward the gun and now she was on top of it, feeling with trembling fingers, searching for—yes! She had the grip. She pushed it forward, probably filling the barrel with sand, probably jamming the trigger. She tried to tell where Cigar was, rolled once more, pulling the shotgun on top of her, and fired.

The explosion was shocking. A jet of light so much bigger than it had ever seemed before.

In the split-second flash Astrid saw at least three coyotes, and Cigar mobbed by them, and a fourth just a few feet away, lips back in a snarl, all of it freeze-framed for the duration of the flash.

The noise was awesome.

She pushed herself to one knee, aimed at the place where the fourth coyote had been standing, and pulled the trigger again. Nothing! She'd forgotten to jack another round in. She did it, aimed shakily at blank space, and fired again.

BOOM!

This time she was expecting the flash and saw that the coyote she'd aimed at was no longer there. Cigar was no longer mobbed by the beasts. His terrible, white marble eyes stared.

Something had happened to the coyotes. They had exploded.

The flash wasn't enough to show more. Just that their insides were where their outsides had been.

Silence.

Darkness.

Cigar panting. Astrid, too.

The smell of coyote guts and gunpowder.

It was a while before Astrid could master her voice. Before she could reassemble her shattered thoughts into something like coherence.

"Is the little boy here?" Astrid asked.

"Yes," Cigar said.

"What did he do?"

"He touched them. Is it . . . Is it real?" Cigar asked tentatively.

"Yes," Astrid said. "I think it's real."

She stood with her smoking shotgun in her hands and looked at nothing. She was

shaking all over. Like it was cold. Like the darkness was made of wet wool wrapped all around her.

“Petey. Talk to me.”

“He can’t,” Cigar said.

Silence.

“He says it will hurt you,” Cigar said.

“Hurt me? Why doesn’t it hurt you?”

Cigar laughed, but it wasn’t a joyful sound. “I’m already hurt. In my head.”

Astrid took a breath and licked her lips. “Does he mean it will make me . . .” She searched for a word that wouldn’t hurt Cigar.

Cigar himself was beyond worrying about euphemisms. “Crazy?” He said. “My brain is already crazy. He doesn’t know how to do it. Maybe it would make you crazy.”

Astrid’s fingers ached, she was clutching the gun so hard. There was nothing else to hold on to. Her heart beat so loud she was sure Cigar must hear it. She shivered.

Anything else. Not that. Not madness.

She could get all the answers she needed by way of Cigar. Except that Cigar was coherent for only snatches of time before he spiraled down into lunatic rantings and shrieks.

“No,” Astrid said. “Not taking the risk. No. Let’s get going.”

Like she knew which way to go. She’d been following Cigar, who had been following—or so he said—Little Pete.

Panic. It tickled her, teased her. There was something smothering about the darkness. Like it was thick and hard to breathe.

The darkness was so absolute. She could walk in circles and never know it. She could walk into a zeke field and not know it until the worms were inside her.

“Just turn the damned lights on, Petey!” she yelled.

Her words seemed to barely penetrate the blackness.

“Just fix it! You’re the one who did this. Fix it!”

Silence.

Cigar started in again, moaning and giggling, talking about Red Vines and how good candy tasted.

She had a vision of herself back at the lake, lying in the bunk with Sam. She had loved touching his muscles. What an embarrassing, juvenile thing. Like the girls she despised, always mooning over some rock star, some movie star, some guy with hard abs and yet, and yet, hadn’t that been her all along?

She recalled with intimate detail having her hand on his biceps when he flexed to pick her up and the way the muscle had just doubled in size and become hard as if it were carved out of oak. He’d lifted her up like she weighed nothing. And set her down again, so gently, with her hands sliding to his chest to balance and . . .

And now, she was here. With a ghost and a lunatic. In the dark.

Why?

Risk your sanity and maybe know something. But maybe not. Maybe just be destroyed. And what would she know then, if Petey scrambled her mind?

Scrambled brain, full of things she needed to know, but wouldn’t really know if her brain was twisted in the learning.

“Fix it! Fix it!” she screamed at the dark.

“My leg, it’s not my leg; it’s a stick, a stick with nails poking through,” Cigar moaned.

A dark, terrible urge to turn the shotgun around and end Cigar’s misery had Astrid breathing hard and clenching her jaw. No. No, she’d already played Abraham to Petey’s Isaac, not that ever again. She would not allow herself to take an innocent life, not ever again.

Innocent, a derisive voice in her head taunted. Innocent? Astrid Ellison, prosecutor and jury and executioner.

There’s nothing innocent about Petey, the voice teased. He built this. All of it. He made this universe. He’s the creator and it is all his fault.

“Let’s go,” Astrid said. “Give me your hand, Cigar.” She shouldered the shotgun. She felt around in the dark until she found Cigar, and then fumbled some more before she had his hand. “Get up.”

He got up.

“Which way?” Cigar asked.

Astrid laughed. “I have a joke for you, Cigar. Reason and madness go for a walk in a dark room, looking for an exit.”

Cigar laughed like it had been funny.

“You even know what the punch line is, you poor crazy boy?”

“No,” Cigar admitted.

“Me neither. How about we just walk until we can’t walk anymore?”

OUTSIDE

CONNIE TEMPLE SAT sipping coffee at a booth in Denny's. Across from her sat a reporter named Elizabeth Han. Han was young and pretty but also smart. She had interviewed Connie several times before. She reported for the *Huffington Post* and had been on the Perdido Beach Anomaly story from the start.

"They're setting off a nuclear device?"

"The so-called chemical spill is a trick. They just want everyone away from the dome. They must have deliberately left it for the last minute so it would seem like a real emergency."

Han spread her hands wide. "A nuclear explosion, even underground, will show up on seismographs all over the world."

Connie nodded. "I know. But—" At that moment Abana Baidoo came into the restaurant, walked past the hostess, and slid into the booth beside Connie. Connie had called her but told her nothing. Quickly, and without revealing Darius's name, she backed the story up to the start.

"Are they out of their minds?" Abana demanded. "Are they insane?"

"Just scared," Connie said. "It's human nature: they don't want to just wait, feeling powerless. They want to do something. They want to make something happen."

"We all want to make something happen," Abana snapped. Then she put a reassuring hand on Connie's arm. "We're all worn-out with worry. We're all sick of not knowing."

Elizabeth Han barked out a laugh. "They can't do this without approval from very high up. I mean, all the way up." She shook her head thoughtfully. "They know something. Or at least they suspect something. This president doesn't go off half-cocked."

"We have to stop it from happening," Connie insisted.

"We still don't have any idea what caused this," the reporter said. "But whatever it is, it rewrote the laws of nature to create that sphere. They didn't just decide this overnight; there must have been a plan in place for a long time. They wanted this as an option. So why suddenly, now, use that option?"

"The dome is changing," Connie said. "They briefed us. There's some change in the energy signature or whatever." She looked at her friend. "Abana. They don't want our kids coming out. That's why. They think the barrier is weakening. They don't want our kids coming out."

"They don't want whatever made this coming out," Abana said. "I can't believe they're targeting our kids. It's whatever made this happen."

Connie hung her head, aware that she was bringing conversation to a halt, aware that Abana and Elizabeth were exchanging worried glances.

"Okay," Connie said, wrapping both hands around the ceramic coffee mug and refusing to look at either woman. "What's happened inside . . . I mean, the kids who have developed powers . . . I never shared this, and I'm so sorry. But with Sam . . ." She bit her lip. She looked up sharply, her jaw set. "Sam and Caine. Their powers developed before the anomaly. I saw them both. I knew what was happening. The,

whatever they are, the mutations, they came before the barrier. Which means something caused them besides the barrier.”

Elizabeth Han was thumbing frantically into her iPhone, taking notes, even as she said, “Why would this scare the government any more than—” She frowned and looked up. “They think the dome is the cause of the mutations.”

Connie nodded. “If that’s the way it is, then when the dome comes down the mutations will stop. But if it’s the other way around, if the mutations came before the barrier, then maybe they caused the barrier. Which means this isn’t all just some freak of nature, some quantum flux or whatever, or even an intrusion from a parallel universe, all those theories. This means there’s something or someone inside that dome with unbelievable power.”

Elizabeth Han looked grim as she went back to taking notes. “You have to give me the name of the person who told you about the nuke. I need to source this.”

Out of the corner of her eye Connie saw Abana pull back. A cold distance opened between them for the first time since the anomaly had begun. Connie had lied to her. All this time, as they had suffered together, Connie Temple had been holding something back.

And now, Connie knew, Abana was wondering if somehow her friend could have kept this from happening.

“I can’t give you his name,” Connie said.

“Then I can’t run the story.”

Abana stood up abruptly. She banged the table hard and rattled the cups. “I’m stopping this. I’m calling the parents, the families. I’m going to get around that roadblock, and if they want to blow up my child, they’ll have to blow me up, too.”

Connie watched her go.

“What do you want me to do?” the reporter asked Connie, angry and frustrated. “You won’t tell me who gave you this information; what am I supposed to do?”

“I promised.”

“Your son—”

“Darius Ashton!” Connie said through gritted teeth. Then, quieter, more calmly, but hating herself, she repeated, “Sergeant Darius Ashton. I have his number. But if you leak his name he’ll end up in prison.”

“If I don’t get this out, and right now, it sounds like all those kids inside may die. What’s your choice?”

“Sergeant Ashton? Sergeant Darius Ashton?”

He froze. The voice, coming from behind him, was unfamiliar. But the tone, the repetition of his name, that told him all he needed to know.

He forced a pleasant smile and turned to see a man and a woman, neither smiling, both holding badges so he could read them.

His cell phone rang.

“I’m Ashton,” he said. Then, “Excuse me.” He held the phone to his ear.

The FBI agents seemed momentarily uncertain as to whether they should or could stop him taking the call.

Darius held up a finger to signal *just a minute*. He listened for a while.

He was, he knew, destroying himself. With two FBI agents watching he was going

to commit what might as well be suicide.

“Yes,” he said into the phone. “What she told you is one hundred percent true.”

The FBI agents took his phone then.

THIRTY-TWO

7 HOURS, 1 MINUTE

DIANA CRAWLED AND fell. She was cut and bruised in so many places she couldn't even begin to keep track. Her palms, her knees, her shins, her ankles, the soles of her feet, all ripped and torn. And the cuts from Drake's whip were on her back, shoulders, the back of her thighs, her bottom.

But she felt little of the pain now. That pain was something far away. Something that happened to a real person who was not her. Some shell she'd once inhabited, maybe, but not her, not this person, because this person, this Diana, felt something so much more awful.

It was inside her.

The baby. It was inside her and pushing and kicking.

And it was growing. She felt her belly grow each time she reached to hold it. Bigger and bigger, like someone was filling a water balloon from a hose and didn't have the sense to stop, didn't know that it would burst if you just kept making it—

A spasm went through her, seizing her insides, drawing on every ounce of her strength and concentrating it in that one spasm.

Contraction.

The word came to her from the depths of memory.

Contraction.

Was her stomach really growing? Was the impatience of the baby inside her real, or was it Penny playing some game with her reality?

She felt the gaiaphage's dark mind. She felt the fear that squeezed the air from her lungs. And more horrible still, she felt that evil mind's eagerness. It strained to hurry her on. It reached for her from the depths. Like a little kid impatient for the ice cream. Give me, give me!

But worse by far was the echo that came from the baby.

The baby felt the force of the gaiaphage's will. She knew it. It would be his.

How long had she crawled like this? How many times had Drake grabbed her roughly with his whip hand and lowered her down some sheer drop to cling with torn fingernails to the rock wall?

And blind. Always blind. A darkness so total it reached into her memory and blotted the sun from the pictures there.

Then, at long last, a glow. At first it seemed like it must be a hallucination. She had accepted that light was gone forever, and now here was a faint, sickly glow.

"Go!" Drake urged her. "It's straight and level now. Go!"

She stumbled forward. Her belly was impossibly big, the flesh stretched like a drum. And the next contraction now racked her, a vise inside her that tightened so hard it seemed it must break her very bones.

It was hot and airless. She was bathed in sweat, her hair sticking to her neck.

The glow brightened. It stuck to the floor and walls of the cave. It revealed the contours of rock, the stalagmites rising from the floor, the tumbled piles of broken stone like waterfalls rendered with a child's blocks.

And then, beneath her bare feet, the electric zap of the barrier, forcing her to climb

for safety up onto pieces of the gaiaphage itself.

She could feel the gaiaphage move under her, like stepping on a million ants all packed tight together; the cells of the monster seethed and vibrated.

Drake cavorted across the chamber, snapping the air with his whip, shouting, "I did it! I did it! I brought you Diana! I, Drake Merwin, I did it! Whip Hand! Whip! Hand!"

Justin. Where was he? Diana realized she hadn't seen him in a long time.

Where was he? She looked around, frantic, amazed to have eyes to see with. Her vision blurred green. No Justin.

Penny caught the frantic look. Her face was grim. She, too, now realized they'd lost the little boy somewhere along the bloody miles leading them here.

Penny, too, had not fared well. She was almost as battered, bruised, and bloodied as Diana. The trip down a jet-black tunnel had not been good to her. At some point she must have hit her head very hard, because a gash in her scalp bled down into one eye.

But Penny had already lost interest in Justin. Now she looked with narrow, jealous eyes at Drake in all his joy. Drake was ignoring her. He hadn't introduced her. *Gaiaphage, meet Penny. Penny, gaiaphage. I know you two will get along.*

The image would have made Diana laugh if not for a contraction that forced her to her knees.

It was in that position that Diana felt a sudden wetness. It was warm and ran down her inner thighs.

"Impossible." She wept.

But she knew in her heart, and had known for some time, that this baby was no normal child. Already it was a three bar, an infant with powers not yet defined.

The child of an evil father and a mother who had tried, had wanted to . . . had tried to . . . but somehow had failed.

Repentance had not saved her. Burning tears had not been enough to wash away the stain.

The water that had gushed from inside her had not washed away the stain.

Diana Ladris, beaten and scourged and crying out to heaven for forgiveness, would still be the mother of a monster.

Brianna had a little roasted pigeon in her backpack. She had a more than healthy appetite, and she liked to always keep food handy. A history of starvation did that to people: made them nervous about food.

Now she tore a piece of the pigeon breast away from the bone, felt through the meat with dirty fingers for any fragment of bone or cartilage. Then she found the little boy's hand and put the meat into it.

"Eat that. It'll make you feel a little better."

They were deep inside the mine shaft. She'd almost laid into Justin with her machete before realizing he was sniffing, not snarling.

Now what, though? She could walk him out to the mine shaft entrance, but what difference did it make? It was dark in here, and it was dark out there. Although at least out there that oppression of the soul that came with proximity to the gaiaphage might be lessened.

"What can you tell me, kid? Did you see the thing?"

"I can't see anything." He sniffed. But he was cried out. More like shell-shocked,

that was how he sounded. Brianna felt an unaccustomed stab of sympathy. Poor kid. How was it right that this kind of stuff happened to a little kid? How was he ever going to forget it?

He'd forget when he was dead, Brianna thought harshly, and that wouldn't be too long from now, most likely.

Then, surprisingly, Justin said, "There's a really long drop."

"Up ahead, you mean?"

"That's where they forgot about me."

"Yeah? Right on, kid, that helps me to know that."

"Are you going to save Diana?"

"Kind of more thinking about killing Drake. But if that means I save Diana, I can live with that." She tore off another piece of her precious pigeon meat and gave it to him. What did it matter? This was a suicide mission. She wasn't coming back. She wouldn't need much to eat.

Not a happy thought.

"The lady. Diana. I think her baby is going to come out."

"Well, that would make everything just about perfect," Brianna said with a sigh. "Kid. I have to keep going. You understand? You can keep heading back to the entrance. Or you can just sit tight right here and wait for me."

"Are you coming back?"

Brianna gave a short laugh. "I doubt it. But that's me, little dude. I'm the Breeze. And the Breeze doesn't stop. If you get out of this somehow, and you get out of the whole FAYZ and get back home to your mom and dad and everyone out in the world, you tell people that, okay? Maybe find my family some—"

Her voice choked. She could feel tears in her eyes. Wow, where had that come from? She shook her head angrily, pushed her hair back, and said, "I'm just saying: you tell people the Breeze never wimped out. The Breeze never gave up. Will you do that?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Ma'am," Brianna echoed in an ironic tone. "Anyway. Later, okay?"

She began to make her way down the tunnel. She had worked out a way to move a little faster than a normal person might. She used her machete, twirling it ahead of her in a variety of different patterns to avoid getting too bored—figure eight, a five-pointed star, a six-way star. She could swing the machete maybe two, three times as fast as a regular person. Nowhere near her usual speed, but one had to adapt.

When the machete struck something, she slowed down until she found an open way. It was like a blind person using a cane, but so much more badass.

From time to time she would feel for a rock and throw it ahead, listening for something that might be, as Justin had called it, "a really long drop."

She was very much against really long drops.

She tossed a pebble finally and did not hear it clatter on stone. "Ah. I believe we have the long drop." She edged forward until, sure enough, she could sense a gap in the floor.

She crept to the edge of it on hands and knees. She positioned herself in a way to see straight downward. "Eyes open, don't flinch," she told herself.

She aimed the shotgun down into the hole and pulled the trigger.

Shotguns were never exactly quiet. But in the confines of the mine shaft it was like a bomb going off.

The muzzle flash stabbed thirty feet down, painting an indelible image of stone walls, a ledge perhaps twenty feet straight down.

The echo of the blast went on for some time. It sounded a bit like when a jet broke the sound barrier. Most likely Drake would hear, unless this shaft went down even farther than she imagined.

Brianna smiled. "That's right, Drakey boy: I'm still coming."

Two explosions. Two stabs of light.

No way to know how far away they were. The sound said a long way. The light seemed nearer. Impossible to tell.

It could be anyone. Brianna. Astrid. Or just any number of armed kids who might be lost in the darkness.

"Definitely a gun," Sam said to no one. How weird that gunfire was almost reassuring.

He did not believe it had come from the same direction as the mine shaft. It was to the right. More like in a line to where he thought Perdido Beach might be. Which was not his objective. He wasn't on a mission to find and rescue Astrid, if that was her. He was on a mission to—

"Too bad," he snapped, again talking defiantly to no one.

If it was Astrid, and if she was in a fight, then having whoever she was fighting—maybe even Drake—see a line of Sammy suns approaching would give everything away. If it was Astrid—and he'd already convinced himself it was—he needed to move fast. He wouldn't just have to walk tentatively into the dark, lighting his path back to home with a row of lights. He would have to run straight into darkness.

Sam fixed in his mind's eye the direction the flashes had come from. He began to trot, lifting each step high to avoid tripping. He made it surprisingly far before something hard caught his foot and he slammed facedown into the dirt.

"That's one," he said. Stood up, and started running again.

It was insanity, of course. Running blind. Running with his eyes closed. Running with absolutely no idea where his foot would land, running when maybe there was a wall or a branch or a wild animal just right there. Right there an inch from his nose.

That was his choice: to inch his way cautiously, try to avoid falling, but never get anywhere. Or to run, and maybe get somewhere, but maybe just run right off a cliff.

Yeah, that's life, he thought, and as the wry smile formed he plowed into a bush that tripped him, tangled him, and threatened not to let him escape.

Finally he rolled free, stood up, and started running again, picking thorns out of his palms and arms as he went.

All his life Sam had feared the darkness. As a kid he'd lain in his bed at night, tensed against the assault of the unseen but well-imagined threat. But now in this ultimate darkness, it seemed to him that fear of the dark was fear of himself. Not a fear of what might be "out there," but a fear of how he would react to what was out there. He had spent hundreds, maybe thousands of hours in his life imagining how he would cope with whatever terrible thing his imagination had conjured up. It used to shame him, that incessant hero fantasy, that endless mental war-gaming for threats that never

materialized. An endless series of scenarios in which Sam did not panic. Sam did not run away. Sam did not cry.

Because that, more than any monster, was what Sam had feared: that he was weak and cowardly. He had a terrible fear of being afraid.

And the only solution was to refuse to be afraid.

Easier said than done when the darkness was absolute, and nothing was foreseen, and there really were genuine, actual, terrible monsters lying in wait.

No night-light now. No Sammy sun. Just darkness so total it negated the very idea of sight.

Having thought about his fear did not lessen it. But continuing to run straight ahead did.

“So just don’t cry,” Sam said.

“I miss Howard,” Orc said. Dekka wasn’t exactly talkative. In fact, she’d barely said a word. Normally Orc didn’t talk all that much, either, but it wasn’t like there was anything to see. Or anything else to do.

Orc was walking in front with Dekka just behind him, following the sounds of his steps. The nice thing about being the way he was, Orc reflected, was that it was pretty hard for anything to trip him.

Most things he just plowed right through. And if it was a bush or a bumpy place or whatever he could warn Dekka.

In some ways it was a pleasant stroll. Nothing to see, hah, hah. But it wasn’t too hot or too cold. The only real problem was that they didn’t know where they were going.

“Sorry about Howard,” Dekka said, too late. “I know you were friends.”

“No one liked Howard.”

Dekka didn’t choose to disagree.

“Everyone just saw him as this guy who sold drugs and booze and all. But he was different sometimes.” Orc crushed a tin can under one foot and with his next step flattened the earth over what felt like a gopher hole.

“He liked me anyway,” Orc said.

Nothing from Dekka.

“You have lots of friends, so you probably don’t understand why Howard—”

“I don’t have a lot of friends,” Dekka interrupted. Her voice was still shaky. Whatever had happened to her back there, it must have been pretty bad. Because as far as Orc was concerned Dekka was a hard, hard girl. Howard always said that about her. Sometimes he would call Dekka names. Probably because Dekka had this way of looking at Howard, like her face would be down, but her eyes would be on him, like they were watching him through her own eyebrows, kind of. And from that direction all you saw were these cornrows and her broad forehead and those hard eyes.

“Sam,” Orc said.

“Yeah.” Dekka’s voice softened. “Sam.”

“Edilio.”

“We work together. We’re not really friends. How about you and Sinder? She likes you okay.”

The idea surprised Orc. “She’s nice to me,” he admitted. He thought it over a little

more. "She's pretty, too."

"I wasn't saying she liked you that way."

"Oh. No. I knew that," Orc said, feeling as if he'd be blushing if he had more than a few inches of skin left. "That's not what I was talking about. No." He forced a laugh. "That kind of stuff, that's not for me. Not a lot of girls are interested in someone like me." He didn't want it to sound like he was feeling sorry for himself, but it probably did.

"Yeah, well, it turns out there aren't a lot of girls interested in me, either," Dekka said.

"You mean boys."

"No. I mean girls."

Orc missed a step, he was so shocked. "You're one of those lesbos?"

"I'm a lesbian. And I'm not one of those anything in this place; it looks like I'm the only one of those."

This was making Orc feel very uncomfortable. Lesbo was just a name to call some ugly girl back when he'd been at school. He hadn't really thought much about it. And now he had to think about it.

Then a thought occurred to him. "Hey, so you're like me."

"What?"

"An only. Like me. I'm the only one like me," Orc said.

He heard a derisive snort from Dekka. It was an annoyed sound, not a happy laugh. But it was the best she'd come up with so far.

"Yeah," Orc went on. "You and me, we're onlies is what we are. The only person made out of rocks and the only lesbo."

"Lesbian," Dekka corrected. But she didn't sound that mad.

Something smacked Orc's head and poked at his eyes. "Careful. There's a tree. Grab my waist and I'll go around it."

Lana was right. It wasn't long before trouble started. Quinn stopped a kid who had taken a burning stick from the fire and was heading toward his home.

"I just want to get my stuff."

"No fire outside the plaza," Quinn said. "Sorry, man, but we don't want another Zil thing with the whole town going up in flames."

"Then give me a flashlight."

"We don't have any to—"

"Then mind your own business. You're just a stupid fisherman."

Quinn had grabbed the torch. The kid tried to rip it away, but he, unlike Quinn, had not spent months with his hands gripping an oar.

Quinn wrested the torch away easily. "You can go where you want. But not with fire."

He'd escorted the kid back to the plaza just in time to see two torches heading away on the far side of the plaza.

Quinn cursed and sent some of his people after them. But the fishing crews were exhausted. They'd been chopping wood and dragging it and sawing it and distributing food and organizing a slit trench.

Lana had been right. She was looking at him now, not saying it, but knowing he

was coming to the same conclusion.

“Caine,” Quinn said. “Do you have it back?”

Caine had disappeared for a while. Later Quinn realized he’d walked down to the ocean and washed himself up. His clothing was wet but more or less clean. His hair was slicked back, and the scars of the staples Penny had driven into his head had been healed by Lana.

His hands—the backs, at least—were still covered in anywhere from an eighth of an inch to half an inch of cement. He had a hard time articulating his fingers. But his palms were mostly clean.

He looked gray, even by firelight. He looked like a much older person, like he had gone straight from handsome teenager to weary, beaten old man.

But when he stood he held himself with some dignity.

Caine turned toward the steps. The church had been emptied of anything that would burn. The last of the roof had come down with a sequence of crashes that sent dust billowing out to spark the bonfire. Now the tired crews were tearing handrails and old wooden office chairs, framed pictures and broken-up desks out of the town hall building.

Caine focused on the largest fragment, most of a desk. He extended his hand, palm out.

The desk rose from the ground.

It sailed through the air over upturned faces. Caine set it gently atop the burning pile.

Quinn braced himself for an announcement by Caine that he was back. That he was in charge. That he was still king. And the sad reality was that Quinn would have welcomed it: being in charge of all this was more than he wanted to handle.

“Let me know what else I can do,” Caine said quietly. Then he sat down, cross-legged, and stared into the fire.

Lana sauntered over. “Have to admit: the guy has a genius for doing the wrong thing. We actually need him to be the bad guy, and suddenly he’s Mr. Meek and Mild.”

Quinn was too tired to think of some clever retort. His shoulders sagged. He let his head drop down. “I wish I knew how long we had to keep it together.”

“Until we can’t,” Lana said.

The panic started then. There was no cause that Quinn could see. Suddenly kids on the far side of the fire were shouting and some were squealing. Maybe nothing more than a rat passing through.

But those beside them didn’t know what it was and the panic spread lightning-quick.

Lana cursed and started running. Quinn was right behind her. But the panic came to meet them, kids suddenly screaming without knowing why, running, circling back to the fire, getting spooked and running again, knocking one another over, yelling.

Sanjit’s sister, Peace, knocked into Quinn. He grabbed her shoulders and yelled, “What is it?”

She had no answer, just shook her head and pulled away.

A kid ran into the darkness. His clothing was on fire; the flames streamed behind him as he fled screaming. Dahra Baidoo tackled him like a football player and rolled him over to kill the flames.

Other kids grabbed torches and formed into knots and paranoid clusters, back-to-back like ancient warriors surrounded by foes.

And then to Quinn's utter horror a girl ran straight into the fire. She was screaming, "Mommy! Mommy!"

He leaped to cut her off, but he was too late. The heat drove him back as he cried, "No! No! No!"

Then, as if grabbed by a divine hand, the girl came flying back out of the fire. She was rolled across the ground. It was rough but effective. The fire that had just caught onto her shorts went out.

Quinn turned, grateful, to Caine. But Caine did not look at him. Quinn heard Lana shouting at kids, telling them to stop acting like idiots, to calm down.

Some listened. Others did not. More than one lit torch went off into the darkness. Quinn wondered how long it would be before he started seeing fires throughout this poor, beaten town.

Lana came storming back, furious, practically spitting with rage. "No one even knows what it was. Some idiot yelled something and off they went. Like cattle. I hate people."

"Do we go after the ones that got away?" Quinn wondered aloud.

But Lana wasn't ready for a calm discussion. "I really, sometimes, really just hate them all."

She threw herself down on the steps. Quinn noticed a slight smile on Caine's lips. Caine favored him with a curious look. "Question for you, Quinn: how long would you have stayed on strike?"

"What?"

"Well, seemed to me like you were ready to have all these people go hungry over Cigar."

Quinn rested his fists on his sides. "How long would you have defended Penny?"

Caine made a small laugh. "Being in charge. It's not easy, is it?"

"I haven't tortured anyone, Caine. I haven't turned anyone over to some psycho girl who'll drive them insane."

Caine sagged a little at that. He looked away. "Yeah, well . . . You pretty much had me beat, Quinn. Albert was already thinking about how he'd get rid of me, not whether."

"Albert had his escape plans ready."

Caine's eyes glinted in the firelight. "We'll see. I liked that island. Never should have left. Diana told me not to. There are other boats. Just maybe I'll pay old Albert a visit one of these days."

"You should do that," Quinn said. He was remembering the sight of those tiny eyes like beans in the blackened sockets of Cigar's head. Let Caine go after the island. It might be good to see whether those missiles Albert claimed to have would work.

But Caine seemed already to have lost interest in Quinn's anger. "More likely we're all dead soon," he said.

"Yeah," Quinn agreed.

"I would have liked to see Diana again. No baby now."

"Are you relieved?" Lana asked harshly.

Caine thought it over for so long it seemed he'd forgotten the question. Then at

last, “No. Just kind of sad.”

THIRTY-THREE

5 HOURS, 12 MINUTES

WAS THAT LIGHT?

Astrid opened her eyes wide. Stared.

Yes. An orange glow. A fire.

A fire!

“Cigar, I think I see town. I think I see a fire.”

“I see it, too. Like devils dancing!”

They walked forward eagerly. Astrid registered the fact that the ground beneath her boots was no longer flat and hard and occasionally interrupted by some unnamed weed, but had become bumpier, dry clods of dirt that tripped her as they rose and formed rows and from those rows rose neatly ordered plants.

What she noticed was the light.

And then Cigar’s screams.

But Cigar screamed a lot, so Astrid kept walking and ignored his mad shrieks that something was in his feet.

Then it all came together and Astrid knew. She felt something pushing at the leather of her boot.

“Zekes!” she cried, and stumbled back, fell down, jumped up like the ground was electrified, crawled, stood, ran back, back until the ground was hard and flat again.

She fumbled in the dark, fingers searching for and then finding the whipping worm, its head already through the leather and touching her flesh, and she got her hands around it even though it fought, and she pulled at it with all her strength and it came free and whipped around, quick as a cobra, and sank its nasty, tooth-ringed mouth into her arm, but she had the tail and yelled, “No! No!” and then it was away from her.

She had thrown it. Somewhere.

Cigar cried pitifully.

And then, so much more terrible, laughed and laughed in the dark.

Astrid with shaking hands grabbed the shotgun and fired it once.

She saw the edge of the field.

She saw Cigar frozen in a twisting fall.

He was in the field.

She heard the greedy mouths burrowing into him. A sound like hungry dogs eating.

“Petey! *Petey!* Help him!”

Cigar said, “Oh,” in a small, disappointed voice.

And the only sound in the darkness was the relentless feeding of the worms.

She sat there listening, no choice but to hear. Tears flowed. She sat with her knees together, head in twisting hands, crying.

How much time passed until the worm sounds were finished she couldn’t know. The stink . . . that remained.

She was alone now. Completely and absolutely alone in a darkness that seemed almost like a living thing, as if she had been swallowed whole and was now in the belly of some indifferent beast.

“All right, Petey,” Astrid said at last. “No choice, huh, brother? The crazy behind door number one or the crazy behind door number two. Show me what you have to show me, Peter.”

She saw him. Not him, not like there was light, but something, like the darkness had warped around itself. A suggestion of a shape. A little boy.

“Are you there?” she asked.

Something cold, like someone had slid an icicle through her scalp and through her skull and pushed it deep inside her brain. No pain. Just a terrible cold.

“Petey?” she whispered.

Peter Ellison did not move. He stayed very, very still. His hand touched her on the head, but only just, just barely, and he stayed very still.

The avatar that was his sister had within it an amazing complexity of lines and designs, signs inside of mazes inside of maps that were part of planets and . . .

He pulled himself back. Inside her was a game of such beautiful complexity.

This was what it was to be the girl with the yellow hair and the stabbing blue eyes. It took his breath away. Or would have if he had breath and body.

He mustn't play with those complex swirls and patterns. Each time he had tried he'd broken the avatar and it had come apart. He couldn't break this one.

It's me, Petey, he said.

The avatar shuddered. Patterns twisted around his touch, feeling for him like tiny light-snakes.

“Can you fix it, Petey? The FAYZ. Can you make it stop?”

He could hear her voice. It came straight up through the avatar, words of light floating to him.

He wondered. Could he fix it? Could he undo the great and terrible thing he had done?

He felt the answer as a sort of regret. He reached for the power, the thing that had made him able to create this place. But there was nothing there.

It was in my body, he said. *The power.*

“You can't end it?”

No.

No, sister Astrid, I can't.

I'm sorry.

“Can you bring the light back?”

He pulled away. Her questions made him feel bad inside.

“No. Don't go away,” she said.

He had memories of how much her voice had hurt when he was the old Pete. When he had a body, with a brain all wired crazily so that things were always too loud, even colors.

He stopped moving away. He resisted an urge to reach inside that mesmerizing avatar and take its sadness away. But no, his fingers were too clumsy. He knew that now. The girl named Taylor, he had tried to make her better, and he had torn the avatar to shreds.

“Petey. What is the Darkness doing?”

Pete considered. He hadn't looked at that thing lately. He could see him, a green

glow, tendrils like a writhing octopus reaching out through the placeless place where Pete now lived.

The Darkness was weak. His power, spread all through the barrier, was weakening. He was the thing Pete had used to create the barrier. In that panic moment with the terrible loud sounds and the fear on all the faces, when Pete had screamed inside his own head and reached out with his power he'd stretched the Darkness into that barrier.

Now it was weakening. Soon it would break and crack.

Dying.

"The Darkness, the gaiaphage, it's dying?"

It wants to be reborn.

"Petey. What happens if it is reborn?"

He didn't know. He was out of words. He opened his mind to her. He showed sister Astrid images of the great sphere he had built, the barrier that had pushed all the rules and laws away, the barrier made of the gaiaphage, that had become the egg for its rebirth, the numbers all twisted together, fourteen, and the twisting, screaming distortion when anything passed through from one universe to the other, and now sister Astrid was screaming and holding her head; he could see it in the avatar, funny screaming, like words that popped and exploded around him and—

He pulled away.

He was hurting her.

He'd done it. With his clumsy fingers and his stupid, stupid stupidity, he had hurt her.

Her avatar twirled away like a snowflake in a storm.

Petey turned and ran.

"Oh, God, it's coming!" Diana screamed.

She was sweating, straining, on her back with her legs spread wide, knees up. The contractions were just minutes apart now, but they lasted so long it was as if she had no rest in between, just a chance to gasp some super-heated fetid air.

She had no more energy for crying. Her body had taken control. It was doing what it was supposed to do five months from now. She was not ready. The baby was not ready. But the enormous swell of her belly said different. It said the time was now.

Now!

Who was there to help her in this? No one. Drake stared in horrified fascination. Penny curled her lip with contempt. Neither of them interfered or spoke, because it was clear, clear to anyone with a heart or brain, that the only other thing in the room that cared about the baby was the pulsing green monster.

Diana felt its hungry will.

Doom for her baby.

She had known there would be pain. And while it was bad, it was not as bad as the stroke of Drake's whip.

It was not the pain that made her cry out, but the despair, the certain knowledge that she would never be the baby's mother. That she would fail even at this. The deadening reality that she was unforgiven, still an exile from the human race, that she still bore the mark of her evil deeds.

The taste of human flesh.

She had been so hungry. So close to death.

I've said I'm sorry, I repented, I begged for forgiveness; what do you want from me? Why won't you help this baby?

Penny moved closer, careful of her damaged, bloody feet. She leaned down to look at Diana's straining face.

"She's praying," Penny said. Penny laughed. "Should I give her a god to pray to? I can make her see whatever—"

Through a veil of bloody tears Diana saw Penny reel back. Like a marionette she slammed hard, face-first into a wall.

Drake laughed. "Stupid chick. If the gaiaphage wants something, he'll let you know. Otherwise it's best not to spend a lot of time down here thinking about how powerful you are. There's only one god down here, and it's not Diana's, and it sure isn't you, Penny."

Diana tried to remember what she had read in the pregnancy books. But she'd barely glanced at the sections having to do with birth. Birth was months away, not now!

Contraction. Oh, oh, a hard one. On and on.

Breathe. Breathe.

Another.

"Ahhhh!" she cried out, earning a jeer from Drake. But even as he laughed he was changing. Bright metal wire crossed his exposed teeth.

Hold on, hold on, Diana told herself. Don't think. Just wait for—

Another contraction, like her guts were being squeezed hard by a gigantic fist.

And then Brittney was there, kneeling between Diana's legs.

"I see its head. The top of its head."

"I have to—have to—have to—" Diana gasped. Then, "Push!" she yelled, urging herself on.

A sudden motion. Something very fast. Brittney's head rolled off her neck. It landed on Diana's belly and then rolled heavily to one side.

BLAM!

Penny's left arm took a partial hit. A chunk the size of a small steak was vaporized, leaving a divot in her shoulder, a divot that sprayed blood.

Brianna's face appeared, looking down at Diana. "We're out of here!"

"I can't . . . can't . . . oh, oh, aaaaahhhhhh!"

"You're doing this right now?" Brianna asked, incredulous and offended. "It has to be right now?"

Diana grabbed Brianna's shirt in an iron grip. "Save my baby. Forget about me. Save my baby!"

Sam found her, not by sight but by sound. By her weeping and her giggling.

He hung lights, more than one, illuminating a patch the size of a suburban lawn. He saw Astrid, crumpled and unaware.

He saw a skeleton just a dozen feet away, still seething with zekes.

Sam sat down wordlessly beside Astrid. He put his arm around her shoulder.

At first it was as if he wasn't there. Like she didn't notice him. Then, with a sudden, loud sob, she buried her face in his neck.

The tenor of her sounds changed. The wild flights of giggling stopped. So did the keening, heartbroken wail. Now she just cried.

Sam sat there perfectly still, saying nothing, and let her tears run down his neck.

The warrior who had gone out from the lake to save his people by slaying the evil one was now just a boy sitting in the dirt with his fingers in a mane of blond hair.

He stared at nothing. Expected nothing. Planned nothing.

Just sat.

Brianna picked up Brittney's head. It was surprisingly heavy. She threw it as hard as she could down the tunnel.

Brittney's body got up, swayed a little, and seemed as if it was ready to go after its head, so Brianna shot it in the leg at close range. The loss of one bloodless leg caused the whole body to topple over.

Penny was obviously in shock, staring at the terrible wound that was draining her life away, squirt, squirt, squirt.

Got to finish her off, Brianna told herself. But she hesitated. Penny was a human being. Not much of one, but an actual human being. Whereas the Drake/Brittney thing, well, whatever it was, it wasn't human, because humans pretty much never stood up and tried to walk away after their heads were chopped off.

Brianna jacked a round into the chamber and aimed at Penny.

Then the gun blew apart in her hands. Exploded!

Brianna dropped it, but even as she let go she realized it was a trick. An illusion of Penny's making.

The girl was spraying blood like a Super Soaker and still able to mess with Brianna's head.

Brianna bent down to get the shotgun, determined to ignore any further interference, but Diana gave a huge cry of pain, and suddenly there was a head sticking almost all the way out of a place on Diana that Brianna had never wanted to see.

"Yaa-aahh-ah!" Brianna said. "Oh, this is wrong."

But it just kept coming out as Diana grunted like an animal, and if Brianna didn't get down there and do the right thing, the baby was going to land on the floor, on a rock.

Brianna snatched up her shotgun, snapped off a quick, poorly aimed, one-handed shot in the general direction of Penny—*BLAM!*—and cupped her hands beneath the emerging head.

"It's got a snake around its neck!" Brianna cried.

Diana sat up—amazing that she could even think about sitting up—and yelled, "It's the umbilical cord. It's around the neck. It'll choke!"

"Oh, man, I hate slimy stuff," Brianna moaned. She pushed the baby's head back a little, which wasn't easy, because it was really ready to come out, and yelled, "Ewww!" a couple of times as she stretched and wrestled the umbilical cord over the baby's head, freeing it.

And now in a rush the baby came out. It spilled out with liquid sounds and a hideous translucent sac attached and a pulsating snakelike thing leading to its belly button.

Diana shuddered.

"I am so never doing this," Brianna said fervently. She shot a look to see if Penny was dead or alive and couldn't see her at all.

The Brittney body was gone as well, no doubt crawling off to look for its head.

"You have to cut the cord," Diana said.

"The what?"

"The cord." Diana gasped. "The snake thing."

"Ah. The snake thing."

Brianna took her machete in hand, raised it up, and chopped through the umbilical cord. "It's bleeding!"

"Tie it off!"

Brianna tore a strip from the waist of her T-shirt, twisted it to make it easier to handle, and tied it around the six-inch stump of the umbilical cord. "Oh, man, oh, it's all slimy."

Brianna worked her hands beneath the baby. It was slimy on its back, too. Then she looked down and saw something that made her smile.

"Hey. It's a girl," Brianna said.

"Take her," Diana cried.

"She's breathing," Brianna said. "Isn't she supposed to cry? In a movie it cries."

She frowned at the baby. Its eyes were closed. Something strange about it. The baby wasn't crying. She seemed perfectly calm. As if this was all no big thing, being born.

"Take her away from here!" Diana yelled. Her voice was coming from far away.

Brianna lifted the little girl up and oh! Her eyes opened. Little blue eyes. But that couldn't be, could it?

Brianna stared into those eyes. Just stared. And the tiny little girl stared back, eyes focused so clearly, not the squinty little eyes of a newborn baby but the eyes of a wise child.

"What?" Brianna asked. Because it almost sounded like the baby was saying something. She wanted Brianna to take her over and lay her down in that crib.

Well, of course, who wouldn't want to lie down in that nice, white crib?

There was a siren going off here at the hospital, an insistent screech that Brianna just ignored. As she laid the baby down and . . .

But wait. No. That wasn't a siren.

It was a voice.

Run. Run. Ruuuun! the siren said.

But now Brianna's breath was short; she was choking because the baby wanted to be put down in that nice crib with the green sheets.

Green? Hadn't they been white?

Green was a nice color, too.

Brianna was so incredibly weary holding the baby. She must have weighed a million pounds. So tired, and the green sheets, and—*Ruuuun! Ruuun! Nooooo!*

Brianna blinked. She gulped air.

She looked down and saw the baby lying on rock covered with a sickly green that looked up close like a billion tiny ants.

The green swarmed up onto the baby's chubby little legs and arms.

“No, Brianna! Noooo!” Diana cried.

Brianna, paralyzed with horror at what she had just done, watched as the seething green mass flowed onto the baby’s arms and legs and belly and then poured like water into her nostrils and mouth.

Penny, holding a rag to the bloody hole in her shoulder, staggered back, laughed, and suddenly collapsed to the ground.

“What did I do?” Brianna cried.

A noise. She spun, ducked, and barely avoided the whip.

She snatched up her shotgun—*BLAM!*—fired into Drake’s belly. He smiled his shark grin.

Too much. Too much!

Brianna ran.

OUTSIDE

ABANA BAIDOO WAS shaking as she reached her car outside Denny's. She could barely take a breath.

No. No way she was letting this happen. But if she was going to stop it she had to focus. And not focus on how angry she was at Connie Temple.

Liar!

She pulled out her iPhone and, despite her fumbling, shaking fingers, found the mailing list of families.

First, email.

Everyone! Emergency! They are blowing up the dome. I have solid proof that they are blowing up the dome. All families immediately call your senators and congressmen and the media. Do it now. And if you are close to the area come! The chemical spill story is a lie! Don't let them stop you!!!!

Then text. The same message, but shorter.

Nuclear explosive is being used to blow up the anomaly. Call everyone! This is not a joke or a mistake!!!

Then, without delay, she opened her Twitter app.

#PerdidoFamilies. Nuclear explosion planned. Not joke or mistake. Help now. Come if u can!

Facebook app, same message, but a little longer.

There. Too late for anyone to cover up now.

Connie was coming from the restaurant at a run. She raced to her own car, hopped in, started it, and pulled up, tires squealing beside Abana. Abana rolled down her window.

"Hate me later, Abana," Connie said. "Follow me now. I think I know a dirt road."

Connie didn't wait but took off, laying rubber across the parking lot.

"Hell, yeah," Abana said, and drove with one hand as the tweets and messages started pinging her phone.

THIRTY-FOUR

4 HOURS, 21 MINUTES

“HE CAN’T CONTROL it,” Astrid said. The first words she’d spoken in what felt to Sam like an eternity.

He’d become aware after a while that she had stopped crying. But she had not pulled away then. And for a long time afterward he wondered if she was asleep. He’d determined that if she was asleep he’d let her go right on doing so.

He knew Edilio and all the rest were expecting him to solve something, everything. He recalled the high of realizing he wasn’t the leader, carrying everything on his shoulders. He remembered the liberation of believing that his role was as warrior. The great and powerful warrior and that was all. And he was that. Yes: he was. He had the power in his hands, and he knew he had the strength and courage and violence to use that power.

But he was also, at least as much, the boy who loved Astrid Ellison. Right now he was powerless to put that part of himself aside. He couldn’t have left her side when she was like this, ever, not if Drake had shown up and challenged him to one-on-one combat to the death.

He was a warrior. But he was also this. Whatever this was.

“Who?” he asked.

“Petey. Pete. It doesn’t feel right to call him Petey now. He’s changed.”

“Astrid, Petey’s dead.”

She sighed and pulled away. He stretched his arm and got pins and needles in payment. His arm was asleep.

“I let him in. In my head,” Astrid said.

“His memory?”

“No, Sam. And I’m not crazy. I was pretty close there, though, and then you came. And I turned it all to you. How weak, huh? I’m embarrassed at how lame it is. But I was on the edge. It messed me up. Twisted my thoughts into . . . Well, messed me up, that’s all I can say. Words are coming hard to me right now. I feel like I’m bruised in my brain. Again: sorry that’s not more coherent.”

He had let her ramble on, but he wasn’t making any sense of it. Now that she mentioned feeling crazy he wondered if she had, well, become . . . stressed.

Almost as if she could read his thoughts, Astrid laughed softly and said, “No, Sam. I’m fine. I cried it out. Sorry. I know crying freaks boys out.”

“You don’t cry much.”

“I don’t cry ever,” Astrid said with some of her usual snap.

“Well, rarely.”

“It’s Pete. He’s . . . I don’t know what he is.” There was a marveling quality to her words, the exalted sound of Astrid discovering something new. “There’s some kind of space, some kind of reality that exists here in the FAYZ. He’s like a spirit. His body is gone. He’s outside. Not in his old brain. Like a data pattern or something, like he’s digital. Yes, I know I’m babbling. It’s not something I understand. It’s like a slippery thought, and Pete can’t explain it.”

“Okay,” Sam said. He couldn’t think of anything better to say.

“Here’s the thing I remember clearly: the gaiaphage, Sam. I understand it now. I know what happened.”

For the next half an hour she explained. It began in a rambling way, but, Astrid being Astrid, the thoughts grew clearer, the explanations more crisp, and by the end she was getting annoyed with him for failing to immediately grasp some details.

Nothing was more reassuring to him than an impatient, condescending Astrid.

“Okay. The gaiaphage is part of the barrier,” Sam summarized. “And the barrier is part of the gaiaphage. He’s the building material Pete used to create the barrier. And now the gaiaphage is running out of energy. Starving for energy. So the barrier is failing—going dark, then maybe breaking open. That’s good news, then. In fact, that’s great news.”

“Yes,” Astrid said. “It would be the best possible news. Unless somehow the gaiaphage escapes the barrier.”

“But how is he or it or whatever going to do that?”

“I don’t know, but I can guess. Listen, Sam, when the gaiaphage gave Drake that disgusting whip arm he needed Lana’s powers to do it. Ever since then he’s tried to lure her back. And all the while, too, he tried to entice Pete. Now that Pete has lost most of his power, he can interfere with what he sees as data patterns—people and animals—but he can’t just perform miracles like he could. Somehow Pete’s power was a function of his body. Like Lana’s power is part of her body.”

“The baby,” Sam said. “The gaiaphage wants the baby. We guessed that much, but didn’t really know why.”

“Diana can read power levels,” Astrid said. “Did she ever . . .”

Sam nodded. “She said the baby is a three bar. As a fetus. Who knows what it will be when it’s born. Or as it grows. Diana’s only, like, four or five months along. I should know exactly, but I forget. When she would talk about it I would kind of, you know.” He made a shivering move, like it all gave him the creeps.

Astrid shook her head in disbelief. “Really. That’s the part of all this that makes you squirm: pregnancy.”

“She made me touch her, you know, stomach. And she talked about her, um, her things.” He pointed at his chest and whispered, “Nipples.”

“Yeah,” Astrid said dryly. “I could see where that would be devastating.”

At that Sam had no choice but to go to her, put his arms around her, and kiss her. Because now she was one hundred percent Astrid again.

“So now what?” Astrid asked a few minutes later.

“Drake’s had plenty of time to get Diana to the mine shaft. Going in there after them is a job for an army, not just me alone,” Sam said, thinking out loud. “In any case, however bad it is for Diana, they won’t kill her until they have the baby, and that won’t happen for months.”

“That must mean the gaiaphage has months before the barrier cracks. How do we survive that long?”

Sam shrugged. “That, I don’t know. Yet. But if we’re going after that thing in the mine shaft, we’ll need help. Brianna, if she’s still alive. Dekka, Taylor, Orc. And Caine. Especially Caine. If he’ll help.”

“So we go to Perdido Beach?”

“Slowly. Carefully. Yeah. And we’ll leave a trail of lights for anyone else needing

a safe path. I need to get my troops back together. Then we worry about going after the gaiaphage.”

After a while Drake lifted the baby up with his whip hand. He was gentle. He knew what the baby was. Who it was.

He laid it down just as gently on Diana’s belly.

“Feed it,” he ordered.

Diana shook her head.

Yeah, Drake thought with a smirk, all the snark has been beaten right out of that girl. Still, he’d have loved to make her beg. . . . But no. The will of the gaiaphage was clear in his mind. The baby body must be nurtured, protected. That baby now was the gaiaphage. Drake’s god. And he would follow it. He would obey it.

Even though the baby itself was a girl.

That was a shame. It would have been cooler if it was a dude’s body. But okay, what was a body but a tool or a weapon?

Drake gave Diana the baby. Diana closed her eyes, squeezing out a tear.

The baby latched on and nursed.

Now, at irresistible urging from the gaiaphage, Drake went to Penny. She was white as a ghost. She was shivering like she was cold, although it was hot as always down here.

She was lying in a pool of her own blood.

Fine with Drake. She was too full of herself. Way too impressed by her own power. The gaiaphage didn’t need her.

But a voice in his head made him turn around. The baby was sitting up on Diana’s belly. Sitting up. Looking at Drake.

Drake knew nothing about babies, but that wasn’t right. He knew that much. This was definitely not right. Babies still covered with slime weren’t supposed to be sitting up and making eye contact.

Then, to his even greater shock, the baby seemed to be trying to speak. No sounds came out, but he knew without question what the gaiaphage wanted.

“Yeah,” Drake said, annoyed but submissive.

He curled his tentacle arm around Penny. She was small, not hard to carry. So he brought her, shivering and muttering incoherently, to the baby gaiaphage.

Drake set her down and the baby toppled over. It would have been comical in another time and place. The baby’s giant head was too big for the body to support it very well.

So it toppled, but then, with surprising speed, it was on all fours. It crawled the few inches to Penny.

It reached out a pudgy hand and touched the grisly wound.

Penny gasped, a sound that might have been either pain or pleasure.

Drake felt a stab of jealousy, thinking the gaiaphage might give Penny the gift of a whip hand. But no, all it did was to heal the wound.

The baby healed the shotgun-destroyed flesh in seconds.

And then the baby crawled back to her mother and nursed.

Brianna had not expected to return to Justin. But there he was, breathing softly in the

pitch-black. And here she was, a mess of cuts and bruises, but alive.

“It’s me, kid,” she said wearily.

“Did you rescue her?”

“No. I didn’t. I couldn’t pull it off. It was a fight I couldn’t win. Not by myself. Besides . . .” She stopped herself, unwilling to explain about the baby. And about the overwhelming urge to place the baby on the gaiaphage.

“I need to find Sam,” Brianna said. “Which is pretty hard in the dark.”

“Take me, too, okay?”

“Yeah. Of course, little dude, what am I going to do, leave you here?” Actually the thought had occurred to Brianna. She was already slowed to a crawl by the dark. With Justin she’d be moving at whatever it was that was slower than a crawl.

They began feeling their way, inch by bruising inch, toward the mine shaft entrance. In her imagination, with her boundless optimism, Brianna still hoped that when they emerged they would find the world magically restored. Sun shining. Light everywhere.

But when, after a terribly long time, Brianna finally felt clearer, cleaner air on her face, she knew her hope had been futile.

The trip was from narrow darkness to wide-open darkness. She was still blind. And still slow.

The bonfire in the plaza was much smaller now. They’d realized that it had to be if they were going to keep it burning. Even with Caine’s sullen help, ripping flammable materials out of buildings and carrying them to the fire was not easy. So now the bonfire was more like a campfire. And the light of it barely cast a glow on the first circle of kids. Most sat in darkness, staring at the fire, unable even to see the person sitting beside them.

In the dark fights broke out. And there was nothing Quinn could do but yell at them.

One fight went from curses to sickening thuds of some blunt weapon on flesh and bone.

A few seconds later someone—no one knew who—dashed forward to grab a burning chair leg and ran off into the night.

The first home fire had flared in the west end of town. It sent sparks a hundred feet into the air, and Quinn was certain it would spread. It didn’t seem to, at least not quickly, but the greater glow did draw some of the people to it. They could be heard jostling and calling out to one another as they felt their way to it like moths drawn to a lightbulb.

“I wish I knew whether Sanjit was safe,” Lana said.

“I was just thinking about Edilio for some reason,” Quinn said. “Somehow I always feel like if Edilio’s still standing, we’re not totally beaten yet.” He laughed. “Weird, I guess, because I didn’t used to like him. I used to call him a wetback. Not the worst thing I ever did, I guess, but I wish I could take it back.”

Caine was resting beside them, having used his power to noisily rip some wooden doors off houses and then carry them back to feed the fire.

“It’s stupid to waste time worrying about what you did,” Caine said. “It’s not going to matter.”

“Your brother, Sam, he worries about it all the time,” Quinn said. He winced, thinking maybe that was violating a confidence. But weren’t they past all that? Past everything, in fact? Wasn’t this maybe the last peaceful conversation before the end?

“Does he?” Caine asked. “Idiot.”

So much for peaceful conversation. Caine was returning to form. Soon he’d grow tired of pretending to get along. Of course, for now he still liked the fire, as they all did. No wonder ancient man had worshiped fire. On a dark night surrounded by lions or hyenas or whatever, it must have seemed like it was more than just burning twigs.

“I’m hungry!” a voice cried out of the dark.

Quinn ignored it. It wasn’t the first such cry. It wouldn’t be the last. Not by a long shot.

Lana had been quiet for a long time. Quinn asked her whether she was okay. No answer. So he let it go. But a few minutes later Patrick came nosing against Quinn, and so he said, “Lana, I think Patrick’s starting to wonder about dinner, too.”

And again she didn’t answer. So Quinn leaned past his former king and saw Lana staring, eyes wide, into the fire.

He reached past Caine and shook her.

“What?” she snapped. Like someone awakened from a dream.

“Are you okay?”

Lana shook her head, a frown deepening the black and orange lines of her face. “None of us are okay. It’s free. Oh, my God, it finally did it.”

“What are you ranting about?” Caine snapped, irritated.

“The gaiaphage. It’s coming.”

Quinn saw Caine snap his mouth shut. He saw Caine’s eyes widen. His jaw clenched hard.

“I can feel it,” Lana said.

“Probably just—” Quinn started to say something reassuring, but Caine cut him off.

“She’s right.” He shared a strange, frightened look with Lana. “It’s changed.”

“It’s coming,” Lana said. “It’s coming!”

Quinn saw then what he never expected to see in this life: sheer terror in Lana’s eyes.

THIRTY-FIVE

4 HOURS, 6 MINUTES

THE BABY TRIED to walk. But it failed. It toppled over, legs still too weak, coordination lacking. But it wasn't supposed to try. It shouldn't even be born, let alone attempting to stand up.

"I'll carry it," Drake announced.

"No," Penny said. "You may need your whip hand free. I will carry it. My powers don't need me to use my hands."

Diana could see that Drake was not happy. Not happy at all with Penny. He'd have been happier to see her die. Drake was now trapped with females he couldn't just beat on or intimidate.

"What do we do with her?" Penny pointed at Diana with utter contempt, curling her lips at Diana's disheveled appearance. The torn clothing barely put back together. The stains. The wounds. The weakness.

Drake's dark discontent grew darker still. "The gaiaphage says she has to live."

Penny snorted. "Why? Is the gaiaphage getting sentimental now that it has a girl's body?"

"Shut up," Drake snapped. "It's just a body. It's a weapon the master uses. He's still he. He's still what he always was."

"Uh-huh." Penny smirked.

Drake squatted down in front of Diana. "You're a mess. You look like roadkill. You even stink. You're sickening."

"So kill me," Diana said, meaning it. Willing him to do it. "Do it, Drake. Big man. Do it."

Drake sighed theatrically. "Babies need milk. And you're the cow, Diana. Moo."

That made him laugh, and Penny, after a hesitation during which Diana saw contempt for Drake in her eyes, joined in. More terrible by far, the baby girl, Diana's baby, grinned as well, a weird smile revealing pink gums and no teeth.

"Let's go, cow," Drake said.

"Are you a moron?" Diana said. "I just had a baby. I can't—"

They hit her then, both of them, competing to see who could force her to her feet. Drake's whip hand, Penny's sick visions. Diana was on her feet, woozy, feeling she should vomit except that her stomach was empty.

The greenish glow of the gaiaphage—because not all of the lurid green had flowed onto or into the baby—had faded so that there was almost no light. Within a few feet they found themselves in total blackness.

Diana recalled that there were places where she might throw herself down a crevasse and end her hellish life. If Drake didn't stop her.

No, not Drake now; now it was Brittney. The sound of her breathing was different from his. Were the emergencies coming faster? She dared to hope that Drake was weakening. She dared to hope that he and Penny would go after each other.

Diana relaxed a little. Brittney was as much a tool of the gaiaphage as was Drake, but she lacked Drake's own personal hate-fueled insanity.

She also, unfortunately, had less knowledge of the path. And she did not intimidate

Penny.

“You know what would be creepy, Diana?” Penny asked. “If you were pregnant again. Only this time with, let’s say, a belly full of rats! Hungry rats!”

Diana felt her belly swelling, felt the hundreds of—

“No,” Brittney said calmly. “No. She’s our lord’s mother.”

The illusion, barely begun, ended abruptly.

“Shut up, Brittney,” Penny said. “Maybe I listen to Drake, but I don’t listen to you. You’re nobody.”

Brittney didn’t argue. She just said, “She gave birth to our lord.”

Penny must have tripped over a rock, because she went sprawling with the baby in her arms. She plowed into Diana, almost but not quite knocking Diana over.

The baby hit solid rock with a sickening thud.

From the darkness a thin wail of baby fury. It was the first time the baby had cried. It cried just like any baby.

Diana felt her heart respond. And her body, as her breasts leaked milk.

She felt in the dark and touched the baby’s arm. She fumbled the baby to her and cradled it. It latched on and again began to suck vigorously.

In that first contact Diana had read the baby’s power level. A four bar now. The equal of Caine or Sam.

A four bar. And still just a baby!

“Our lady should carry our lord,” Brittney said.

“Are you mental?” Penny was disbelieving. “Are you that stupid? You think this is Jesus in the manger and she’s Mary, you dumb metal-mouthed hick?”

“I will walk in front,” Brittney announced. “I will make straight the way of the lord.”

Diana looked down at the baby. She could see its cheek. Impossible. Nothing could be seen in this absolute darkness.

And yet, she did see the baby’s cheek. And her squeezed-shut eyes. And her little rosebud mouth holding on. And then her fat little arm, and her tiny fist pressed into her mother’s breast.

“She glows!” Brittney said. “Our lord gives us her light!”

“That’s it, I’ve tried to put up with your—”

“Hush!” Brittney put up a hand, amazingly visible in the glow that came from the baby. “She speaks to me. We must go forth. . . .”

“Go forth,” Penny echoed with cutting sarcasm. “Hallelujah. Drake’s a psycho but at least he’s not a moron.”

“We must go to the barrier and prepare for our rebirth.”

Diana heard all this, but her thoughts were all for the baby at her breast. It was, after all, her baby. The gaiaphage might be inside it, might take over its thoughts and use it. But something in there was still her daughter. Hers and Caine’s.

And if terrible things awaited this little girl, whose fault was that? The guilt lay on Diana and Caine.

Diana had no right to reject Gaia.

The name came to her as if she’d known it all along. It made her sad. It would have been so much better if she could have named her baby Sally or Chloe or Melissa. But none of those would have been the right name.

Gaia.

Gaia's eyes opened. She squinted blue eyes at Diana.

"Yeah," Diana said. "I'm your mommy."

"It's a trail of lights," Dekka said. "Wow. I can see my hands."

She stepped close to the Sammy sun and checked her body for marks. Penny's vision had been powerful. Even now it was almost impossible to believe it was just an illusion. But her skin was unmarked.

"Most of them go that way."

Orc pointed, and Dekka could actually see him. Not well, of course. Each small pebble that made up his body was surrounded by blackest shadows. His eyes were down inside deep wells. The small patch of human skin around his mouth and part of one cheek looked as gray-green as every other part of him.

But he was real, not just a sound and a resistance at the fingertips.

"Yeah. But what does that mean if more go one way?" She could see perhaps half a dozen of the suns spreading out to the right. Just four to the left. "I mean, they could be blocked. And it's not like they show up all that well anyway. If we had a compass . . . I mean, Orc, we don't even know which way is which. We don't know if Sam is moving right or left from this point."

"I have an idea. But it's probably stupid," Orc said.

"Stupid ideas are all we've got. So what is it?"

"Well, can't you see better if you're up high?"

Dekka said, "Yes, as a matter of fact. And that's not stupid at all. In fact, I don't know why I didn't think of it."

Orc shrugged his massive shoulders. "You're having a bad day."

This was such an understatement, and yet so kind in a way, that Dekka had to laugh. "You could say that. So, Orc, you want to fly a little?"

"Me?"

"Why not you? There're some rocks over there. Better than dirt, because when I switch off gravity the dirt tends to float up and get in your eyes."

They moved to a rock outcropping. Orc stood stiff, like he was on display and wanted to look right. Dekka did her thing and Orc rose. At ten feet he let out a huge, delighted guffaw.

"Hah! This is fun!"

At thirty feet she could no longer see him at all. "What do you see, Orc?"

"Fire," he said. "And I think the Sammy suns are going that way."

"I'm bringing you down now."

When he was back on terra firma Dekka said, "The fire. What did it look like?"

"Like it was two or maybe three different fires, but all close together."

"Perdido Beach?"

"Maybe," he said reluctantly.

"Okay, so we follow the Sammy suns toward town."

But Orc hesitated. "You can do that, Dekka. But me, I set out to find Drake and kill him."

"Orc, you must know we can't look for anything. Not in this pitch-black. It could take us forever to just accidentally run into Drake."

He nodded, but he wasn't really agreeing. "I don't mind the dark as much you do, Dekka. In the dark I don't have to be like I am. You know? People can't see me. Anyway, there'll likely be some booze back there in town. So I'm just going to go on in the dark. It's probably better for me."

He held out his oversize paw and Dekka felt strangely moved taking it. "Thanks, big guy. You saved me, you know."

"Nah."

"No, listen to me, Orc. I know you have some bad stuff on your conscience."

He nodded and muttered, "But I've been forgave of that. I prayed and I was forgave." Then he added, "But that don't mean it doesn't weigh me down."

"That's what I'm saying, Orc. When all that weighs you down, you remember that you saved me. Okay?"

He didn't look too sure of that. But he may have smiled. It was hard to tell. And then he went galumphing off into the dark.

Dekka followed the lights leading left.

"There's a light out there. Down the highway. It just appeared!" Lana said.

"A Sammy sun!" Quinn said. The sense of relief was amazing. Sam was coming.

He felt like he might well faint from the sheer release of tension.

Quinn, Lana, and Caine—with Patrick as well—had snuck away from the dying campfire, leaving some of Quinn's people in nominal charge. Not that anyone was able anymore to do more than yell, "Knock it off!"

Torches were spreading through Perdido Beach, little knots of kids looking for food, water, beloved toys, or just a bed.

Now Sammy suns were blossoming like radioactive flowers on the highway.

Patrick barked once, announcing himself, and took off down the highway.

"Hail the conquering hero," Caine muttered. "Mr. Sunshine."

After ten minutes a new Sammy sun appeared, perhaps no more than a hundred feet away, and they walked toward it, still moving carefully. The highway was littered with debris up to and including entire trucks.

Then Quinn could make out two forms dimly outlined.

The two groups came together and Sam illuminated the scene.

"Quinn, Lana," Sam said. One hand was scratching Patrick's ruff. "Caine."

"Hey, brother. How's it going? Some weird weather we're having, huh?" Caine said.

"What happened to your hands?" Sam asked.

Caine raised his hands, still patched with concrete. "Oh, this? It's nothing. I just need a little lotion."

"Astrid?" Lana said. "You're back?"

"About time," Quinn said under his breath.

"Well, then, it's a happy ending," Caine said savagely. "I love a happy ending."

Quinn was about to say something to Caine, something along the lines of *shut up*. But he stopped himself. Caine was a power-mad tool, but he'd been through hell this day. Sarcasm wasn't the worst thing he was capable of.

"You here to turn on some lights?" Lana asked. "Because as good as that would be, we have bigger problems. The gaiaphage is coming."

“How?” Astrid asked sharply. “Everyone says the gaiaphage is a green encrustation in the bottom of a mine shaft.”

“I don’t know how,” Lana said, a little evasively. “It just is. That’s why we’re standing out here. We weren’t waiting for you. We’re waiting for it.”

“I won’t ask how you know,” Astrid said.

“Yeah?” Lana shot back. “Well, here’s my question, Astrid: why aren’t you arguing more? I tell you this is happening and you just meekly accept it? You know something.”

“Oh, Astrid? She knows everything,” Caine said.

“It has Diana,” Astrid said. She tilted her head and considered Caine. “And your baby, Caine. At least, Diana says it’s yours.”

“Yeah,” Caine said. He seemed about to say something more, but stopped himself and just muttered, “Yeah. A baby.”

“Wait,” Lana interrupted. “Sanjit. Did . . .”

“Barely,” Sam said. “But as far as I know he’s safe at the lake. I got your message. Too late. And Astrid was bringing a message to you as well.”

“Funny how things fall apart when the lights go out,” Quinn said. “Lots of plans, and nothing works.”

“The gaiaphage is looking for a body,” Astrid said. “It needs a physical body. The barrier is dead. It’s going to crack open. It’s finally going to be over. But when that happens the gaiaphage is going to try to get out.”

“And you know this because of your amazing geniusness?” Caine said, smirking. “You know what time this is all supposed to happen? Because I have to say, I’m ready to get out of this place. Can’t happen soon enough for me. I’ve been really craving some ice cream.”

“I don’t know when. It could be months. Your son or daughter isn’t due for—”

“Stop that!” Caine snarled, abandoning his snarky pose. “Don’t play that game with me, Astrid. What do you think I’m going to do? Suddenly become a different person just because I had sex with Diana?”

“You got her pregnant,” Astrid said quite calmly. “I thought maybe that fact might make you consider something besides yourself.”

“Oh, it does, Astrid,” he said with savage sarcasm. “It makes me want to go toss the football around in the backyard. Maybe barbecue some steaks. Real daddy kind of stuff. Only slight problem is this darn darkness.”

A flame leaped into the air not far from the road. They heard the agitated voices of young children.

“Thanks, that’s better,” Caine yelled over his shoulder. “So Lana says the gaiaphage is coming, and you guys say it’s got Diana—by the way, great job protecting her, Sam—and I should be taking parenting classes, plus, oh, by the way, the barrier is coming down. Someday. Probably after we’ve all starved to death.”

All the while Sam had been watching Caine like a specimen under a microscope. Trying to figure him out. “You going to fight or not?”

“Who, me?” Caine laughed. “What’s the matter with you, Sam? Genius girl says the barrier is going to come down. And you want to run out and get killed before that happens? Let the barrier crack open like an egg. If the gaiaphage wants to walk on out I say we wish him well, wait until he’s a ways down the road, and then leave

ourselves.”

“Taking Diana and your . . . and the baby,” Sam said.

“You hear what Albert did? Did you?” Caine tried to point in the direction of the ocean and the island, but it drew attention to his still-encrusted hand, so he dropped it to his side. “As soon as Albert realized what was happening he caught a boat and ran for the island. And the best part? He’s been planning it for a long time. He bribed Taylor. He apparently got hold of some missiles—who knows how he pulled that off; he’s Albert—and moved them out there, too.”

Quinn saw Sam’s jaw clench hard at that.

“Now,” Caine went on, “Albert’s sitting out there eating cheese and crackers and laughing his butt off at fools like us.”

Sam ignored, or at least pretended to ignore, all of that. He said, “Look, Caine. I don’t know where Brianna is, or Dekka, or Orc. Jack is maybe dead by now. Anyway, he won’t be coming to the fight. So maybe I can take down Drake myself, and maybe not. But I don’t even know what it means to say the gaiaphage is coming. Coming how? Coming as what? With what kind of power? I don’t even know if—”

Quinn held up his hand and Sam stopped. “Penny,” Quinn said. “We followed her until she crossed the highway. She’s out there somewhere, too. Out there in the dark.”

“There’s no reason to think she would run into Drake,” Lana said, but she sounded worried.

“Now, there,” Caine said, holding up his crusted index finger, “there’s someone I’ll fight. Show me Penny and I’ll kill her for you. I’ll kill her twice.”

The conversation died. And they stood there in silence, the five of them and one dog, underneath a weak mockery of a light.

Quinn said, “Everyone saw you, Caine. Dragging that cement bowl around. Hunched over like a monkey walking on its knuckles. That crown stapled into your scalp. You got beat. King Caine, and all you could do was be Penny’s little monkey. Kids will be laughing about that for a long time. Yeah. If the barrier comes down, you’ll be hearing stories about that on TV. Internet jokes about it.” Quinn watched Caine’s hands warily. He was hoping someone would stop Caine before he struck and threw Quinn against and through the nearest wall.

Caine turned with menacing slowness to Quinn. Quinn felt the heat of his malevolence. Humiliation was dangerous stuff to play around with.

“What do you think your story will look like, Caine? Always swaggering around, playing all bad and tough. You did one right thing, Caine: you went out, helped Brianna, and you fought those bugs back, and that’s why the people said, yeah, he can be our king.”

“I helped Brianna?” Caine snapped. “She helped me.”

“All that, though, that gets wiped out, because the end of the story is how Penny humiliated you—”

“Enough, all right?” Caine said sharply.

“What people remember is the end of the story. And if the barrier comes down, the end of the story will be how you cried and crapped yourself and danced like a trained monkey for Penny.”

There was no way to know whether Caine was as pale as he seemed by the light of the Sammy sun. His eyes were narrow, and his lips were drawn back, almost like a

wolf baring its teeth. His face was right in Quinn's.

He kept his gaze on Quinn but spoke to Sam. "Your loser friend here must have grown a pair, Sam."

"Seems like," Sam said, sounding amazed.

Then Caine spoke to Quinn. "Tell you what, Quinn, since you're so worried about my . . . legacy. Is that the right word, Astrid? Since you're worried about my legacy, Quinn, I'll go out Drake hunting with my brother there if."

"If what?" Quinn asked.

"If you come with us," Caine said with a cruel smile. "You've been a pain in my ass, fisherman. It's because of you I had a beef with Penny in the first place. So it's real dark out there, and most likely Drake and maybe even our old friend Penny are out there. Not to mention Mr. Nasty himself."

Quinn couldn't stop himself glancing out toward the utter darkness within which he knew monsters hid.

"He's a fisherman," Sam said. "He doesn't even have a weapon."

Caine laughed. "Have you been to Perdido Beach? It's a nice little town. Not much food, no entertainment, plenty of weapons. Weapons are the one thing we do have. And he'll need one."

"I don't even know how to shoot," Quinn protested.

Caine laughed cruelly. "It's not for you to shoot Drake or Penny, let alone the Darkness, if he's actually coming," he mocked. "It's for you to stick in your mouth and pull the trigger if any one of them gets hold of you."

THIRTY-SIX

18 MINUTES

AFTER HOURS AND hours of total darkness, the soft glow of her baby's skin allowed Diana to walk with more confidence. She was a light in the darkness.

Gaia. Her baby.

She felt still the horror at seeing the green pixels, that swarm that was the gaiaphage enter her daughter's nose and mouth. She would never, ever be able to block that out.

So many things she would never be able to forget.

But against it all was this person. This soft, chubby little girl, who looked up at her with eyes so absurdly blue and so unnaturally aware.

She seemed to grow heavier even as Diana carried her down through the ghost town beneath the mine shaft. Soon Gaia would not need to nurse. Already Diana could feel tiny teeth biting.

And then what would Gaia do with her mother?

"Doesn't matter," Diana whispered. "It doesn't matter. She's mine."

Brittney walked beside her, peering in eagerly to see Gaia's face. Brittney wore the expression of an ecstatic believer. Diana knew that if Gaia somehow spoke and told Brittney to leap off a cliff, Brittney would do it.

But Gaia spoke through Diana now.

She spoke through her mother.

Diana could feel her baby's mind probing inside her own. Not the mind of a baby, true, but not quite the cold violence of the gaiaphage, either. The two were becoming one: Gaia and the Darkness. The two were growing together, and the resulting entity might be more than or less than, but definitely not equal to, either the baby or the monster.

Just one thing, though, that Diana couldn't dismiss from her thoughts. Just one thing. The way Gaia reached into Diana's memory and opened it up as if she was thumbing through a picture book. Like she was looking for something. Something the baby sensed must be there.

Not rustling around blindly, but looking for something.

Diana had no defenses against Gaia. She could hide nothing from her. Diana could only watch as her memories unfolded to reveal pictures of things past. And of people.

Gaia was studying the people Diana knew. Now Brianna. Now Edilio. Now Duck and Albert and Mary.

Not Panda. No.

Caine. Gaia lingered long on pictures of Caine. A first meeting at Coates. The many flirtations. The teasing. The way Diana had made him want her. The dark ambition she had seen in him. The first time he had revealed his power to her.

The terrible things they had done. Battles.

Murder.

Yes, but don't look any further; all that I confess, Gaia, my daughter, but enough. Enough.

Please don't.

The smell. That was what the baby found first. The aroma of roasted human flesh. Diana's eyes filled with tears.

"What's the matter?" Brittney asked.

The baby tasted what Diana had tasted.

The baby felt her stomach gratefully receive the meat that had been a boy named Panda.

Yes, Diana said to the mind within her own, I'm a monster, and so are you, little Gaia. But your mommy loves you.

"There's a string of lights up there," Penny said. "They look like Christmas lights."

Yes, go there, Gaia said inside Diana's thoughts.

"Go to the lights," Diana said without even thinking about it. "Then follow them to the left."

"Shut your mouth, cow," Penny said. "You don't give orders."

Gaia kicked against Diana's enfolding arms. She pushed herself up so that she could see over Diana's shoulder. She looked at Penny.

The baby pushed her clenched fist over Diana's shoulder, opened her hand, and Penny screamed.

Diana stopped. She watched and listened. And did it fill her with a brutal sort of joy to see Penny writhe in terror and pain? Yes. As it pleased her daughter to cause that terror.

Gaia laughed a baby's innocent, gurgling laugh.

Penny's scream seemed to last a very long time. Long enough that Drake merged from where Brittney had been.

When at last Penny stopped, and just sat on her meager haunches, staring, staring in horror at the baby, Drake said, "So, the baby has game." He unwrapped his whip from around his waist and said, "Don't think that means I can't do what I want with you, Diana."

Diana met his dead gaze. It occurred to her for the first time that she felt better. Much better. She had just gone through hell, but she felt . . . fine. She inventoried her body, checking in with her whipped back, her bruises, her murderously stretched belly, her torn parts.

She was fine.

Gaia had healed her.

"Actually, Drake," Diana said, "I think it means you'd better watch very carefully what you do or say to me."

Gaia, once more cradled in her mother's arms, grinned a two-toothed grin.

"Something coming down the highway," Sam said.

"It's a light," Astrid said.

"A light called Darkness," Lana said in a faraway voice.

"It's following the Sammy suns. Straight for us," Caine said. He wasn't snarking or snarling anymore. Sam saw the same look on his face and Lana's. They both knew, deep down in their souls, what was coming.

Lana went to Caine and put a hand on his arm. Just making contact. Caine didn't shake her off.

It was a weird bond they shared: memories of the gaiaphage. Memories of its

painful touch deep inside their minds. Scars left on their souls.

“Fear is the mind-killer,” Lana said, reciting from memory. “Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I . . . I can’t remember the rest. From a book I read a long time ago.”

To almost no one’s surprise, Astrid said, “*Dune*, by Frank Herbert. ‘I must not fear. Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where the fear has gone there will be nothing.’”

She and Lana together spoke the last phrase of the incantation. “Only I will remain.”

There was a collective sigh that was almost a sob.

Sam pulled Astrid to him and they kissed. Then Sam pushed her away and said, “I love you. All my heart. Forever. But get the hell out of here, because I can’t be watching out for you.”

“I know,” Astrid said. “And I love you, too.”

Lana took a furious, defiant look down the highway. Sam knew what was in her heart.

“Lana. What you’ve got won’t kill him. What you’ve got may save a bunch of others. Go. Now.”

Then it was just the three of them, Sam, Caine, and Quinn, watching the dim light advance. Seeing now that it was three indistinct shapes. It was as if the one in the middle was carrying a Sammy sun of a different hue. Sam couldn’t make out faces. But he was sure he saw a tentacle twisting, twisting.

“Three of them,” Caine said. “That means most likely Penny is one of them.” Caine took a deep breath. “Get outta here, Quinn.”

Quinn said, “No. I don’t think I will.”

“Hey. I’m letting you off the hook, fisherman, okay? I’m being a good guy. You can go tell everyone the last thing I said was, ‘Just get out of here, Quinn, and try to stay alive.’”

“Quinn,” Sam said. “You’ve got nothing to prove, man.”

They had found Quinn a pistol. A revolver. It had three bullets.

“I’m in this,” Quinn said shakily.

“You have a plan, Sammy boy?” Caine asked.

“Yeah.” He extinguished the nearest Sammy sun, plunging them into darkness. The next one back was a hundred yards down the road. “Quinn, you start walking backward toward the last light. They won’t have any depth perception, no more than we do in this light. They’ll keep coming toward you. Caine, you drop left; I drop right; we hit them when they’re fifty feet out. Hopefully before Penny can find a target.”

“Great plan,” Caine said a little sarcastically. But he melted into the darkness on the left-hand side of the road.

“Quinn. My friend. What Caine said before. Save one bullet.” With that Sam plunged into the deep, enveloping darkness.

He watched Quinn begin to walk backward. It would mean Quinn was in darkness until he neared the next Sammy sun back. If Drake had seen them at all, he probably hadn’t been able to tell how many there were. But he would eventually be able to see Quinn. At that point he would fixate, anxious to take whoever it was standing in his

way.

There might be an opportunity there. A few confused seconds where Caine and Sam could strike unexpectedly. If they were fast and lucky they could take out at least one of the three and reduce the odds.

Who was that third person?

Drake. Penny. And someone—or something—glowing like an old headlight.

Whoever it is, he told himself, first go for Penny.

Penny was the one to fear.

“Dada,” Gaia said.

Diana stared down at her bright, glowing child. She was already the size of a two-year-old. There were teeth in her mouth. There was hair—dark like her parents’—on her head. Her movements were already deliberate and controlled, no more wild lack of coordination. Diana wondered if she could already walk.

“Did you say ‘Dada’?”

Gaia was looking fixedly at the dark off to the right. Straight ahead a lone figure stood beneath the light of a Sammy sun. Beyond him at least two fires could be seen, one fairly close and dramatic.

Gaia was in her head again, not straining to use her child mouth, but reaching straight into Diana’s memories. Pictures of Caine. And suddenly it was clear.

“It’s an ambush!” Diana said.

“Shut the—” Drake said, and was hurled bodily onto his back with such sudden force that he skidded clear out of sight.

A beam of terrible green light shot from the other direction.

Penny had reacted faster to Diana’s warning. She was already moving to hide behind Diana when the light split the night. Half of Penny’s hair frizzled and burned, leaving a terrible smell.

A roar from the dark behind them and Drake was rushing forward, his terrible whip at the ready, searching for a target. Light sliced deep into his side. He spun and fell. But even as he fell the burn was healing.

Diana saw Sam rush from the darkness. He yelled, “Diana, get down!” and fired at the spot where Drake had been a split second earlier.

Suddenly, revealed by the flash of light from Sam’s palms: Caine.

It had been four months since she had seen him. Just a little longer since together they had made Gaia.

Their eyes met. Caine froze. He stared at Diana. A look of pain creased his brow.

That moment’s hesitation was too long.

Caine reeled back, slapping at his body with hands weirdly encrusted on their backs. Slapping and yelling, and then Sam was yelling, “It’s Penny, it’s just Penny, Caine!”

Caine seemed to get control of himself, though barely, and for only a moment as he raised his hands and, with a wild sweep of both hands, flung Penny into the dark.

It was a mistake. An invisible Penny was even more dangerous.

Sam saw it and swept his killing beam around in a semicircle, searching for her. A flash of Penny, running. But when the beam pursued her, burning up the shrubbery, turning sand to bubbling glass, she wasn’t there.

Penny was not there. Astrid was.

Astrid in flames. Running, screaming toward Sam. Her skin was crisping. There was a smell of burned meat. Her blond hair was like a single flame and the edges of that fire ate at her forehead and cheeks.

“Astrid!” Sam cried, and ran to her. He was already whipping off his shirt to smother the flames when she suddenly ballooned, like a marshmallow dropped into a fire. She swelled and her skin turned charcoal and her eyes were just smears and . . .

The vision was gone.

Sam was in the dark. Panting. Staring.

He turned and saw the glow of the child in Diana’s arms. They were marching calmly toward Quinn.

Caine? Where was he?

Sam heard the sound of a whip. He ran toward that sound, but now the darkness had closed in and he had to toss Sammy suns profligately in order to see.

“Quinn! Run! Get out of there!” Sam yelled.

He watched as Quinn started to make a brave show of it, then he realized it wasn’t so much brave as stupid.

It was several minutes before Sam found Caine. He was breathing, but just now returning to consciousness. There was a livid red mark around Caine’s throat.

He sat up, then accepted Sam’s extended hand.

“Drake?”

Caine nodded and rubbed his neck. “But it was Penny who distracted me. You?”

“Penny,” Sam confirmed.

“Okay, next time we have to take Penny out before we do anything else,” Caine said.

The little procession—Drake, Penny, and Diana, with a baby in her arms—kept walking on down the road.

“So she had the baby,” Sam said. “Congratulations?”

“We lost the element of surprise,” Caine said. “They’ll be ready.”

As if to make the point, Drake, now even with the next Sammy sun, turned to look back at them, laughed, and snapped his whip. The laugh carried. So did the crack.

“Why didn’t they finish us?” Sam wondered.

“If I tell you something crazy, will you just accept it?” Caine said.

“It’s the FAYZ.”

“It was the baby. The baby stopped Drake. I was choking and he was behind me so I couldn’t get at him. Anyway, as good a hold as he had on me, if I’d thrown him or pushed him I’d have ripped my own head off. I saw the baby. Looked right at me. And Drake let me go.”

Sam wasn’t sure if he believed it or not. But the days of doubting a story just because it sounded crazy were over.

“They’re heading for the barrier.”

“Maybe it really will open?”

“Maybe,” Sam said. “But they’re going through town. Tearing up your people, King Caine.”

A scream reached their ears.

“Well, I guess we’d better give Quinn a good story,” Caine said dryly. “My legacy

and all.”

“Penny first,” Sam said, and started running.

THIRTY-SEVEN

3 MINUTES

GAIA LAUGHED AND Diana couldn't help laughing, too. They'd passed a burning house with kids lurking as near as they could get to the light without burning.

Penny had done something to make them run into the burning house.

Diana was horrified until Gaia laughed. And then Diana couldn't help but laugh, too. It was funny, in a way.

Gaia had a sense of humor. How amazing to see it in an infant. Diana credited herself, her genes. Gaia had gotten that from her mommy.

Down the street, and the light that shone from Gaia was enough to draw people like moths to the flame. They would come creeping or cavorting, needing that light, needing it after so long in the hopeless pitch-black.

They came, and when they did Drake would whip them until they ran away again, or danced just out of his range.

Gaia laughed and clapped her hands. Amazing how fast she learned.

The barrier would be broken and Diana and her baby girl would be free. They could go to the zoo. Or what was that place kids went for pizza and games? Chuck E. Cheese's! Yes, they could play the games and eat pizza. And watch TV in . . . They would find a house. Who could stop them, really? With Drake and Penny as their servants. Hah! Servants.

Who could stand against them? They had brushed Caine and Sam aside like they were nothing.

And Gaia had yet to even reveal the extent of her own power.

Diana wanted to laugh aloud and dance around with her baby. But even as the high of joy washed through her, Diana felt the falseness of it. The strained edginess of it. She wanted to shout for joy and scream for joy and then stab the baby, her baby, her beloved little daughter, stab her with a knife. For joy.

Gaia was looking at her. Her eyes held her. Diana couldn't look away. They cut right through her and saw the truth. Gaia could see the fear inside Diana, the fear of Gaia.

Gaia laughed and clapped her hands and her blue eyes shone and Diana felt weak inside, and sick, and all the suffering her body had been through all felt as if it was still there and only concealed from view. She was hollow. An empty nothingness tottering along on stick-figure legs that would snap and collapse.

Screams of burning children pursued Diana as she held her baby close and looked fearfully into her glittering eyes.

There was no way the suspension on Connie's car was built for this road. The Camry kept bottoming out with a sound like chain saws ripping through steel.

But the time for hesitation was over. Now was the time for her to behave like a mother. A mother whose child—whose children—were in danger.

In the rearview mirror she saw Abana keeping pace. Her SUV was doing a little better. Fine: if they survived this day they could drive home in that.

If Abana ever talked to her again.

The road came perilously close to the highway when they were just half a mile from the barrier. The dust trail they were putting up would be obvious.

Sure enough, as the awful blank monstrosity that was the Perdido Beach Anomaly filled the entire field of view, Connie heard a helicopter overhead.

A loudspeaker blared, audible even over the *chop-chop-chop* of the rotors.

“You are in a dangerous, restricted area. Turn around immediately.”

This was repeated several times before the helicopter sped ahead, pivoted neatly, and began to land in the road a quarter mile away.

In the rearview mirror Connie saw Abana’s SUV take a sharp, bouncing, crazy veer into the rough terrain. She was angling toward the highway where it met the barrier. It would lead straight through the remains of the hastily moved camp.

There were still a few trailers there. Still a satellite dish array. Dumpsters. Porta Pottis.

Connie swore to herself, apologized to her car, and veered after Abana.

It was no longer a case of the car just bottoming out. Now the car was flying and crashing, flying and crashing. Each impact jarred Connie’s bones. She hit the ceiling so many times she quickly lost count. The steering wheel tore itself from her grip.

Then suddenly she was on tarmac, blistering through the remains of the camp.

The helicopter was after them again and it blew overhead.

It executed a daring, almost suicidal maneuver, and landed way too hard in the final feet of pavement before the intimidating wall of the barrier.

Two soldiers jumped out, MPs with guns drawn.

Then a third soldier.

Abana slammed on her brakes.

Connie did not stop. She aimed the battered, disintegrating car at the helicopter and stood on the accelerator.

The Camry hit the helicopter’s skids. The air bag exploded in her face. The seat belt jerked back against her. She heard something snap. She felt a jolt of pain.

She jumped out of the car, stumbled over the twisted metal remains of the skid, saw that the rotor had plowed into concrete and stuck fast.

And Connie ran, staggered, realized she’d broken her collarbone, ran on toward the barrier. If she could reach it, if they couldn’t stop her, couldn’t drag her away, then she could stop it all from happening.

One of the soldiers snagged Abana as she ran, but Connie dodged, and only as she ran past him, only when he called out, “Connie! No!” did she realize that the third soldier was Darius.

She reached the barrier.

Reached it. Stopped. Stared at it, at the eternal gray wall.

Darius was behind her, breathless. “Connie. It’s too late. It’s too late, babe. Something’s happened to the device.”

She turned on him, somehow believing he was reproaching her, too emotional to understand what he was saying. “I’m sorry,” she cried. “It’s my boys in there. It’s my babies!”

He took her in his arms, squeezed her tight, and said, “They tried to stop the countdown. It worked, the message got out, and they tried to stop it.”

“What?”

Abana came running up then. The MPs had given up holding her back. The soldiers wore identically strained expressions. Neither seemed interested in the two women anymore.

“Listen to me,” Darius said. “They can’t stop it. It’s this place. Something went wrong and they can’t stop the countdown.”

At last his words penetrated.

“How long?” Connie asked.

Darius looked at the MPs. And now Connie understood the passive, strained look on their faces. “One minute and ten seconds,” the larger of the two MPs, a lieutenant, said. And he knelt on the pavement, folded his hands, and prayed.

Sam was torn between spreading light with abandon and being seen coming, or going without light and moving much more slowly. He chose a compromise. He tossed off Sammy suns at a run as he and Caine made their way to the beach, and then along the beach until they were hidden from view beneath the cliffs.

The ocean had a faint, very faint phosphorescence that seemed almost bright. It could be seen not as particular waves or even ripples, but as a fuzzy mass that was only dark as opposed to utterly black.

“Here,” Sam said, hanging a sun. He pointed at the forbidding wall of stone to their left. “The climb isn’t too bad.”

“You don’t need to climb.”

Sam felt himself lifted off his feet. He rose through the air with the cliff face just within reach. In the eerie light, the rock face look like the blades of broken knives.

Sam scrambled to get from Caine’s grip onto solid ground. Did he dare hang a light? No. Too near the highway. He could sense—at least, he hoped he could—Clifftop off to his right. If he was where he thought he was, he could easily cross the driveway, the access road, a sand berm, and then descend at the point where the highway ran into the barrier.

Caine landed beside him.

“You going to light up?”

“No. Let’s try for surprise number two.”

They stumbled across rough ground, tripping, falling, silencing their curses.

They were just beside the sand berm, a sand wind barrier that ran within fifty feet of the road, when they heard a crack. It was like a peal of thunder, but with no lightning.

It seemed to go on forever and ever.

“It begins,” a strange, childlike, but beautiful voice said. “The egg cracks! Soon! Soon!”

“She speaks!” Diana cried.

“We’re getting out,” Drake cried. “It’s opening!”

“Now,” Sam hissed.

He and Caine motored up the side of the sand. As soon as Caine could see his target he swept his hands down and literally threw himself into the air. The swoosh gave him away, and Penny saw him in an instant.

Sam aimed carefully, but Diana moved between him and Penny. Calm, fluid, as if she’d known he was there.

“Get her!” Caine screamed in despair as a horrific vision left him plummeting, screaming, to the ground.

Sam ran straight for them. He fired once, hitting Drake full in the face. It didn’t kill him, but it would keep him from talking for a while.

Sam shouldered Diana roughly aside, seeing tiny blue eyes follow him.

Penny spun.

Sam fired wildly.

Penny’s left leg caught fire. She screeched and ran in panic, spreading the flames to her clothing.

“No, Sam!” Diana cried.

An unimaginably powerful force threw Sam spinning into the air. It was like someone had set a bomb off under him. And then he stopped spinning. He stopped falling back to earth.

He looked down and saw the baby looking up at him and laughing and clapping her hands. Then the baby took her chubby little fingers and made a motion like she was stretching dough.

Sam felt his body pulling in opposite directions. It squeezed the air from his lungs. It was as if two giant hands had each taken a rough grip on him and were tearing him apart.

He heard his bones cracking.

Felt the sharp pain of ribs separating from cartilage.

The baby was bringing him closer now. Like she wanted to see better. Like she wanted to be sprayed with his very blood as he was ripped in—

Diana stumbled forward. She plowed into her child and both fell, but without hitting the ground.

Sam fell to earth. But he, too, did not quite smash onto the concrete.

Dekka!

She was panting like she’d just run a marathon. She stood in the middle of the road, glaring furiously, hands raised. She looked, Sam thought, like she’d taken a trip to hell. But she had shown excellent timing.

Sam did not hesitate. As soon as his feet touched the ground he jumped up, ignoring the bone-shattering pain in his body.

Penny had dropped and rolled, the fire was out, but her skin was the color and texture of a well-glazed ham.

Sam ran to where she lay gasping with pain, real pain, no illusion, and straddled her and aimed his hands down at her.

“You’re too dangerous to live,” Sam said.

His own flesh suddenly caught fire, but he was too close, too ready. He was already there and all he had to do now was to think and—

—and a chunk of pavement, a slab of concrete two feet across and shedding the dirt from which it had been ripped, smashed down on Penny’s head with such force that the ground bounced beneath Sam’s feet.

Her body ceased moving instantly. Like a switch had been thrown.

Caine stood over her, breathing hard. “Payback,” he snarled. He kicked the slab of cement for emphasis.

Drake’s melted face had begun to repair itself, but he still looked like a

microwaved action figure. His whip, however, was in perfect working order.

He struck and Sam cried out in pain.

Caine raised the rock he'd used to kill Penny and readied it to smash down on Drake.

"No, Daddy," said Gaia.

THIRTY-EIGHT

15 SECONDS

“IT BLOWS UP and kills us all,” Connie said quietly, weirdly calm. “Or it does . . . something else.”

Abana took her hand. The two of them.

And other vehicles were coming down the highway. Not police—there were no sirens. The police and soldiers had been withdrawn to a safe distance.

These were a handful of private cars and vans. Parents. Friends. People who had gotten the emails and tweets and were rushing to stop what could not now be stopped.

Connie and Abana looked at each other. A look full of fear and sadness and guilt: they had brought these people here to die.

Connie looked at the MPs. The chopper pilot, a woman with blond hair and captain’s bars, had joined them after roundly cursing the damage to her craft.

“I’m sorry,” Connie whispered. “I’m sorry I did this to you.”

She heard a cracking sound. Like slow-motion thunder, or like a world-size eggshell breaking open. Everyone fell silent and listened. It went on for a long time.

“It’s opening,” Abana whispered. “The barrier, it’s cracking open!”

Too late, Connie thought. Too late.

Connie went to Darius and they waited, side by side, for the end.

The baby. It was no longer in Diana’s arms. It stood. All on its own, a glowing, naked two-year-old, by all appearances.

Caine flew back. He was pressed against the barrier, in full contact, yelling at the pain, then barely making a sound at all as the pressure grew stronger, relentless.

Sam could see him being squashed; he could quite literally see Caine’s body flatten as if a truck were pushing against him, squashing him like a bug against the barrier.

“Make her stop!” Sam yelled at Diana.

“I . . .” Diana looked stricken. Like she was coming out of a nightmare into a worse reality.

“She’s killing him!”

“Don’t,” Diana said weakly. “Don’t kill your father.”

But there was a determined look on the child’s face. Her cherub lips drew back in a weird snarl.

Sam raised his hands, palms out.

“Get back, Diana,” Sam said.

Diana did not move.

Sam glanced at Caine. A bug against a windshield.

Sam fired. Twin beams of murderous light hit the child dead center.

And the entire world exploded in blinding light.

Caine slid to the ground. Diana reeled back, covering her eyes. Drake used his tentacle to cover his eyes.

Sam was blinded by it. It was not the light of his hands. It was not the light of the baby.

Sunlight.

Sunlight!

Brilliant, blazing, Southern California midday sunlight.

No sound. No warning. One second the world was black, with only the pitiful light of a few Sammy suns. And the next instant it was as if they were staring into the sun itself.

Sam squeezed open one eye. What he saw was impossible. There were people. Adults. Four, no five, six adults.

A wrecked helicopter.

A Carl's Jr. The same flash of the world outside Sam had seen for only a millisecond once before. But now the vision lingered.

The barrier was gone!

Drake cried out in a sort of ecstatic fear. He ran straight at the barrier, his whip swishing at his side.

Caine, groggy, injured, stood up.

But something was wrong about it. Caine was leaning on something, propping himself up, then pulling his hand sharply away.

From the barrier.

Drake hit the wall. He ran with his whip hand lashing straight into something unyielding but invisible.

The adults, the women, the soldiers, all stared, mouths open.

They were seeing!

Seeing Diana screaming.

Seeing Drake lashing viciously in every direction with his whip.

Seeing the brutally pulverized head and face of a young girl named Penny driven half into the pavement.

Seeing a little girl, a toddler, untouched, unharmed by Sam's now-extinguished light.

Faces everywhere. They pressed closer; they tried to walk, but Sam could see them touching, then jumping back from the barrier.

The barrier was still there. But now it was transparent.

Sam's heart seemed to stop. One face suddenly came into focus.

His mother.

His mother mouthing some unhearable words and looking at him as Sam aimed his palms toward the defenseless little girl.

He couldn't stop. He had stopped once before. No: he couldn't stop.

Sam's light burned.

His mother's face, all the faces, all of them screaming soundlessly. *No! Noooo!*

The little girl's hair caught fire. It flamed magnificently, for she had her mother's lush dark hair.

Sam fired again and the little girl's flesh burned at last.

But all the while the girl, the gaiaphage, its face turned away from onlookers, stared at Sam in undiminished fury. The blue eyes never looked away. Her angelic mouth leered in a knowing grin even as it burned.

Until at last, the gaiaphage was a pillar of flame, all features obscured.

Sam stopped firing.

The baby, the child, the monster, the devil, turned and ran back down the highway.

Diana, her face a twisted mask, ran after her.

Drake, eyes hollow and vacant, horrified, turned and ran, lashing impotently at nothing.

Sam and Caine were left standing side by side, bruised and battered, to stare over Penny's sickening corpse, at the face of their mother.

LATER

A **HELICOPTER** HAD arrived overhead. It was decorated with the logo of a news station out of Santa Barbara. It made no sound, of course—the dome was still impervious to noise—but Astrid could see faces in the cockpit, and could guess at the telephoto camera lens aimed down at them.

The helicopter's view was slightly hampered now by the fact that outside, out there beyond that diamond-hard, glass-clear barrier, it was raining. The drops splatted on the dome and then ran down in streams.

Along the inside of the barrier, on both sides of the highway, kids stood as close as they could get to the outside. Three or four dozen kids had come so far, rushing from Perdido Beach. At first all they saw were the soldiers and the state cops who had raced up with lights flashing, the helicopter, and a handful of parents.

But more parents were arriving in cars and SUVs from their new homes in Arroyo Grande, Santa Maria, and Orcutt. The parents who had found new places to live farther away, in Santa Barbara or Los Angeles, would take a while longer to get here.

Some of the parents were holding up signs.

Where is Charlie?

Where is Bette?

We love you! With the ink bleeding from the rain.

We miss you!

Are you okay?

There wasn't much paper left in the FAYZ, and kids had come at a run, not even waiting to grab anything. But some found pieces of wallboard or tattered windblown scraps of cardboard, and used bits of gravel to write back.

I love you, too.

Tell my mom I'm okay!

Help us.

And all of this was watched by the TV camera on the helicopter, and the people, the adults—parents and cops and gawkers. Half a dozen smartphones were snapping pictures and shooting video. Astrid knew that more, many, many more, would come.

There were boats beginning to appear on the ocean outside the dome. And they, too, stared with binoculars and telephoto lenses.

An old couple came running from a motorhome, scribbling as they ran. Their sign read, *Can you check on our cat, Ariel?*

No one would answer that, because the cats had all been eaten.

Where is my daughter? And a name.

Where is my son? And a name.

And whose job was it, Astrid wondered bitterly, to write the answers? Dead. Dead. Died of carnivorous worms. Died of a coyote attack.

Murdered in a fight over a bag of chips.

Dead of suicide.

Dead because she was playing with matches and we don't exactly have a fire department.

Killed because it was the only way we could deal with him.

How did one explain to all those watching eyes what life was like inside the FAYZ?

Then a familiar car that almost rear-ended a parked police cruiser. A man jumped out. A woman moved slowly, unsteady. Astrid's mother and father came to the barrier. Her father was holding her mother up, as though she might collapse.

The sight of them tore Astrid apart. The adults and older teens who had been in the FAYZ area when Petey had performed his mad miracle had obviously made it out. How many thousands of hours had Astrid spent trying to figure it out, trying to walk through each possible outcome? Parents dead, parents alive, parents all off in some parallel universe, parents with all memory rewritten, parents erased from past as well as present.

Now they were back, crying, waving, staring, carrying loads of emotional baggage and demanding explanations that most kids—Astrid included—could not somehow reduce to a few words scratched on a piece of plaster, or gouged with a nail on a piece of wood.

Where is Petey?

Astrid's mother held that sign. She'd written it with a Magic Marker on the side of a canvas bag, because now the rain was too intense to allow for paper.

Astrid stared at it for a long time. And in the end she could manage no answer better than a shrug and a shake of her head.

I don't know where Petey is.

I don't even know *what* Petey is.

Sam was beside her, not touching her, not with so many eyes watching. She wanted to lean against him. She wanted to close her eyes and, when she opened them again, be with him up at the lake.

Desperate months had gone by when all Astrid had wanted was to be out of this place and back in her old life as her parents' loving daughter. Now she could barely stand to look at them. Now she sought desperately for an excuse to leave. They were strangers. And she knew, as Sam had always known, that they would in the end be accusers.

They were a stab in her heart when she just could not take any more, when she just could not start to feel any more. Too much. She couldn't switch suddenly from one despair to a different despair.

Dekka stood behind Sam with her arms crossed, almost as if she were hiding. Quinn and Lana stood a little apart, just marveling at the sight of the outside world, but having as yet no faces to connect with.

"We're monkeys in a zoo," Sam said.

"No," Astrid said. "People like monkeys. Look at the way they look at us. Imagine what they're seeing."

"I've been picturing it since the beginning."

Astrid nodded. "Yeah."

"You want to know what they see? What my mother sees? A boy who fired light from his hands and tried to incinerate a baby," Sam said harshly. "They saw me burn a child. No explanation will ever change that."

"We look like savages. Filthy and starved, dressed like street people," Astrid said.

“Weapons everywhere. A girl lying dead with a rock crushing her brains.” She looked at her mother and oh, there was no avoiding her mother’s look of . . . of what? Not joy. Not relief.

Horror.

Distance.

Both sides, parents and children, now saw the huge gulf that had opened up between them. Astrid’s father seemed small. Her mother looked old. They both were like ancient photographs of themselves, not like real people. Not as real as her memories of them.

Astrid felt as if their eyes were looking through her, searching for a memory of their daughter. Like they didn’t want to see her, but some girl she had long since ceased to be.

Brianna came zooming up, a welcome distraction that caused silent faces on the other side to form round circles with their mouths: Ooh. Ahh. And hands to point and cameras to swivel. Brianna gave a little salute and a wave.

“She’s ready for her close-up,” Dekka said dryly.

“Is it bright in here, or is it just me?” Brianna said. Then she drew her machete, whirled it at ten times human speed, stopped, sheathed it again, and executed a little bow to the baffled and appalled onlookers. “Yes. Yes: I will play myself in the movie. The Breeze is way beyond special effects.”

Astrid breathed for what felt like the first time in a long while. She was thankful Brianna had broken at least some of the tension.

“By the way, back to business: they’re headed into the desert,” Brianna announced to Sam. “A happy little crew, Mom and daughter and Uncle Whip Hand. I got a little too close and that baby nearly buried me under about a ton of rock. That is one bad baby.”

Brianna nodded, satisfied. “That can be my tagline. ‘That is one bad baby.’”

“No, no,” Dekka said. “Just: no.”

Astrid smiled, and her mother thought it was meant for her and smiled back.

“I saw someone recording it,” Sam said. “Me burning that . . . that creature. You know what they’ll see? You know what people out there will think?”

Astrid knew he was jumping out of his skin. She could see—anyone could see—the look of horror on Connie Temple’s face every time she looked at her son.

“Son,” singular, for Caine had taken one long look at his mother, turned, and walked away, back to town.

“You’ve been afraid of this for a long time, Sam,” Astrid said in a low voice. “You’ve been afraid of being judged.”

Sam nodded. He looked down at the ground, then at Astrid. She had expected to see sadness there. Maybe guilt. She almost cried out with relief when she saw the eyes of the boy who had never backed down. She saw the eyes of the boy who had first stepped forward to fight Orc and later Caine and Drake and Penny.

She saw Sam Temple. *Her* Sam Temple.

“Well,” Sam said, “I guess they’ll think what they want to think.”

“It’s getting dark out there,” Dekka said. “When night comes, we’d better get Penny out of there. Bury her. Everyone who shows up stares at—”

Dekka fell silent, because Sam was moving. He walked purposefully to the spot

where Penny's body lay, her head crushed beneath a rock, like some grotesque parody of the Wicked Witch of the East.

Cameras tracked Sam's movement.

Eyes—many of them hostile, condemning—traced his every step.

Sam looked straight at the cameras. Then he looked at his mother. Astrid held her breath.

Then Sam systematically, thoroughly, incinerated Penny's body. Until nothing but ash was left.

Connie Temple stood still as a statue, refusing to look away.

When Sam was finished, he nodded once at his mother, turned his back, and walked over to Astrid. "She will not be buried in the plaza with good kids who died for no good reason. If we're looking for people to bury, we'll find what's left of Cigar and Taylor."

Lana shook her head just slightly. "I can't say for sure that Taylor is dead. Or that she's alive."

Sam nodded. "That's the kind of thing all those people out there are going to have a hard time understanding. But anyway, there they are, and you know what? We still have kids to feed and a monster to kill." He reached his hand toward Astrid. "You ready to go?"

Astrid looked past him, over his shoulder, to her mother's worry-etched face. Then she took Sam's hand.

"There's a lot to do," Sam said to the kids within earshot. His back was turned to the outside. "A lot to do, a lot to work out, and this war is a long way from over. They will be back." He jerked his head toward the north, where Gaia had fled.

"Quinn," Sam said. "You want to be in charge of business down here in Perdido Beach? Take over Albert's job? I think Caine would agree."

"Absolutely not," Quinn said. "No. Nooo. No."

Sam looked a little taken aback. "No? Well, I guess they'll work something out. Caine and Lana and Edilio and Astrid."

"I hope they do," Quinn said fervently. He gave Sam a friendly punch on the shoulder. "Thanks for saving our butts. Again. But me? Dude: I am going fishing."

Astrid felt she should look back at her parents. Explain that she had to leave. Make some excuse. Stay there to reassure them.

But something fundamental had changed, like a shift in the magnetic poles or a rearranging of the laws of physics. Because she no longer belonged with them. She was no longer theirs.

She was *his*.

And he was *hers*.

And this was their world.

PRAISE FOR THE GONE SERIES

Gone

“This intense, marvelously plotted, paced, and characterized story will immediately garner comparisons to *Lord of the Flies* or even the long-playing world shifts of Stephen King, with just a dash of *X-Men* for good measure. A potent mix of action and thoughtfulness—centered around good and evil, courage and cowardice—renders this a tour de force that will leave readers dazed, disturbed, and utterly breathless.”

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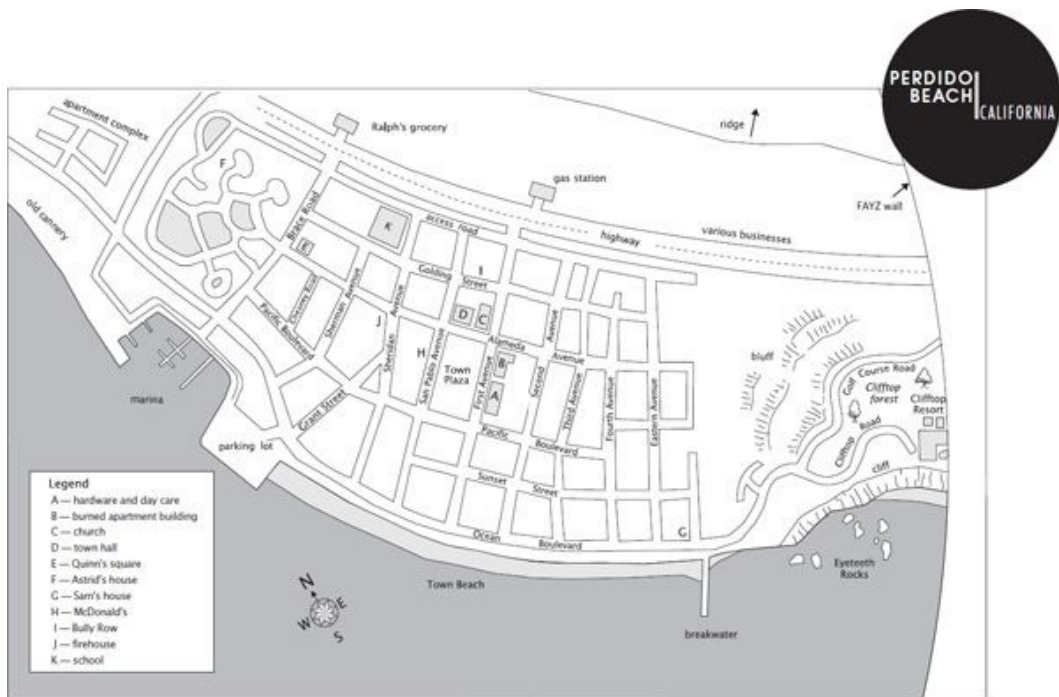
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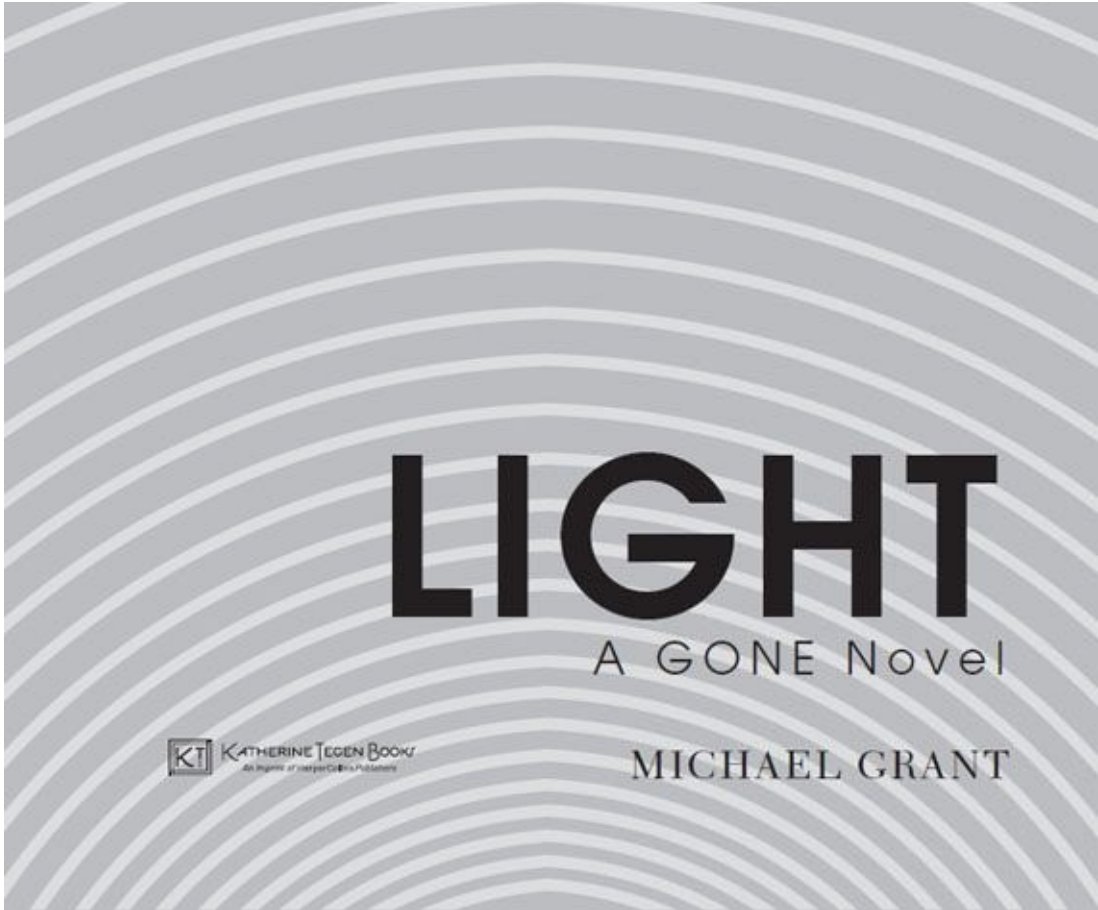
A **GONE** NOVEL

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MICHAEL GRANT

MAPS





DEDICATION

For Katherine, Jake, and Julia

EPIGRAPH

Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.

—Martin Luther King Jr.

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ONE

88 HOURS, 39 MINUTES

THE LITTLE GIRL'S hair caught fire. It flamed magnificently, for she had her mother's lush dark hair.

Sam fired again, and the little girl's flesh burned at last.

But all the while the girl, the gaiaphage, its face turned away from onlookers, stared at Sam in undiminished fury. The blue eyes never looked away. Her angelic mouth leered in a knowing grin even as it burned.

Gaia had started a fire in some twigs that Diana had gathered. It wasn't much of a fire. It would die out soon, and Diana would sleep, again, on the cold ground.

There had been a moment, two days earlier, when Diana might have gone to Caine. Caine had been with Sam, and she could have broken away from Gaia then and run to him.

Maybe Drake, Whip Hand, could have stopped her if she had tried that. Maybe Gaia could have as well. But for some reason Gaia had kept Drake from killing Caine, and then, seconds later, Sam had burned Gaia with his deadly light and . . .

. . . and right then, Diana could have run to Caine. She had wanted to.

Had she stayed with Gaia out of some new maternal instinct? Gaia had cried in genuine, terrifying agony from the burns. She could be hurt. She *had* been hurt.

Yes, Diana thought now, too desperate, hungry, cold, that had been part of it. Gaia was her daughter. What an impossible idea! Gaia had been created inside Diana's body, egg and sperm, Diana and Caine, the world's oldest story. And when Gaia was born in pain and blood, Diana had felt a connection. It had been good, that connection. It had been reassuring, because Diana had not been sure she would feel it. She had not been sure she was capable of feeling it. The connection meant Diana was human, that she was a woman, that she could feel something for the baby she had delivered.

That there was, despite everything, some hope for Diana.

But she had also felt fear. Gaia was a beautiful baby girl when she was born. She would be beautiful again, no doubt, when she finished healing herself of the deep and terrible burns that had turned her skin into something that looked like the top of an overcooked lasagna. (Gaia seemed unconcerned with all that.) But she would never be just a girl, the daughter of Caine and Diana. Because there was a third force, greater than egg and sperm and womb. Greater even than a mother's love.

Gaia was the creature of the gaiaphage. The gaiaphage had taken her. It had brutally suppressed whatever slight, tenuous personality the baby might have had, and it had imposed itself. Diana had seen it and had cried out against it, but the gaiaphage didn't care. It didn't care when it was a seething mass of green seeping across the floor of a deep cave, and it didn't care now that it was a girl with half-healed burned flesh and hair only now growing back, staring into a fire.

"Nemesis," Gaia whispered, not for the first time. Like she was whispering to a friend.

Diana's daughter was never going to love her. She'd been an idiot to even imagine

it, to even dream of it.

But maybe . . .

Maybe what? Maybe what? Diana taunted herself, as pitilessly judgmental with her own self as she was with others. *What ridiculous hope are you holding on to, Diana? You know what she is. You know she's not yours, not really yours. You know she's not a "she" but an "it."*

But so pretty by firelight. Imagine, Diana tortured herself, imagine if she was really just a girl, your daughter. Imagine what a miracle you would see in her. Imagine how you would feel, Diana, if this beautiful girl was really yours.

Yours and his.

A beautiful, perfect little girl . . .

A dark and terrible creature.

"It won't hurt, my little Nemesis," Gaia said, but not to Diana.

Would Diana once again let herself be swept along in the wake of an evil person, first with Caine, now with Gaia? Was impotent snark all that Diana had to offer in opposition?

During her abbreviated pregnancy she had allowed herself to fantasize about being a mother, a better mother than her own. She'd pictured herself becoming a good person. She could do that, she'd told herself. She didn't always have to go on being what she had been and what she had become.

She could have been saved.

"The end is the best part of any story," Gaia whispered, talking to no one that Diana could see. "The end."

Diana had imagined redemption, forgiveness, a new beginning as a young mother.

But she was mother to a monster who cared nothing for her.

"I don't make good choices," Diana whispered as she lay down in the dirt and wrapped her arms tightly for warmth.

"What," Gaia snapped, looking up at her.

"Eh," Diana said with a sigh. "Nothing."

Little Pete was getting littler. That's how it felt, anyway. He could feel himself sort of shrinking, and he wasn't so sure it felt bad. Maybe it was a relief.

Life had always been strange and disturbing for Peter Ellison. From the moment of his birth the world had attacked him with noise and light and scraping touch. All the sensations that were easy for other people to make sense of were terrifying and overwhelming for him. Other people could filter things out. Other people could turn down the noise, but Pete could not. Not while he'd been in his body.

That body had been the problem. The severe autism that had crippled him had been in his body, in his physical brain.

It had been a relief to be out of that body and brain. When Astrid, his sister with the cutting blue eyes and the yellow snake hair, had thrown him to his physical death, he had been . . . relieved.

Pete had been able to create a new thing for himself, a new place that was not a body. He had carried his power with him, but with that power he had made terrible mistakes. He saw that now. He saw what he had done to Taylor. He could no longer do things like that; he could no longer play with the abstract patterns that were actually

human beings.

Now he was fading, like a light with one of those special switches. There had been one in the house, the dining room of the house he'd been raised in, the one that had burned down. A dimmer switch, that's what his mother had called it.

Turn the dimmer down, let's make dinner seem romantic.

Little by little the light that was Pete was getting dimmer. He was romantic.

He had been like a rubber band stretched out. Like one end was attached to his body and the other end was . . . well, wherever he was now. But with his body gone the rubber band was contracting.

It wasn't so bad.

He could see the Darkness. The Darkness, too, could reach into this space of Pete's. It, too, had been dimming, the creature that named itself gaiaphage, but now it was stronger with a body to anchor it.

Pete could listen to the gaiaphage's mind sometimes. Pete knew the Darkness was watching him. Laughing at him as he weakened, but nervous, too.

So many times the Darkness had reached to him with its tendrils, sneaking up behind him, trying to find him, trying to make him believe things, do things.

The Darkness wanted Pete to dim. When Pete was all the way gone, all his power would be gone, too.

The Darkness whispered to him. *It won't hurt, my little Nemesis. It will just be the end, like the end of the stories your sister used to read to you. Remember how you always wanted them to end because her voice and her eyes and her yellow hair hurt you?*

Don't fight it, Nemesis.

The end is the best part of any story. The end.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me.

Orc had memorized the verse. In his head he said it "yeah" instead of "yea," but that didn't change the meaning. What it meant was, if you're scared, don't be, because God is there. That much was clear. But the next bit about a rod and a staff . . . as far as Orc knew, a rod was maybe a stick and a staff was, like, all the guys who worked for you. My staff.

My staff will comfort you. Which made sense because if you were God you'd need a staff of, like, angels or whatever to take care of comforting people and so on.

He had walked up Trotter's Ridge at sundown, up above the town of Perdido Beach. But as he'd reached the top of the hill where the barrier sliced it in two, he'd crouched lower and lower, afraid even to be outlined against the stars. He'd finished the last hundred feet on his belly.

You still couldn't touch the barrier, that hadn't changed; it would still zap you. But now you could see right through it. Like it was just plain old glass. Which meant people out there could see in.

That thought made him sick to his stomach.

He peered through a crispy, dead stand of tall yellow grass, and there it was. The other side. The out there.

No one was on the hill right where he was; they were all down on the highway and

around there. It was so amazingly bright out there. The hamburger place was lit up like light cost nothing. The motels, so many lights. Like Christmas or something. He could see the lights of cars and vans and campers backed up in the world's biggest traffic jam. It went on as far as he could see. There were police lights flashing all over the place, near and far, the Highway Patrol trying to get things organized. Problem was, the highway just hit the barrier and stopped. Someone had bulldozed a turnaround, but with cars lining both sides of the highway as well as jamming the highway itself, that whole turnaround thing wasn't working. There was a slow-moving stream of red taillights.

Up against the barrier in the out there were a few big news trucks all covered in antennas and satellite dishes and crazy bright lights. A little past them it looked like some kind of army base, because earlier he had seen green uniforms and Humvees.

Above all there was the neon, red and gold and a little green—a Carl's Jr. His mouth watered. Fries. He would do just about anything for some fries and a chocolate shake.

From this angle he couldn't see the kids up against the inside of the barrier, but he knew they were there, because unlike the stuff outside he could hear the things inside. He heard voices, some yelling like they didn't believe no one could hear through the barrier.

A girl with a high-pitched voice was yelling, "Mommy! Mommy!"

Everyone seemed to think it was all going to end. They all thought the barrier had to come down now—sooner, not later. Caine, who called himself King Caine, had told Orc to help him get people back from the barrier, get them back to work, because here in the FAYZ every day was hungry, and starvation was never more than a couple days off.

But of course Orc had said no. No way. If he went down there, every camera would point toward him. People would scream: he wouldn't be able to hear them, but he'd see them, see their mouths making big Os and see them point at him.

Orc had always been a big kid, but he was more than big now. He was probably more than six feet tall and almost that wide just standing with his arms down at his side. And he was made of something that looked a lot like wet gravel, or maybe concrete that hadn't set yet.

He was a monster.

He wanted a drink of booze so bad. If he got really rip-roaring crazy drunk, then maybe he could go down there, down into the valley of the shadow. But not sober, no, he couldn't take that.

His mom might be there, if his dad hadn't killed her yet.

He tried to picture her and succeeded. Then Orc tried to picture his mother without a bruise on the side of her head or a cast on her wrist and he couldn't.

And his father . . . he didn't want to picture his father, but he couldn't help it, the pictures came: pictures of his father in a cold and evil drunk, sizing up his son, making sure that Charles Merriman, who had long been known as Orc, was hanging his head and looking away. Making sure his son was afraid.

His dad liked that part, the part where Orc was desperately trying to stay out of his way but was forced to sit down and do his homework while his father drank beer after beer and dropped the cans beside his chair, waiting until he had an excuse—almost

anything would do.

His father sober was distant and indifferent. His father drunk was a monster.

Like Orc, but not as ugly.

He wondered if his father knew he could come here and glare at his son again through the dome. And what would he say if he saw Orc now? Make that snorting sound of his, that sound that said, *You're worthless*.

If that happened . . .

His father was a big man. But Orc was bigger and had strength to match. Orc could snap him like a dry stick.

With one thick, stony finger Orc delicately touched the tiny patch of human skin near his mouth. It tickled.

If the barrier came down, everyone would see him in the bright TV lights. And sooner or later his father would, too. Orc was sure if he ever saw his father again, he would kill the man.

That was the death that shadowed the valley. That was the evil. And God's staff would have to move pretty quick to stop it happening.

"Don't let it come down, Lord," he prayed. "I know all them kids want to see their moms and all. But please, God, don't let that barrier come down."

Sam was asleep, finally, facedown, uncovered, naked, and turned slightly away from Astrid.

There was a light. Sam Temple, the hero of most of the kids in the FAYZ, had always been a little afraid of the dark. So he had created a night-light for this dark space.

It was not a normal light: a tiny ball, no bigger than a marble. It floated in a corner above the bunk. Astrid had taped a sheet of red paper in front of it so that its green, unnatural glow would be softened. The tape had come loose, so the imperfect lampshade blocked the light only intermittently as the paper twirled in the slightest breeze, drifted as the boat gently rocked.

When the light brightened, Sam would appear as bits and pieces—a broad back, a flicker of round, pale bottom, a length of muscular thigh in harsh shadow. When the light softened, he would be almost invisible just sounds of breathing, and a scent, and a warmth.

She should cover him. Really, she should. He'd get cold after a while and wake up and realize she wasn't sleeping and that would worry him.

But not just yet, she thought.

She was trying to read by the uncertain light. The book was on law, and Astrid had become convinced by the book that she would never be a lawyer, or even try. She could read most anything, but this was a very dull book, and it did very little to distract her from the view.

My God: she was *happy*.

The very idea that she should be happy was absurd. It was almost a crime. Things were desperate, but then they had been for a long time. Desperate had long since become the new normal.

If the barrier really did come down . . . if this really was the endgame . . . They were fifteen. Out there, out in the world, they had no legal right to be together.

They'd been through hell. They'd been through a whole series of hells, and they were still together. But none of that would mean anything in the eyes of the law. Her parents, or his mother, could snap their fingers and break what Sam and Astrid had built.

It was not the first time Astrid had had the thought that maybe liberation from the FAYZ would be no such thing.

TWO

78 HOURS, 26 MINUTES

THE BREEZE WAS famous.

She had been interviewed on the *Today* show.

The interview had been a bit unusual, because there was no way for Matt Lauer to actually speak to Brianna, and no way for Brianna to speak back. Communications with the outside world were purely visual. The world could see in. The kids in the *FAYZ* could see out. That was it.

Which meant that an interview was done with what amounted to a sort of primitive Twitter. The interviewer would write a question on a pad, or in the case of the *Today* show, since they were a little more high-tech, light it up on an HD monitor that had been set up to be visible within the dome. Then whoever was inside the dome could write the answer and hold it up to the cameras outside.

This made for extraordinarily tedious interviews. The interviewer could have a bunch of questions preloaded, but the kid on the inside would have to write his or her answer out, and that was slow. Very. Very. Slow.

For anyone except the Breeze.

Brianna had ripped a segment of chalkboard off from the school, and had found some chalk, and with her superhuman speed she could write faster than most people could talk.

Unfortunately, Brianna was not the most cautious or sensible person in the *FAYZ*. She was bold, fearless, very, very dangerous in a fight, and had a sort of reckless charm. But she was not a person who carefully thought out her answers.

So when Matt Lauer had asked whether kids had died in the *FAYZ*, Brianna's chalked answer had been: *A bunch. Kids have been dying all over the place. This isn't Disneyland.*

Which was okay in itself, although it sent shockwaves of fear through the parent community.

It was the follow-up question that caused the problem.

Matt Lauer: *Have you taken a life?*

Brianna: *Absolutely. I'm the Breeze. I am the most badass person in here except for maybe Sam and Caine.*

Then before Matt could put up his next question, Brianna went on happily scribbling and holding her chalkboard up for the cameras, then rubbing it with her sleeve and scribbling some more.

There's some more I want to kill but sometimes it's hard. I've cut Drake up with wire and a machete and blown his head off with a shotgun. He's still not dead! LOL.

And then:

What I'm thinking about doing is slicing him up and then zooming the pieces all around, like up in the mountains, out in the water. Let's see if he can put himself back together then. LOL.

So basically Brianna had confessed to several killings—despite the fact she hadn't actually killed anyone unless you counted bugs and coyotes—and bragged that she

intended to go on killing and was in fact contemplating murder right then.

And grinning.

And striking poses for the cameras.

And adding a jaunty “LOL.”

And demonstrating just how fast she could twirl a bowie knife, a machete, and a garrote. And brandishing the sawed-off shotgun for which she had modified a runner’s backpack.

All of this got back to Sam.

Sam was not happy about it.

“Oh, my *God*. Are you out of your mind? ‘LOL’? Really?” he demanded. “I thought I told everyone: no talking to people unless it’s your parents. I told you *and* Edilio told you. And then, because I knew perfectly well that you would pay no attention to that and do whatever you wanted, I looked you right in the eyes”—he pointed at her eyes for emphasis—“right in those eyes, and I said something along the lines of, ‘Breeze, don’t go telling horror stories.’”

“He believes he said that.”

That last was from Toto, the truth teller. The boy could not restrain himself from announcing the truth or falsity of everything he heard. And he was 100 percent accurate. And 100 percent annoying.

Sam, Astrid, Brianna, and Toto were on the top deck of the houseboat at the lake. Two days had passed since the dome went transparent. Two days since they had seen the outside world for the first time in almost a year.

Two days since Sam had burned Penny to ashes while his mother watched.

And two days since the evil child, Gaia, and her mother, Diana, along with the foul Drake/Brittney creature, had retreated in pain and confusion.

“In the eyes. Me looking straight at you,” Sam said, insisting, even as Brianna adopted a transparently false *What, me?* look.

“Brianna, listen,” Astrid said. “You’re very useful at communicating with the world, but don’t go confessing to major crimes.”

“Crimes!” Brianna’s eyes narrowed and her thin lip curled. “Hey, I only do what I have to do.”

“We know that,” Sam said wearily. “We know that. The world may not.” Then he added, “LOL.”

“Yeah, well they can all drop dead,” Brianna said heatedly. “What are they doing to get us out of here? They tried to kill us all! Now they’re going to judge us?”

Sam’s face revealed his own private agreement, so he kept his eyes carefully averted from Astrid, as if that meant she wouldn’t notice.

“They didn’t try to kill us; they were trying to blow open the dome,” Astrid said.

“With a nuke?” Brianna shrilled.

“She doesn’t believe that,” Toto said. Then he clarified: “Astrid doesn’t believe what she said, Spidey.”

Toto was talking less often to his long-since-destroyed Spider-Man bust, the object he’d spent lonely months with, but there were still occasional references. No one took notice: at this point no one in the FAYZ was entirely sane.

“Okay,” Astrid said icily. “Let me restate that: They didn’t set out to destroy us all. But they were willing to risk it.”

Toto hesitated a moment. Then: “She believes that.”

But now Astrid was angry, and not at Toto or Brianna or even Sam—to his relief. “They wanted their highway back. They wanted this to be over. And they sure didn’t want people discovering that they’d been tracking mutations for months. So they set off a freaking nuke under the dome. Is that true enough, Toto? And maybe it would have overloaded the dome and crashed it like they hoped, and we’d be free. But quite possibly it would have incinerated all of us, the reckless, stupid scumbags who would kill us after all we’ve gone through, gone through hell trying to stay alive!”

There were other choice words, many, in fact, a long and erudite stream of them. Astrid had never been one for cursing, but she was very well-read and had obviously picked up a few phrases along the way.

When she was done and both Sam and Brianna were staring at her with a sort of wary amazement, Toto said, “She believes that.”

“Yeah, I kind of think she did,” Sam said dryly. “Do me a favor, Toto: go find Edilio, if he’s free, and Dekka. We’re wasting time.”

Toto raised an eyebrow but did not comment. He climbed down to the dock. He was used to being sent on errands. It was almost as if people found him irritating.

“Breeze: you know what I need from you. I understand that you love to entertain the lookers, but I need you patrolling.”

“I was just going,” Brianna said huffily. She blurred, reappeared on the dock, and then, walking quickly backward, said, “By the way, they still want to interview you, Sam.” Then she zoomed away out of sight.

“Why do I get the feeling we have a crazy twelve-year-old daughter?” Astrid muttered.

Sam looked at Astrid with affection so obvious a blind man would have seen it. The days of wondering whether they would be together were over. It wasn’t that either of them had said it quite that way; it was just the way it was, it was there, it was a fact. It was chiseled in granite.

Astrid stood with legs apart, arms crossed, wearing a sleeveless T-shirt and jeans so torn and ripped they looked like they’d been tailored with a chainsaw, her once-long blond hair now hacked short, her cool, judgmental blue eyes still judging, still watching the world more closely than anyone else.

She was still Astrid the Genius, the girl who had so intimidated Sam back before the FAYZ that he hadn’t even let himself think about asking her out, or even talking to her. She had been so far above him—at least in his own eyes—that she was practically on a different planet.

The funny thing was that he was still in awe of her, but she was no longer unattainable. She wasn’t the icy, distant Athena looking down at him from Olympus with affection mingled with disappointment. She had committed. She had bought in. And now it was as if an invisible FAYZ barrier of their own encircled just the two of them, defined them, and made each of them hate the idea of being apart.

They spent their days and their nights together, and they still disagreed, and they still argued, and they sniped, and they were absolutely bound together into one.

Unbreakable unless by death.

Which was a very likely outcome, and a thought that wiped the smug, contented look from Sam’s face.

Endgame. That word had quickly become part of conversation in the FAYZ. He had tried to quash it. Edilio had tried to quash it. Down in Perdido Beach, Caine had tried to quash it. It wasn't good for people to start thinking things were coming to an end.

But Sam was thinking it himself, and he was trying to imagine that ending. Each time he tried, each time he ran the clock forward in his imagination, the fantasy would fall apart. He believed it was the endgame. He felt it in his bones. He just didn't think he was going to make it out.

When he saw the end, it was always a terrible one. And he always saw himself watching others leave the FAYZ while he did not.

When had that morbid thought first surfaced? Had it been there festering in the back of his mind for a long time? Had it only now broken through to conscious awareness because people were talking about the endgame?

Endgame. It can mean more than one thing, he thought.

But it was all nonsense, all speculation. None of it meant anything. None of it mattered, not really. It would end how it ended.

Edilio and Dekka arrived. They had very sensibly not brought Toto back with them.

Sam didn't get up, just gave them a wave as they climbed aboard the docked houseboat. Edilio plopped into a deck chair. He was weary and dusty. It would be wrong to say that he looked old—he was still physically a teenager, a sunburned, dark-skinned guy in jeans and boots, with a desperate-looking cowboy hat he'd found somewhere, over shaggy dark hair. He didn't look old, but in some way it was impossible to define, he looked like a man, not a boy.

That impression came only partly from the fact that he was carrying an assault rifle slung over one shoulder.

"Word from PB is that Caine is trying to get Orc to force people away from the barrier and back to work," Edilio said.

"Maybe not such a bad idea?" Sam said.

"Except it's not working," Dekka said. "Orc won't go near the barrier. He doesn't want anyone to see him. You know, the way he is. There's, like, no produce down in Perdido Beach, not even cabbages," Dekka went on. "If it wasn't for Quinn still bringing in fish, they'd all be starving again. I'd almost say we need Albert back, if he wasn't such a backstabbing little worm."

Dekka had never looked young; she'd been born with a serious face that over time had become forbidding. When she was annoyed—as she was now—her expression could become downright intimidating. And an angry Dekka was a storm front coming.

"I guess you heard about Breeze?" Dekka asked, changing the subject. There was a mix of exasperation and affection in her tone. Dekka might not be over Brianna, but she had made peace with her rejection. The infatuation had burned out, but the love was still there.

"Oh, we heard," Astrid said. "You just missed her."

Edilio wasn't in the mood for small talk. Something was on his mind. "We're vulnerable here. We don't know where Diana and that freak-show baby of hers are. And we don't know what kind of power Gaia has—except that if she was really a normal kid, she'd be dead. We don't even know what they want, what they're after.

Maybe they don't want anything, though most likely . . ." He shrugged. "But the bigger vulnerability is probably down in PB. We got, what, two hundred fifty kids all together, between the lake and PB? Give or take. At least half of them are down there right now where the highway hits the barrier. Waving and crying and writing notes. Especially the littles, man. It's not just no work getting done; it's that they're out in the open with no one protecting them."

"They're a target," Astrid said.

"Big one," Dekka said.

"That's Caine's territory down there," Sam said, shifting uncomfortably at the temptation to palm off responsibility on his alienated brother.

"Yeah, but a lot of them are our people. Lake people," Edilio argued. "You notice it's quiet around here? Half our people walked ten miles down to PB so they can cry looking at their family." He didn't say that with a sneer. Edilio didn't own a sneer.

Astrid said, "We have the same two top priorities we've had since the start: keep people fed and stop those trying to destroy us."

Sam smiled privately at the rather grandiose phrasing.

"We need a plan beyond hoping Breeze finds Drake and Diana and Gaia," Edilio said.

"I was kind of hoping you had one," Sam said. He was joking, but Edilio wasn't smiling.

Sam had the odd feeling that he'd just been caught goofing off in class. He sat up straighter and unconsciously lowered his voice half an octave. "You're right, Edilio. What is it you want to do?"

At some point, and Sam could not really pinpoint quite when, Edilio had stopped being his sidekick and become his equal, his full partner. The change had permeated the consciousness of the population at the lake, had become fact without anyone having to announce it. No one anymore told Edilio they'd have to "check with Sam": in everything except for a battle, Edilio was in charge.

Sam could not have been more pleased. He had discovered about himself that he had no talent for details. Or managing. And it was a wonderful thing to be able to lie in bed with Astrid and not feel the whole world was depending on him. In fact, glancing up at her now, with her sleeveless T-shirt gapping at the side, and the amazing line of her legs, and . . . He forced himself back to Edilio.

"Okay, a couple things. First, while we have time, I want to prepare for the worst," Edilio said. "We don't have much extra food, but I want to stop people eating the last of the Nutella and Cup-a-Noodles. I want to put that stuff on a boat we'll anchor out in the lake. Also some of the vegetables that Sinder is growing, the stuff that won't spoil. I don't want us getting caught flat-footed again. From now on, people want to eat, they had better get their butts back to work."

Sam nodded. "Yeah." Up above, the sky was cloudy. But they were not quite normal clouds. They moved in a strange pattern, seeming to slide by, swifter close in, slower off in the far northern distance. Toward the southeast the sky turned dark blue. It was all part of the dome effect.

The newly transparent sphere that contained the FAYZ was twenty miles in diameter, with the nuclear power plant at its center. That meant that directly over the power plant the top of the sphere was ten miles up. At that point the top of the sphere

approached the stratosphere, up beyond clouds, beyond much oxygen. It was quite a bit lower here at Lake Tramonto, which was near the northwest edge. This close to the barrier they could be seen from the outside by anyone with a decent set of binoculars.

Just forty-eight hours after the barrier had gone clear it was still very strange to Sam to be able to look across Lake Tramonto and see the rest of Lake Tramonto. There was a marina over there, probably not a mile from where he was sitting. There were boats, and people, too, though not more than a handful. Some had ventured out in the boats to nose right up against the barrier and look in, like people staring at the animals in the zoo. There was one over there right now with two guys pretending to fish but actually shooting video. Sam waved and felt foolish.

Life in the FAYZ had changed.

As if to make that point, Astrid shaded her eyes and looked off to the north. “Helicopter.”

There was a helicopter with some sort of logo, maybe a news station or a police department, impossible to read from this distance. It was hovering above the “out there” marina, most likely aiming a camera into the dome. Perhaps focusing, as well as they could from that distance, on the four of them sitting there.

Sam fought a sudden childish impulse to give them the finger.

Edilio was still talking, and for the second time Sam felt like a distracted student in class.

“What we need most of all is simple information,” Edilio was saying. “What are Drake and Diana and that kid going to do? And what can they do? Right now we’re blind.”

“Irony,” Astrid said. When everyone just stared at her blankly, she sighed and explained, “For the first time we can see the real sky, and the world outside of this fishbowl, and we’re still blind.”

“Ah,” the three said in unison. “Yeah, right.”

“You know, it’s not a witty remark if I have to explain it,” Astrid said, obviously disgruntled.

“I want to talk to Caine,” Edilio said. “I’m going to head down to PB. We need to work together.”

“You want me to come?” Sam asked.

“If it’s you down at the barrier trying to get kids motivated, it will just get Caine pissed off. And we don’t have time for that whole enemies thing. To be honest with you . . . Well, I was wondering, Sam . . . I mean, just a suggestion . . .”

Sam smiled affectionately at his friend. “Dude: if you got a job for me, just tell me what it is.”

“It’s not just a job. It’s . . . Okay, here it is: Even Breeze can’t be everywhere. She searches, but she doesn’t search smart. I love her, but she just zooms around randomly and doesn’t let anyone tell her where to look.”

Sam nodded. “You want me to go looking for trouble.”

“Breeze is all over the area around PB, looking for any sign that Gaia and Drake are heading toward town—and of course making sure the TV cameras see her. But maybe Gaia is holing up somewhere, waiting. Getting stronger. Or maybe she’s on the move.”

Sam thought about it. “The mine shaft, the National Guard base, the Stefano Rey,

or the power plant.”

“Same as my list. And you can’t take Dekka with you; I—we—need her here.”

“Who can I take?”

“We don’t know what Gaia can do. Sam, you may not be strong enough to take her, *it*, whatever. Not alone for sure, or even with Dekka.” He nodded respectfully at Dekka. “No offense to you, Dekka.”

Dekka nodded slightly to say no offense was taken. Dekka knew the limits of her powers.

“I don’t think we should wait for Gaia to choose the time and place,” Edilio said.

“She ran away with Diana and Drake,” Astrid said. “She didn’t come right back; she ran off. That doesn’t make me think she’s all that dangerous.”

Sam looked down and smiled. “If Toto was here, he’d call BS on that, Astrid. The gaiaphage did not choose to take on a body thinking it would get weaker. You know that.”

The mood, which had been light earlier, thanks to Brianna, had grown steadily darker. Edilio had brought reality with him. And reality had a bad feel.

Astrid was looking for something to say, some argument, but in the end all she had was, “I don’t want you getting killed, Sam. If you go after Gaia . . .”

“Edilio isn’t thinking I’ll go alone, are you, Edilio?” Sam said. He reached for her hand, squeezed, but she did not return the pressure.

“We should probably leave soon,” Edilio said. “One hour?”

Sam nodded, a condemned man accepting the inevitable sentence. “One hour.”

THREE

77 HOURS, 37 MINUTES

“I’M HUNGRY,” GAIA said, and not for the first time that morning. Drake had come in the night and brought some artichokes and a dead rat, but it wasn’t enough. Gaia had sent him right back out for more.

She was a very hungry girl. A growing monster.

At first Gaia had taken a little milk from Diana’s breasts, but her development was way too fast to allow her to survive on mother’s milk. And Diana’s body was a wreck — malnourished, bruised, beaten. Her body had had only four months to adjust to what should have been a nine-month pregnancy. And the birth itself, crying out in pain in a hot, dark cave . . . Well, she wasn’t in the best of shape.

For the last two days, as Gaia healed herself and grew, Drake had been sent off to forage for food. He had raided the fields; he had successfully attacked a cart heading from Perdido Beach to the lake; he had killed animals and brought them back to Gaia, who cooked them with a blast of light from her hands and ate them.

But her appetite was still growing. Her appetite was becoming dangerous. Diana no longer had even a small chance of taking any of the food for herself. And worse, more frightening still to Diana, were her daughter’s long, speculative looks. Gaia was not good at hiding emotion: she was looking at Diana as a possible meal. At times the girl would drool like a dog at feeding time.

They were following the barrier still, stolidly walking along the circumference of the space that everyone had come to call the FAYZ. Fallout Alley Youth Zone, a mordant label that Howard Bassem had come up with. Howard: no longer alive. Himself eaten by coyotes.

So Drake was off foraging yet again, and Diana was in the unusual position of hoping her hated foe would succeed, and quickly.

Diana and Gaia had reached a high point, up in the hills above the gaiaphage’s mine shaft. For the first time Diana could really see that beyond the dome the hills soared much higher still. They were standing on a series of foothills, really, but with enough altitude that in the other direction Diana could see the distant blue haze of the ocean. There were low, dark smears where the islands sat.

“Huh. I know where there’s food,” Diana said.

“You told me: Perdido Beach,” Gaia said. “But I’m not ready to go there. Are you so stupid you don’t remember?”

“I really am getting sick of being called stupid,” Diana snapped. “You can call me Mother. Or you can call me Diana. I’ll take either one.”

Gaia hesitated, stared at Diana, then blinked.

Diana screamed. “Aaaaahh! No, no, no!” She felt the hot knife in her head. The pain was terrible and terrifying, like some desperate animal inside her head trying to rip its way out.

The pain stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Maybe it had lasted three seconds, but it had felt much longer.

Had it lasted longer still, Diana would have gone mad. She was on her knees,

trembling, fighting the urge to vomit up the nothing in her stomach.

“You don’t make demands,” Gaia said. She came close: just a child, but with a power no child had ever held. Her eyes were blue. Her hair was so dark, it was almost black. She ran her chubby child’s fingers over Diana’s back and neck, probing, feeling, like a cook assessing a piece of steak. “You serve me. You’re a slave. My slave.”

Diana nodded, unable to speak as the sense memory of that pain echoed in her skull.

Gaia relented. “But in using this spoken human language I have to call you something. So I’ll call you Diana.”

“Lovely,” Diana said through gritted teeth.

“Food?” Gaia prompted.

“There’s an island. You can see it, that gray lump out in the ocean.”

Gaia looked. “I see nothing.”

“You see the ocean, the bluish stuff out there.”

“No.”

Diana considered this for a moment, looked around for what she needed, and said, “Do you see the stand of trees on that ridge? How many trees?” There were three, quite distinct from one another.

“I can’t count them. They blur together.”

“You’re nearsighted,” Diana said. She laughed. “You’ve got to be kidding me? You’re a nearsighted devil child? You need *glasses*?”

Gaia did not object to being called a devil child, apparently, as there was no stabbing pain. But she frowned at the term “nearsighted.” “Do you mean that your vision is better than mine?”

Diana shrugged. “It has to do with the shape of your eyeball, I think. Bodies are like that: all kinds of imperfections. Also, you’re growing at an amazing, unnatural rate. So who knows what’s going on with your body?”

It occurred to Diana to wonder whether Gaia could control the aging process. She had assumed that the gaiaphage caused it, but was it just some bizarre effect of the *FAYZ*?

And she was still trying to figure out what Gaia knew and did not know. Gaia—the gaiaphage—had spent her life, if you could call it that, in a mine shaft. She could use language, but it always seemed forced. She knew many things, but there were also lots of holes in her knowledge. She was like a foreigner just coming to grips with a new society.

Diana’s best theory—and she had not asked Gaia—was that Gaia knew what she had picked up from minds she had controlled or at least touched at different times. Minds like Diana’s. Like Lana’s. Like Caine’s, too, once upon a time.

She flashed back to the time after Caine had come crawling away from the gaiaphage. He’d been raving, paranoid, sick almost to death. She had nursed him through it. Was that why, despite everything, he had never betrayed her?

Gratitude? *Caine*?

“You’ll need bigger clothing soon,” Diana said. “At this rate you’ll be healed and less, sorry, gross, soon. And you’ll be . . . developing.”

“Developing?” Gaia seemed unsure whether this was an opportunity or a threat.

“Never mind; I am so not ready for *that* conversation,” Diana said. “Anyway,

there's food on one of those islands out there.”

“How do we get to this island?”

“Well, that depends, doesn't it?” Diana said.

“On what?”

“On what you can do, Gaia. On what powers you have. I saw you attack your fa— Caine. You moved him with your mind. Is that all you have? Telekinesis? What Caine has?”

“I have access to *all* powers, Diana. The speed, the ability to move things with my mind, strength. I can switch gravity on and off. I have the killing light. I can heal.”

“Then you can bounce like Taylor. You could teleport yourself to the island, get us both some food, and be back in a flash.”

Gaia looked curious. “I don't know Taylor.”

Diana frowned. “Don't you?” Interesting, she thought.

“She's got the power to teleport. She thinks, and then, click, she's there.”

Something that might almost have been embarrassment made a fleeting appearance on Gaia's face. She didn't like revealing her limits.

Maybe I can use that.

Use it for what? Are you her mother or her enemy?

All of the above?

Gaia closed her eyes and stood very still. Her expression was focused, questing for something, almost like she was praying. Finally she said, “That one, the one you called Taylor, she no longer exists as what she was. I cannot . . . reach . . . her power.”

It took Diana a few seconds to figure out what she was hearing. Then it dawned. “You don't really have many powers of your own; you can only use theirs, the moofs', the mutants'. So you can't do what Penny could do, because she's dead. And Taylor?”

“The mutations that enable powers are physical, but the power exists beyond their bodies as well. I can reach into that space and use those powers.” She spoke with acid condescension, like she was talking to a child, which was particularly strange coming from what looked like a child. “You wouldn't understand.”

But Diana's breath caught, because she did understand one thing. “That's why you didn't let Drake kill Caine. It's why we ran away. You can't start by killing Caine or Sam or Brianna; if you do, you lose their powers.”

Gaia looked smug. “All things are connected to me, stupid . . . Diana. My father's power exists because he mutated and formed a field with me. When he dies, one end of that field will fail. The power that stretches between us will fail. Eventually, though, I will cause others to mutate. It's my . . . my nature. It's what I am. What I may lose today, I can gain back later. Over time.”

Diana wondered if she dared to risk a question. They started walking along again, almost like friends, if you could get past the fact that they were a fifteen-year-old half broken in body and spirit and a pretty child filled with the mind and will of a terrible monster.

Kind of a lot to get past there.

Gaia could kill her at any time. Gaia could torture her at any time. Gaia had done the second but not the first. Why? Did she feel something for Diana? Or was Diana useful? If so, for what? Certainly not for her own power, which was simply the ability to gauge others'.

“How do you know all this?” Diana asked, trying to make it sound admiring. In her mind she suddenly had an image of Astrid. Astrid would be furiously jealous if Diana understood the great mystery of the gaiaphage before she did.

“I was created knowing some things. And I have learned other things in the course of my life. I use this body, but this is not me,” Gaia said. Her voice was still a child’s voice. “I am greater than any form I may take.”

The tiny part of Diana that still fantasized about this beautiful girl being her actual daughter noted that Gaia had a healthy ego. That was the kind of thing a parent should notice, wasn’t it? She should beam with pride and say something like, *Yes, Gaia is quite self-assured.*

Gaia is advanced for her age.

Gaia is a gifted child.

Gaia is imaginative: she thinks she’s a mass of green slime inhabiting a human body. Isn’t that cute?

“It all happens because of me, Diana,” Gaia went on. She was marveling at her own power, her own uniqueness. “A script written long ago and very far away. Not that they ever imagined that I would be born, but that script, that virus, got a diet of hard radiation and a trace of human and other DNA. That wasn’t their idea; they were just trying to spread life around the galaxy.”

“You’re talking about the meteorite that hit the power plant,” Diana said. This far Astrid had guessed. It didn’t take a genius to figure out that the disaster that had given Perdido Beach its nickname, Fallout Alley, was connected to what had happened later. “Wait. *Human DNA?*”

“One human was in the power plant when the meteorite struck. His code and my code were melded together, fed by the uranium in the plant. And I was born. My *real* birth,” she added quickly, with a disgusted look at Diana. “My true birth. Not the crude freak show of this body’s birth, but the beautiful accident that made me.”

Gaia’s high-pitched voice sounded excited. But that voice held no true sense of joy or wonder. It was high because her vocal cords were still short: a biological fact, not a reflection of the mind behind the voice.

Or else she really was just a complete egomaniac.

Diana wondered if this creature felt anything real, aside from a high opinion of herself and a lust for power. And she wondered where Gaia had picked up the phrase “freak show.” Whose mind had she ransacked to come up with that?

What exactly *did* she know?

Not *everything*, Diana thought, answering her own question. She hadn’t known about Taylor. Maybe that’s why she’s keeping me around and alive: to fill in the gaps in what she knows.

“That crude freak show of a birth nearly killed me,” Diana said a little bitterly. It still made her ache inside, and the trauma to her body sapped her strength.

This is not my daughter, Diana thought. That she looks like me, that she has Caine’s chin and my eyes, all of that is an illusion. Whatever my daughter was, or might have been, this is the gaiaphage.

I am walking and talking with a monster.

“We are near the place where I spent my . . . my childhood,” Gaia said. “I can feel it.”

“The mine shaft? Yeah, I guess we are. We’re not going there, are we? If Sam is looking for you, he’ll go there.”

“I’m hungry, stupid . . . Diana. I’ll go there and call the coyotes, if any have survived. A single coyote would feed us for a while.”

“I don’t think there are many coyotes left. I think—”

“I’m hungry! I’m hungry! I have to eat!” Gaia bellowed like a spoiled child. “This body must be fed! All you do is tell me what I can’t do! I can do whatever I want: I am the gaiaphage!” Her fists were clenched, and her face was white with fury.

Rage. So that’s one emotion she has.

Diana backed away, afraid that Gaia would go after her. She cringed, awaiting the stab of pain. But it didn’t come, because now Gaia was gazing past Diana.

“What is that?”

Diana turned and saw something so improbable it was hard to believe. They were in the hills, far from town, almost at the northernmost part of the FAYZ. But there, just outside the barrier, were two young men, both in their twenties, both outfitted in mountain-climbing gear with pitons hanging from webbing belts.

The men seemed surprised and excited to see them. Diana was suddenly aware of just how odd she and Gaia must look: a bruised, bloodstained teenager and a young girl still partly covered in third-degree burns.

The climbers stopped what they were doing—which was assembling a rickety aluminum ladder—and waved. The red-haired one took an iPhone out of his backpack and started to videotape.

Diana gave him the finger.

Red-hair laughed, a silent show.

“Let’s get out of here,” Diana said.

“No.”

“They’re just a couple of idiots trying to climb up the dome and get pictures.”

“They won’t get far,” Gaia said. “They can lean things against the barrier, but nothing will stick to it, and they cannot drive in nails.”

“So they’ll fall down a few times.”

“Stop talking. I need to concentrate.”

“Concentrate on what?”

Gaia smiled grimly. “On *Nemesis*.”

Gaia closed her eyes. Her little fists clenched, then released. Every muscle in her body tightened. Her skin took on a glow that Diana had seen before: a faint, sickly green glow.

The two men leaned their ladder against the dome. They didn’t notice what was happening to Gaia. They were discreetly looking away.

Diana risked a small shake of her head: *No*.

No, you need to run. You need to get out of here.

But the redhead ascended with rope and pitons at the ready. At the top of the ladder he tried attaching a suction cup to the dome. It didn’t work.

He shrugged at Diana, a little comically, like, *Hey, I was hoping it would work.*

Then he tried banging in a piton. This made no sound within the dome, and it also made no mark.

His partner handed up two more pieces of metal that Red-hair fitted into the

existing ladder. This allowed him to climb another twelve feet on a rickety, single-pole structure.

“Not exactly bright, are they?” Diana observed.

Probably Gaia couldn’t do anything. Probably. But the little girl that was no little girl watched with teeth bared, eyes focused far away, seeming to enjoy whatever it was she was doing in that space that Diana could not enter.

“For just a moment, Nemesis,” she whispered.

Despite the growing sense that something was about to go very wrong, Diana found herself fascinated at something she had not seen in what felt like a lifetime: adults. More than that, adults with clean clothing and clean, professionally cut hair. And they were unarmed, not even so much as a crowbar or a baseball bat. When was the last time she had seen anyone unarmed? Anyone over the age of four in the FAYZ had something, even if it was just a pointed stick.

“You’re making me angry,” Gaia whispered. “I’m hungry.”

Gaia’s eyes began to glow like someone had turned on a dim flashlight inside her head so that light bled just a bit around the rim of her eyes. Her fists were clenched tight. Her teeth made a cracking sound as she clamped her jaw.

The redhead was now well over Diana’s height, but in no danger of making any progress. He had gotten himself into position to take some decent video, but he was at the end of his ladder. The dome was ten miles high in the center, and there was no ladder in the world that would cover even a tiny fraction of—

“Ahhhh!” Gaia cried, and the whole world wobbled. It was like a small earthquake, but more, as if the air itself had been stirred.

There was a blast of air in Diana’s face.

A sound of rushing wind.

And the red-haired man fell.

He fell and hit the ground at Diana’s feet. Inside. In the FAYZ.

The man lay stunned. He looked at them in amazement, looked back at his friend, who just stood with his mouth open, then grinned and said, “Whoa! This is cool!”

Gaia made her little teeth-baring smile and said, “Food.”

It had hit Little Pete in a way that was impossible to explain to someone who lived in the normal universe. Pete had no body, but he had just been punched, very hard. It had hurt. It had sent his mind spinning.

He had never felt anything like it. It could only come from one person: the Darkness. The green, vaporous tendrils that had often reached to touch his mind had this time struck him.

The gaiaphage. Had punched him. Hard enough to make his consciousness blink out for just a fraction of a second.

It was shocking. He had not known such a thing was possible. No one could hit him! It wasn’t okay. It was not okay to hit. His sister had told him that a lot of times. So had his mother.

It was not okay to hit. Even if you were mad or frustrated.

If it could happen once, it could happen again. The dark mind that had touched him very early on, that had shaped him in some ways, that had manipulated him at times, that had scared Pete at times—and feared him always—that constant if faraway

companion had just *hurt* him.

Pete had begun to accept his own fading, the almost pleasurable sense of giving up and letting go of a life that had been short but painful. He was ready to go away. He was ready to fade out.

But that sudden attack . . . it was wrong. He hadn't done anything to deserve it.

It was wrong.

And it made Pete angry.

Don't hit me again, he thought.

Or else.

FOUR

76 HOURS, 52 MINUTES

THEY CLOSED THE door on the cabin. There wasn't room enough for them to stand, so they fell into each other's arms on the bunk.

Sam kissed her and tried not to think that it was for the last time.

He was happy. That was the hell of it. He was finally happy. Right here, right now, in this place, with this girl in his arms, he was happy. Was that why he felt the hammer about to fall on him? No, that was crazy. He was happy. Happiness didn't mean that tragedy was coming around the corner. Did it?

"He shouldn't ask you to do this," Astrid said.

"Sure he should," Sam said. "Who else is going to go if not me?"

"You've done enough. You've done more than enough. A hundred times more than enough."

They were only inches apart, so close that Sam could feel her breath on his face when she spoke. So close he could hear her heart beating too fast.

"It's the endgame, Astrid," Sam said softly.

"You're supposed to survive the endgame," Astrid pleaded.

"What am I going to do? Hide here with you and hope it all blows over?"

"Maybe, yes. Maybe just don't go out looking for a fight this time. Maybe just let it be on someone else."

"Gaia ran off with Drake and Diana, but I don't think it was because she was weak. If she is weak, great, let's find out now and maybe end this easily."

His words made sense. She wouldn't be able to dispute them.

"And if she's not weak? If she's exactly what we think she is and just as dangerous as we're afraid she is? Then what, Sam?"

"Then better to move on her before she's ready. Better not to let her choose the time and place." He tilted his head to rest against hers, sharing the pillow. "Edilio's right. You know he is."

He was a little disappointed when she didn't have a good counterargument. A part of him had been hoping that he was wrong. Her silence was his doom.

Another fight. Another battle. How many could he survive? He was living on luck. Was he supposed to believe that the world meant him to be happy with Astrid? That didn't sound like the world he knew.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you too, for all the good it does." She sounded bitter. Angry. Not at him, but at the universe. Then, in an intense whisper: "First, isolate her. Take out Drake. And Sam, if you need to, take out Diana."

That cold-blooded advice shocked him. "Diana?" Since when had Astrid used a euphemism like "take out"? And since when had she ever counseled him to be so hard?

"Gaia seemed to be relating to her. If you find Diana's still alive, it will be because Gaia needs her or maybe even cares for her. That's a vulnerability. Exploit that vulnerability."

He tried to treat it lightly. “You’re kind of ruining the mood.”

“I’ll recapture the mood,” she said. “But first, you promise me, Sam: whatever it takes to win, whatever it takes to survive.”

“Astrid—”

Suddenly she grabbed his face with one hand and squeezed too hard. “You listen to me. I’m not losing you because you played fair. You’re *not* getting killed. You’re *not* dying. This *isn’t* some doomed last mission. Do you understand me? This does not end with me crying and missing you every day for the rest of my life. This ends with us walking out of this nightmare together. You and me, Sam.”

There was silence between them for a long moment. Sam didn’t know what to say.

Astrid found the hem of his T-shirt and pulled it up over his head. She unbuckled his belt and shoved his jeans to the deck. She pushed him, gently but insistently, onto the bed. Then she undressed herself and stood in the faint light, looking down at him as he gazed up at her.

“You’re giving me a reason to live,” he said, half joking.

“I’m just recapturing the mood,” she said, trying to make it sound light and sexy.

“You captured me a long time ago.”

She climbed atop him. “We walk out of this together, Sam. Whatever it takes. You and me.”

“You and me,” he said.

She would not yet let him have her. “Whatever it takes,” she insisted. “Say it.”

“You and me,” he said at last. “Whatever it takes.”

“Swear it.”

“Astrid . . .”

“Swear it. Say the words. Say ‘I swear.’”

“I swear,” he said, saying it too easily. Saying it even though he didn’t feel it. Saying it because he wanted her and wanted to be happy right here and right at this moment.

He rolled a condom into place and she gasped as he entered her. “This is not the last time, Sam,” she said.

“This is not the last time,” he said, knowing that neither of them believed it.

Lana Arwen Lazar woke suddenly, and as she often did when startled, she grabbed for the big pistol beneath her pillow. She sat up and leveled the automatic, all in one easy motion.

Sanjit Brattle-Chance dropped to his belly and, in a surprisingly reasonable tone of voice, considering his face was in the ragged carpet, said, “If you shoot me, I can’t tell you where I hid your cigarettes.”

“You what?” Lana snapped. It was still fairly dark in the room. Clifftop Resort, where she had lived since the coming of the FAYZ, had excellent, thick curtains that blocked out the sun. The only light getting in came from a hole that had been burned in the curtains by one of said cigarettes.

“I think you need to cut back,” Sanjit said, bravely getting back to his feet despite the fact that Lana had not dropped the gun.

Patrick, Lana’s faithful dog, had an instinct for dangerous situations and took the opportunity to jump off the end of the bed and crawl behind the sofa.

“Cut back?”

“Quit, actually. But cut down for now.”

“Give me my cigarettes.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Do you see this gun?”

“I noticed it, yes.”

“Give me my cigarettes.”

“I don’t want you getting lung cancer. You’re very good at healing injuries, but you know as well as I do you aren’t much use against disease.”

Lana stared hard at him. “See this bed? Do you ever expect to be back in this bed? With me?”

Sanjit sighed unhappily. He was thin, not very tall, dark-skinned with dark hair and darker eyes, all of it generally lit up by a devil-may-care smile. However, he knew better than to smile at this particular moment. “I’m not going to even respond to that, because the day will come when you’ll be ashamed of yourself for even suggesting—”

“Give me my cigarettes.”

Sanjit reached into his pocket. He handed something to Lana.

“What is this?”

“It’s half a cigarette.”

Without putting down the gun she reached for her lighter. She lit the half cigarette and filled her lungs. “Where’s the other half?”

“On a completely different topic,” Sanjit said, “there’s something kind of disturbing going on.”

“This is the FAYZ, there’s always something disturbing going on, and right now it’s the fact that I’m calculating whether I can shoot you in the eyeball.”

Sanjit ignored her and opened the curtains.

“Yes, daylight is disturbing,” Lana said, blinking. She had smoked the half cigarette down to a length of about five millimeters and was still determined to get another puff, even if it burned her fingers.

Finally curiosity got the better of her, and she swung her feet out of bed, stood up with a groan, and walked to the sliding glass door. Sanjit opened the door and stood aside. Lana stepped out and froze.

The balcony provided an amazing view of the ocean. But since moving into Clifftop the left side had been nothing but the pearly-gray FAYZ wall. Two days earlier that wall had gone transparent, so she’d been able to see the rest of the ocean, and of course the rest of the hotel. But there had been no one in sight, and that was how Lana liked it.

Now, however, there were six people standing together on the balcony just to the left of hers. They were no more than six feet away.

Cameras—ranging from cell phones to full-on Canons with huge lenses—rose in unison and aimed at her.

Lana’s hair was sticking out in multiple directions, she was wearing a ragged purple T-shirt that read “FCKH8” over boys’ boxer shorts, and she was sucking a cigarette butt down to the ash.

And then there was the automatic pistol in her right hand.

Lana went back inside and said, “Okay: now where are my cigarettes?”

“How did that happen?” the red-haired man demanded. He looked at his friend, still on the other side. He reached over and banged on the barrier and got zapped in payment.

His friend was miming the same look: *How did that happen?* Then he whipped out his own phone and began to shoot video.

“How did that happen?” a stunned Diana asked Gaia.

Gaia did not look surprised. She did look troubled. “I hit Nemesis,” Gaia answered, as though it was obvious. “But it wasn’t good, really.” She suddenly bit at the cuticle of her thumb, a nervous gesture Diana recognized: Caine.

“He was stronger than I expected,” Gaia said. “I think I just made him realize . . . Never mind. I may have to move faster than I’d thought.” She sighed and seemed surprised to have made the sound. Then she said, “But at least I have food to feed this body you made for me. Diana.”

“I can’t believe this happened,” the red-haired man said. He stood up and extended his hand to Diana. “Amazing, right? Am I the first guy in?”

Gaia stepped in, grabbed the man’s hand, then shifted her grip to his wrist, put her other hand on his bicep, and with one swift, sudden movement tore his arm off at the shoulder like she was ripping a drumstick from an overcooked turkey.

“Gaia!” Diana cried.

The man screamed, an eerie, awful sound.

“Ahhh! Ahhhh! Ahhhh!”

Blood sprayed from both the arm and the shoulder. The man fell onto his back, screaming, screaming, screaming as blood sprayed like water from a cut garden hose.

Diana dropped beside him, crying, “Oh God, oh God!”

Gaia casually slung the arm onto a flat rock. She raised one hand and played a terrible, burning light—just like Sam’s light—up and down the arm.

She wasn’t destroying, though: she was cooking.

“No, no, no!” the man screamed. “Ahhh! Ahhh!”

“He’s going to die, Gaia!”

“Possibly,” Gaia said, evaluating the cooked arm. “A lot of blood—”

“Gaia!”

Outside the dome the other man was screaming silently, his eyes wide, his mouth a horrified O. The phone in his hand tilted crazily.

Diana tore the man’s small backpack open, found a T-shirt, and tried to stuff it into the gruesome, shredded wound that had been his shoulder. The man’s eyes rolled up into his head, and he passed out as blood continued gushing, making mud of the dirt.

“Gaia! Save him!” Diana begged, and looked up to see Gaia ripping with her child’s teeth at the charred and smoking bicep.

“Yes, I should save him,” Gaia said through her chewing. “He’ll be easier to move if he’s alive.” She ripped another chunk, a long, stringy piece of muscle, and while she chewed and sucked it into her mouth, she knelt beside the unconscious man and put her hand on the bloody mess of shoulder.

Diana scooted backward, pushing violently away.

Gaia held the cooked arm out toward her carelessly as she focused on the wound. “You should also eat. There is enough for both of us now.”

Diana rolled to her knees and retched. There was nothing in her stomach to come up. But she retched, tears flooding her eyes.

The man's eyes fluttered open. He looked up at Gaia and screamed again, but more weakly. The one outside was banging on the dome with a piece of the ladder, yelling and threatening without making any sound.

Diana started crawling away. Her mind was spinning crazily: images, memories. Hunger and the smell of Panda's flesh, and the memory of the taste of it, and the memory of the sickening way it had flooded her with relief at the time, the way it had filled her stomach.

"No, no, no, no, no," she cried, over and over again, scraping scabbed knees over sharp rock.

Diana stood, so weak she could barely stay up, and tried to run away, but with a flick of Gaia's finger she was yanked back to land beside the brutalized man.

He screamed, but weakly.

His eyes focused on hers, confused, afraid. Betrayed.

Diana felt herself spinning down a long tunnel, wishing to hit bottom, wishing for death. And, mercifully, she fell unconscious.

FIVE

74 HOURS, 41 MINUTES

“**WHERE THE HELL** is everyone?” Caine demanded. But he was demanding it of no one in particular. He was king in Perdido Beach, but he was a king without a court. Literally the only person with him at that moment was Virtue Brattle-Chance, an African kid—not African American, but literally from Africa.

And literally a kid, though he was strangely solemn. In fact he was downright gloomy. He and his brothers and sisters, the adopted children of very famous, very rich movie-star parents, had once inhabited San Francisco de Sales Island. But when Caine had found his way to the island, they had found their way off it.

There was, to put it mildly, some history between Caine and the Brattle-Chance kids. Some violent, disturbing history.

But Virtue was efficient in his own morose way. Tell Choo, as everyone called him, to deliver a message, and it got delivered. Tell Choo to go see if anyone was working the cabbage fields, and you got a thorough and accurate answer.

But he was no Drake. He wasn't even a Turk. There was no chance of Choo beating someone up, let alone killing them for you. He wasn't a henchman; he was an administrative assistant.

Caine missed henchmen.

More, he missed Diana.

It was sad to think that he now looked back on the early days of the FAYZ as the good old days. Once, he had ruled Coates Academy. Once, he had ridden in a blaze of glory—well, an unsteady convoy of inexpertly driven cars—into Perdido Beach. Once, Orc and his bullies, and Drake, and Pack Leader, and even Penny had been his right arms.

Well, Penny had turned out to be a treacherous lunatic. Pack Leader had been killed, and the replacement Pack Leader, too. Drake had gone to serve the gaiaphage. And Orc had cleaned himself up and gotten religion.

If there was one thing worse than a bellowing, roaring-drunk Orc, it was Orc quoting—*misquoting*, usually—scripture.

The hangers-on like Turk and that sniveling little creep Bug had ended up being more trouble than they were worth. Bug still crept around using his invisibility power to spy on people—yet without ever bringing Caine any useful intelligence—and when he wasn't watching people pick their noses, he was stealing food and causing pointless conflicts.

Slowly, inexorably, Caine's control had been diminished. His great ambitions had died. Now he had far more responsibility than power. Some kids still called him king, but it wasn't the same when they did it ironically rather than fearfully.

Oh, he could still use his telekinetic power to toss kids around randomly, throwing them through walls or out into the ocean, but what was the point? He didn't need dead kids; he needed someone to go and pick the lousy cabbages. Albert had always taken care of that, but Albert had jumped ship and sailed off to the island with a load of missiles.

Caine missed Albert.

Caine missed henchmen.

But most of all he missed Diana. He could see her if he closed his eyes. He could remember every detail of her body and face. Lips? Yes, he remembered her mouth. The smoothness of her skin? Yes, definitely, yes, he remembered.

“When kids get hungry enough they’ll pick vegetables,” Virtue said.

“Choo, you don’t know people, do you? What they’ll do is panic and freak out. Start robbing each other and most likely burn down whatever is left of town. People are idiots, Choo. Always remember that: people are faithless, backstabbing, weak, creepy, stupid, lazy idiots.”

Virtue blinked and said nothing.

Caine looked around at his current lair—a desk Caine had levitated out onto the landing at the top of the church steps that looked down onto the town plaza. He had a rolling chair. And a desk.

He missed his previous lairs. This lair sucked.

He never should have left the island. He’d been there with Diana and Penny. He could have tossed Penny off a cliff and been fine on the island. Decent food, a beautiful mansion, electricity, and a soft bed with Diana in it.

What had he been thinking, leaving the island?

He missed Diana busting him. He missed her snarky voice. He missed her eye rolls and that skeptical look she had where she’d half close her eyes and look at him like he was too dumb to merit her full attention. He’d have killed, or at least injured, anyone else who treated him like that. But she wasn’t anyone else.

He missed her hair. Her neck. Her breasts.

She understood him. She loved him, in her own way. And if he had listened to her, he’d still be on the island. Somehow he would have found some fuel to keep the lights on there. Probably. And the food would have run out and then they’d have starved, but hey, this was the FAYZ, where all you could really hope to do was delay the pain.

Delay of pain: that was the meaning of life, wasn’t it?

“I’ve made some bad decisions,” Caine said, not really meaning to say it out loud.

Had Diana been there she’d have said something like *Duh* but cooler and funnier and meaner, and he’d have been annoyed but he’d have tried to kiss her and eventually she would have let him, and was it really possible that her lips had been that soft?

Virtue said, “Well, you’re ruthless and narcissistic and totally devoid of morals.”

Caine shot a look at Virtue, wondering if there was any way all of that amounted to a compliment. Probably not. From Diana it would have been a perfect blend of snark and admiration, but Virtue seemed to have decided at some point to take his name seriously. The kid had no sense of humor that Caine could detect. He was a straight arrow. It was baffling.

“If I’m so ruthless, how come I don’t walk down to the barrier and start slamming kids into the ground until they obey me?”

Virtue shrugged. “Because your birth mother or your adoptive parents might be out there watching?”

Caine bit at his thumbnail, a nervous habit when he was feeling thwarted.

“Also TV cameras,” Virtue went on.

“Sam fried Penny’s body in front of his—our—mother,” Caine said, just to argue.

Virtue said nothing.

“What?” Caine demanded.

“Well . . . Sam is stronger than you are,” Virtue said.

Caine considered throwing Virtue into the wreckage of the church. It would be satisfying. But if he did that, it would upset Virtue’s brother Sanjit, and Sanjit and Lana were close, and the last thing Caine needed was trouble with Lana, the Healer. She had saved his life, and despite the fact that he was mostly incapable of gratitude, it wasn’t wise to pick a fight with the closest thing they had to a doctor.

“We have visitors,” Virtue said. Caine heard it, too: a car’s engine. With gas as rare as food it was very unusual to hear an engine running.

A white van drove slowly—as slowly as only an inexperienced and frightened driver could go—down San Pablo Avenue. It came to a stop at a distance, and Caine found himself hoping it was trouble. Trouble he could handle. A fight would be a wonderful relief from the tedium.

Out stepped Edilio, and a second later, Sam.

So. Maybe it was a fight. Hah!

But Edilio was walking ahead with Sam hanging back and looking unusually reticent, even a bit abashed. Then Toto, the weird kid with the Spider-Man fixation, climbed out.

“We’re not here for trouble,” Edilio said, holding up his hand and crushing Caine’s hopes.

“True,” Toto affirmed.

Caine sighed. “Well, that’s just great. Okay. Choo, go grab a couple of chairs.”

“Caine,” Sam said, and nodded.

“Sam. What do you want here? Is the surf up?”

Sam nodded to Edilio. “This is *his* party.”

When the chairs came, they sat down around the large but rather forlorn desk. There was no chair for Toto. Caine didn’t care.

“I’d offer you milk and cookies, but we seem to be out,” Caine said. He put his feet up on the desk just to remind them who was boss here.

“It’s true. He has no milk. Or cookies.” Toto.

Edilio got right to it. “We can’t have this. We need to get food production back up. We need to think through how to deal with the lookers. We need rules and organization.”

“Yeah, brilliant,” Caine said. “I wish I’d thought of that. Choo, make a note: need people to get back to work. That’s genius. That’s what you came to say? Are you asking me to go down there and start smacking kids around?”

Edilio pretended not to notice the sarcasm. “No. In fact, I don’t think you can help, Caine. No one trusts you. No one will follow you.”

“That’s the truth,” Toto said. Then, in response to Caine’s withering glare, he added, “Spidey.”

“Oh, I see,” Caine said. “No one trusts me, but they will follow Saint Sammy here. Well, not to be impolite but—”

Caine’s hand came up fast, and the telekinetic punch hit Sam right in the chest. Sam went flying. In fact he flew straight backward through the air. Ten feet. At least—maybe even a dozen feet. And when he hit, he landed on his butt, and the momentum

carried him into a backward roll.

Caine laughed delightedly. This was so much better than just sitting around and—

Sam was up faster than Caine expected, and he managed to leap aside and dodge Caine's next blow. Sam's hands were up, palms out. Not ten feet away. And the real problem was that Caine was still seated.

It's not easy to move quickly when you're sitting and your feet are up on a desk.

"I'd actually rather not have to kill you," Sam said. "But if your hand so much as twitches . . ."

Caine let his hands hang in the air, carefully aimed just a bit off target.

He looked at Sam's face. His brother's eyes were focused narrowly on his own. Smart boy. Sam had gained experience since the old days when they were an even match. An inexperienced fighter watches the opponent's hands; a smart fighter watches the other guy's face.

Caine had to carefully control his eyes, not shift, not look toward—

Sam's right hand was still aimed directly on Caine's body. But from his left came the air-sizzling green light. It burned in a flash through the leg of Caine's chair.

The chair tipped; Caine slipped, landed on his side, rolled fast, and as Sam rushed him pulled one of his newer tricks: he blasted the concrete directly below himself, throwing his own body back with the recoil.

It worked! Sam rushed past, grabbing air. Unfortunately, Caine's new tactic was not a precision technique. It knocked the wind from him, and he banged the back of his head hard on a stair and saw stars.

"Ow."

Caine tried to roll to his feet, but something was jabbing him in the crotch. He shook off the stars and saw Edilio standing over him. Edilio had the business end of his automatic rifle in a very sensitive place.

"If you move, Caine, I will shoot your balls off," Edilio said. "Toto?"

"He will," Toto said. "Although he's not sure it will be just your balls."

Caine glared up at Edilio, murder in his eyes. "You'd get off one round—maybe—and then I'd knock your head right off your shoulders."

"He believes he could knock your head right off—" Toto began.

"No doubt," Edilio said. "I guess you have to decide whether one more killing will compensate for your . . . loss."

"What's the matter, Sam? You can't fight your own battles? You have to have your boy here cover for you?" Caine said.

Sam started to respond, then seemed to think better of it and remained silent. He even took a step back.

Edilio said, "Toto. I'm going to say some things to King Caine. You evaluate."

"I will, Spidey."

"One: I'm my own man," Edilio said.

"He believes it."

"Two: I am sick to death of this tired-ass sibling nonsense between you two."

"He believes it is tired-ass," Toto said.

"Three: the gaiaphage and Drake—your daughter and your former partner—"

"Partner? He was my henchman," Caine said. "Partner would be an equal. Drake was never my equal."

“Three,” Edilio repeated, “the gaiaphage and Drake are out there, and I don’t think they’re just camping.”

This made Toto hesitate. Then: “He does not believe they are camping.”

“And now, I have a question for you, Caine: Do you believe you can take on Gaia alone? Yes or no?”

Caine’s gaze slid toward Toto. Caine hated the very idea of a truth teller. Control was impossible without some dishonesty. But then his thoughts turned inward. He imagined fighting the gaiaphage alone. He could picture it all too clearly. Fear gnawed at the edges of his mind, and memories of terrible pain, weakness . . . despair.

“Yes or no?” Edilio pressed.

“You know the answer,” Caine muttered.

Edilio pulled the gun barrel away. He extended a hand to help Caine up, but Caine just gave him a hard stare and climbed to his feet. He looked at his now three-legged chair. “That was a nice, comfortable chair.”

He dusted himself off. The admission—even unspoken—that he couldn’t take Gaia on alone left him feeling depressed. From the very start he’d been paranoid that a power greater than himself might emerge. In the beginning there had been only the two “four bar” mutants: him and Sam. Gradually they’d come to realize that Little Pete was somewhere off the scale, but that hadn’t worried Caine too much, because Little Pete was just Little Pete, however godlike his powers.

Now here was Gaia, the physical embodiment of the gaiaphage, and Caine knew too much about that creature to believe it could be beaten by one guy with the power of telekinesis.

“So I’m supposed to stand aside and let Sam just walk in and take over,” Caine said. “That’s not—”

“Not me,” Sam interrupted. “Him.”

Caine looked in disbelief at Edilio. “What? The machine-gun wetback here?”

Sam stiffened at that, but Edilio with a small gesture waved it off. So Sam said, “There are exactly five people who are trusted by just about everyone. I’m one, but I kind of suck at running things—”

“True,” Toto said, and this time caught a hard look from Sam.

“Lana is trusted,” Sam went on, “but . . . well, she’s Lana, and she has a job. And Dekka is trusted, but also . . . well, she’d be the first to say she doesn’t want to run anything. The fourth person is Quinn.”

“I tried to get Quinn to do something more than fish,” Caine protested.

“I know,” Sam said. “The other person everyone trusts is Edilio.”

Caine barked out an incredulous laugh. “Are you seriously here to tell me you want Edilio to take over running Perdido Beach?”

“He’s already running the lake.”

“That’s . . .,” Toto began, hesitated, and said, “mostly true.”

“Yeah, well, I’m still king here,” Caine said. It sounded ridiculous, even to him. He pointed a finger at Toto. “No: don’t say it.”

Edilio said, “I can work well with Quinn. I get along well with Lana. I get along with Astrid and Dekka, who’ll stay at the lake. Sam trusts me. And the fact is, even you trust me, Caine.”

“I do?”

“Yes,” Edilio said.

“He believes it,” Toto muttered.

“You’re still Sam’s boy, Edilio.”

“Sam won’t be here, or at the lake. He’s going after your daughter.”

Caine chose not to argue that label, though it filled him with extreme and conflicting emotions. “Sam is going after Gaia and Drake alone? Hah. If I can’t do it alone, neither can he.”

“He believes this.”

“Not *alone*,” Edilio said.

It took Caine a few beats to get it. “No. Go kill yourself. Eat your own gun. No. No no no.”

“You’re happy here counting fish and nagging kids to work?” Edilio asked.

“He’s not,” Virtue said, beating Toto to the punch and earning an annoyed glance from Caine. “He’s only done it for two days since the battle, and he’s already bored.”

“Here’s the proposal,” Edilio said. He had shouldered his assault rifle. “I come to Perdido Beach, work with Quinn and Sanjit and of course Virtue. And maybe bring Computer Jack down, too. Lana, well, she’ll do whatever she wants to do, as usual.”

“Wait, I thought Jack was dead.”

“No. Lana got to him in time,” Sam said. “But he’s shook up, that’s for sure. He could use a change and something to keep his mind occupied.”

Caine shook his head no, but it wasn’t as firm as it might have been.

Sam leaned forward, elbows on knees, and said, “Caine, you’re not a king any more than I’m a mayor.”

“No, then what am I?” Caine demanded, hating the pleading tone in his voice.

“You’re a bully and a sociopath. You’re a thug and a killer. You’re also smart and powerful and you don’t scare easy.”

“True,” Toto affirmed.

“And you love Diana,” Virtue said.

“What? Shut up, Choo.”

All eyes turned to Toto, who nodded and said, “He does.”

“Probably the only person you ever did care for,” Edilio said. “And surely the only person who loves you. And you’re going to leave her out there? With Drake and that monster child of yours?”

Caine saw something then on Sam’s face. An emotion he was anxious to conceal. Guilt? Sam suddenly had the need to rub his face. Caine’s instinct was pinging, warning him of . . . well, he didn’t quite know what. And Sam kept his mouth shut, which meant Toto was no help.

Caine swallowed hard and looked helplessly at Edilio.

Edilio nodded, accepting Caine’s surrender.

“You know what?” Caine said. “You want Perdido Beach? It’s all yours, my friend: it’s all yours.”

And thus ends my brief reign, Caine thought mordantly.

He had to fight down the urge to grin. He drew a deep, satisfying breath. His eyes met Sam’s. Sam had a knowing smile, seeing and understanding, as no one else could, Caine’s relief at giving up power.

“This is only because I’m bored,” Caine said. “I’m not running off to rescue Diana.

Or do the right thing or any of that.”

“That is not—” Toto began, but Virtue reached over and put a hand over the truth teller’s mouth.

Well, at least Diana would be grateful, Caine thought. And then smiled. Nah. She wouldn’t be.

SIX

73 HOURS, 3 MINUTES

THEY HAD SOON discovered that Gaia needed to eat. So did Diana, but Drake didn't care about Diana: Diana could starve for all he cared. Diana could die a slow, painful death, hopefully caused by him, by Drake.

Gaia was a very different matter. Gaia could make him feel terrible pain, deep-down-inside pain. Drake's body, his unkillable body that somehow shared space with Brittney's, didn't normally feel much. Only the most intense pain broke through.

What Gaia did to him when she was displeased—that broke through.

Anyway, it wasn't like Drake could disobey Gaia. She might now look like a little girl, but Drake knew who and what she really was. Who else was he going to serve? He and Caine had parted ways. Caine had become weak. Drake had nowhere else to go if he wasn't with Caine. And in the gaiaphage he had found someone much tougher, more demanding. More powerful. Someone who would never be weak.

His sharp eyes detected movement on a rock. A lizard. He unwrapped his reddish, ten-foot-long tentacle arm from around his waist. He took careful aim, snapped the bullwhip arm, and sent the lizard flying.

He scooped up the dead thing and dropped it into the canvas bag slung from his belt. He'd so far nailed maybe a half pound of lizards—about all there was to be found out here in the desert emptiness. Should he carry it back to Gaia? Was it enough? Or would she punish him for bringing too little?

On the one hand, even here, a mile away from her, Drake could feel her hunger. Her hunger was his hunger. His only hunger since he—whatever he was—no longer felt the need for food. Or water. Or air.

But pain? He could still feel that, at least the pain she gave him. If he brought her too little, there was the thing the gaiaphage could do to him, that twisting inner agony, that little visit to hell.

Just then he spotted a roadrunner. The bird was about a foot and a half long from sharp beak to the end of its long tail. Of course that was mostly feathers and bone. But maybe a few ounces of actual meat, too, and if he nailed it he could head back to Gaia in the certainty of a pleasant, or at least pain-free, welcome.

They were quick little birds, though. Not as fast as the cartoon Road Runner, but quick and dodgy.

The bird had its head cocked. One eye was aimed right at Drake. He froze. He needed to halve the distance before he could strike.

The bird darted half a foot and suddenly had a lizard in its mouth. The lizard was still alive, thrashing in the bird's beak, and that distraction let Drake advance with, slow, silent steps.

Then: the unsettling feeling that presaged the emergence of Brittney. Since they had been buried together and resurrected they had shared . . . well, not a body, really. In fact they shared nothing except that they seemed to trade existences. He would be there, and then Brittney would emerge, and while she was present, he was simply gone.

“Not now!” he hissed, frustrated at the thought of losing his prey.

He snapped his whip arm, but it was already a foot shorter. The roadrunner was gone.

Brittney opened her eyes to see she was alone, in a very dry-looking place, nothing but brambles and sand and stone. She noticed the bag on her belt. Looking in she saw a wad of lizards, some in pieces.

The hunger that had motivated Drake filled her as well, the hunger of her god. The thought of Gaia eating well, growing stronger, made Brittney smile. What a miracle to have her god take on human form, become the baby Gaia! No, not a baby anymore, a beautiful little girl, and growing at an amazing rate. By the time Brittney got back to her, she could be a preteen.

Wouldn't that be exciting!

Food. That was the first thing.

She saw a roadrunner dart into a thornbush. She wasn't fast enough to catch the bird, but she wondered . . .

Brittney dropped to her hands and knees and crawled to the bush. She got as low as she could and shielded her eyes from the glare of the true sun beating down very hard here near the center of the FAYZ.

It was shadier beneath the bush, but she could still see clearly, and there was her reward: a circular nest and in the center of that nest three small, white eggs, no more than an inch and a half in diameter.

Brittney carefully lifted the eggs from the nest and put them in her bag. She pulled apart a bit of the nest and used it to pack the eggs carefully so they wouldn't break.

Now this would be a feast for Gaia!

She backed slowly, carefully, out of the thornbush, indifferent to the multitude of tiny cuts.

Brittney had no warning of the wire that went around her throat. No time even to flinch as the wire cut into her neck, severed the empty, bloodless arteries, and stopped tightening only when it had closed around her upper spine.

“Wish it was Drake, not you, Britt,” Brianna said.

Then Brianna put her foot on Brittney's back and heaved as hard as she could. The wire sliced through cartilage and nerve tissue, making a sound like a knife cutting gristle, and suddenly Brittney's head rolled free and landed in the dirt with a thump.

Brittney could not move her head, but she had rolled to an angle where she could see Brianna. Brianna was sweating from exertion. She wiped her brow with the back of her hand. The garrote—a two-foot-long piece of piano wire strung between steel grips that had once been part of someone's home gym—hung from her free hand.

Brianna looked down at her, quite satisfied, and said, “Now I'm going to chop you into little bits and spread the pieces all over the place. See if you or Drake can reassemble yourself then.”

Brittney was not dead. Aside from no longer being attached to her body she didn't feel any difference, just a dull pain in her neck. When she strained her eyes upward, she could see her body. The body was attempting to stand up all by itself.

But when Brittney tried to speak, she found she could only whisper, and the sound of her whisper was partly drowned out by the gasping noise of air sucked into her severed esophagus.

“You can’t kill us,” Brittney whispered.

“Maybe not. But I’m sure going to try.”

Brianna carried a sawed-off shotgun in her specially adapted runner’s backpack, and a machete, also slung over her back. She pulled out the machete and swung it so fast Brittney couldn’t see the blade move. She just saw the fact that her body was now minus a leg, which caused it to topple over.

Whump!

There was a whirl of movement that raised the dust, and a sound of chopping, a rapid-fire *whap! whap! whap! whap!* and what had been Brittney’s body was in pieces—arms cut off and then cut in two. Legs off and then chopped into three pieces. Torso hacked into random chunks. There was no blood. It was as if Brianna were chopping up an embalmed corpse.

That thought bothered Brittney. How could she be alive with no blood? What was she?

“Want to watch?” Brianna asked.

She grabbed Brittney’s hair, lifted her up, and set her on a flat rock. The first effort failed, and Brittney’s head rolled off. But Brianna was finally able to settle Brittney’s head atop the rock so that Brittney could see her body lying in a couple dozen bloodless pieces.

The pieces were already twitching toward one another, extending tentacles, attempting to rejoin. And things that had been female were becoming male as Drake slowly reemerged to discover he was in very bad shape.

With a look of distaste Brianna began to pick the pieces up and toss them a distance away. “I can’t have you putting yourself back together, Brittney . . . Ah! Wait, is that Drake coming back?”

Brianna performed a short happy dance and stepped—perhaps accidentally—on a piece of flesh that Drake would miss.

“Perfect. So much better this way. Hello, Drake. So glad you could make it. I’m just going to start moving your pieces farther apart. Much farther apart. Then I’ll have Sam go around and fry each piece. And then I believe that’ll be it for you, Brittney slash Drake. I believe we’ll have seen the end of both of you. And your little whip, too.” She patted Drake on the head. Then she picked up a foot and a shoulder section, one in each hand. With a wink she was gone, leaving a trail of dust.

Quinn was rowing back to shore. It was a point of pride for him that he always carried his share of the hard work, in fact more than his fair share, because if you were boss, you started off by setting a good example. So even though he had gotten a hook caught in the back of his arm and had had to cut it out and as a consequence was bleeding through a salt water-soaked bandage held with a strip of duct tape, he pulled at the oars.

No one on his crews ever claimed Quinn was lording it over them or saddling them with too much work. Well, sometimes they did, but it was in the nature of long-running jokes.

“You’re pulling to your left, Captain,” Amber said.

“At least I’m pulling,” Quinn said, and the two of them lifted the oars, leaned forward, dipped the oars, and pulled in long-practiced unison.

“You know, if you’re feeling weak you could let Cathy take over,” Amber said, grunting with the effort. “What with your boo-boo and all.”

“I’d have to be missing an arm before I rowed as weak and spastic as Cathy,” Quinn teased.

For her part, Cathy, seated in the stern and guiding the tiller, said, “Just a good thing we didn’t catch much or we’d never make the marina.”

“Yeah, a good thing,” Quinn said, unable to keep the worry from his voice. “Barely enough to feed us, let alone the whole town.”

He glanced up at a cabin cruiser in the out there. He was a long way from getting used to the fact that he could see the outside. It was weird. Nothing had changed in his daily life except for the fact that he could now see out of his prison. Still a prison, but now the prison had a view.

Two women in bikinis were on the bow, and two much older guys were in the stern of the cabin cruiser, with their fishing rods in rod holders, chilling with bottles of beer. The captain seemed to be of a different breed, a thirtysomething man with salt-bleached clumpy hair and red skin and wraparound glasses. He was watching Quinn’s boats with interest.

The cabin cruiser was throwing up a bow wave Quinn admired and envied. What must it be like to fish from a power boat?

“Give ’em a wave, Cath,” Quinn said. So Cathy did, and the captain gave them a sort of salute. And then one of the women on the bow took off her bikini top.

“Well, I didn’t expect that,” Quinn admitted.

“Drunk,” Amber said.

The cruiser captain, obviously displeased, turned his boat sharply, which threw the woman off balance and would foul the men’s lines if they weren’t quick about reeling in.

Quinn could see the men yelling at the captain, and the captain stoically ignoring them as he motored away. The last Quinn saw of him he was shaking his head in an *I can’t believe these people* kind of way.

At the dock they unloaded the catch—not impressive—and hauled out their gear for mending. Salt water was hell on nets. By now Quinn knew just about every submerged rock or old wreck that could snag a net, but they still needed checking and mending every day.

He was excused by mutual agreement from this part of the day’s work because he was the one who had to go and meet with Caine, a task no one else wanted.

He trudged up the slope toward the town plaza, torn between missing the businesslike and practical Albert and cursing him at the same time for being a treacherous, cowardly weasel. Dealing with Caine was always difficult. Caine was not a businessman: he had a tendency to believe that threatening Quinn would produce more fish. Other times Caine could be self-pitying or grandiose or even depressed. Until very recently Albert had managed Caine, but in these last couple of days Quinn was starting to fear that in some way the care and feeding of the temperamental “king” had fallen to him.

It was therefore with mounting joy bordering on giddiness that he made out the face of Edilio sitting at Caine’s outdoor desk. Virtue was with him, and kids were coming and going, evidently getting instructions from Edilio.

Once, long ago in what felt like another life, Quinn had derided Edilio as a wetback, an illegal alien. Now he could have kissed him.

“Tell me you’re in charge,” Quinn said after he had mounted the steps.

“I’m in charge,” Edilio said, with a shy grin.

“If I were any less tired, I’d do the happy dance,” Quinn said. “I still may.”

Edilio stuck out his hand and Quinn took it.

“I hear you’re having a hard time getting anything in exchange for your fish,” Edilio said.

Quinn nodded. “Pretty much.”

“Give me twenty-four hours to figure it out?”

“You got it. So, where’s His Highness?”

Edilio, straight-faced, said, “His Highness is off with Sam.”

“Are they killing each other?”

“Not as far as I know,” Edilio said. “They’re looking for Gaia.”

That wiped the grin off Quinn’s face. “Oh.”

“Yeah. And I’m the one who asked them to do it, not that I had to twist their arms much. Have a seat, if you have the time.”

Quinn took a seat. Virtue had a notebook. He was writing notes, like an administrative assistant taking minutes of a meeting.

“The island,” Edilio said.

Quinn sighed heavily. Oh, man. “Yeah?”

“Have you seen anything going on there?”

“You mean like Albert up on the cliff watching us through a telescope?”

“Yeah, like that. And also like him trying to talk to you.”

Quinn shook his head. “No, not that. Me and Albert are not friends, not anymore. And he’s got those missiles out there.”

“You think he got them up the cliff to where he can use them?”

“I know he did. I have a pretty good pair of binoculars. I’ve seen him and his girls training. He wanted me to see.”

“Has he ever warned you off? Like threatened you?”

“He doesn’t have to. No reason for me to go in there and look for trouble.”

Edilio considered this and nodded. “It sucks. You guys used to work well together. By now Albert must realize he made a dumb mistake in panicking.”

“Edilio, ask me anything, but don’t ask me to go and try to sweet-talk Albert. He stabbed us all in the back.”

“Caine’s done worse, far worse, and Sam is out there with him now.”

“Albert wouldn’t listen to me anyway, Edilio. Albert thinks he’s far above me. I’m just a working guy who smells like fish. He’s the brains. He’s the big organizer. He’d probably shoot me out of the water.”

Edilio sighed and leaned forward, elbows on the desk. “Quinn, listen, man. We need stuff back to normal. We need the market open and we need people working, or we’re all in big trouble. Kids are gonna die of hunger watching their mom or dad eating a pizza three inches away. Kids are acting like everything is all over; it’s not all over. Just because they can see out doesn’t mean they’re getting out. Kids who ought to be harvesting and planting are sitting there up against the barrier watching TV shows because some network put up a big monitor with captions on. Those lookers out

there don't know what damage they're doing here. They might as well be giving those kids drugs or something."

Quinn didn't disagree. He'd lost two of his own people that way. The rest stayed out of personal loyalty to him, not wanting to let him down.

Edilio didn't push the matter: he let it rest there. Which kind of irritated Quinn, because it meant Edilio was trusting him to step up. He had more than enough to keep him busy. He was tired, and he didn't even think Albert would listen. Plus Albert might well shoot him right out of the water.

"No fish, anyway," he muttered at last. Giving Edilio as peeved a look as he could, he said, "When?" He'd been hoping to find an excuse to visit Lana. It was painful seeing her with Sanjit, but less painful than not seeing her. And, after all, he did have a boo-boo.

Then he saw the *Sorry* look on Edilio's face.

"Great," Quinn said.

SEVEN

71 HOURS, 12 MINUTES

IT WAS EXHAUSTING work for Brianna. She would run two or three pieces of the Drake/Brittney thing off to far corners of the FAYZ, and by the time she got back to grab more, she'd find the body already partly reassembled. Then she'd have to chop it up all over again.

Still, the total pile grew smaller. Some of the pieces were now ten miles apart. That was a long way for a chunk of thigh to ooze and squirm. Other pieces would be swimming. If they could.

At some point in all of the back-and-forth, the head, still on its rock, had reverted to Brittney but then had gone right back to Drake, as if Brittney were weakening, no longer able to manifest for more than a few minutes.

This made Brianna much happier. Brittney had never been evil—a nut, maybe, a little weird, but then who wouldn't be, in Brittney's rather unusual situation? She'd been buried alive, after all, only to reemerge inextricably linked with Drake in a sort of weird immortality.

If that didn't mess you up, you were unmessable.

In any case it was Drake's head that now cursed her in a gasping whisper.

"I'm not quite sure what to do with you, Drake," Brianna said, squatting down to look him in the eye.

"The gaiaphage will kill you," Drake hoarse-whispered. Then he spit up a piece of gravel that must have been sucked up off the ground through his severed windpipe.

"I probably better take you to Sam; he can fry you up," she said. "By the way, why do you have a sack full of dead lizards and some eggs?"

Drake just hissed. Then he called her a dyke and made some extremely crude suggestions. Extremely crude. Crude enough that Brianna actually got angry. She raised her machete high and brought it down with all the strength and speed at her command. Which was considerable. The machete struck sparks off the stone after it had passed clean through the skull, face, and neck.

Drake's head split, top to bottom. The left side—which had almost all of his nose but only a quarter of his mouth—rolled off the stone. The other half—not so much nose and a lot more mouth—stayed in place.

Brianna had a strong stomach, but something about seeing the inside of Drake's head was almost too much for her. It retained all the same structures it had had when Drake was fully human. But it did not bleed. It was alive, but alive in a way very different from the way in which most people were alive.

The brain was gray. Brains are sometimes described as gray, but in reality they're pinkish—she'd seen brain spilled, so she knew. Drake's was genuinely gray with a tinge of green. It looked like an unhealthy cauliflower that had been split down the middle.

She could also see what she supposed were sinuses—open spaces above and behind the nose.

And she could see teeth.

The brain did not fall out all the way, but it did sag a bit and looked as if it might fall out if she shook the head sideways a little.

And it had an odd smell about it. It was the smell of the meat department at a supermarket. A smell that suggested slaughterhouses.

“About your little fantasies there, Drake? Your boy parts? They’re in the glove compartment of an old, wrecked pickup truck that looks like it rolled down a ravine. Might even be Lana’s grandfather’s truck: I should ask her. And some are floating out in the surf. I mean, if you’re ever looking for them.”

What was left of Drake’s mouth tried to speak, but his esophagus was no longer even slightly intact. The exposed tongue stuck sideways, licking air.

Brianna opened the bag of dead lizards and the little eggs. She lifted the right side of Drake’s head and dropped it in. Then fetched the left side and dropped it in as well.

The bag was surprisingly heavy, and the weight of it was awkward, so she couldn’t run full speed. She set off at a slow thirty miles an hour, whistling happily but making no sound since even at thirty the wind snatched the tune away.

It took just ten minutes—she stopped to pee and drink some water at one point—to reach the lake. She sauntered down the dock toward the houseboat, swinging the bag with affected nonchalance, feeling a bit like one of those girls who likes to shop and can’t wait to show off her purchases to her friends.

Astrid and Dekka were on the boat, apparently discussing something important. Astrid looked impatient, like she was restraining herself from saying something snippy. Dekka looked like a thundercloud that might spark lightning at any moment. So, basically, both girls were totally normal.

Astrid was the first to notice Brianna.

“Aren’t you supposed to be patrolling?”

“Where’s Sam?” Brianna asked.

“He’s out. So is Edilio,” Dekka said. “You going to tell us what’s in the bag or do we have to guess?”

Brianna stopped. She was disappointed. In her imagination the big revelation would have been to an admiring Sam Temple. He was the one she wanted to impress. Failing that, Edilio, who was generally warm and sweet to her.

But she was tired and wanted to put the bag down. Also, she couldn’t keep the secret any longer.

She climbed nimbly up to the top deck of the boat, grinned, and said, “Is it anyone’s birthday? Because I have a present.”

“Breeze,” Dekka warned.

So Brianna opened the bag. Dekka looked inside. “What is it?”

So Brianna upended the bag. Dead lizards, broken eggs, and Drake’s head landed on the antiskid flooring.

“Ahhhh!” Astrid screamed.

“Ah, Jesus!” Dekka yelled.

“I know,” Brianna said proudly.

“Oh, my God.”

“Oh, that is . . .”

What lay there was something to strike envy into the heart of a horror movie special-effects expert. The two halves of Drake’s head had started to rejoin. But

because the halves had been tossed wildly together, the process was very incomplete. Very.

In fact at the moment the halves were backward, so that the left half was looking one direction and the right half another. Sections of neck and spine stuck both up and down. The part that held most of Drake's mouth was stuffed with hair from the back of his head.

And, somehow, bits of dead lizard were squeezed in between. But the dead lizards thus incorporated were no longer dead. And there was egg white smeared across one eye.

The mouth was trying to speak and not managing it.

A lizard tail whipped one eye—hard to tell if it was left or right—a parody of Drake's whip arm.

The three of them stared: Astrid with blue eyes wide, hand over mouth; Dekka with mouth wide open and brow furrowed; Brianna like a proud school kid showing off her art project.

"Ta-da!" Brianna said.

Connie Temple had done three interviews, sitting in a chair beside her trailer home on the bluffs south of the barrier. They set up a monitor so she could see her interviewers—MSNBC, the BBC, and *Nightline*.

She had noticed the sudden change in . . . temperature. Even a week ago an interview with the media would have been sympathetic. She would have been one of the brave band of bereaved mothers.

Now she was the mother of not one but two killers.

The entire country had turned on a dime. One minute it was concerned but bored—the whole thing had dragged on too long. People were "over" the whole Perdido Beach Anomaly. Ho-hum.

Now the kids inside were a threat. Dangerous. Monsters.

The pictures were everywhere. Kids dressed like something out of a Mad Max movie with knives and spiked baseball bats. A sullen, bedraggled girl with a cigarette and a gun. Toddlers wandering filthy and naked. Kids with the hollow eyes and sunken cheeks of famine victims. A twelve-year-old who had once been an altar boy but was now all-too-obviously drunk.

Video of Sam using some supernatural light to burn a dead girl's crushed body. That played over and over and over again.

Kids relayed stories by writing on scraps of paper and then holding them up to be read. This had yielded pictures and video of children relating terrifying accounts of hunger, murder, carnivorous worms, talking coyotes, a parasite that ate kids from the inside out.

And dark hints of someone called Drake and a creature called the gaiaphage.

The graphic that Fox News used was "Little Monsters" over a shot of Sam.

People drew comparisons to war criminals. To the killing fields of Cambodia. To the Nazis.

The outrage over the attempt to blast open the dome with a nuclear weapon had died very quickly to be replaced by the muttered suggestion that maybe next time the bomb should be bigger.

People were demanding the army be sent in to surround the anomaly—just in case the “containment” failed. The containment. Like these were dangerous wild animals in a zoo.

There were others who argued that the kids of the FAYZ—that word from the handwritten signs, “FAYZ,” was quickly gaining currency—were victims, desperate survivors who could not be blamed for doing whatever it took to stay alive. But these people were fewer in number and not nearly as loud.

The president was avoiding the press. Many politicians were not, and were using every opportunity to talk about being tough, being firm, sending National Guard and army troops. One congressman from South Carolina had said flatly that the Perdido Beach Abomination, as he called it, should be obliterated. “A quick and easy death is the only way,” he said. “Let God sort them out.”

This, finally, led some to try and calm the building hysteria.

The pope had issued a statement calling for compassion. The movie stars Jennifer Brattle and Todd Chance, parents of the island kids inside, had issued an angry denunciation of the media, reminding everyone that these were children. Just children.

The American Civil Liberties Union had issued a press release with much the same message: children, just children trying to survive.

In a *Wall Street Journal* poll, 28 percent of respondents said that the FAYZ and everyone in it should be destroyed.

All of this had happened before the video that had crashed YouTube: a little girl ripping the arm off the first adult to somehow blunder into the FAYZ and then eating that arm.

The effect had been electric. Suddenly it was clear: this wasn’t child’s play. Whatever power was in there could kill adults as well. Connie had no doubt that the next poll would show many more people in favor of simply wiping out the FAYZ.

She carried a thick art pad and two black Sharpies and headed toward the barrier. It wasn’t easy getting through the crowd that had grown despite the California Highway Patrol roadblock, despite all efforts to get people to back off.

It wasn’t just parents now: it was every kind of nut who could wave a sign. It was people with their kids eating picnic lunches like this was a county fair. It was vendors offering flashing pins that said “FAYZ!” and T-shirts that said “Don’t Let ’Em Out.”

And the crowd had spread, north of the highway and south across the grounds of the abandoned, truncated half of Clifftop. Surfers rode beside the barrier, and in deeper water boats pressed close.

A no-fly zone had been established, but it didn’t apply to news helicopters, or to the drones on loan from the army. Google had repurposed one of its satellites to watch. It was getting crowded in orbit as foreign powers also looked in to see whether this was all some American conspiracy.

Connie walked north at the edge of the crowd, looking for an opening. Over the heads of the lookers she saw the kids, maybe a hundred of them, peering out like suffocating fish from a badly maintained fishbowl.

She had to climb halfway up a dusty hill before she could achieve a little piece of privacy. There were no kids up there, but she thought if she waited, one might come. She wrote a sign:

I am Sam Temple and Caine Soren’s mother.

Then she waited. What felt like ages passed before a girl who might have been fourteen or so noticed her and climbed the hill. She did not have paper or pen, but she had a stick, and the ground at that spot was bare dirt.

The girl used the stick to write:

Team Sam

Connie wrote:

What's your name?

Dahra.

Dahra Baidoo? I'm friends with your mom!

She told me.

Each time Dahra wrote she had to first wipe the ground clear with her hand.

I need to speak to Sam, Connie wrote.

Sam & Caine looking 4 Gaia.

Connie nodded. So her boys were working together. That certainly didn't sound like the stories of a deadly rivalry between them. She looked hard at Dahra.

Can I trust you?

Dahra smiled wryly. *People do.*

It didn't seem like a brag to Connie. Dahra, like all the kids Connie had seen, looked haggard and worn, with eyes that were way too old for the rest of her.

So this was the girl who had taken on the job of nurse, dispensing what medication she had, caring for the sick. Nurse Connie Temple had immediate sympathy for her. Good Lord, what must her life have been like? What terrible strains had this girl been under?

Things getting nasty out here.

Yeah. Dahra jerked her head toward the forest of signs down at the bottom of the hill.

You need to plan. Who can I talk to about that?

Dahra considered. *Edilio or Astrid.*

How can I get in touch with them?

Edilio very busy. Then, when she saw that Connie had read that much, she added, *Astrid. They call her Astrid the Genius.*

Connie nodded. She knew the name. She knew most of the names of the kids in the FAYZ. This would be Astrid Ellison. Her parents were pains in the butt, the mother semihysterical and the father a tense, repressed engineer type, and they had contributed just about nothing to the group known as the families.

And judging by those early impressions when the barrier went transparent, Astrid was Sam's girlfriend.

I need to talk to Astrid. It is URGENT. How?

Dahra considered this for a moment, sighed noiselessly, then drew a circle. At the top of the circle she drew what Connie knew was a lake. Then she stabbed the stick into the lake. Then she drew a wavy line from where they were now to the lake and pointed at Connie. And a second line inside the circle and pointed to herself.

Dahra was telling her to get to the lake and she would meet her there and deliver Astrid.

Connie nodded.

Dahra dropped her hand to the two-foot-long lead pipe that hung from a leather

strap and looked worried. Scared.

And Connie wavered. Was she sending this girl in harm's way? Was she meddling where she shouldn't? She was about to tell Dahra to forget it, but Dahra had already turned away.

"What's it all meant, Sammy boy? What's it all meant?"

Sam didn't bother to answer. Caine was just bored and looking to provoke him.

They each carried two water bottles and some dried fish in a backpack. They each carried a knife—a sheathed hunting knife for Caine and a big Swiss Army knife for Sam. They each wore a baseball cap. Caine slung a twelve-gauge shotgun over his shoulder, muzzle pointed up. Sam carried one of Edilio's automatic rifles over his shoulder, muzzle down.

The fact was that both of them had more powerful weapons in their empty hands. And with guns came ammunition, and both ammunition and guns were heavy. After about two miles on the road Sam was regretting the weight.

"Have you thought at all about what people out there are going to think about this bloody mess?" Caine asked.

Sam had thought of little else. But the day had not yet come when he would bare his soul to Caine. "We've got bigger problems on our hands."

Caine laughed, not believing it. "Nah, a dutiful son like you, surfer dude? You've thought about it."

Caine was walking a little ahead of Sam. Was that because Caine trusted Sam at his back more than Sam trusted the reverse? Maybe. Or maybe, Sam thought, Caine had longer legs. One of those things was probably true.

"No, you definitely thought about it," Caine went on, apparently not discouraged by Sam's refusal to engage. "You barbecued Penny in front of your mommy."

Sam felt a bit provoked. "Don't you mean *our* mommy?"

Caine shook his head. "No, I do not. She may have provided the egg and womb space, but she was not my mother. Yours. Not mine."

Sam winced a little. "You didn't miss all that much."

"Nurse Connie Temple," Caine said. "I knew she was spying on me back at Coates, you know. I never did know why until, well, until I knew."

"You figured she was just interested by you as a thug, a bully, and a manipulator?"

"Pretty much."

Caine was refusing to be provoked, whereas Sam was distinctly uncomfortable. This little mission could take days. It wouldn't do to let Caine work on him. He had to accept the fact that he was partnered with Caine. And that meant not calling up mental images of the plastering Caine had inflicted on kids who were now Sam's friends. And the burning down of half the town in a mad plot with Zil and his little bigot brigade. And about a thousand other felonies.

"Felonies." A legal word. There was a reason that word was popping up in his head.

Caine wasn't the only killer in the FAYZ. Of course, Sam had done only what was necessary to save lives and defeat Caine and Drake. But would courts see it that way?

To torture himself Sam ran through the laundry list of things he'd done that could be called crimes. Breaking and entering. Destruction of property. Assault and battery.

Public drunkenness. Driving without a license. Burning a hole in a nuclear power plant. Theft.

Caine was looking back at him from the top of a rise. “You have a lousy poker face, Sammy boy. What’s in your head is right there on your face. You’re thinking about it, and it’s not the first time.”

“I am still underage,” Sam said weakly.

Caine erupted in disbelieving laughter. “Yeah, that’ll do it. ‘I’m just a kid, Your Honor!’ Hah. They’ll have to find a few scapegoats, and guess who it will be? You and me, surfer dude. You and me.”

“You act like we’re getting out of here,” Sam said.

“Do I? Funny, because I expect we’ll all be dead. Because I’ll tell you what: that girl, that Gaia? We both know who she really is. I don’t think old green-and-gross chose to take on a body for fun. I think it expects to get out of here alive.”

That was way too close to Sam’s own thought process.

“Endgame,” Sam muttered, not really expecting Caine to hear.

“Yep,” Caine said. “That’s right. Endgame. The FAYZ barrier is coming down; at least that’s my bet. But there’s also a ninety percent chance you and me both end up dead. Ten percent chance we both actually get out of here alive. In which case we end up sharing a cell somewhere.” He laughed. “Kind of unfair, really, what with me being evil and all, and you just so darned virtuous and heroic.”

“So why are we doing this?” Sam asked. “Why are we on this mission?”

Caine stopped, turned around, and walked back to him. Sam was struck by the undeniable fact that even now, even after being beaten and humiliated by Penny, his brother could project that hard-to-define thing called charisma. Evil, yes, but a tall, handsome, charming kind of evil.

“Why are we doing this?” Caine asked him. “You know damned well why we’re doing this. Because it’s a fight. It may be *the* fight. It may be the final fight. And what else are we good at, you and me? What are we going to do if we ever get out there anyway? You going to sign up for some AP classes? Get your college essay started? Take driver’s ed?” Caine laughed, laughing at himself, it seemed. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure Harvard will want me. I mean, how many former kings do they have applying?”

Sam tried to stop himself asking, but in the end he blurted it out. “And Diana?”

“Great body,” Caine said breezily. “And a very open mind.”

Sam didn’t buy it. “It’s more than that, you and her.”

Caine didn’t answer, which was all the answer Sam needed.

“Less talk, more walk,” Sam said.

“Ta-da?” Dekka echoed, staring at Brianna because it was much better than looking at Brianna’s trophy. “Ta-da?”

Astrid knelt down to look at the monstrous object. The temptation to taunt Drake was powerful. Drake had been the bogeyman in her life. Drake had made clear that he intended to kill Astrid, slowly and with every humiliation his diseased mind could conjure up. Astrid had spent almost four months in the forest, and fear of Drake had been the constant. She had spent hours practicing the smooth unlimbering and aiming of a gun just so that when the time came she would at least get in a useless shot.

There was a second effect of seeing Drake helpless: Sam would face one less

enemy. His odds of survival had just ticked up.

Dekka was obviously thinking the same thing. “One down,” she said.

As she watched, the object moved, oozed, coming slowly together. The lizard tail remained.

“What are we supposed to do with him?” Dekka asked.

Just then Roger, known as the Artful Roger for his skill in drawing, came up the side. “Is Edilio around? Because—

ahhhhh! Oh no. Oh no.”

“Hey, Roger,” Brianna said. “Have you met Drake?”

“Oh, God, no. Oh . . . Oh . . .”

“I know!” Brianna said proudly. “We’re just trying to figure out what to—hey, you know what? You should totally draw him so we can always remember what he looked like.”

Dekka, in as dry and nonchalant a tone as she could manage, said, “Roger, can we help you?”

“Can you . . . ?” He had definitely forgotten why he was there.

“You were looking for Edilio, right? He’s down in PB.”

The Drake head was almost back to being Drake with the addition of the lizard tail, and the larynx was mostly repaired, so he was able to produce a windy, wheezing sound while his tongue and mouth worked furiously.

“I figured Sam would fry him up,” Brianna said.

“Sam’s not coming back right away,” Astrid said. She was trying to mimic the light tone, but failing. She was worried about Sam. And she was a little sickened by the emotions that swept over her in waves: bitterness, rage, triumph. How much of her life had been about fearing this psychopath? And now he was in her grasp. Now he was without his famous whip hand. Now he was helpless.

The urge to kick him was almost too much to resist.

“Go ahead,” Dekka said, as if she’d read Astrid’s thoughts.

It took Astrid a while to react, to slowly shake her head no. She hated Drake; there was no denying it. But she couldn’t give in to that. She had to use what she had been given.

“Tell us about Gaia, Drake,” she said.

His answer was voiceless but easy enough to decipher.

“Yeah, you don’t seem to have the body parts to do that,” Dekka said.

“Hah! I told him the same thing,” Brianna said with a happy grin.

“I’m just going to, um, not be here anymore,” Roger said, and beat a retreat.

“You had a bag of dead lizards and a couple eggs,” Astrid said. “Why was that?”

Drake cursed foully. But softly.

“Where are Diana and Gaia?” Astrid asked Drake.

“Better just chop him up,” Brianna said. “I can spread the parts of his head all over like I did the rest of him. I only brought him to show Sam.”

Astrid and Dekka exchanged a look. They were in charge at the lake. It was their call. But neither wanted to decide without Edilio. This was not exactly one of the contingencies they had discussed beforehand.

A thought occurred to Astrid. “He morphed from Brittney back to Drake. He’ll sooner or later go the other way. Brittney may be easier to talk to.”

Dekka nodded. “Yeah, that’s right. She might be of some use if we can get her to talk.”

“We can’t be careless, though,” Astrid said. “We don’t know what his capabilities are. Maybe he can regenerate beyond just his head. For all we know the separate parts can regenerate.” She glanced uneasily at Brianna. “Do you know where you put all the parts?”

“Yes,” Brianna said, but with definite uncertainty in her tone, accentuated by the way she stared up and off to one corner as if trying to remember.

“If he can regenerate . . .,” Dekka began.

“Then we could have a bunch of Drakes, one from each severed part.”

“Are you guys going to turn this into a bad thing?” Brianna asked shrilly. “I *got* him! I got him and I sliced him up. And I brought you the head.”

“You did great, Breeze,” Dekka said. “But do us a favor and check on some of those parts. Make sure they’re where you left them, huh?”

“Okay, I just have to eat something first. I ran a hundred miles, probably.” She zipped away, leaving Astrid and Dekka, and the head, which was still making faint vocalizations of an unpleasant nature.

“I have an idea,” Dekka said. “There’s a cooler in my trailer. I get it, I poke some holes in it, put the head in, weigh it down with rocks, and we sink him at the end of a long rope. Maybe it’ll even kill him.”

Astrid sighed. “This would be a story not to tell the *Today* show. I’ll start getting some rocks.”

EIGHT

68 HOURS, 42 MINUTES

DRAKE COULD HEAR perfectly well, although there was something of an echo effect. But pretty well given that his head was separated from his body and split in two still-somewhat-mismatched halves.

He had heard what they were planning. And he was afraid. It was an odd kind of fear, disconnected from his body: there was no stomach-churning, no shortness of breath, no quickening of his pulse.

But he was afraid. He had spent long weeks buried underground—it had had an effect on him. He was not quite human, but he could still feel fear.

And pain. Not like he would have in the old days, but still . . . he could feel the body that was no longer attached to his head.

He itched for his whip hand. God, he would make these two witches pay. Oh, definitely. He could picture it. He had pictured it, many times, especially Astrid. How long had he hated her? Probably from their very first meeting. She was just that kind of girl: hate at first sight.

But now . . .

Dekka, the dyke, was using a Phillips screwdriver to poke holes in the plastic cooler. It wasn't easy—she was slamming it again and again, like some crazy killer. She'd already put a couple of dozen holes in it.

Astrid was just standing there, watching her, and looking back at Drake. He knew she wanted to say something to him. She wanted to tell him, *Hah, see, now it's me on top. Now it's me looking down at you.* She couldn't hide the look of triumph, not from Drake.

"Ready," Dekka said.

Astrid squatted down. She grabbed a handful of his hair, and suddenly he was up and swinging through the air.

He saw the cooler with its top open. He wanted to scream, but he couldn't manage that much noise, and he wouldn't give them the satisfaction.

Astrid set him down—didn't drop him, set him down—in the cooler.

"I have a bike chain I can wrap around it," Dekka said. "Then I'll tie the rope around the whole thing, in case we need to haul him back up."

"Drake," Astrid said. "Last chance: tell us where we can find Gaia and Diana."

For a terrible moment Drake considered it. But he knew that whatever these two could do was nothing next to the pain the gaiaphage could inflict.

He cursed weakly.

The two of them set heavy chunks of broken concrete in beside him. Astrid closed the lid. Darkness stabbed through with beams of light from the holes.

The cooler rocked back and forth with much scraping noise as they wrapped the chain and then the rope.

"That'll hold," Dekka said.

Drake felt the cooler being lifted. It teetered precariously as they almost lost their grip.

Then: A short drop. A splash.

Water began seeping in through the screwdriver holes as air leaked out. Water came in from all directions, like some kind of awful multihead shower. Soon there was an inch of water in the bottom, and when Drake tried to curse, it was lake water that he sucked up into his severed throat.

The descent seemed to take forever. Then: a bump as the cooler landed on the lake bottom.

It took ten minutes for the box to fill completely with water as it rose over his mouth, his nose, his eyes, and finally swirled his hair.

But he was not dead.

Tiny fish, guppies, came sneaking in through the holes. They nibbled at him, but stopped once they'd had a taste. Still, they swirled around him, faintly luminescent in the dark water, like dull fireflies.

They looked into his ears. They poked curious heads into his nose. They swam up into his esophagus and from there up into his mouth.

They were still there when Drake began screaming without sound as he changed into Brittney.

The idea of facing Taylor without a cigarette was bothering Lana quite a bit. Not that she was addicted to cigarettes, she told herself; it wasn't anything like that. Only a very weak person would become addicted, and she was not weak.

The fact that she'd been shaking and even more snappish than usual all day absolutely did not prove that she was addicted. Neither did the fact that she'd spent much of the day searching for smokes or cursing Sanjit.

And yet she was thinking of cigarettes even as she turned the key in the lock. The old electronic key system at the hotel didn't work, of course, but she hadn't wanted to leave Taylor free to just walk away—like she could anyway—so Lana had told Sanjit to screw a lock onto the door. He was handy that way. It was almost a pity she would have to shoot him.

Strange the idea of locking Taylor up. Before her recent—well, it wasn't quite a mutation; no one knew what it was—anyway, before all this, she'd had the power to teleport. To “bounce,” as she called it, from one place to the next with just a thought. Maybe she still could, but she'd have a hard time standing up when she got wherever she was going.

Lana slid open the bolt.

“Taylor. It's me.”

She opened the door. No one had ever closed the curtains in the room, so it was bright with the slanting rays of the setting sun. Different light now. Hard to say what made it different; it just was. The old sky and the old sun had had a seasonless sameness to them. This sun—the real sun—set a little earlier, and a low cloud bank out beyond the barrier bent the light into shades of yellow and gold.

It was a different gold than the gold color of Taylor's skin: Taylor was more metallic. Almost as if she really was made of actual gold. She sat propped up in the hotel bed, leaning on her one stump arm, the other complete arm in her lap. Her legs had been placed on the bed with her, but one had fallen off and was on the floor.

Taylor was completely nude, but it didn't matter. She had none of the signs of

gender. She was a golden Gumby with one arm and a long, green, reptilian tongue.

The best theory anyone had was that it had been done by Little Pete. Little Pete was not thought to have done it maliciously—Petey was incapable of malice. Or any intention, really. He might be the most powerful person in the FAYZ but he was still, despite it all, a five-year-old autistic kid. Couldn't blame him. He'd probably just been playing. A heedless, unaware little god.

With great power comes great responsibility, Lana thought, recalling the line from the Spider-Man movie. But Little Pete had all kinds of power and no responsibility.

"Let's try the hand again, Taylor," Lana said. "Where is it?"

Maybe Taylor understood what she was saying, maybe not. Her ears looked normal, but who knew what went on down inside them? And who knew what went on in her brain? Or if she still had a brain?

Lana couldn't find the hand, which was disturbing. She'd had no evidence that Taylor could move off her bed. Then she found it all the way across the room and behind the permanently off television. Were the parts moving on their own? Once, Brianna had told Lana that Drake could do that: reassemble. As if the parts had lives of their own. Was Taylor the same sort of thing Drake now was? Or at least similar?

No. Drake still looked like Drake. Taylor . . . well . . . But maybe there was some kind of similarity. It was a puzzle. A creepy, creepy puzzle.

Lana carried the cold thing back and pressed it against Taylor's stump. She focused her thoughts on healing the stump. Had Taylor been a regular human, it might well have worked. It wouldn't be the first appendage Lana had reattached. But it wasn't working, just as it hadn't worked on earlier efforts.

"What do I do with you?" Lana asked Taylor. "What are you? You're sure not human. Or even mammal, obviously. Or . . ."

A thought struck her. Was she sure Taylor was even an animal?

A second more perverse thought popped into her head: what would happen if she dragged Taylor out to the balcony to wave to the lookers out there? *Hey there, tourists, check this out! That should keep your nightmares fresh for a while.*

She wondered how much The Powers That Be in the FAYZ—Sam, Caine, Edilio, and Astrid—had thought about the outside world's view of what was going on. The reality in the FAYZ was way weirder than the lookers could imagine. This wasn't just a bunch of kids trapped in a bubble; it was an unprecedented event in the history of the planet. The barrier wasn't the only thing separating inside from outside—things could happen here that just flat *could not exist* out there.

For example: a girl able to heal with a touch.

"Yeah, let's not even start thinking about that," she told herself. She looked at Taylor, a pretty girl with dead eyes and golden skin and black hair like a sheet of rubber. "Are you more like a plant?"

No answer.

"Are you made out of Play-Doh?"

There came a soft knock at the door. "Can I come in?"

"Why not?" she answered sourly.

Sanjit stepped in. "Any change?"

Lana shook her head. "What if she isn't an animal? If she was a plant, what would we do if we wanted to try and reattach a broken stem or whatever? Bring me a knife.

The big sharp one.”

“A plant?”

He fetched the knife.

“Now, hold her stump,” Lana said.

Sanjit shuddered. “You know, Lana, that’s one of those phrases I could have gone my whole life without hearing.

‘Hold her stump.’” He had seen a lot in his life and dealt with some serious weirdness, but Taylor gave him the willies. Nevertheless, he came around the bed, stepping over Lana’s legs, and took hold of the stump.

Lana took the knife and began to shave off a thin slice of the stump. Taylor turned her head to watch, but there was no evidence it was causing her any pain or concern. Sanjit, on the other hand, was turning green.

Lana removed an oval slice and picked it up like a piece of bologna. She held it to the light, inspecting it critically. Then she laid it aside and took a similar slice from the hand. Then she pressed the two newly cut pieces together.

“Get me some duct tape,” Lana said.

“Some what?”

“Some tape,” she said impatiently. “Tape. Staples. Whatever.”

It took Sanjit twenty minutes, and he came back with a roll of white Velcro.

“How am I going to Velcro this?”

“It’s adhesive-backed. It’s like tape. I couldn’t find tape. I found a stapler, but this will be better. Also less disturbing.”

“Wimp. Get me a cigarette.”

He pulled another half cigarette from his pocket, stuck it in her lips—she was busy holding the hand and the arm together—and lit it.

Then he rolled out a foot of Velcro, cut it, and carefully taped the body parts together.

An hour later they carefully unwound the tape.

“Huh. It’s adhering,” Lana said. “A little, anyway. Huh. Wow. You think you could manage a trip into town?”

“Why? So you can try to find your smokes with me out of the way?”

“Yeah, that, too. But mostly I was thinking you could bring Sinder back here. I saw her in town, down from the lake. Or she might be out at the barrier playing wave-at-the-rents. Either way, get her: she has a green thumb.”

“I don’t feel it,” Sam said.

Caine shook his head. “Me neither.”

They were at the entrance to the mine shaft. They hadn’t even discussed their first stop; they’d both just known that it had to be here. This mine shaft was where the gaiaphage had lain for years, growing and festering. This had been the nexus of the evil, its home.

“Should we go in and check?”

“No,” Caine said. “I’ve been in. It wasn’t enjoyable.”

“I can imagine.”

“No, you can’t,” Caine said flatly.

Caine felt Sam watching him, impatient, ready to move on. But Caine was

mesmerized by that dark, blank opening. Once, it had been neatly framed with timber, but now it was more of a gash in the ground, a twisted mouth with stone teeth.

The memory of it . . . Dread had left a permanent mark on him. Pain. Fear. Loneliness.

“Lana knows,” Caine said at last. “And I guess Diana does now, too.” That thought, that realization, something he should have long since acknowledged, rocked him.

When he had come crawling away from this terrible place and found his way home, shattered and insane, Diana had helped him. Who had helped Diana?

“Once it touches your mind, see . . . ,” Caine said, “once it really reaches inside you, it doesn’t let go. It doesn’t just stop. It’s like a, you know, like a wound, like you got cut real badly, and you stitched it up, but it won’t really heal.”

“Lana fought it,” Sam said.

“So did I!” Caine snapped. Then, more quietly, “So did I. I still do. It’s still in my head. It still reaches out to me sometimes.” He nodded, now almost seeming to have forgotten Sam. “*Hungry in the dark.*”

He had fought it. But he hadn’t fought it alone.

What the hell? He felt tears in his eyes. He tried to shake it off. Diana had spoon-fed him, and protected him, and cleaned him. And what had he done? He’d been sitting in Perdido Beach feeling sorry for himself while she was out there. With *it*.

“Is that what you’re going to tell people if we get out of this?” Sam asked. “That the gaiaphage made you do it? Because I don’t buy it.”

If Sam expected a furious answer, Caine disappointed him. He wasn’t going to let Sam bait him. At the moment he didn’t care about Sam.

The failing light was casting long shadows. They would need to think about finding a place to spend the night.

“Won’t make any difference what I say,” Caine said softly. “Won’t be me telling the story. It’ll be a hundred kids if we get out of here. All those kids who mostly just kept their heads down all through this, they’ll be the ones telling the story.”

“Why do you say that?”

Caine laughed. “Sometimes you are so naive. You think you and me and the other big deals are going to be the only ones talking to whoever? The cops? The FBI? Don’t be stupid. You think the adults are going to listen to us? They’ll be afraid of us.”

“You think we’ll still have our powers? Even if we did—”

“It’s not about that, Sammy boy.” Caine turned his back on the mine shaft. It seemed to take a great deal of effort for him to do that, and once he’d accomplished it he nodded like yes, yes he could do it. “It’s not about the powers, man; it’s that we aren’t kids anymore. Look what we’ve been through. Look what we’ve done. Look at yourself, surfer dude. We’ve done something none of our parents have even come close to. We didn’t take over their boring world; we took over a world about a thousand times tougher. If we walk out of this alive, we won’t have to bow our heads to anyone. There’ll be guys who were in wars hearing what we did and thinking, ‘Whoa.’ You and me, we can say, ‘You got yourself some medals, soldier? Yeah, well, I lived through the *FAYZ.*’”

“I haven’t thought much past wanting to get out of here and have a pizza.” Sam was trying to lighten the mood, probably because what Caine was saying made Sam

squirm.

But Caine wasn't done. "They'll be afraid of us, brother, not because we can shoot light out of our hands or throw people through walls, but because we'll be the living proof that they're nothing special just because they're old. They'll fear us and they'll hate us. Most of them, anyway. And they'll try to use us, make money off us." He sighed. "You don't know much about human nature, do you?"

At last Caine smirked and nodded his head, satisfied with himself and satisfied as well with the troubled expression on Sam's face.

Sam said, "Yeah, well getting back to reality here, we should make sure the gaiaphage doesn't come back this way. Let's shut this place down once and for all."

Caine spun on his heel, looked back at the mine shaft. "Now, that is an excellent suggestion." He raised his hands, palms out. Loose rock from all around the mine entrance hurtled into the pit. Boulders rose and suddenly veered, fast as jet fighters, to crash into the hole. Pebbles and rocks and bushes and dirt and bits of broken timber all flew at the entrance.

The noise was a screaming hurricane.

"That outcropping up there, that big rock?" Sam pointed to a sun-bleached boulder about the size of a house. "If I get it to break loose, can you handle it?"

"Let's find out."

Sam aimed green beams of light at the rock and held them on target for several minutes. The rock went from orange-by-sunset to a deep, glowing red. There was a loud cracking sound, and half of it broke away, a single very big, very hot boulder.

Caine focused and stopped its slide down the hill. He swung it left and let it drop just to the side of the cave entrance.

"Break it up a little more," Caine said.

Sam focused the killing light again and held it until the face of the rock began to melt. It fell into two uneven pieces, which Caine easily drew back and then hurled into the mine shaft entrance, blocking it completely.

Sam once again focused energy and held it for a very long time, lighting the mountain's face with the green glow, until the rock softened into magma and crumbled wetly into the shaft entrance.

Finally he stopped. The boulder formed a welded plug that would have to be blasted out with a great deal of dynamite should anyone wish to dislodge it.

Without looking at Caine, Sam said, "Something we're good at."

"Yep. Something we're good at. But listen to me, Sammy boy, I have one rule for when we throw down with the gaiaphage: Diana doesn't get hurt."

It took Sam completely by surprise. "We may have no choice."

"You're not listening. I'm going with you to kill what some would call my daughter, although I don't think she's anyone's daughter. But if I suspect you're going to hurt Diana, our peace treaty ends. We clear on that?"

Sam nodded. "We're clear."

"Deep down, she's a good person, Diana is," Caine said, and sighed. "Deep down, I'm not. But she is."

NINE

64 HOURS, 25 MINUTES

AS SOON AS the lights came on, so to speak, Albert had known he had made a mistake. He had seen doom, nothing but doom coming as the dome went dark. But then, like something out of the book of Genesis, it was “Let there be light.”

And there *was* light.

Now as he stood sourly recalling his own failure of judgment, the sun, the actual sun, was setting out over the ocean, and Perdido Beach was touched with gold.

In this light Albert pretty much looked like he’d panicked. In this light he didn’t look like the prescient, cold-eyed businessman. He looked like a coward.

Standing on the southernmost point of San Francisco de Sales Island over these last three terrible days he’d seen that the wild, terrified mobs of kids had not, as he’d expected, burned Perdido Beach to the ground just to provide light as he’d expected. In fact, he was looking now through a very good telescope he’d found in the Brattle-Chance home, and while he could certainly not make out faces, he could see people in town. And he could see beyond town to the motels that had been built, and the fast-food restaurant, and the news trucks. Out there.

And now all was being revealed to that wider out-there world.

Had it happened just a week earlier, he, Albert Hillsborough, would have been one of the great heroes of the FAYZ. Who had kept the McDonald’s running while there was still electricity? Albert Hillsborough. Who had created the market up at the school? Albert Hillsborough. Who had created a stable currency—the ’Berto—using gold and McDonald’s game pieces? Albert Hillsborough.

He had put people to work.

He had saved them all from starvation. Everyone knew it.

My God, had it all ended then, he could have written his own ticket. He was barely in high school and he would have had university business schools lining up to give him a full scholarship.

Albert Hillsborough—Harvard MBA.

Recently graduated Albert Hillsborough offered vice presidency at General Electric.

Albert Hillsborough named youngest president ever of Sony Corporation.

All of it lost in a moment of panic. The story might already be out there. Half the country might already despise him.

Albert Hillsborough buys waterfront villa in the south of France. Says, “I needed some place to dock my yacht.”

Albert Hillsborough hosts party aboard his yacht. George Clooney, Denzel Washington, Olivia Wilde, and Sasha Obama in attendance.

But he really had done all those good things, and he’d done them without ever raising his hand against anyone, and without any so-called powers he had saved everything.

Just by being smart. Not a genius like Astrid, just smart. By working hard. By not giving up.

Albert Hillsborough dating supermodel. "Marriage not in the plans," Hillsborough says.

Albert Hillsborough declines to run for president despite huge poll numbers. Says, "That job doesn't pay enough."

A boat.

There it was, black on a rippled yellow sea: a boat.

One of his missiles was lying under a tarp held down by rocks on what had once been a lush green lawn and was now an overgrown, dried-out weed patch. He had read the instructions carefully. The missiles weren't hard to fire, really, but then, why would they be? They were used by soldiers in the heat of battle—they'd have to be fairly simple.

It was a rowboat. One of Quinn's.

He turned the telescope toward it and after a few jumpy misses finally centered the boat in the circle and saw the broad back straining against the oars. It would be at least another hour before Quinn could reach the island.

Albert had never before felt shame; it was an alien emotion for him. But of all the people to have to see: Quinn.

At the start Quinn had been Sam's best friend. But he had been weak while Sam was still uncertain and had fallen in with Caine. Caine had been too violent, too overtly evil for Quinn to stomach, which had left Quinn neither here nor there, not someone Sam trusted, not someone of any use to Caine.

But over time Quinn had found his place. And then he had slowly, imperceptibly, grown from the unreliable, foolish boy he'd been into, well, into the Fisherman. People called him that, just as they called Lana the Healer. The Fisherman, with a capital "F."

His crews were absolutely devoted. He outworked anyone in the FAYZ. More than any other person except for Albert, he fed Perdido Beach. He had stood up to Penny and to Caine, although Quinn was not the hero type.

And at the end it had been Quinn who'd stayed to see things through when Albert ran away.

No, he did not want to speak to Quinn.

Albert glanced at the missile. It wouldn't be hard. But beyond the missile, out at sea, out in the open sea beyond the FAYZ barrier, there was a glistening white cruise ship passing slowly. Probably, what, four miles away? Five? But not so far that binoculars and telescopes trained in his direction would miss the flame and the explosion.

"And there's the fact that I don't kill people," Albert admitted almost sadly. "I'm a businessman."

He walked slowly back to the mansion to tell Alicia and Leslie-Ann that they would be having a guest.

"Oh, God, it hurts. It hurts!" He was staggering and shrieking, pausing to stare in horror at the stump of his arm, crying, babbling. His shirt was saturated with blood, now mostly dried.

The red-haired man was not used to suffering, Diana thought.

Well, welcome to the FAYZ, mister. This is a hard place.

Gaia was walking along at a sprightly pace, still following the barrier as the sun fell into the distant sea and the shadows deepened. They were very near the northeastern point, where there was a wrecked train: a dozen boxcars tossed around the landscape, some plowed into the sand, others piled up against each other.

Their shadows were long. Night was rapidly approaching. It was possible to imagine goblins and spooks in this desert train wreck.

“The Nutella train,” Diana said. She of course knew about the bisected train that Sam, Dekka, and Jack had found. The freight had been mostly useless, everything from toilets to wicker furniture. But there had also been a huge amount of Nutella, Cup-a-Noodles, and Pepsi. The discovery remained one of the great days in FAYZ history.

Diana would have given anything for a bowl of noodles.

Everything edible had been removed, hauled to the lake, and either eaten and drunk or bartered to Perdido Beach. Baby Gaia had been nurtured in Diana’s womb on a diet that included a lot of Nutella. Sam and Edilio had been generous with her for the sake of her baby. For the sake of what could be their own destruction.

“What is this thing called?” Gaia asked.

Again Diana noted the fact that there were holes in Gaia’s knowledge. She knew a lot. She didn’t know everything.

Weakness.

Vulnerability.

“It’s called a train.”

When exactly had Diana started thinking in those terms of weakness and vulnerability? When had Diana stopped feeling she had some duty to Gaia and begun to think of ways to stop her?

Gaia had slung the cooked arm over her shoulder. The bicep was mostly consumed, as was the tender meat of most of the fingers. The thumb still remained untouched.

Diana knew the taste of human flesh. That was the terrible crime for which she had been punished by a God who could see even into the FAYZ. Gaia was that punishment, the curse that now mocked her mother’s horror at cannibalism with jaunty, careless amorality.

“Why won’t you let me go to a doctor?” the red-haired man moaned.

“There’s no doctor,” Diana said. “Where do you think you are?”

“She . . . oh, my God!” the man cried.

“You’ll be better off if you don’t spend too much time thinking about it,” Diana said. “The wound isn’t bleeding any—”

“She’s eating my arm!”

Diana spotted a long stick, an umbrella pole, she thought, part of the wicker mess from the train, perhaps. She hefted it experimentally. It was about six feet long and not too heavy, broken jagged and sharp at one end, brass-bound at the other. A very nice walking stick.

“Stab her with it!” the man hissed.

Diana almost laughed. “You don’t want to attack her.”

“She’s a monster!”

“Yeah. We have monsters here. She’s one. The worst. But you won’t kill her with a

stick.”

His face was gray, the look of a man in terrible pain and shock. The look of a man who had lost a lot of blood. But the wound had been cauterized, if not really healed. Gaia didn't care much about cosmetic things; she hadn't even completely healed her own face. He would live long enough to feed her again. That's all Gaia cared about.

“I have a knife in my pack.”

This time, Diana did laugh. “Go ahead: give it a try.”

That hard, cynical laugh brought him up short.

“Are you . . . like her?”

“I'm her mother,” Diana said.

“Jesus.”

“Yeah, we haven't seen *him* around here much.” Diana liked the stick. It helped her plow ahead through the sand, following in Gaia's footsteps.

“Who are you people?” It was like he'd been in too much shock to ask these basic questions before now.

“My name is Diana. She's Gaia. She's . . .” How to explain Gaia? “Well, not exactly what she looks like. Less girly. More Satan-like. What's your name?”

“Alex. Alex Mayle. I feel like I'm going crazy. I don't know what—”

“What were you doing out there?”

“Just trying to get some cool video. You know. YouTubes.”

“Still have your camera?”

“My phone! I have my phone.” With his one hand he managed to draw his iPhone from his pocket. He dialed a number.

“911? Seriously?” Diana laughed.

“There's no signal.”

“Hmmm. That's a surprise. Because none of us ever thought of making a phone call to 911 and saying ‘get us out of here.’ Should have thought of that.” It wasn't that Diana was enjoying this, exactly. But it was a reminder of just how much she had endured, how much she had survived.

Still here, she thought. Still alive. Still sane, mostly.

He opened his camera app and aimed it at Gaia's back. Then he slid the phone back in his pack. He had to use his knees to hold the pack.

“I'm going to die,” Alex moaned.

“Not yet,” Diana said darkly. “Not until she finds another food source.”

The implication stopped him in his tracks. He hung back, and then Diana heard the sound of his footsteps scrambling away.

Without even looking back Gaia simply raised a hand, and Alex flew through the air to land hard at her feet.

“Leave me alone!” Alex cried up at Gaia.

“I could kill you and carry the nutritious parts with me,” Gaia said. “But that would be harder, carrying all that meat. So you'll carry yourself until I find better food. If you try to run away, I'll do something very painful to you. It won't kill you, but you'll wish you were dead.”

“What are you?” he begged, rising to his knees. “What are you?”

“I am the gaiaphage,” Gaia said proudly. “I am your . . . your master. Obey me.”

Gaia found that amusing, obviously, as her young face broke out in a grin that she

shared with Diana, as though the two of them were coconspirators in dismembering Alex. As though Diana would see the humor in it all.

Gaia walked on, and Diana helped Alex to his feet.

It was strange. The first adult she had spoken to in almost a year. Sometimes she had pictured this moment. The fantasy had usually involved firemen and cops rushing in, offering help and food and comfort. Safety.

But this adult wasn't here to rescue her. He was just another lost, desperate fool, more scared than she was.

"I just want to go home," he moaned. He started crying again.

Diana's stomach clenched with a hunger pain. That familiar pain reached into her memory and dragged out images she could not stand to look at. It was a terrible feeling. So was the fact that she was eyeing the cooked arm and salivating.

No, she told herself. *Not again. I'll die first.* She thought of Alex's knife, supposedly in his backpack. Not the wrist—that could be too easily fixed by Gaia if she chose to. It would have to be an artery in her throat. A quick, deep, assured, stabbing thrust. And death before the evil creature, her daughter, could stop her.

But then hope, that cruel thing, came to taunt her. Caine would come for her, wouldn't he? He would know she needed rescue. Because deep down he cared for her, didn't he?

But when he did come, if he did come, Gaia would kill him, wouldn't she?

And then I'll do it, Diana told herself. Then the quick, deep, assured thrust. Not before.

Albert had taken three people to the island with him. Leslie-Ann was his maid, a mousy little thing. She was mostly useless, but she had saved his life once upon a time.

Pug—she had an actual name, but Albert didn't recall what it was—was a big girl, strong and not very bright, and loyal to Albert, though he wasn't quite sure why. She was not clever enough to make trouble.

And finally, Alicia. Alicia had been trained by Edilio to handle a gun. She'd been part of his security force until he'd caught her extorting bribes. At which point Albert had hired her, informally, as a spy. She was clever, a good observer, and had done a good job of keeping him aware of everything.

She was also tall, about five inches taller than Albert, which he liked, and she had large breasts, which Albert also liked. But she was not loyal like Leslie-Ann or Pug; she was too unstable for loyalty. She had been one of the first Coates kids to abandon Caine and come over to the Perdido Beach side. Later she had rejoined Caine for a time, and later still had lurked at the edges of Zil's Human Crew.

She was on the island because Albert had lately begun to develop an interest in girls. When it had seemed that the FAYZ would be plunged into permanent darkness, Albert had thought that under the circumstances . . . well . . . But, no. None of that had happened.

And now he was stuck with her.

At present, she was shining a flashlight down, watching Quinn come up the rope hand over hand, climbing the cliff with the agility and ease of an ape.

"He's strong," Alicia said.

“He rows a boat all day long.”

“Huh.” Pause. “You know, you should work out, Albert. We have a gym. You and those stick arms of yours.”

Albert was looking for a suitably cutting retort when Quinn came up over the side of the cliff, stood up, brushed himself off, and said, “Albert.”

“Who sent you, Quinn?” He was not interested in small talk. Alicia had a gun, and so did Pug, who was standing a few dozen feet away, watchful, ready.

“Yeah, good to see you, too, Albert,” Quinn said.

Albert hesitated, nodded, and said, “I guess come inside and we can talk.” He turned on his heel and stalked up to the house, not waiting for Quinn. Alicia fell back so she could walk just behind Quinn.

There was an electric light on inside, something no one had seen for months in Perdido Beach. But just a single bulb: fuel was in very short supply, and Albert’s priority was keeping the water pump running and having enough energy to at least take some of the chill out of his showers.

They went inside and to the living room with vast bowed windows that provided a horizon-to-horizon view. Perdido Beach was a silhouette now, a dark space against the bright lights of out there.

Leslie-Ann brought in a pitcher of iced tea and glasses. Glasses filled with actual ice. Quinn stared at the ice like he was seeing the gates of heaven.

“So?” Albert pressed as Quinn poured himself some tea, added sugar—a second impossible luxury—and took a drink.

“So, Albert, I noticed you didn’t fire a missile at me.”

“No.”

“Which means you want to know what’s going on. So maybe stop acting all high and mighty. I don’t work for you anymore, Albert. I’m only here because Edilio asked me to come.”

“Edilio?” Albert frowned. “Not Caine?”

“Well, you wouldn’t know this, Albert, since you ran off when things looked bad, but with the barrier transparent things have changed.”

“Yes. It’s lighter during the day,” Albert said dryly.

“Lookers—people, adults, people out there, I mean—are all up against the barrier where the highway goes. TV cameras, parents, nuts. It’s a mess because—”

“I can see them,” Albert cut in. “Let me guess: no one’s working, they’re all waving at their family members, and pretty soon everyone will be very, very hungry.”

Quinn didn’t bother to confirm.

“Caine?” Albert asked.

“Caine is off with Sam looking for Gaia. Edilio is running things now, thankfully.”

Albert drank some tea and thought it over. He could work with Edilio. Edilio was much more sensible than Caine. For one thing he wouldn’t go around proclaiming himself king and then let his psycho allies terrorize everyone.

“Edilio wants me to come back and get people working,” Albert guessed.

“Yep.”

“How about you, Quinn?”

“Me?” Quinn looked him right in the eye. “I think you’re a selfish little coward.”

The insult did not particularly bother Albert. Selfishness was a virtue, and if self-

preservation was cowardice, so be it. “I’ve got everything I want right here,” Albert said, holding up the glass of ice as proof number one, then nodding at Alicia as proof number two, then sweeping a hand around the elegant room, barely visible in the meager fifteen watts.

Quinn set the glass down and ran his hand through his hair, a gesture that flexed his considerable biceps and well-defined triceps, causing Alicia to edge a little forward on her seat and thereby definitely annoying Albert.

“I’ll tell you, dude,” Quinn said, “I think the way things stand right now, you’ll go down in history as a slimy little creep who ran off and left everyone to starve.”

“History?” Albert mocked.

Quinn shrugged. “Everyone seems to think the barrier is coming down. Just before I left, we saw some TV footage outside of some guy, some adult guy, falling through. *Into* the FAYZ. Yeah. Into. Anyway, the gaiaphage obviously thinks we’re getting out; otherwise why move into a body? Right?”

Albert couldn’t argue with that.

“So, yeah: history,” Quinn said. “We’re all being watched now. And judged. Up until a few days ago you were a big hero. Now you’re dirt. The only way you fix that is by coming back and doing what you do.”

TEN

61 HOURS, 36 MINUTES

THAT NIGHT SAM and Caine camped out within a mile of Gaia and Diana.

Quinn slept in a bed with actual sheets while Albert walked the halls of the mansion on San Francisco de Sales Island and wondered if he had made a mistake agreeing to go back.

Astrid lay in the cabin she usually shared with Sam and tried to think about life after, about how they could be, how . . . but ended up thinking of Drake, twenty feet below her in a water-filled box. She tried then to turn her thoughts to memories of Sam, but again Drake intruded. So she gave up on sleep and read a book.

Diana curled on the ground near a pile of stones Gaia had consented to heat and prayed not to dream but did dream, a dream of an overly lit hospital room, and an incubator, and herself approaching that incubator, only to see a bloody beast inside beating violently at the Plexiglas sides. Nurses stared at her.

Edilio crashed on a ratty mattress in the corner of what had once been the town magistrate's office. He started to try and organize his plans for the next day but fell asleep so suddenly and so completely that when he woke up in the morning he would find he had only removed one shoe.

Lana lay with Sanjit and thought of many things. Of Taylor, and what she might be, and whether Sinder—who had agreed to stop by tomorrow—would be able to make any difference. And she thought for a while of Quinn, and wondered if he would care enough to try and force her to stop smoking. This made her feel disloyal, so she veered her thoughts away and tried to imagine what she could ever do, how she could ever survive out there.

Dekka dreamed of Brianna.

Brianna dreamed of running, and she smiled in her sleep.

Little Pete didn't notice the passage of time in the usual way. He drifted and for a while seemed almost to stop thinking, to stop being. But then he was again, focused, aware, and still repeating to himself that it was not okay to hit.

Where the highway passed through the barrier, eighty-seven hungry, traumatized, heavily armed kids wrapped in filthy sleeping bags or blankets lay bathed in the eerie light of the out there and saw that the price of a Carl's Jr. Memphis BBQ burger was just \$3.49.

ELEVEN

52 HOURS, 10 MINUTES

BY MID-MORNING ORC was on the move. He had decided once and for all he would go into hiding. There was forest off to the west somewhere. Dark trees and good places to hide. Astrid had told him about being there, about wild berries but with thorns all around them—oh, he was hungry. And how she had laid traps for squirrels and things. But mostly about berries. Thorns didn't bother Orc.

That was where she had lost God, out in the forest for four months alone. She said that, anyway, so Orc was worried a little. Since finding God he had become a better person. He didn't drink anymore. And he didn't hurt anyone. And he wasn't angry inside like he'd been all his life.

Well, angry a little, still. He missed Howard. He could see now that Howard had used him. And Howard was a sinner, too, that was for sure. But Howard had still been his friend. Not his good friend, maybe, but his close friend.

Howard had been killed by Drake. And eaten up by coyotes.

Once, he'd read a story in the Bible about a woman who was eaten by wild dogs. There was some bad stuff in that book.

But Orc was not afraid of coyotes.

He planted huge, bare, stony feet on rock and dirt and thorny brush and none of it mattered. He just wanted to find a place, like Astrid had found, where he could be alone. In the wilderness.

Once, Jesus had gone into the wilderness. He had talked to the devil there and outsmarted the devil by making the devil get behind him.

It's a metaphor, you idiot, Howard had said once when Orc had read it to him. *Or a whatever. A simile. Something like that, I forget. What it means is if someone is trying to get you to do something bad you say, "Get away. Get thee behind me, dude."*

Orc had grinned. Well, he had tried to grin, which usually scared people. And he'd said, *I guess I better tell you to get behind, huh, Howard?*

Howard had had a nice way, sometimes, of kind of cocking his head and looking up at Orc and smiling with just half his mouth. *I'm always behind you, big guy*, he had said.

It made Orc almost cry, remembering.

Anyway, his own Satan, who was also his only friend, was gone, and now Orc was alone.

He looked up and thought of the day ahead and was not afraid. Whatever bad stuff was ever going to happen to Charles Merriman had already happened. Probably. And anyway, there were bigger hands even than his own gravel hands, and it was those big hands that held his fate.

"Berries and thorns," Orc said to himself, trying to picture what Astrid had told him.

Quinn had spent the night on the island. He ate cheese—actual cheese that Albert's careful survey of the house had found in a special cheese-aging room. It had

apparently never occurred to Caine and Diana, or to Sanjit before them, to look for cellars and subcellars, but Albert, being Albert, had located and cataloged everything of any use in the mansion, and had done it all in just the few days he'd been there.

Quinn had to admit: it never would have occurred to him, either. The concept of a special cheese room was not part of his experience.

Someone had also been growing pot in a small, underground greenhouse, but it had all died off when the power was cut back.

In the morning Albert had Leslie-Ann and Pug help lower a massive wheel of Parmesan cheese in a net down to Quinn's boat. Alicia would be going back to the mainland with Albert, but Leslie-Ann and Pug would stay behind. Pug had been taught to fire the missiles and use a gun and had strict instructions to fire on anyone who was not Albert.

Anyone.

It took Albert a while to get ready. It was lunchtime when they finally got moving—after crackers and peanut butter, lovely, lovely peanut butter. Quinn was trying hard not to regret the fact that it would now be back to the regular grind of work. It was a long, hard row back to town—harder since Albert and his giant cheese were dead weight and Albert clearly was not going to take a turn at the oars. Neither would the cheese.

Alicia rowed for a while, but she was almost more trouble than she was worth. In the end she just put her feet up on the cheese and added to the dead weight.

"The thing is," Albert said, "I did the logical thing with my business. Right?"

Albert was in an unusually talkative mood, which just annoyed Quinn. Generally when Quinn rowed, he slipped into a contemplative mood, often pondering the meaning of life, but also less overwhelming questions like *Star Trek* versus *Star Wars*, and why people would spend a fortune on some fancy car when any car would get you where you were going.

"I'm used to being criticized, everyone resenting me because I'm successful," Albert said. "It's probably inevitable."

And sometimes, despite himself, Quinn thought about Lana.

Those thoughts never ended well. The thing was, Quinn liked Sanjit. And he was glad that Lana was happy, or at least as happy as Lana could get.

"They don't really have a right to hate me, you know: it's not like I owe anyone anything. Actually, they owe me.

Without me they'd all have starved to death by now."

There had been a time when Quinn had thought he and Lana would end up . . . what, going out together? Hah. Those sorts of ideas were just strange in the FAYZ. "Hanging out." The phrase made Quinn smile. If they were getting out of here, he would have to adjust to a world where people hung out. A world where there wasn't really any such thing as a full-time job for a fourteen-year-old kid.

"If they'd all been reasonable instead of panicky and emotional, I wouldn't have had to offshore."

That finally penetrated Quinn's reverie. "You're going with 'offshoring'? Good luck. Some people might call it treason, or cowardice, or abandoning ship like a rat, but give 'offshoring' a try."

Albert waited until he was finished, then said, "Obviously none of it is my fault so

long as I behaved in my own best interests.”

“Douche.”

“What?”

“I was coughing,” Quinn muttered.

He looked up, avoiding Albert’s suspicious gaze, and saw the same cabin cruiser he’d seen the day before. The captain didn’t look in his direction.

They passed Quinn’s outgoing crews and received some good-natured catcalls for Quinn—mostly on the theme of him shirking work. And there were some less good-natured remarks for Albert.

Edilio must have spotted them coming in, because he was waiting on the dock to receive Albert like some kind of visiting celebrity.

Edilio reached down, took Albert’s hand, and hauled him up onto the dock.

“I’m glad you could come, Albert,” Edilio said, perfectly diplomatic. “We need your help.”

“I’m not surprised,” Albert said. “You want people back at work and you’ve already figured out that begging and reasoning don’t work.”

“Also threatening,” Edilio said.

“You just used the wrong threat,” Albert said. “I brought some paper and a Sharpie. I need a stick. No, make it several sticks.”

Half an hour later, Albert marched to the barrier with Edilio in tow. It was now a rather desperate-looking encampment. At least a hundred kids, all filthy and bedraggled, sat staring out. Out at parents, out at siblings, out at the Carl’s Jr. just a block away, out at TV monitors, out at news reporters trying to interview them. It was like some kind of desperate refugee camp, except all that seemed to separate the well-fed, even overfed, people from the starving people was basically a sheet of glass.

No one had bothered to even dig a slit trench, so the entire place stank of urine and human excrement.

Albert focused on the largest cluster of TV cameras. With Edilio carrying half a dozen signs stapled to wooden poles, Albert strode purposefully to a slight rise, unceremoniously chased off the kids sitting there. He swung a backpack off his shoulders and opened it.

“Attention! Attention, everyone! I have cheese!”

Then he began throwing chunks of Parmesan cheese out into the crowd.

The result was instant pandemonium. Desperately hungry kids rushed for the cheese, pushed, shoved, shouted, threatened, waved weapons, beat, kicked, clawed, cried, and cried some more. And as soon as any of them had a hand on some morsel of cheese, they began to stuff it into their mouths like hyenas rushing to eat a wildebeest before the lion came back.

“I’m going to—” Edilio began.

Albert cut him off. “No! Do nothing!”

Then, as the cheese ran out and the riot calmed, and kids were left to stanch the flow of bloody noses, Albert began setting up his signs, one by one.

The first one read:

These kids are going to starve if they sit here watching you.

The second one read:

They need to get back to work. If you keep them here, they will die.

The third one read:

I can feed them if they work. Go away or stay and watch them die.

The fourth:

You can visit from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. daily. Now leave.

The last sign read:

Alberco: Feeding your kids. Albert Hillsborough, CEO.

To the stunned and now bruised and bloodied crowd of kids Albert said, "I'm going to make this simple. I'm shutting Quinn down, so no more fish. You just had the last food you get unless you get back to work. Everyone will resume their old jobs. If you've come here from the lake, either go back to the lake or see me for a work assignment."

It would work right now, Albert thought, or it wouldn't work ever.

A single voice muttered something about Albert trying to push everyone around. Albert ignored it.

"Now, wave good-bye to your families or whatever, and let's get back to work."

Kids started to move. A few at first, then more. Some of those on the outside, some of the parents and siblings, started to retreat tearfully.

The TV cameras did not retreat. Instead they swiveled toward Albert. Albert looked impressive. He wasn't a big kid, he was still a bit of a shrimp, but he was wearing clean and pressed khakis and a somewhat too large, pink, immaculate Ralph Lauren button-down shirt.

Albert pulled a six-inch-long tube from his pocket, unscrewed one end, and tapped out a fat cigar. Among the things he had discovered on the island was a humidior. He used a small chrome blade to snip one end of the cigar, stuck it in his mouth, lit it with a matching cigar torch, and puffed out a cloud of smoke.

Albert knew two things at that moment. First, that his signs, and the image of him right now, standing as tall as he could and playing the role of arrogant businessman, would be on every newscast in the world.

And second, he knew that from this moment forward his recent error would be forgotten and if he lived to get out of the FAYZ he would be a millionaire before he even went to college.

"You did the right thing sending for me, Edilio," Albert said.

Edilio sighed.

Along with many other things from the old days, bikes had become a luxury in the FAYZ. Many had been destroyed out of sheer vandalism or stupidity—attempting the kinds of stunts that were harder to do with adults around, such as riding down the steps of the town hall or setting up a ramp to jump over a car.

Dahra had helped some of the kids who'd tried that last one. And at least one kid who had tried to ride a bike through a window. And another who'd thought he could ride a bike off his roof. Lana had refused to heal them at first on grounds that they were idiots.

And there had been blown tires, broken chains, all the mishaps that occurred, along with parts being stolen and bikes being repurposed to make wheelbarrows. So Dahra's own bike—a relic of better days that she had kept hidden underneath a tarp in her garage—was a rarity. It had been kept in one piece. But the tires had long since gone

flat and Dahra had wasted much of the day before looking for a pump before finally finding one in a neighbor's garage. She was concerned that she was now too late and Astrid would miss meeting Connie Temple. But hey, this was the FAYZ, this was not the world where all you had to do to get someplace was nag your parents into driving you. She would do her best. That's all she could do.

There had been times in the history of the FAYZ when she would have expected to be set upon by gangs or by coyotes as she rode out of town, but at the moment most of the population was up against the barrier and not paying much attention. And most people thought the coyotes had been finished off by Brianna anyway.

The highway was an eerie graveyard of cars wrecked at the moment the FAYZ occurred, and of course others that had been vandalized or burned out since. Every single one had been broken into by kids searching for food or drugs or alcohol. The batteries were all long since dead, gas tanks evaporated or drained off.

Dahra weaved her way through the wrecks and around debris and drifting trash. From Perdido Beach to the lake was just about the maximum distance you could go in the FAYZ. A full day's walk for sure, but not quite as bad by bike, although sticking to the roads made it less direct.

She passed the turnoff to the power plant, the center point of the FAYZ and more or less the halfway mark for her. The Santa Katrina hills rose off to the right, shadowed by the rising sun, and now she had to choose which road to take. The nearest was gravel and dirt, which would be hard with a bike.

If she rode on into the Stefano Rey National Park she'd find a better-paved but steeper road—at least that's what kids said; Dahra had never been. The wooded part would be shadier, too, and that sounded good. It was hot and she was out of shape. She had spent most of the last year in the basement of the town hall, down in the so-called hospital, reading medical books and doling out the dwindling supply of medicine.

She had taught herself to bandage, to attach splints, to suture wounds—Lana wasn't always available. And she had with great misgiving taken on a bit of dentistry. At least as much dentistry as could be accomplished with a pair of needle-nose pliers and a small vise grip.

Well, maybe if they ever got out she could look into medical school. Of course, first she'd have to go back to being a kid. Three more years of high school, then college, and then medical school, maybe.

She had "spoken" with her mom at the barrier. Her mother had wondered if she was keeping up with her school subjects. How were you supposed to even answer a question like that? She hadn't slept a full night since . . . forever. She had been up just about every night of the last year applying cold compresses to bring down fevers, holding puke buckets, wiping up diarrhea . . . until the great plagues had come, the killing cough and the murderous insect infestation.

That had broken her. For a while. But she had come back.

Yes, she had.

Dahra rested, drank some water, wished she had some food, told herself they'd feed her at the lake, and rode on.

The sign for the Stefano Rey was still in place. Not enough people got up this way to properly vandalize it, like every other sign had been. There was even an unvandalized stop sign, a rarity in the FAYZ, where bored kids with spray paint had

painted suggestions for just what you should stop: breathing, wetting yourself, and things a bit cruder.

Why was she doing this? Dahra asked herself. She was taking a risk, why? Because she hadn't before? Because she'd stayed out of the battles, out of the wars, except to tend the wounded? Because she wanted, just once, to play the hero and not the person who bandaged the hero?

Stupid.

It was cool under the trees, but the steepness of the road soon brought back the sweat. She—

She hit the branch before she saw it. The bike yanked out from under her, and Dahra went flying. She hit the pavement hard, facedown, hands too slow to cushion more than a little of the impact.

Dahra lay there, stunned, panting into the blacktop. She tasted blood. Gingerly she checked her extremities. Legs moved. So did her arms. Her palms and knees were bloody but not broken; that was a relief. Her jaw felt funny, like it was off center, but it moved okay. She climbed slowly and only then felt the stab of pain in her ankle. She tested it, and yes, oh, definitely, it hurt.

The bike's front tire was no longer round. It wasn't going to be any use—not that she could have ridden it with a sprained ankle.

She fought down the panic. She was still at least four miles as the crow flies, more like five in reality, from the lake. That was a long way to hop on one leg.

She glanced around for a stick to use as a crutch. "You'd think there would be more sticks in a forest," she said aloud, wishing the sound of her voice made her feel braver instead of emphasizing her aloneness. Her abrasions stung, and she'd have liked to wash the wounds at least, although she doubted there were too many terrible bacteria living on the surface of the road.

"You'll be okay," she told herself.

The dark trees and her own inner voice said otherwise.

She had felt it when she'd panicked, when she'd broken down in the aftermath of the plagues. When the plagues hadn't killed her, she had felt then as if she had used up the last of her luck. Yet now she had tempted fate again, and now, with the end of the FAYZ perhaps in sight, here she was.

Why?

"Just to deliver a message?" Dahra asked herself, bewildered.

She sat by the side of the road and cried.

TWELVE

44 HOURS

GAIA HAD SLEPT in, seeming to both age and heal while asleep. She had gone to sleep still burned and perhaps seven or eight years old, and had awakened healed and closer to ten.

Diana had not tried to wake her.

Let sleeping monsters lie.

Alex had raved through much of the long night, had awakened several times after sunrise to cry out in pain, and then had fallen back into a restless, disturbed sleep.

Diana had tried not to look at the cooked arm, now mostly eaten but not entirely, which lay by the softly snoring Gaia.

Finally, with the sun already past its peak, Gaia had snapped awake, stood up without preamble, and stepped behind a tree to take care of necessary business. Then she had eaten the rest of the arm, down to bare bone, while Alex watched in some disturbing mix of awe and horror and hatred.

He's going off the deep end, Diana thought. She could see it in his eyes. Too much, too fast.

"I'm hungry," Gaia said. "Growing this body at an accelerated rate demands a lot of nutrition."

"Gaia, no," Diana said.

Alex made a gurgling sound and tried to run. Gaia raised a finger, and he found himself running in place, feet slipping helplessly on stony earth. "I have a . . . I . . . Wait! Wait! I have a granola bar!"

"What is a granola bar?" Gaia asked.

"It's food! Food!" Alex cried. He let the backpack slip from his intact shoulder.

The mere mention of a granola bar made Diana's mouth water. Hunger pains stabbed at her insides. If Gaia took Alex's other arm, she would let Diana have the granola bar.

Take it, kill him, eat him; I don't care.

Diana lifted the pack. It was small, more a runner's pack than anything meant for camping. She spilled it out on the ground. A small tube of lotion. A knife. A water bottle. An iPhone with headphones and some sort of solar charger. The granola bar. A map.

Gaia moved in. "Which is the food?"

Diana stared at the bar. Unimaginable luxury in the FAYZ. Oats and raisins and dates, it brought tears to her eyes. All she had to do was say, "Take *him!*" and the bar would be hers.

"There it is! Eat it!" Alex cried.

Gaia stooped, picked it up, frowned at it, and finally realized it was meant to be unwrapped. She ate it like Cookie Monster scarfing a chocolate chip cookie.

Diana breathed. Decision made.

"What is that?" Gaia pointed at the iPhone.

"It's his cell phone," Diana said. "They don't work in here."

“I’ve got my tunes on there,” Alex said eagerly. “Want to hear some, Gaia? Do you want to hear some music?”

“Music,” Gaia said. “What is it?”

“See, you listen to it. You stick the white things in your . . .” He had grabbed the headphones with his remaining hand and was trying to proffer them to Gaia.

Gaia took them.

“Gaia, I know how to get to the lake from here,” Diana said. “I can get you food there.” And some for myself.

Gaia laughed as she toyed with the white earbuds. “Once we go to the lake we’ll have plenty to eat.”

“You’re going . . . I mean, wait,” Diana said, confused. “You’re going to the lake? I mean, we’re deliberately going there?”

“Of course, stupid Diana,” Gaia said. Her blue eyes were merry. “Once it’s dark. How else can I kill them all?”

“Kill them all?” Diana echoed blankly.

“Any human that *Nemesis* can use. I thought that was obvious, Diana. I can’t allow *Nemesis* to find a host; do you know how powerful he would be? No, he must die. First the people at the lake. It will be easier. Then Perdido Beach. There are many hiding places in Perdido Beach. I know.” She nodded smugly. “How many humans are alive in this small universe of ours?”

“Gaia, you can’t—”

Diana felt herself slammed to the ground, hard enough to knock the wind out of her. Then she was hurled straight up into the air, flying, arms windmilling, screaming in terror.

She began to drop. The drop onto hard stone would surely kill her.

Please, yes, let me die.

But Gaia stopped her fall just two feet from impact. Gaia’s child’s face was twisted into a sneer. “Don’t tell me what I can’t do, Mother.”

She let Diana go so that she would fall the last two feet.

“See, she’s the one causing trouble,” Alex cried, pointing at Diana with his one hand. Spittle flew from his lips. His eyes were wild. “Eat her! Eat her! Hah hah hah! Yeah!”

Diana wasn’t even offended. The red-haired man was traumatized. He’d fallen into a nightmare, unprepared. His eyes were rimmed in red. Madness was moving in to claim him.

Wait until he’s hungry enough that the smell of his own cooked flesh begins to . . .

Gaia laughed. It was a jarring sound, strange and out of place. “You don’t want to feed your god?” she asked Alex. She moved close to him, and as he recoiled in fear she took him by his ear and drew him close. It was an act of pure sadism, Diana realized. Gaia wasn’t simply ruthless; she enjoyed causing fear. Gaia whispered to Alex, “You have hope still. You think you might escape me. Stupid man. Don’t you understand? You only live to feed me. You have to *hope* you can feed me. Beg to feed me. Because when you can’t, you die.”

Alex shook so badly he fell to his knees. Urine stained his pants.

Gaia laughed, delightedly. “See?” she asked Diana. “Now he worships me on his knees.”

“Are you killing them all or humiliating them?” Diana asked bitterly.

“Can’t I do both?”

“Why do you need to do this, Gaia? What . . . Just, why? Why?”

Gaia was suddenly matter-of-fact, businesslike. “Nemesis may take a body for himself. And then where will I be? I need Nemesis to die, Diana. When he dies, the barrier will fall. When he dies, I will be free to emerge. I am ready. I am seeing this place and realizing that it is small. Look at the world out there.” She waved her arm grandly toward the transparent barrier, toward the desert beyond. “It goes on and on, doesn’t it? How big is it, Diana?”

“What, the whole country? Earth?”

“All of it. Is the earth all of it? Then the earth. How big is the earth?”

Diana shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m not exactly honor roll. Astrid would know, down to the mile, I’m sure.”

Gaia turned to her, eyes lit with excitement. “But it’s big. How many humans?”

“Billions.”

That seemed to take Gaia aback. Her mouth dropped open.

“Even you can’t kill them all,” Diana said, enjoying Gaia’s look of consternation.

But Gaia had absorbed the new information. “I won’t need to kill billions, Diana. When Nemesis is gone, there will be no other like me. Just me alone. I will grow and spread, one body and then another, and soon there will be so many of me that it will be impossible to eradicate me. Eventually all will be me, and I will be all.”

“Won’t that be boring?” Diana asked. “You’d be dating yourself. You’ll have no one to discuss your evil plans with. No one left to terrorize.”

Gaia nodded thoughtfully. “Yes. Yes, you make sense. I will leave some free so that I can teach them fear and pain.”

Diana stared at her, seeing not the fast-growing girl but the monster beneath. Only now did she truly understand. How had she not realized it before? The sadism. The game playing. The irrational fears and grandiose visions of godhood.

Diana had seen enough of it in the FAYZ; how had she not seen it in this creature? Madness. Lunacy.

The gaiaphage was insane.

Gaia was going to kill everyone: that was her plan. Kill the good and the bad, all of them. Diana grasped the truth of it now. That was Gaia’s mad endgame. The gaiaphage couldn’t allow Little Pete to find a body and survive, and that meant killing every living person in the FAYZ.

And it wouldn’t be a simple act of survival. She would enjoy it. She would enjoy watching people run from her. She would enjoy hunting them down and killing them. Gaia wasn’t ruthless and self-serving like Caine; she was evil, like Drake. A psychopath. A mad and terrible beast.

For some reason Diana’s mind went to Orc. Not a regular kid by any stretch. He’d been a bully, a thug, a drunk, and a killer. Then he’d been a penitent. Like Diana he had come to regret what he’d done. He had irritated her with his Bible reading and his endless questions, but he had found a way to redemption.

Could Orc’s life story simply end in Gaia’s flames, just to feed Gaia’s psychotic ego?

Sinder, who was so devoted to her garden.

Dahra, who had worked herself into a breakdown caring for sick kids.

Computer Jack? He'd been confused and aimless, and in her time Diana had used and manipulated him, but to actually die? To be killed by this . . . this abomination?

Astrid, that sanctimonious bitch . . . and Brianna, who Diana had actually come to like. And Dekka, who had never liked Diana but had forgiven her in her own snarling way. And Lana.

And Caine.

Yes, above all, Caine.

All their battles, hers and Caine's, all their rages? All of it to end in death so this evil creature could walk out to trouble the wider world?

She remembered the touch of Caine's skin on hers. Who would have guessed that egomaniacal, power-mad Caine would have such a gentle kiss?

Yeah, and that worked out so well. Pregnant with a mutant child who was sacrificed at the moment of her birth to the needs of the gaiaphage.

It wasn't like Caine could ever walk free from the FAYZ, Diana knew that. He was a criminal ten times over, a rotten, charming, worthless sociopath, and they would lock him up.

And she would visit him and make fun of him behind the security glass at the prison. And then she would wait for him. Years, if necessary. All her years, if necessary.

You make bad choices, Diana, she told herself. So: one more won't be a shock.

At that moment Diana felt a change in herself. It surprised her. At some level she had, like Alex, held on to hope: she had somehow still wanted to believe that this was her daughter, that she was a mother, that . . .

But this was no little girl. This was a beast with a pretty face and beautiful blue eyes.

Gaia had let the earbuds and the phone fall as Alex wept and whimpered and implored her. Diana picked them up off the ground.

"Music," Diana said through gritted teeth.

"Music?" Gaia said, confused.

"You wouldn't like it, Gaia. It's only for humans."

Gaia knew a lot of things. She did not know about child psychology.

"I *will* hear it!"

It would be close to dark by the time they reached the lake. Diana didn't think much of her chances: what she was thinking of doing was hopeless, futile, and certainly stupid. But what the hell, was there really anything left for her to lose?

Wasn't there an old song that went "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose"?

Gaia was fumbling with the earbuds now, frowning as she mimicked what Diana showed her.

And, to her own dark, private amusement, Diana was planning to play hero.

Many hours had passed, night was falling, and Dahra had managed to hobble maybe three hundred yards. It was painful work. Her hands were bloody from the bike crash, and she kept tripping and landing on them again, leaving red handprints on the road behind her.

Maybe, she thought, the barrier would come down and there would suddenly be cars driving down this road. If so, it had better happen fast. Night came dark and intense in the forest. She could barely make out the tree trunks on either side of the road. Looking up, she could see that the sky was the darkest possible blue before going black. Far up above and well off to the east she saw the blinking lights of a passenger jet. A plane full of people, regular people, not captives of the FAYZ, on their merry way from San Francisco to Los Angeles.

Ladies and gentlemen, if you look out the right side of the aircraft, you can see the Perdido Beach Anomaly.

Maybe if it all did come to an end, there would be tours of the former FAYZ. *And here is where Dahra Baidoo starved to death by the side of the road.*

That made her start to cry again. What had she done to deserve—movement! She raised her head, and there, not twenty feet away, stood a coyote. Its head was low. Its eyes glittered in the gloom. It was bedraggled, filthy, skin and bones. Dahra knew that Brianna had played grim reaper to the coyote population, chasing them down one by one. After the terrible coyote attack on panicked kids just south of the lake Sam had made it part of Brianna’s job to eliminate the mutant canines once and for all.

But here was one who was not dead.

The coyote sniffed the air, ears cocking this way and that, on the alert for the sudden death brought by the Breeze. It was nervous, but it was more hungry.

“Go away!” Dahra yelled. “The Breeze is coming to meet me. She’ll be here any second!”

The coyote didn’t buy it. “Not here,” it said in its strangle, glottal voice. It advanced, still cautious. Saliva dripped from its muzzle.

An awful terror took Dahra then. The coyote wouldn’t just kill her; it would eat her. It would eat her alive, and she would watch it happen until blood loss deprived her of consciousness. She knew. She had heard the stories; she had seen the bloody, mangled survivors dragged into the so-called hospital to await salvation at Lana’s hands.

She began to pray. *Oh, God, save me. Oh, God, hear me and save me.*

Then, aloud, she said, “Kill me first. Kill me before you . . . before . . .”

Oh, God, don’t let him . . .

The coyote closed to within two feet. His nostrils were filling with the scent of her; his mouth was foaming in anticipation.

“No,” she whispered. “No, God, no.”

The coyote froze. Its ears swiveled to the right. It hunched low, and now Dahra could hear it, too, a slow crashing of underbrush and fallen leaves.

“Help! Help!” she cried, having no idea who or what might be in those woods, only knowing that whatever it was, the coyote didn’t like it.

The coyote made a low growl.

The crashing sound came closer, and with a furious, frustrated whine the coyote trotted away.

“Help me!” Dahra cried.

At first she couldn’t make sense of what she was seeing in the shadows. It looked like a person, but built on too thick a scale, with outlines all blurred and indistinct. Then she recognized him and almost fainted with relief.

“Orc!”

Orc easily climbed the incline up to the road, then squatted beside her.

“Dahra? What are you doing here?”

“Praying for you to show up,” she gasped.

Orc couldn’t make much of a smile; it was only the human part of his mouth that could do that. “You prayed to God? Like in the Bible?”

Dahra was about to say she would happily have prayed to any and all gods and the devil, too, but she stopped herself and instead said, “Yes, Orc. Just like in the Bible.”

“And he sent me.” This seemed to give Orc great satisfaction. His huge chest swelled. “He sent me!”

“I crashed my bike. One leg is twisted. Can you help me get to the lake?”

“Shouldn’t you go see Lana?”

“Lake first, if you don’t mind. I have an important message to deliver. I have to talk to Astrid.”

Orc nodded. “Be sure and tell her God saved you. He brought me here, just to save you. Maybe then Astrid will . . . Anyway, I can carry you.”

He lifted her up like she was a doll. He had always terrified her. He was as strange as if he was from another planet.

But she felt safe in his arms.

He chuckled to himself, giddy, as he carried her.

THIRTEEN

40 HOURS, 3 MINUTES

FOR ASTRID IT was another night apart from Sam. How quickly his presence had become necessary to her. Sam in her bed: an addiction that had swiftly taken hold. Fifteen years of sleeping alone now seemed like it had involved some other person entirely. Hadn't she always had him beside her? Hadn't she always awakened to his touch?

Astrid was trying to think. And not about Sam. But she was in the cabin she shared with Sam, and everything about the place reminded her of him.

She was also not trying to think about the fact that Drake's head was in a cooler twenty feet below her at the bottom of the lake.

Heavy tread on the dock, followed by someone large and very heavy stepping onto the boat. Astrid snatched up her shotgun and headed out. One of Edilio's guards should have challenged the intruder. She heard the sound of someone peeing—that would be the guard.

With shotgun leveled Astrid went the length of the passageway, then carefully climbed the steps out onto the deck. She found her sights aiming at Dahra Baidoo, improbably in the arms of Orc.

"Don't shoot," Dahra said through gritted teeth.

"God sent me to save her!" Orc blurted.

"What happened to you?" Astrid asked, setting her gun aside and helping Orc lower Dahra onto the padded bench.

"I was coming to see you, riding my bike," Dahra said. "Twisted ankle."

"Your ankle is three times its normal size," Astrid observed.

"Yes, Astrid, I noticed that," Dahra said. Sarcasm was not usually in Dahra's repertoire, but Astrid could hardly blame her.

"What can I do to help you?"

"Get me to Lana as soon as I tell you what I came here to tell you," Dahra said.

"Maybe I can have you driven down," Astrid said, wondering if this was enough of a justification for using some of their dwindling gas supply. If so, she'd have to make the trip useful in some other way as well. Maybe she could go to Perdido Beach . . . see if Sam was around . . .

"What is it you have to tell me?" Astrid asked.

"Food," Dahra said. "First, something to eat."

"Well, since you're injured, I can give you a Cup-a-Noodles. I guess you can each have one."

Heating the water for the noodles—there was a small hibachi on deck and a few dry twigs—took some time, and while the water was heating Dahra relented and told her tale.

"Sam's mother, Connie Temple, I ran into her at the barrier. She wants to talk to you."

"To me?" Astrid frowned. Was this about her relationship with Sam?

"She says things are getting very nasty outside. Out in the world. And she's right,

by the way. I saw a sign that said ‘Kill Them All, Let God Sort Them Out.’”

“That is not Christian,” Orc huffed.

“No, it isn’t,” Astrid said dryly.

“I guess Nurse Temple wanted someone to talk to about it. Sam was gone, Edilio is busy, so it was you, Astrid.”

“Third choice?”

Dahra shrugged, but the motion made her wince. “She’ll meet you at the barrier. Probably thought it would be earlier, sorry, slightly delayed.” She was talking through gasps of pain. “Tomorrow maybe, right? You’ll need paper or something. You know, to communicate.”

Astrid thought about it. “Thanks, Dahra. And thank you, Orc.”

“It wasn’t me,” he said solemnly, and pointed one thick finger upward. “Maybe he has a use for me. You know? Like a plan.”

Astrid smiled at him. “You have become one of the good guys, Orc. If there was ever an example of redemption, it’s you.”

She hesitated only a moment out of fear of touching him, but then gave him a hug. How strange he felt. How alien.

Orc seemed too overcome to say anything. Which was nice, Astrid thought as she drew back, but her thoughts moved quickly on to what she and Sam had been calling the endgame. It wasn’t enough to survive a war: you had to plan for the aftermath.

She was pleased Connie Temple was reaching out to her. Getting ready for the aftermath was possibly the most important thing left to do. It was something Astrid could handle very well, she thought.

Gaia was singing. She wasn’t singing well—her voice was thin and reedy and she had no experience of music—but with the earbuds in she was singing.

She was singing “Mainlining Murder” by Lars Frederiksen and the Bastards.

“Great playlist you’ve got there, Mr. Alex,” Diana said.

They were just beyond a low hill, very near the lake. They had a small twig-and-branch fire going, lit easily by Gaia. Diana had suggested it, hoping the light would be seen from the lake. Hoping that Sam was even now planning a surprise attack that would end this.

Gaia was staring into that fire and singing: “Mainlining Murder” followed incongruously by “Girls Just Want to Have Fun.” If she was at all concerned by the proximity of the lake settlement, she showed no sign of it.

“Is that the Miley Cyrus version or the original Cyndi Lauper?” Diana asked Alex. He didn’t seem to know. He was not in a talkative mood; at least, he was not talking to her. He muttered unintelligibly sometimes, and had taken to mumbling, “Melted, man. Melted.” Whatever that meant in crazy town, where Alex had apparently taken up residence.

Diana was hoping he would pass out or fall asleep. She didn’t trust him: he could easily rat her out to curry favor with Gaia.

Diana had seen people break before, just collapse, lose it. But never this quickly. Was he already a mess before he ventured into this particular level of hell? Was he already fragile? Or was it that he was an adult?

She pondered this for a moment. People always said kids were resilient, so

obviously adults were less so. She wondered how much differently things would have gone if it had been three-hundred-plus adults trapped in the FAYZ with the gaiaphage and dangerous mutants—human and nonhuman.

But now she was stalling. She had to act before Gaia could. She was convinced Gaia was just waiting to attack until the sky was completely dark, and it was dark.

Enough. Time was up.

Time to die, most likely.

Oh, well. Bad decisions. My secret power: bad decisions.

“I have to go pee,” Diana said through a tense, clenched jaw. She heaved herself up, knees popping, muscles aching, and scabs stretching with the effort.

Gaia didn’t even glance up, and Diana realized her eyes were closed. Somehow she looked less . . . well, evil, with her eyes closed. She could almost be asleep except for the fact that she was back to singing about murder. Or rapping, maybe.

Diana walked away with all the nonchalance she could manage. She was stiff-legged, but she was always stiff now. Nothing new.

Gaia didn’t seem to even notice, and Diana was most afraid Alex would take this as a sign that he, too, could walk away. That would ruin everything. But the man was busy pretending to enjoy Gaia’s singing, obviously in the ridiculous belief that Gaia would like him. And muttering, “Melting, melting.”

Poor one-armed fool, Diana thought. Pray Gaia doesn’t get hungry again. Or bored. Or just wants to see you scream.

They were in an area of low, rolling hills. Boulders jabbed up out of the hard dirt. Desiccated grass edged up to small stands of nearly dead, stunted trees. Diana knew the area: Sinder’s garden was just over the hill. The lake was not a quarter mile away.

As soon as she was out of sight she started to run. The moon—the actual moon, not the simulation they’d seen back in the old days—had just risen, and its light was faint. She stumbled, tripped, but kept running. It hurt each time she fell, but Diana had endured worse, far worse. And she ran now hoping, believing, that Sam and Dekka and Brianna and maybe enough force to fight off Gaia were just over the next hill.

Sam liked her; he’d been kind to her; he could save her. She had to believe that. Absent Caine to play knight in shining armor, Sam could save her.

She heard her own feet on sand. She heard her own gasping breath. She felt the heart pounding in her chest. Running brought hope, and hope was a cruel trick, but she ran anyway.

She spotted a human silhouette and ran to it.

“Hey, who’s there?” a young voice cried out.

“It’s Diana,” she said, not yelling, but urgent. “Keep it down!”

“Show me who you are!”

She forced herself to slow—not much point in getting shot by her rescuers—and waited until the boy recognized her. She did not recognize him, but she’d never made a lot of friends at the lake.

“Listen, kid, do you have some way to sound an alarm?”

“What?”

“Don’t ‘what’ me!” she snapped. “Do you have a way to sound an alarm?”

“I’m supposed to fire in the air.”

“No, she’ll hear that. Come on, let’s run! Run!”

Her fear was contagious, and the nameless boy set off after her, his automatic rifle banging against his back. Ahead were the lights of the lake, just a few pitiful candles, a few faintly illuminated trailer windows and boat portholes.

“What’s happening?” the boy asked, breathless behind her.

“The devil’s on her way,” Diana said. She glanced back: still no pursuit. Of course when Gaia came she’d be a whirlwind with Brianna’s speed. Diana wouldn’t even have a warning.

She pelted into the settlement, which was a dozen or so trailers and motor homes, some bedraggled tents, a few boats at the dock, and a few more boats anchored out in the water.

Diana had lived here for a while; she knew her way around.

She ran onto the houseboat and yelled, “Sam! Sam!”

Silence.

“Sam’s gone,” the out-of-breath guard said.

“What?”

“He’s gone to Perdido Beach.”

Diana felt like she’d been kicked in the stomach. Without Sam there was zero chance of beating Gaia.

Ah, hope: you tricked me again.

Dekka came running down the dock. “What’s going on?”

“Dekka! Thank God. Gaia is just over the hill. Listen to me: she’s going to kill everyone.”

Dekka stared. Diana thought it was as close as she’d ever come to looking truly frightened. Then to the guard, Dekka said, “Get Jack. Right now!”

“Who else is here?” Diana demanded.

“That can do any damage in a fight? Me and Jack. Breeze may have come back. Breeze! Breeze! If you’re down there, wake up!” Nothing. “She may be asleep down below, but she went out on patrol earlier, I think. Breeze!”

Someone very large was climbing up from below, and Diana was relieved to see the mudslide that was Orc’s head.

“Orc!” Dekka said. “Thank God you’re here! Is Breeze down there?”

Orc shook his head. “But I am because the Lord sent me.”

“Glad to have you however you got here.” Dekka grabbed Diana’s arm. “What powers does she have? What can Gaia do?”

“She says she has everyone’s powers. But if you die, she loses that power. That’s why she didn’t take on Sam and Caine. She’ll kill the moofs last.”

“Why is she . . . Everyone? Never mind. Where is Astrid?”

“She was in the outhouse. Here she comes,” Orc said.

Astrid and Jack were running toward the boat with the guard leading the way. “Gaia may be here any second,” Dekka explained quickly. She repeated what Diana had told her.

“We have to evacuate into the boats,” Astrid said.

“We can fight!” Dekka said. “Me, Jack, Orc, we can take her on!”

“Fine, but the rest have to get on the water. That’s the plan,” Astrid said coolly.

Dekka nodded and ordered the guard to run and ring the alarm bell.

“No!” Diana cried. “Quietly! If she hears anything . . .”

“You’re right.”

Into the boats, out into the water. Once, they had defeated a determined attack by Drake using that simple tactic. The water was their defense.

“Dahra’s downstairs, injured,” Astrid said. “She can’t run. Dekka?”

“The three of us, Jack and Orc and I, need to get between Gaia and the lake. If we head up onto the ridge, top of the bluff there—”

“Agreed,” Astrid said, cutting her off.

“I wish Sam was here,” Diana muttered.

“We all do,” Astrid snapped, “but this is what we’ve got. Dekka, Jack, Orc. That’s a start.”

“No,” Jack said.

“No what?” Dekka asked, honestly confused.

“I’m not fighting. Don’t you know what happened to me the last time? I nearly died!”

“You’ll die for sure if you don’t fight,” Diana said. “Listen to me: This is the gaiaphage. It’s going to kill anything with a human body that might act as a host for Little Pete.”

Astrid’s eyebrow shot up. “Interesting.”

“Really, Mrs. Spock? Not *fascinating*?” Diana made a strangled noise of frustration. “Does anyone have any food? If I’m going to die, I’d like to eat first.”

“I’m not fighting,” Jack said stubbornly. “Just because I’m strong doesn’t mean I’m a fighter.”

“You’ll fight or die, most likely both,” Diana said. “Do you not get what you’re dealing with here?”

But Jack shook his head. So much for the resilience of youth, Diana thought. He’s as broken as Alex.

“Let’s get the houseboat started up and cast off,” Astrid said. “Dekka? Orc? Good luck. Jack, you can at least help people get to the boats.”

Diana felt Astrid’s fingers wrapped around her bicep and realized she was being pulled away. Everyone else was running to their assigned tasks, but Astrid led Diana to the railing and looked hard into her eyes. “Keep your mouth shut about the powers. And about Petey.”

“What are you grabbing me for? Get off me!”

Astrid released her but leaned in even closer. “That information? That gets Sam killed. It gets Caine killed, too. You understand me?”

Kids were already streaming out of their motor homes and tents, racing to cram onto the boats. Boats moored farther out saw that there was an evacuation under way and fired up engines or dipped oars to come in and pick up their friends.

The evacuation had been practiced many times, thanks to Edilio’s persistence. It was working.

And then, in a blaze of swift-moving light that practically flew over the hills: Gaia.

FOURTEEN

39 HOURS, 40 MINUTES

TWIN BEAMS OF green light, so bright you couldn't look at them, swept from right to left, from a motor home that burst instantly into flame to a tent near the dock that seemed to simply disappear in the heat.

"Jump!" Astrid yelled, and took her own advice.

Orc saw what was happening, flashed on Dahra, and dived down the steps. Dahra was up, hobbling, and he just had time to wonder how he could turn around with her in his arms in the narrow passageway when the houseboat blew up.

It did not burn; it blew up.

Orc was thrown against a bulkhead, which dissolved before he hit it. Fire was everywhere and, an instant later, water. He sucked in a lungful, gagged, and vomited into the lake.

He windmilled his hands and legs, fending off debris from every direction—shattered plywood, a toilet, blankets and bits of clothing like poltergeists floating and swirling and tangling. The only light was the yellow of the fire that now burned directly above him.

He looked frantically around, searching for Dahra, but nothing. His lungs burning, he kicked his massive legs and only then realized: gravel is much heavier than flesh.

Orc sank toward the lake bottom. Air bubbles rose from the thousands of crevices in his body.

Below him he saw a picnic cooler, bound with chain, and wondered what it was. And whether it mattered. And whether he was truly, finally, going to be comforted by God's staff.

Dahra never knew what was happening. She heard noises and agitated voices up above. It all sounded important, so she climbed painfully out of the bunk Astrid had let her use. Then she saw Orc coming toward her in a rush.

And then she was torn apart by the explosion.

Diana and Astrid had already hit the water.

When Astrid clawed her way back to air, she saw Diana in the water beside her, facedown, seemingly unconscious. Three quick strokes and Astrid was beside Diana. She twisted her around and tilted her head back to face up toward the sky.

Diana coughed water and opened her dark eyes, reflecting moonlight outshone by sudden green lasers.

Fifty feet away a sailboat at anchor did not explode—there was no fuel on board. It just erupted in a ball of fire that ran from stem to stern and swirled up around the mast. It seemed to burn it to the waterline in seconds.

"Dekka! Jack!" Astrid yelled. "Orc!"

Dekka dropped from the sky, sinking down through a waterspout. She had suspended gravity and risen above the explosion, but the flames had singed her shoes and jeans. There was smoke coming from the soles of her shoes, and she let herself sink down into cooling water before saying, "Give me your hands, both of you!"

“No, find Orc! He can’t possibly swim!”

Another bolt of green light, and another boat and then another burned like torches. The shore was all aflame, tents simply gone, motor homes exploding at the touch of the light. One of the burning motor homes rose into the sky, paused, suspended, then was slammed against a minivan, crushing it, burning it, killing the screaming occupants.

Dekka sucked air and dived under.

A boy named Bix ran screaming, stopped suddenly, and was thrown into the air. The green light found him there, and he burst into flames.

Like skeet shooting. Gaia wasn’t just killing: she was playing.

Edilio’s boyfriend, the Artful Roger, tried to grab some of his pictures before the light reached the boat he called home, but the end was too swift. The killing light was interrupted by a trailer between the boat and Gaia, so only half the boat burned.

Roger recoiled, shouting for Justin, who he had cared for for months. Roger was two feet behind the kill line. Justin was two feet on the other side, and was incinerated as Roger cried out in horror. He tried to yell, but the heat sucked the air from his lungs. He stumbled back with fire spreading toward him, climbed the ladder, fell onto the tilting deck of the sailboat, and rolled into the water, unconscious.

“Wake up,” Caine said, shaking Sam roughly.

“What the—”

“Get up. You want to see this,” Caine said, and trotted away, up out of the dip where they had decided to spend the night after a long day searching from the mine shaft down to the burned-out remains of the hermit’s shack.

They had decided to leave the power plant for last and had been on their way to the Stefano Rey when night rolled over them.

Sam threw off his thin blanket and followed Caine to the high point. He instantly saw what Caine was pointing at. Far in the north there were flames throwing yellow light against the sky.

“The lake!” Sam cried.

“I think we just found Gaia,” Caine said. “It’s probably, what, five miles away? The road’s out of our way, but it might be faster in the long run. Cross-country like this it’ll take us—”

But Sam was already running.

Caine dashed after him. They ran in the dark, keeping the forest to their left, until Sam tripped and realized he was going to kill himself if he didn’t watch where he was going. He formed a ball of light in his left hand and held it at shoulder level. It didn’t cast much light, but it was better than relying on the faint moon.

If they could keep up the pace—a moderate running speed—they could be there in an hour. Maybe a little more.

Both of them knew it would be too late.

Gaia strode through the burning camp, earbuds still in, music still on, with the terrified Alex cringing like a Harry Potter house elf behind her.

Each time she saw movement she aimed and fired. The killing light was quite

effective, she thought, not as messy or as slow as using her father's telekinetic power. But the lifting and throwing and smashing were more fun, somehow. There was a certain pleasure in grabbing a human, throwing it high in the night air, and letting it fall with a scream that ended in a satisfying crunch of broken bone. Or bashing a car down like a hammer on a fleeing person and seeing the way two tons of steel would collapse a human body and burst it like a water balloon.

A group of maybe twenty was racing away on foot, running at top speed. Gaia turned on her own speed and was on them in a flash, running beside them effortlessly.

She lit her hands, not to kill, but to see the looks on their faces. Terror. They were like terrified herd animals running from a predator, eyes wide, mouths open, gasping, weeping. She was the tiger and they were, what, sheep?

She decided to play with her other powers. She canceled gravity beneath the fleeing people. They stumbled and rose into the air, twisting, unable to get their balance.

She looked up at them and laughed. She raised one hand, picked out a first victim, and fired. A girl burned like a torch in the sky.

It was wonderful.

The others screamed and begged and floated even higher, unable to escape, unable to hide.

She fired and missed, which was embarrassing. The moonlight was too dim to see them clearly, even when Gaia squinted. So Gaia lowered them until her nearsighted eyes could make them out in detail. Then she lit them up, one by one. They burned prettily, casting a lurid orange glow over the ground below.

She pulled out the earbuds to hear more clearly. The sound of burning was—

Gaia toppled over. She hit the ground, face in the dirt, and realized she was staring over at her own leg, lying by itself, the severed knee bleeding.

The second blow was from a knife that seemed almost to come out of thin air, it happened so fast. An invisible force had left it planted in her belly.

Agony!

With Gaia's focus destroyed, her burning human torches plummeted and splattered in greasy flames on the ground all around her. Someone—a girl, Gaia thought, a blur—was momentarily caught in the light, and Gaia saw her yanking something off her back.

Gaia rolled to one side as *BOOM!*

Shotgun pellets tore up the ground where Gaia had been. She kept rolling, each turn forcing the knife deeper into her stomach.

Gaia yanked the knife out, amazed by the pain, and pressed one hand on the wound. Her severed leg was now several feet away.

BOOM!

She was too slow this time, and some of the pellets hit her arm, lacerating her bicep and spraying blood everywhere. Blood was pumping from the hole in her belly and her leg, and Gaia could already feel herself weakening dramatically.

She felt fear. Pain. And worse, a sort of humiliation that she might be beaten.

"Who are you?" Gaia gasped.

The girl froze for a moment. Looked at her. Smiled and said, "Who am I? I'm the Breeze, bitch!"

This person, this blur of a girl, this *Breeze*, was a mutant. She was the source of the speed. Gaia couldn't kill her. And yet, if she didn't . . .

Gaia swept her killing beam in a wide arc, low to aim for the girl's legs, and so fast she almost caught her with it. But quickly, so quickly, her target leaped to let the beam pass beneath her, and even as she jumped, Gaia could hear her slamming in another shotgun round.

Gaia struck then with telekinetic force, and the mutant girl went flying backward through the air.

Gaia pressed one hand on the deadlier wound, the one in her midsection, and caused her leg to fly to her. It came a bit too fast and hit her in the head, knocking her on her back again, and now Gaia was really afraid, because if the speed demon attacked again, Gaia would be helpless.

But the telekinetic blow against the *Breeze* must have been effective, because Gaia had time to shut off the loss of blood from her stomach before the counterattack could come.

This time her tormentor was not moving so fast: she had been hurt, too. Gaia had time to aim and fire her deadly light. The aim was poor and the girl was still quick enough to sidestep the worst of it, but the light caught the side of her head, and she screamed in pain and dropped her shotgun.

Just like I was burned, Gaia thought.

Justice.

Gaia shoved the leg stump in place and focused all her healing power, ignoring the fires and screams, the burning bodies, all around her. She waited only until the skin had reattached at the most tenuous, superficial level—she could not walk on the leg, let alone run—and stood on her remaining good leg and hopped away.

It was an undignified, pain-racked retreat, but no one came after her.

FIFTEEN

38 HOURS, 58 MINUTES

THE LAKE SETTLEMENT burned.

Astrid swam to shore, chilled to the bone by the freezing water, and in something like a state of shock.

She climbed heavily from the water, dragging herself up over the wet pebbles and into the sand. Dekka was already on the shore, and Diana was just behind Astrid.

Other survivors were swimming ashore or had just climbed out of the water. No one was talking. Many were crying.

The water of the lake rose suddenly, a massive waterspout that seemed to carry Dekka and Orc in its flow. Astrid saw Orc move. He was alive.

Computer Jack was on his knees, sobbing, hands over his face. Astrid had no time for that. “Jack, get a dinghy, go pick up survivors.”

“Everyone’s dead,” he moaned.

“No, they aren’t. If you don’t want to fight, then you get ambulance duty. Go! Put that strength to some use.”

Brianna was hobbling toward them, cursing loudly with every step. Half her hair was gone. One side of her face was cherry red.

“Brianna!” Dekka cried. She reached land, dropped Orc unceremoniously on the shore, and ran to Brianna.

Brianna sagged into her arms, showing weakness in a way Astrid had never before witnessed. But then Brianna had never had to fight someone like herself.

“She’s hurt! She’s hurt bad!” Dekka cried.

Other kids were gravitating toward the three, now four, girls on the beach. Orc got slowly to his feet and looked around in confusion.

Astrid gave orders with a calm she did not feel. See what cars or trucks we have that will still run. Look for survivors. If anyone’s too hurt to move, come tell me where they are. See what food you can round up.

Brianna’s left ear was gone, and the skin around it and all the way down to her neck looked like melted wax.

“Orc,” Astrid said. “This is a terrible thing to ask, but we need someone on the perimeter—the edge out there—to see if Gaia is heading back. Or maybe she’s injured and—”

Suddenly she felt weak and her head spun. Shock. She recognized it. It was Diana who steadied her.

Astrid sank into the mud, head between her hands, trying to think, trying to not think. *Big picture, Astrid: what do we do?*

I won’t be meeting Sam’s mother, she thought. The endgame is not yet ended. The after is a million years away.

The game is to stay alive. The game is survival. For the next minute, hour . . .

Facts. The van they sometimes used was intact, and it had a quarter tank of gas. The Winnebago they sometimes ran as a charging station had an eighth of a tank. That would still leave a couple of dozen people by the look of it. So most people would

have to walk, but the severely wounded would be able to ride—assuming that anyone could be found who could drive a motor home without running it into a ditch.

She would have to stay with the ones on foot.

They would die.

The noise level was rising as the shock slowly wore off. Kids were crying more now, sobbing, yelling for lost friends or relatives. People shook with fear. No one was foolish enough to believe Gaia was done or that they were safe.

Jack was rowing out in the lake while someone with him played a flashlight around and shouted, “Is anyone alive?”

Diana, haunted, stood looking after Orc as he trotted in the direction Gaia had taken. “She’s going to kill everyone. She’s going to kill us all.”

“I’m getting Breeze in the van,” Dekka said. She had her friend in her arms, was holding Brianna like a child. “Her and another kid who is in real bad shape.”

Astrid nodded, understanding there was no way to stop Dekka from going with Brianna. She looked into Brianna’s bleary eyes and tried not to stare at the awful burn. “You saved a lot of lives, Breeze,” Astrid said. “You’re a hero.”

“Damn right she is,” Dekka said, her voice rough with emotion.

“Lana will fix her up,” Astrid said. “Get everyone you can in that van. If you run into Sam . . .”

Ten minutes later the van pulled away.

Computer Jack rowed three shocked survivors—just three—back to shore. “There’s more kids floating,” he said.

“Then go get them!” Astrid said.

Jack shook his head. “There’s no hurry,” he said, and Astrid understood what he was saying. She sent him to help carry the injured to the Winnebago.

Orc came back to report a blood trail heading almost due west, in the general direction, if Gaia followed the barrier, of the tall trees of the Stefano Rey.

Oily smoke billowed from some of the vehicles as the fire burned out the last of the gasoline and plush interiors and plastic dashboards and now down to the tires. On the lake the boats had sunk except for bits and pieces of debris. Everything smelled of fire and charred meat.

“Okay, everyone, listen, please,” Astrid said, but her voice wasn’t loud enough against the rising babble of cries and complaints and the chattering of teeth. There were only about thirty healthy kids left. Another twenty or so were either in the van or in the Winnebago, which was now making its shaky, lumbering way toward the road with Jack at the wheel.

At least seventy kids had been killed. A quarter of the population of the FAYZ. Later she would be filled with rage, but for now just sadness and defeat. These kids had endured so much. . . . To die with the end perhaps in sight . . .

Astrid realized that she and they were now almost completely defenseless. They had Orc, some guns, and some bladed weapons and baseball bats. Two dozen kids with an average age of nine, against a monster with all the powers of the FAYZ.

“Listen!” she yelled at the top of her lungs. “Listen!”

Most quieted. They turned terrified faces to her, faces lit by the fires of their homes.

“We’re going to Perdido Beach.”

“It’s dark!”

“Coyotes!”

“It’s too far!”

“Listen,” she repeated. “That thing, the gaiaphage, Gaia, she’s hurt but she’s not dead, at least I don’t think so. We have to join up with the others in town. We have to have all of our people together.”

“Is Sam there?”

“I hope so,” Astrid said fervently. “But anyway, Dekka and Brianna are there, or will be soon, and Lana will heal Brianna.” It struck Astrid that just yesterday she’d snarked to Sam about Brianna being their difficult child. Without that child they would all be dead now.

“Orc is coming with us to protect us on the way. If we walk fast, and we help each other out, we’ll be there by morning.”

“We have to bury the people who got killed,” a little boy said.

“Yes, we do,” Astrid said softly. “But not tonight.”

“My sister’s dead,” the boy said. “She’s burned up.”

“Your brothers and sisters and friends want you to live,” Astrid said, her voice quivering with emotion. “We have to live. Later we can bury people, but right now, tonight, we have to live.”

In the end, three kids stayed behind. Astrid didn’t have the energy or the certainty to compel them. And she was fairly sure that she herself, and her little band of wanderers, would also be dead before they ever reached Perdido Beach.

There would be no meeting with Connie Temple. It seemed Astrid had been wrong: it was not time to plan for after. It was still time to run, to cower, to beg for life.

To fight.

A tent pole stood stark, its surrounding nylon all burned away. Astrid looked for something, anything, and found nothing. So she bit the hem of her shirt, ripped at the small tear, and with some difficulty tore off a six-inch-wide swatch of fabric.

She yanked out several strands of her hair, twisted them into a knot with the fabric, and jammed it onto the tent pole like a pathetic flag.

It would have to do.

Sam and Caine reached the lake, their lungs screaming for air, muscles twanging with exhaustion. Neither was fit for what had turned out to be an hour-long run punctuated by pratfalls and scrapes.

As they pelted down the slope they could see that it was too late. The devastation was total.

Sam fell to his knees. “Astrid! Astrid!”

There was no answer.

“Give us some light, Sam,” Caine said grimly.

“Astrid!”

“Hey, keep it together, surfer dude, you’re no good to her freaking out.”

Sam got to his feet again, but it was all he could do to stand up. The houseboat was a hull, improbably still floating, but burned down to the waterline. She was dead.

She was dead. The monster had killed her.

“Hey: I said, turn on some light!” Caine yelled, and shook Sam by both shoulders. “Light!”

Sam dragged himself back to reality. The smell of cooked grease and smoking tires was in the air. The fires burned low, consuming the last of their grisly fuels. The lake itself was black. Sam focused and formed a ball of light.

He moved the light up in the air, ten, twelve feet, then sent it drifting across the settlement, like a weak searchlight. Burned cars, burned tents. Burned bodies.

Sam rushed to the nearest body. No, too short to be Astrid.

“You don’t want to do that, man. Because if it is her you don’t want to see it.”

It bordered on compassionate. At another time Sam might have appreciated it. Now he stared down at a kid who looked like a plastic toy soldier that had been put in the microwave.

Caine directed him to move the light out over the water. A sailboat—no, half a sailboat—rocked crazily in the gentle swell.

Suddenly, there was movement. Sam and Caine both spun toward the sound. A person, walking.

“Who’s that?” Caine demanded.

No answer.

“I count to three and if I reach three you die,” Caine said tersely.

“Don’t!”

There was something odd about the voice. It sounded too deep. Caine grabbed Sam’s floating light and brought it closer.

Sam and Caine both stared.

“You’re an adult!” Sam said.

“Who are you?” Caine demanded. “How did you get here? Is the barrier down?”

The man was a wreck, that much was clear. He had a stump of an arm with dangling bits of meat half healed. No surgeon had done that.

“What’s your name?” Sam asked.

“Alex.”

“Where did you come from, Alex?”

“I . . . I fell through.”

Both stared. It was weird. Both still felt some automatic deference to adults, but at the same time it was clear that they were the ones in charge here. This particular adult was not exactly ready to take charge.

“Hey, Alex, you need to start talking,” Caine said. “What do you mean you fell through?”

“The goddess . . . she drew me through the barrier so that I might feed her.” He clenched his remaining fist, but the expression on his face was almost reverential.

Sam and Caine exchanged a glance. They’d both seen their share of kids in shock, kids deranged by trauma. This was their first adult. Their first adult of any kind in a very long time, and he was crazy.

“What happened here? Did you see?” Sam asked.

The man pointed to the bluff overlooking the east end of the lake and the settlement. “She came from there. The goddess of light. She swept down upon them . . .”

“Gaia?” Caine asked.

“You know her?” Alex asked eagerly. “Do you have food?”

“Did anyone survive?” Sam asked, his voice catching, afraid to hear the answer.

“Yes, some. Children. They went off . . .” He searched around, then nodded. “That way. I saw some trying to get a body from the lake. I think maybe they drowned. Judgment day. Hey? Like judgment day.”

“They’re heading toward Perdido Beach,” Sam breathed.

“There was a big RV. Maybe a truck,” Alex said. “I don’t remember. Others walked. I don’t think it will matter. She’s going to kill them all, you know. She’s going to melt their brains. Hah! It’s the seventh seal, it’s the opening of the book, the judgment, you know, like . . . like in . . .”

“Gaia just let them walk away?” Sam asked. The man was crazy, but he was still responding.

Alex seemed suddenly very uncomfortable. “She was . . . While she was about her killing and burning, what do they call it? A reaping? While she . . . there came a whirlwind and hurt her. I saw it. Like a devil whirlwind!”

“A whirlwind?” Caine demanded.

“Brianna,” Sam said.

“The goddess was hurt. Oh, she’ll be hungry,” Alex said, his voice an odd mix of fear and anticipation. “I . . . She’s a goddess, the gaiaphage. Her name is Gaia. But shhh. Don’t speak it.”

“She’s not a she; she’s an it,” Sam snapped. “And it is no one’s god.”

“If she’s hurt, that may be her blood trail we saw going toward the southwest,” Caine said. “Which leaves us a choice. Perdido Beach to see if your girlfriend is alive, or go and hunt down this lunatic’s so-called goddess?”

Sam peered at Alex. He had a moment of sickening insight. “She took your arm, didn’t she?”

Alex closed his eyes. “She was very hungry. She must grow and . . . very hungry.”

Sam asked, “Was anyone else with you? A girl? A guy with an arm like a kind of snake? Like a whip?”

“A girl, yes. She was the goddess’s mother, so she said.”

“Diana?” Caine frowned, then bit angrily at his thumb.

“She betrayed us and came to warn the people here.” He grinned. “But she was too late! You should have seen it! Hah! Light show, man, like a heavy metal concert.”

Sam saw something then that was out of place. He peered into the darkness, formed a ball of light in his hand, and walked over to the stick with its pathetic flag.

He drew the blond hairs out, looked at them, and put them in his back pocket. That moment was the worst of it. Feeling that she had been so close. That he had not been there when she needed him. The tears came, and he extinguished his light so that Caine would not see.

But she was alive. Astrid was alive and most likely on her way with the other survivors to Perdido Beach.

Sam steadied his voice and without turning around said, “Mister? Alex? I’m sorry all this has happened to you. This is a very . . . terrible place, sometimes. But we can’t help you. You’re going to have to fend for yourself.”

“So we’re going after Gaia?” Caine asked.

Sam nodded. “We’re going after Gaia.”

SIXTEEN

35 HOURS, 33 MINUTES

SINDER HAD SPENT the afternoon, evening, and now into the night with Lana working on Taylor. It seemed to take both of them, together, to reattach the missing bits of Taylor.

She was not quite a vegetable, which would have made Sinder's powers sufficient. And she was not quite an animal, which would have allowed Lana to heal her alone.

She was . . . she was a bloodless, gold-skinned, lizard-tongued, rubber-haired, dead-eyed freak, and she pretty obviously gave Sinder a case of the unholy willies.

Lana had to admit that even in a place where there was a kid named Whip Hand and a kid made of wet gravel, Taylor was weird.

"Can you stand?" Lana asked Taylor.

It had not been established that Taylor could understand what they said. Or that she really had control over her body. Whatever awful thing Little Pete had inadvertently done to her, it was quite a job.

Taylor did not stand. She flicked out her long tongue and sat, no different from before.

"I don't know what to make of her," Sinder said.

"How's Taylor?" Sanjit asked, coming in from taking Patrick on his evening potty run.

"Well, she's been put back together," Sinder answered when Lana refused to do anything but glare at Sanjit. The truth was, she was craving the smokes just a little less than earlier. And yet she still wanted one.

Suddenly the bed was empty. Taylor was gone.

The three of them stared at the spot where she had been.

"Okay," Sanjit said. "That was unexpected."

Then, just as suddenly, Taylor reappeared.

She flicked out her reptilian tongue, slowly moved her head from side to side, and then disappeared again.

"She's got her bounce back," Lana said.

Taylor did not return in the next five minutes, and they were about to give up and go about their other business when she popped back, this time standing in a corner of the room. In her left hand she had an irregularly shaped, pale-yellow chunk. She threw this on the bed.

Sinder picked it up gingerly. It was the size of half a loaf of bread.

"It's cheese," Sinder said.

The object in Taylor's other hand was a half pack of Marlboros.

Lana grinned and accepted it, ignoring Sanjit's despairing cry.

"Finally," Lana said. "All this healing stuff finally pays off."

Taylor bounced away and did not bounce back.

A minute later the door was literally kicked in by Dekka with an unconscious Brianna in her arms.

Alex remembered waking up in his bed, in his room in his grandmother's house in Atascadero. He had turned on the Cartoon Network and started the day with a Coors Light and a couple hits off a very stale bong. He had called in sick to his job at Best Buy and texted Charlie Rand to see when he'd be coming by.

Then he'd updated his iPhone to make sure he had plenty of free memory for the taping, and grabbed rope, the ladder, his pitons, and a granola bar.

He'd told his grandmother he was heading out to do some rock climbing, which was close to the truth. She'd asked him to take her to Costco on Saturday. He had groaned inwardly but agreed.

Life had been not spectacular, maybe, but okay. Normal, anyway. Then, with a suddenness that he never would have believed possible, everything had changed. Now he was broken in body, and even more broken in mind. Last week he had been a lapsed Methodist; now he worshipped a cannibalistic girl monster. He was self-aware enough to know that this was madness. There was no way to put a good spin on that fact.

Alex wandered the shores of the lake. It was an eerie place as the sun rose. It smelled terrible, and yet his mouth watered from the same scent that had come from his burned arm.

"Food of the gods," he said, and almost laughed and instead sobbed.

Not what he'd expected when he'd headed out to climb the barrier wall and get some cool video.

"But hey, life, man."

This was a whole new experience. Pain surged from his shoulder. It did that. It came and went. Mostly it was just there, but every now and then it would rise up like a demon and he would feel a terrible rage at his mutilation.

He looked at it, at the stump. It was horrifying and awesome all at once. She had eaten his tattoo, the one that he'd gotten in San Diego, the one that showed a guy hanging from a rock face.

With it she had eaten his soul, he was pretty sure of that. He could feel that his soul was no longer with him. It made him cry. Also, who would take Gran to Costco? And she had an appointment at . . . Well, wherever, it didn't matter now. He was a broken toy, and he'd been so easy to break: that's what would be sad for him. If he'd still had a soul.

"Gaia!" he cried. "Gaia!"

No answer. He himself was hungry now. His body had suffered and he was desperate. But at least he could drink. The lake was freshwater. He waded in a couple of feet and bent to cup water to his mouth. It tasted of ashes and oil.

Then he saw the rope. It floated on the surface, curved like a water snake.

Sometimes he went boating over on Lake Isabella, waterskiing and drinking beer. They often trailed nets full of beers over the side to keep them cool. Maybe . . .

Alex began pulling on the rope. There was definitely something attached, and it was heavy, but it was coming. Hah! A cooler punched full of holes. Water drained out as he hauled it out of the lake. It was heavy, heavier than if it was just beers.

Alex had some trouble untying the rope with just one hand, but his teeth helped. The bicycle chain nearly defeated him, and he almost gave up. But a search of the camp, ignoring as best he could the dead bodies and parts of dead bodies, turned up a crowbar. The crowbar broke the chain lock.

At last he pried open the lid and gasped.

It was a head. Mostly a head. But there was something like a lizard's tail protruding, whipping back and forth between the pale blue eyes.

The head spit water from its mouth and seemed to be whispering. Looking up at him with cold blue eyes, so like the goddess. This awesome horror had to be a sign from her.

Alex leaned close, pushing past repugnance and fear, to hear a wet, gurgling voice say, "Who the hell are you?"

Computer Jack was next to arrive at Clifftop. Jack hauled the horribly burned, mauled, broken kids with soot-stained faces and bloody clothes, one at a time, up to Lana's room.

The motor home had broken down, too, and Jack had hauled it with sheer, brute force, pushing from behind, shoving it back onto the road with the incredible strength that had never mattered to him.

In the end they hadn't been far ahead of the kids who had walked.

One kid had died en route. The rest had cried and wailed and shouted their pain with every lurch and jolt. And all the while Jack had been clenched, waiting for the next attack.

Sanjit ran to get his brothers and sisters to haul water and offer comfort. Sinder did a sort of rough triage, deciding who needed the most immediate help, but Brianna was first, that much was clear. There was a war on, and Brianna was a soldier.

Lana laid her hand on Brianna's scarred, half-destroyed face, and Brianna cursed feebly.

"What happened, Breeze?" Lana asked while she stretched to also touch a four-year-old whose leg had been burned down to the white bone.

"Gaia," she said. "The gaiaphage. Trying to kill us all. I—" And that was it for Brianna for a while as her eyes rolled up and she slipped back into the relief of unconsciousness.

Sanjit stepped behind Lana, stuck a cigarette in her mouth, and lit it.

"How many dead?" Lana asked.

Sinder answered, "One of the kids said . . . she said it was all burned down. All the boats, all the vans . . ." Sinder brushed tears from her eyes. "Like more than half the kids up there."

"Sam?"

"He wasn't there," Sinder said.

"Then we're not beaten yet," Lana said.

Gaia had dragged herself and her parts away and into a stand of trees. It was all a terrible shock. She had felt pain, terrible pain when Sam had burned her in the battle at Perdido Beach, but she had never before felt such fear. It had never occurred to her that she really had anything to fear from anyone aside from Little Pete.

Weak humans, even mutants, should be no threat to her. The fact that she'd been very nearly destroyed by one girl—one girl!—was disturbing in the extreme. Obviously she had miscalculated. Worse: What did this mean for the outside world?

Could she be defeated? By mere human creatures?

The fear seemed to have the effect of tightening her throat, a strange aspect of having a body. Her body actually reacted in ways other than what her mind dictated. A weakness, that was. Her heart had hammered; her senses had become disoriented; her muscles had tensed. All of that was apparently beyond her control.

And the way the pain twisted her awareness, the way it forced her to pay attention to it, to the pain, and only to the pain. Weakness. There was a downside to having a body.

You see, Nemesis? Is this what you want for yourself? Are you seeing?

Now there was water leaking from her eyes. And where was the stupid Diana? She should be here. Not to mention the food. She had killed dozens and yet she was hungry, driven off before she could renew her energy. That was injustice. It was unfair!

As soon as she had healed herself she would go after them again and finish them. Had to, especially now, especially if they could actually conceivably *defeat* her.

A complicated problem, though. She couldn't kill the mutants, but she needed to. If she didn't kill them, they might kill her. If she did kill some of them, she might lose the power necessary to defeat those left.

It took hours of focused attention to grow her leg back. She stood at last, but it still felt too shaky to handle super-speed. Assuming she even had that speed. Had the girl who called herself Breeze died? Part of Gaia hoped so; part of her feared so.

The sun was rising, the sun of the outside world shining down on her, revealing the woods around her, tall trees and fallen pine needles, exposed roots and fragile saplings.

And then she saw *them*. Her distance-blurred vision did not reveal faces, but one she recognized immediately. She knew Caine, yes. She knew him without seeing his features. It had been a while since she had reached into his mind, but she could still touch him.

Can you stop me, Nemesis? Will you?

The other was probably Sam, the one who had turned his killing light on her and burned her, caused her such pain. She had not reached into him, not really, though she had brushed against his mind more than once.

So: the brothers united against her again. Well, well, old family ties.

Never mind: none of that mattered. What mattered was that one possessed the telekinetic power and the other the power of light. She couldn't kill either of them without depriving herself of her most powerful weapons. But she could cripple them. She could terrorize them.

She could *break* them.

Gaia couldn't tell if they had seen her. Were they looking right at her? They seemed to be moving apart, going in different directions. She squinted at the forest and flexed her fingers, ready for—

Only the swift-moving shadow alerted her. She leaped to one side, hit the ground, and rolled away as a huge section of fallen redwood dropped from the sky to smash the ground where she had stood.

Caine!

She reached for his mind, stabbed at him, and, from much nearer than she'd expected, heard a cry of pain.

"Caine!" Gaia yelled. "Yes, I can still hurt you!"

"Aaaaahhh!"

“Scream for me, *Father!*”

She heard running feet, someone crashing through bushes and brambles. There! He was running straight at her. She raised her hand to fire the killing light, aiming for his legs, but he struck first. A bolt of green light shot past her, striking a fallen tree and setting a rotted branch aflame.

She fired back, but Sam had already dropped to the ground.

Gaia hobbled toward him, closing the distance so she could see more clearly. She felt stabbing pain from her unready leg, stumbled, and felt Caine’s mind pushing back against her with surprising force.

“Aaaarrgh!” she yelled in sheer fury.

A beam of light aimed blindly nearly cut her in half. She jumped aside and burned the hem of her pants leg.

The beam had cut most of the way through a hundred-foot-tall redwood, which now swayed too far to recover. A loud crunching, cracking sound was followed by a rush of snapped branches and torn canopy as the tree crashed down through the woods, blocking Gaia’s line of retreat.

Gaia fought down a moment’s panic. No, she was still the stronger. She was the gaiaphage.

Caine was the weak point. Gaia dropped to the ground, literally trying to dig herself into the dirt, make herself invisible, as she focused all her malevolence on Caine.

Scream! she ordered him. *Scream!*

And he screamed. Oh, yes, he screamed.

He screamed like he was being torn apart. He screamed like he was dying.

Sam would go to him, knowing he couldn’t defeat Gaia alone. Now, while Sam was trying to rescue Caine! She scrambled away through the dirt, scraping her belly like a snake, forcing her way through the branches of the fallen tree, hair tangled and torn, and filled with the hatred that can only come from humiliation.

Gaia was having a bad morning after a very bad night.

She couldn’t win a battle when she had to pull her punches. Which meant that her course was clear: She had to attack Perdido Beach and get the major killing done with. Then she could take her time torturing the defiance out of Caine and finally deal with the eternally troublesome Sam Temple.

In the meantime, she needed a game changer.

She saw a thin spiral of smoke rise from the dead tree Sam’s light had touched.

Well, why not? Fire. Yes, perfect. Fire would drive everyone toward Perdido Beach. And it might cover her rear from a sneak attack.

Gaia raised her hands above the cover provided by the fallen tree and began to fire randomly, long, sustained bursts hitting a forest that had experienced no rain since the coming of the FAYZ.

Then Gaia fled, pursued by smoke as fire took hold in the Stefano Rey National Park.

SEVENTEEN

29 HOURS, 24 MINUTES

ASTRID, DIANA, AND Orc arrived in Perdido Beach at the head of a strung-out procession of exhausted kids, an hour behind Dekka and Jack. Most collapsed upon reaching the town plaza, just dropped where they were.

Edilio had already checked with the wounded at Clifftop. Now, with barely controlled panic, he raced to each person, looking into each face.

“Have you seen Roger?”

Most didn’t answer. Edilio wasn’t sure they even heard him. But one little said, “His boat got burned up.”

“Did you see him, though? Did you see him?”

Head shake. No.

Edilio’s heart ached. No way Roger had been killed. That wasn’t fair. It wasn’t right. He and Roger had just, finally, been able to acknowledge how they felt about each other, how they had felt for secretive months.

Edilio’s searching eyes met Astrid’s.

She didn’t need to hear his question. “We didn’t see him, Edilio. Jack rowed around the boats . . . there were bodies in the water. Roger and Justin were probably both on their boat. It was cut in half, burned.”

“But you didn’t . . . Did you bury . . .” He couldn’t finish the thought.

“Listen, Brianna kept Gaia from finishing us all off, but we couldn’t stay there. We had to run. We had wounded kids. Everyone was scared; we couldn’t stay and search.”

Edilio nodded dully. He had to put this reality in a box, like he had done so many times with so many tragedies.

But this was too big; it wouldn’t go; it couldn’t be put aside for quiet grief at a more convenient time. A sound of anguish rose from Edilio. Astrid put her arms around him, and he cried into her hair.

“I should have been there,” Edilio whispered.

“You couldn’t have stopped her,” Astrid said. “Did Brianna and Dekka and the rest make it here?”

Edilio pulled away, wiping tears from his cheeks. “Brianna’s hurt bad, but she’s alive. Her and Dekka are up at Clifftop.”

“Don’t ever let me say anything bad about that girl again,” Astrid said. “Everyone who made it out alive owes their life to Brianna. Edilio, it was . . . Gaia would have . . . She was enjoying it . . . floating kids into the air and then . . .”

Edilio nodded bleakly. “What do we do now, Astrid? Did you see Sam? He should be here, but I . . . didn’t work. It’s my fault.”

“Edilio, nothing is your fault.” Astrid called Diana over. Orc had taken it upon himself to fetch water in a big five-gallon plastic tub. Kids were drinking greedily while Orc watched in satisfaction.

“Listen to me, Edilio.” Astrid took his face in her hands, forced him to see, to pay attention. “We don’t have time to grieve. There are things you need to understand.”

Edilio nodded, but he wasn’t there: he wasn’t tracking.

“Diana, tell Edilio what you know about Gaia.”

Diana did, but Edilio needed it repeated. It was impossible to focus. Mental images of Roger dead . . . floating on the lake. Or maybe only terribly injured, lying somewhere.

Had Roger even had a chance to think? Had he seen it coming? Had he seen Justin die before his eyes? That by itself would have killed him. Justin had become a little brother to Roger.

“Listen, Edilio. Gaia’s going to kill everyone,” Astrid said. “The only good news is that we took Drake down. Well, Brianna did. Again, Brianna.”

“What?” Edilio asked, confused. He hadn’t followed anything they’d told him.

Astrid and Diana exchanged a look. “Diana . . .,” Astrid said, and nodded at Edilio.

“Come with me, Edilio; we’re just going to have a seat over on the steps,” Diana said.

“What was the scream about?” Sam demanded, checking Caine for injuries. “Are you hurt?”

Caine was breathing hard, bent over, like he’d been kicked in the belly. “She got me.”

The air smelled of smoke. Something was burning.

“Where?” Sam asked. “Where did she get you?”

Caine straightened slowly. His face was grim. “Here,” he said, jabbing a finger angrily against his temple.

“What’s that supposed to mean? We had her!”

“We had nothing!” Caine yelled. To Sam’s amazement it almost seemed he had tears in his eyes.

Sam decided to take a less confrontational tack. He didn’t need a fight with Caine. “Listen, dude, whatever is going on, you need to tell me. You’re supposed to watch my back.”

Caine brushed dirt from his knees and avoided looking Sam in the eye. “The gaiaphage owned me, okay? Back a long time ago, back after our first big fight, the one in Perdido Beach. I imagine you remember.”

“Yeah, I remember,” Sam snapped. “You and Drake tried pretty hard to kill me.”

“After that I went to the mine shaft. You know all this. And the gaiaphage . . . Look, it’s not something I can explain, okay, or at least not something you can understand.”

“But you fought against the gaiaphage later.”

“It was already weakening. And it was focused on Lana and Little Pete. It’s stronger now. Much stronger.”

Sam frowned. “Why Lana? Why would it care about Lana?”

“It . . . she . . . hates Lana. Lana lost it, Lana was taken, same as me, but Lana shut it down. I don’t know if it’s because of Lana’s healing power or what, but Lana . . . the girl is tough and strong. The gaiaphage doesn’t like that.”

“Okay,” Sam said, not knowing what else to say. It had cost Caine to admit vulnerability. It cost him more to admit that Lana could do what he couldn’t.

Smoke stung Sam’s eyes. All this smoke couldn’t be from the one rotted limb he’d

torched.

Caine was trying to explain. “It’s like, like, we’re all here in this world, but there’s some other place, some other connection. I can’t see it, but I can kind of see it. Like something you see out of the corner of your eye, only when you turn to look at it, it’s not there. And the gaiaphage can reach me through there.”

“What happens when it reaches you?”

“Pain.”

“Bad?”

Caine gritted his teeth and had to squeeze the words out. With his hand he held an imaginary knife and slowly twisted it into the side of his head. “Like someone took a white-hot knife and stabbed it into your head and twisted it back and forth, again and again.”

Sam had felt pain. He had wept and cried under Drake’s lash. He had felt helpless. He had lost control of himself. He understood what it meant and what pain like that did to you. He was about to reach out and put a hand on Caine’s shoulder but caught himself. The gesture would not be appreciated.

Instead he jumped up onto a low branch and pulled himself up to get a better view. Fire had definitely taken hold in the trees. At least three were burning. A year without rain had left the forest dry and vulnerable. It would spread, Sam had little doubt. And there wasn’t anything they could do about it.

“Any time we throw down with Gaia she can do this to you?” Sam asked, dropping back to the dry pine-needle floor.

Caine shrugged. “It’s been a long time. I thought I had it beat. Like Lana. But the gaiaphage is growing more powerful now in this body. It’s up out of the mine shaft. And Little Pete, well, he’s dead or whatever the hell he is.”

“Astrid thinks he’s still alive in some form.”

“Some form.” Caine laughed bitterly. “Seems like one minute we were talking about getting out, all hugs and burgers. Now we’re back deep in the crazy.”

Sam looked curiously at his estranged brother. They’d been born minutes apart to the same mother. Sam had never been a hundred percent sure how that had happened. Did they share a father? Or was their mother a bit more . . . *adventurous* than he wanted to think about?

And why had she kept him and not Caine?

The crazy had started earlier than all of this: that much was clear.

“I don’t think I can beat her without you,” Sam said after a while. “And now I’m not sure you aren’t just a big weak spot.”

Caine did not react angrily; he knew it was true.

“Don’t try to save me if she hits me again,” Caine said. “She’ll expect you to; that’s why she did it this time. We had her in trouble, so she lashed out at me and got you to back off.”

Sam nodded. “Yeah. Fair enough. But what’s her next move? That’s what I don’t see.”

Caine thought it over for a minute. Then his face went slack. “She’ll attack. She didn’t get everyone at the lake; Brianna got in the way. And we’re on her tail, and now she knows she’s not invulnerable. So she has to force us into defending; she can’t have us just chasing her, because we might get lucky.” He nodded at the smoke that now

stung their noses and throats. “That’s why the fire. She’s done being cocky. She’s fighting scared, which is bad, really bad for us. She’s accelerating things. Whatever time we thought we had? It’s used up. You want to talk endgame? This is it.”

“Yeah,” Sam said tightly. “She’s going for Perdido Beach.”

The head named Drake had spoken to Alex.

The head had told him that it served Gaia.

Gaia would reward Alex if he brought Drake to her. Gaia would give him back his arm, better than ever.

So Alex had taken out all the heavy stones but left the head in its convenient carrying case. The cooler was heavy, but he could just manage it with his one arm.

As they traveled to find Gaia, Drake and the other person, the one called Brittney, taught him all about Gaia, so that Alex would understand where he fit in. He would understand the truth. He would understand that he served a true goddess.

And when Gaia emerged triumphant—and could there really be any doubt?—Alex would walk triumphant beside her. So Brittney said. So Drake later agreed.

They were the three apostles, Brittney said: Drake, Brittney, and Alex Mayle.

Alex set out after Gaia to bring her the head of Drake Merwin. He didn’t think much about what Gaia would do with the head of her lieutenant.

Drake, however, seemed to have a pretty good idea.

Connie Temple had arrived the previous afternoon at the place Dahra had sent her. There was a lake, there was a marina, and across the lake, over in the FAYZ, there was a similar marina, almost a mirror of the one she was in.

She had seen kids over there, but none had approached the barrier. And Dahra had not shown up. So Connie had stuck on a note on a sapling that was quite near the barrier and found a motel for the night. She had worried that Dahra might show up late and wonder where she was, but it was almost dark and she didn’t know the area at all well. She found a motel ten miles away, made a dinner of convenience-store fare—crackers, cheese slices, a bottle of wine, and a 3 Musketeers bar—then fell asleep watching Jon Stewart.

The next morning, not at all well rested, and somewhat hungover, she made her way back to the rendezvous armed with convenience-store coffee and donuts. She had little hope that Dahra or Astrid would show up.

Connie climbed from the car, armed with stale coffee and staler donuts. She found the note she’d left, crumpled it, and looked toward that distant, unreachable shore.

Thin trails of black smoke rose from several spots around that second, barely visible marina. In the distance, off to the south, a larger pillar of smoke rose, an ominous sight.

She walked into the marina and out onto the dock to get a closer look, wishing she had a boat to take her closer still.

“All hell broke loose over there last night.”

Connie spun and faced a tall man, slightly stooped, older, with white hair and a weathered face.

“What do you mean?”

The man nodded toward the distant shore. “I been watching since the thing cleared

up. I have a grandson in there. At least, I hope he's still in there, somewhere."

"Are there kids staying over there?" Connie asked.

"Seemed like there was a camp or settlement or whatever you might choose to call it. They didn't have any electricity, so there weren't many lights, but at night you'd see glimmers of candles. And the other day some of them brought one of the boats close up and traded messages with us." He shrugged. "Didn't say anything about my grandson; everyone said they didn't know him. But there were some grim expressions when I mentioned his name."

Connie nodded sympathetically. "I'm Connie Temple. My son—"

"I recognize you, Ms. Temple. From TV. My name is Merwin. The boy is named after me: Drake."

Connie did her best to conceal her reaction. She had heard the name, and not in a good way. There were stories . . . terrifying stories. "What happened last night?"

The elder Drake Merwin shrugged again; it seemed to be a habit with him. "Well, it's going to sound crazy."

Connie waited.

"It was like someone shooting lasers around. And there were explosions. This morning I kept expecting someone from over there to row over and explain. No one showed up. I've been watching. I have a good set of binoculars on my boat; the problem is my eyesight isn't that great anymore. Good till I hit sixty-five, then . . ." Another shrug.

"Can I look through your binoculars?"

He led her onto his boat, docked at the end of the pier. The binoculars were big and mounted on a stand. She had to crouch to see through, and then it took a few tries to get them focused.

Suddenly the scene leaped into view.

"If you'd tell me what you see . . .," Merwin suggested apologetically.

"There's a sailboat, all upended. There's a burning trailer, like a camping trailer . . ." She swallowed hard. "There are more burned things, cars, boats . . . Can we take your boat closer?"

Merwin looked grim. "I've been worried what I might see up close."

She understood that, and without thinking put a comforting hand on his arm.

She cast off the lines while he manned the wheel. It was a big boat for the lake, and with the lake much reduced in size it seemed almost absurd. But he maneuvered it with practiced skill and brought it within ten feet of the barrier.

The two of them were on the flying bridge with the binoculars.

"Are those . . .," he asked in a pained and fearful voice.

"Yes." Yes, there were bodies in the water. They were bumping softly against the barrier.

She spotted movement, a single individual. She swung the binoculars toward him and saw what looked like a man, not a child, carrying a blue-and-white container, a cooler, and moving away from the lake, threading his way through coals and tendrils of smoke.

No one would be meeting her here today.

"You said you saw what looked like lasers?" Connie asked, fighting the tremor in her voice.

"I know what you're thinking, Ms. Temple," he said. "I saw the video of your boy with that light coming out of his hands. But best not to draw any conclusions about any of this."

"No," she agreed.

"There's a coffeemaker down in the galley. A little cream is all for me."

Connie went below, grateful for the suggestion. She started the coffee and then found herself gripping a cup so hard the handle broke. She found another and filled a cup for each of them and carried them back up.

Merwin took his and drank, easily holding the boat on its station with slight turns of the wheel and little thrusts of the engines.

"I'm seventy-four years old," he said, and shrugged again, this time like he was trying to get that fact to roll off his shoulders. "I was drafted into Vietnam. Way before your time, but it was a nasty war, that one."

"I guess wars usually are."

He smiled and laughed a little. "Yes, they are, generally. Well, there was this kid, just been bumped to corporal on account of the regular corporal was dead. Nice enough fellow. Only one day, after he'd had no sleep for three days, and no hot food in five days, and had two buddies shot . . ." He stopped then for a moment, breathed hard, and looked away.

She waited.

"As it happened, they captured an NVA—sorry, North Vietnamese Army regular. This NVA was injured, so he couldn't keep up when his compadres retreated. So, corporal decides to question him. The NVA spits in the corporal's face. Long story short, the corporal shot him in the neck."

Silence.

"War crime, that was, shooting a helpless prisoner.

Court-martial offense. At least it would have been if anyone had ever reported it."

"You didn't report it?"

Merwin shrugged, heavily this time. "No, ma'am. No one reported me for shooting that man in the neck. Because we were all of us hungry and tired and scared and very, very angry. And the oldest of us was just twenty years old."

"Sam wouldn't . . .," she started to say.

"Oh, well, Ms. Temple, there are genuine saints in this world: I married one. But there aren't many. I like to think Drake—my grandson, Drake, not that old corporal—I like to hope, anyway, that he found the strength to . . . But he was always a troubled boy. Especially after my son died. The stepfather . . . young Drake's stepfather . . ." He blew out a breath. "But I don't know and you don't know."

"What happens when we do know?" she asked in a small voice.

"I suppose we'll behave like a bunch of holier-than-thou hypocrites. Because the alternative is to look at ourselves in the mirror and know that we are capable of dark and terrible things."

They were quiet on the ride back to the dock. Connie shook his hand.

"Thanks for taking me and for talking with me. That must be a very hard thing to carry all these years."

The old man smiled, and there was a glint of steel in his eyes. "Not the way you think, though, Ms. Temple. See, what's hard is knowing I took pleasure in that act of

revenge. And knowing if I had to do it all again, I'd still pull that trigger."

She slowly released his hand and stared, stricken, into eyes that were cold and cruel, as he said, "Dark and terrible things. And the joys they bring."

EIGHTEEN

27 HOURS, 13 MINUTES

GAIA WAS MOVING faster, almost at a normal walking speed. The leg was healing. It would have healed altogether if she'd been able to sit and focus on it. But the two mutants were on her trail, and in addition to that she had to keep moving to stay ahead of the fire, which had quickly burned to the edge of the forest and merely awaited some encouragement to spread farther.

It had occurred to Gaia that inhabiting a body meant she, too, was vulnerable to smoke and fire. She had run through her mental inventory of powers that would save her from smoke inhalation. Nothing.

At least the pain was under some control now. The music in her ears helped distract her. The song was called "When All the Lights Go Out." There was a lot of yelling. Gaia decided she liked yelling music best.

She walked straight down a gravel road, counting on the fact that she had a small lead and was in open ground now where she would see Sam and Caine before they caught up to her. They were a manageable threat. What worried her far more was the knowledge that Little Pete was looking at her. She could feel him watching her. And while Nemesis was fading fast, he wasn't dead yet.

Bodies were definitely a mixed blessing—they kept you alive, they focused power, and they allowed you to move about. But they felt pain, and they could be killed.

What would happen to the great and glorious creature called the gaiaphage if this body died?

The truth was, she didn't know. She might end up like Little Pete, a disembodied ghost. Or she might actually, truly, die. Cease to exist.

They hungered, these bodies. Constantly. It was like an insistent, nagging voice in her head: *Feed me. Feed me now!*

She found a dead body by the side of the road, a boy. At first glance he didn't seem to be injured. But when she used her foot to push him over, she saw a chunk of wood protruding from his back near his spine. He might not even have known it was there, and had simply bled to death as he walked from the lake toward Perdido Beach.

Well, one less to kill.

She quickly stripped off his clothing and put it on. It was filthy and stained with blood, but her own clothing was worse and now too small as well. It might confuse her pursuers. She ate some of his thigh, then quickly moved onward. In a while she would try out her speed again. This slow walking was boring.

She reached the highway just as a yellow school bus half covered in graffiti came rattling toward her. It stopped by the side of the road, and a dozen kids climbed out. They were carrying implements and buckets. Two of them manhandled a wheelbarrow out through the back door.

One of them, a girl with black hair, looked up, saw Gaia, and frowned uncertainly. Other kids stared past Gaia and pointed not at her but at the forest fire, which was certainly generating a lot of smoke. Even here, far from the trees, Gaia could smell it.

Gaia walked straight to the group, who were now heading into the field, tossing

what looked like fish heads and bones ahead of them. The fish heads were instantly devoured by seething masses of worms, which then allowed the kids to pass unharmed into the field, dragging their buckets with them.

Gaia pulled out one earbud.

“Better get to work,” a boy said to Gaia.

But the black-haired girl, who had been watching her narrowly, said, “I don’t know you.”

“No, you don’t,” Gaia agreed. She didn’t want to alert and panic the others, so she avoided a light show and simply swung a backhand that crushed the girl’s head and killed her instantly.

The bossy boy said, “What the—”

He dodged her first punch; her second one caught him a glancing blow that shattered his arm. He opened his mouth to scream, but he never had the chance. Her hand found his throat and crushed his larynx as easily as crushing a grape.

She tossed his body behind the bus, where it wouldn’t be seen by the kids now moving slowly across the field.

There were ten in all. She followed them at a quick walk, stepping between rows of plants heavy with green pods. She caught up to the nearest girl and punched her once in the back and snapped her spine.

Nine.

The second one had time to yell, however, before Gaia knocked her head cleanly off her shoulders and set it flying to land between cabbages.

Eight.

The shout, cut short, alerted the rest of the workers, who spun and died, died, died as she easily killed three with blasts of green light.

Seven. Six. Five.

BLAM! BLAM!

One of them had a weapon. He fired fast and panicky. Gaia swept her beam and cut him in two.

Four.

No, there was a second gun. Too late!

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

Gaia spun around, not so much knocked by the impact as by the spasm of pain. She fell on her back.

“Get her! Get her! Get her!”

BLAM! BLAM!

“I’m out of bullets!”

Gaia tried to sit up, but something inside her was badly damaged, and the pain was extraordinary.

In one ear Social Distortion sang “Story of My Life.” It was a song both upbeat and melancholy.

A girl with a knife rose up beside her. Gaia threw an invisible punch that sent the knife wielder flying.

Sudden noise behind her, feet on soft dirt: Gaia twisted to see and was hit in the chest with a spiked baseball bat.

She grabbed the bat with lightning reflexes, held it, and with her other hand burned

a hole through her assailant.

Three.

Gaia pushed herself up and shook her head. She was woozy. Her head was pounding; her eyes didn't want to focus; her chest hurt. Blood was leaking from her in too many ways.

Unable to see clearly, she swept a beam of light three hundred sixty degrees. Again. Again. A scream cut short.

Two.

She had to prioritize. What should she heal first? What was killing her?

She lifted her new shirt and saw that the nail wound in her chest was small compared to the bullet hole. And worse still, far worse, was the exploded exit wound where the bullet had come out of her side. She pressed her hand on that and focused.

She blinked tears from her eyes and saw two people running away, already back at the highway, racing toward Perdido Beach. She aimed a beam after them, but there was no aiming now: they were fuzzy in the distance, and she hit nothing.

Killing everyone in the FAYZ was proving more difficult than she'd expected.

Staying alive was proving more difficult.

Why did everything have to be difficult? It was unfair. It was wrong. She was the gaiaphage, and what were they? Weak things made of meat and blood and bone.

Like you, Darkness, just like you.

Gaia gasped. The voice was in her head. His voice. Nemesis. He was seeing. He was learning from her mistake in taking on a body.

That's right, Nemesis. See how weak a body makes you?

That would confuse him, she hoped. That would delay him. But at any moment Nemesis could make his move, and things would go from difficult to very hard indeed. She didn't have time to lie here and recover. And Sam and Caine . . .

It began to occur to her then that the outside world might also be difficult to conquer, especially if they were ready for her. Stealth would be demanded. She must escape from this place without the humans outside realizing who and what she was. Once outside she would gain in power. She was, after all, a sort of virus that would propagate. She would attract followers. She would take control of other humans. She would . . .

Conquer.

Gaia, the gaiaphage-made-flesh, lay on her back and stared up at the blue sky.

"Story of My Life" was just ending.

Somewhere, way out there, past the thin shell of atmosphere, past this tiny solar system, somewhere out there in the unimaginable distances of the galaxy, was the place where the gaiaphage had first been conceived.

All that way, all that time, millions of years, to arrive here. To feel blood leaking from a human body into the dirt beneath her.

It could not end like this. The gaiaphage was destined for more, meant to transform. Its mere existence had begun to alter the laws of physics that ruled this planet.

Today the FAYZ, tomorrow the planet.

But right now she . . . it—whatever—was very tired.

“You’re back,” Astrid said to Albert. “I heard you were.”

“Yes. And we’re getting a trickle of food in from the fields already. Some teams have come back in, but I’ve pushed some others back out.”

Astrid nodded. “Probably a good thing.”

“Just probably?” Albert demanded.

“Gaia will come after us. It could be in a day; it could be in ten seconds. Having some of the people in different locations might make it harder for her to kill us all.”

She had called a hasty meeting in what had once been the mayor’s office. It struck her that if the barrier really came down there would once again be a real mayor in Perdido Beach. A week from now, or a month, or whenever, some responsible adult would be sitting here deciding important issues of trash collection and water and curfews and assorted other things that would not be life and death.

Albert was there; so were Edilio, Dekka, Quinn, and Diana. She’d have liked to have Jack there as well: he was not especially useful, but he was smart. Lana, too, might have been helpful, but she was busy, to put it mildly.

More, much more, Astrid wished Sam was there. Even Caine would have been welcome. They were facing what was probably the final battle, and she had no soldiers except Dekka and Orc. Dekka was strong and brave, as was Orc, but they were nothing to Gaia.

Astrid had begun to believe that the time had come to plan for after. And now she was afraid there would be no after. The barrier would come down, and the only person walking out into the world would be Gaia.

There was one person she wished wasn’t there: Diana.

It was Astrid’s meeting, but it was Albert who asked Diana the question. “Diana, you’ve been with this gaiaphage-Gaia thing. Everything you know.”

Diana glanced at Astrid, and Astrid saw that Albert had intercepted that look. So had Dekka.

There was a painfully long silence. Now even Quinn and the distracted Edilio noticed.

“Hey,” Quinn said. “No secrets.”

Astrid, as calmly as she could, said, “Tell them everything you know, Diana.”

For once Diana did not see the need to be difficult. “Gaia’s body is growing fast. She needs food constantly, and she doesn’t care where she gets it. She doesn’t seem to have powers of her own, really, except for what she had as the gaiaphage: the power to reach directly into minds, especially of moofs, people with powers, and especially those she’s been connected to in the past. She can cause them terrible pain and fear and—”

“Caine? She can hurt Caine?” Dekka asked.

Diana nodded. “Probably, yes. And me. Everyone but Lana.”

“Lana?” Astrid pressed.

“Gaia hates Lana. Somehow Lana was able to shut her out. Another thing,” Diana said, carefully avoiding Astrid. “Gaia’s powers are borrowed, or derived, or whatever big Astrid word you’d like to use. They aren’t hers. She said if she kills Sam she won’t have his power anymore. Or maybe it’s just that it’s easier if . . . if Sam is alive; I don’t know. I don’t know.”

“That’s why she didn’t kill him, or Caine, when she might have,” Astrid said. If

she could shut Diana down now, she might still be able to manage the conversation. “So, suggestions? Ideas?”

“Astrid,” Diana said. “Little Pete.”

“What about him?” Albert asked.

Diana started to stand up, obviously felt the pain in her battered body, and remained seated. “He’s Nemesis. That’s what Gaia calls him. He’s the one the gaiaphage really fears. That’s why she’s killing everyone: to keep him from being able to take a host body, like she did.”

“Well, I don’t know how helpful that is,” Astrid snapped. “I don’t know how we’d . . . I mean, that’s useless information.” She sounded shrill, even to herself.

Dekka said, “What is Little Pete? Are we sure he still exists? Maybe Gaia’s just nuts.”

Again, every eye was on Astrid. She could feel it. “What about Gaia’s feelings for you, Diana?”

There was an uncomfortable silence. Dekka broke it. “Astrid, this isn’t the time for you to be Pete’s protective big sister.”

“I want to know what Gaia feels about Diana,” Astrid shot back. “It might be a vulnerability we can exploit.”

Edilio had said nothing. Now he spoke. “That creature murdered dozens of kids, including Roger. We need to know everything. No secrets, no evasions, no lies.”

Astrid glared at him, but she couldn’t make it work. She ended up turning away.

“Diana’s told us what she knows,” Albert said coolly. “Your turn, Astrid.”

“I threw Petey to his death,” Astrid said quietly. “I did what I had to do; it was the only way to force his hand, to make him destroy the bugs. I killed him once. Now you’re asking me to . . . to . . .”

“We’ve all lost people,” Quinn said softly. “We’ve all been through hell. And we’ve all failed at times. Everyone in this room has scars on their body and worse ones in their . . . well, souls, I guess.”

“We’re a bunch of sheep waiting for the tiger,” Albert snapped. “There’s only one question: are any of us going to walk out of here alive?”

“Maybe you should run back to your island,” Astrid said with a vicious edge. She glanced up to see something she’d never seen before: Edilio, his face transformed by dark anger. She took a step back.

He said, “Talk, Astrid. Now.”

Astrid swallowed hard. She tried to think of something to say and failed. She was not strong enough to say no to him. She felt her resistance crumble. She felt her own surrender. The coolly logical part of her mind noted almost sardonically that Edilio had a superpower after all: being Edilio.

“Yeah,” she whispered. “Okay. Little Pete is alive. I can’t explain it; believe me, I wish I could. When I was with Cigar, in the dark, waiting for the end, hearing Cigar scream from what Penny had done to him, Petey talked to me.”

“Your imagination?” Albert suggested.

Astrid shook her head. “I can feel him sometimes. Poor Cigar could see him, a little, at least.”

“Gaia sure thinks he’s alive,” Diana said. “She says he’s weaker being separated from a physical self.”

“So we need Little Pete to pull a Gaia, take a body,” Albert said. “Fine. How do we do that?”

Now it was Edilio’s turn to flinch. Astrid had already followed that line of reasoning to its obvious conclusion; he had not. And now that he understood it, he didn’t like it any more than she did.

Not surprisingly it was Diana, with some of her old snark back, who clarified. “So we’re saying Astrid should tell her little brother to go all exorcist on some sacrificial lamb, then get him or her to kill the kid I gave birth to.”

This was followed by another long silence.

Astrid almost didn’t dare to think, lest someone somehow read her thoughts. Because there was another way. If Caine and Sam should die . . .

She focused to see Edilio making eye contact with her. He gave the slightest of nods.

Yes. He had seen the other path.

The silence in the room was profound. The choices were sinking in. Find a sacrifice for Little Pete. Or kill Sam and Caine.

Still looking at Astrid, Edilio said, “Dekka, Quinn, come with me. I’m getting anyone who can shoot. I’ll put everyone who has a gun into a window or doorway around the town square. We’ll fight her here.”

“Without Sam and Caine and Brianna, too, you won’t win,” Diana said.

“Yeah.” Edilio nodded.

“Listen to me,” Albert said, placating, knowing he was speaking the unspeakable. “None of us likes these choices, but that’s what we have. Right? We have what we have.”

“Maybe,” Edilio said. “But there are things I’ll do, and things I won’t do. I’ll die trying to keep people alive. But I won’t do murder.”

He slung his rifle and marched from the room with Dekka and Quinn in his wake.

NINETEEN

25 HOURS, 29 MINUTES

SAM AND CAINE saw the school bus. It wasn't a particularly unusual thing, really: the last of the gas was occasionally parceled out to get kids to this, the farthest out of the farming areas.

But there was something too silent about the bus and the field. If the bus had brought kids out here, then they should be seeing them.

They found the first body lying facedown, leg stretched out into the dirt, face on blacktop. Something very, very powerful had smashed the body and then ripped off one leg. The remaining leg wore a red sneaker.

"She's not that far ahead of us," Caine said. "She's probably going straight down the highway."

"If we run . . .," Sam said, though he felt too tired to last long running.

"You go right ahead and run. I'll take the bus," Caine said.

"Ah. Yeah, that would be better. Have you ever driven a bus?"

Caine shook his head. "No, I have not."

"Strangely enough," Sam said, remembering the long-ago moment of terror and competence that had earned him the nickname School Bus Sam, "I have."

Lana heard the sound of the door opening and someone clearing their throat. Without looking up she said, "I can't take any more messed-up kids!" She had been running in a sort of desperate relay race, going from person to person in the room, out in the hall, in the room next door, laying on hands, trying to keep the worst hurt from dying, parceling out a minute here, five minutes there. It was working. Except for the two who had died because she hadn't gotten to them in time. No one else had died. Yet.

The throat clearer at the door turned out to be Astrid. Lana looked sourly at her. "You want something?"

"Do you have a minute?"

"Do I have a minute? Sure, who do you want to have die while we chat?"

Patrick came padding up to Lana and nuzzled her, as though sensing that his master was on the edge.

Lana had a hand each on a boy, maybe twelve, and a three-year-old girl. The boy was burned over half his body, the clothing melted into the bubbled and cooled flesh. The girl had lacerations on her face that would ensure she would never be a pretty girl again unless Lana healed those wounds.

Astrid squatted down in front of Lana, who was herself cross-legged on a big cushion she dragged from casualty to casualty.

Lana had great respect for Astrid's loyalty to Sam. She had great respect for her intelligence. And she had even come to respect her toughness. She had never quite decided that she liked Astrid.

"The gaiaphage," Astrid said.

"What about it?"

"Diana says—"

“Is that witch in town? Great. Are you trusting her?”

“She brought us useful information. She’s been with Gaia. Her *daughter*.”

Lana snorted derisively. “There is no Gaia; there’s only the same Darkness there’s been since day one.”

“Diana says she—okay, it—hates you.”

Lana barked out a laugh. “Yeah? The feeling’s mutual.”

Astrid was wearing her patient face as she said, “The gaiaphage can’t reach you anymore. That’s why it hates you.”

“Whatever. Not really my problem right now.”

“The question is, can you reach it if you need to?”

Lana’s face was hard as stone. “Why would I want to do that?”

“Because it’s coming. And I’m looking for any weapon we can use.”

“I’m the weapon,” a voice said. Brianna sat up on the couch. Her face was still burned, though was no longer blood red. There were patches that looked almost normal. But one eye was swollen shut.

“You’re half blind, you idiot,” Lana said, but not angrily, affectionately.

Brianna jumped up, wiggled her legs like the world’s fastest tap dancer, shook her arms fast enough to create a breeze.

“*Sit!*” Lana roared. To Lana’s amazement, Brianna sat. So did Patrick. “Listen to me, Brianna: that burn is bad, and if I don’t heal it now you may be stuck with a half-melted face and no hair. Do you understand that? After a while it’s a chronic condition, not an injury, and I won’t be able to heal it any more than I can make someone not be ugly.”

“Ugly may be the least of our worries,” Astrid said. “You have any idea how dangerous a creature we’re talking about? It’s Sam, Caine, Dekka, Brianna . . . all rolled into one.”

Lana felt as if the ground was opening beneath her. But also like she had known it would. Like she’d been expecting it for a long time.

She had fended off the evil; she had not defeated it. She couldn’t. She knew that. It had taken all her strength to shut her mind to the Darkness. It felt almost as if the gaiaphage had infected some physical part of her brain and Lana had healed that damaged bit. But the scar tissue remained and was still sensitive to the slightest touch.

She could feel it reaching for her. It had been out there probing for a moment of weakness for a long time. The gaiaphage did not like defiance. It especially did not like successful resistance. It demanded submission.

Now it had at last brought total war to the FAYZ, and Lana couldn’t sit on the sidelines.

Could she? Could she? Please?

In a dull, lifeless voice Lana said, “Help Sanjit give these kids water.”

“I’m not here to—”

“I’m taking five, Astrid,” Lana said, glaring up at her, and Astrid nodded.

Lana’s knees cracked as she stood up, and it was a few steps before she could straighten all the way. She went out into the hallway, past the crying, scared, and traumatized kids lying under blankets on the floor, past Sanjit’s little brothers and sisters, each trying to offer comfort or prayers.

Down the stairs and out onto the long-dead lawn. Here she was shielded from the

eyes of lookers, but she could see the ocean. She soaked in the air, which should have been fresh but tasted of fire.

Then she closed her eyes and turned her thoughts to the Darkness.

Hello, Darkness, my old friend. The words of an old song. *Hello, Darkness.*

The effort was through a space Lana could not see but could feel, manipulating limbs she didn't have, listening for soundlessness, looking for an object she could only see by looking away.

But then: the contact. The gaiaphage felt her touch. It reacted violently, lashing out, trying to push her away. Sensing a trap.

Lana cried out in pain. No one heard her.

She wept a little—memories, mostly—then wiped the tears away.

She went back inside, felt rather than really saw Astrid's expectant gaze.

"It's coming. But it's hurt. It's trying to heal. It's coming straight down the highway."

"How soon?" Astrid asked.

"It can be killed, I think. It thinks so, anyway," Lana said, in a wondering whisper. Her hand moved reflexively to the automatic pistol still stuck in her belt. "It's afraid."

"Edilio's setting up an ambush."

"No!" Lana said furiously. "Do it now. Now! Kill it now while it's weak. If it heals that body, we're all dead."

Lana grabbed Astrid by both shoulders and looked her in the eye. "Listen to me. I had a chance to kill it once and it beat me. This is a second chance. There won't be a third. Kill it. Kill it! Tell them all, whatever it takes, Astrid. Kill it!"

"There she is!" Caine said. He was in the front seat of the bus, which Sam was driving with painstaking care, weaving across the highway.

Gaia was a quarter mile away, just passing a pair of burned-out cars. She was dragging what looked a lot like a human leg. The foot wore a tattered red sneaker.

"Floor it!" Caine said.

"She'll hear us," Sam countered.

"Look again. She has earbuds in. We're only about two miles from town. Now or never, surfer dude. Floor it! Floor it!"

Sam did. The engine didn't exactly leap to respond. It accelerated at a slow, stately pace, only gradually picking up speed. Caine watched the speedometer needle.

Twenty.

Twenty-five.

Thirty.

Sam weaved madly around an overturned van, and the bus squealed on two wheels.

Thirty-five.

"She doesn't know we're here; hit her, *hit her!*"

Forty.

The distance was eaten up in a rush.

Thirty-five.

"What are you doing?" Caine demanded. He was gripping the chrome pole with white fingers.

“I don’t know!” Sam yelled. “It’s not me!”

The engine sputtered. Coughed. And suddenly they were freewheeling.

“We’re out of gas!”

The bus slowed but did not stop.

Fifteen miles an hour and a hundred feet left. Gaia was smack in the middle of the road.

The engine caught! It found a last sip of gas and the bus jolted forward, and the instant before it reached Gaia she leaped nimbly aside.

The bus seemed to be moving in slow motion now. Caine saw Gaia twist, her face older, no longer quite a little girl, her eyes mad with fear and fury.

She raised a hand, and a beam of light stabbed through the bus, not a foot away from Caine, then burned right through seats, sidewall to sidewall. Acrid smoke filled the bus.

But Gaia was off balance and tripped. Sam slammed open the door. Caine swung to hang off it, raised one hand, and threw Gaia back. The bus veered, clipped a car, slowed further still, and Caine was out, running, stumbling, fighting for balance, trying to close the distance with Gaia when a punch of invisible force knocked him down flat on his back.

Through misted eyes Caine saw Sam jump from the bus, roll, jump up, and fire with both hands at once.

The beams were nowhere near Gaia: they fired without effect over her head.

Gaia raised both hands, laughed, and lifted Sam up and up into the air. Sam fired at her and burned furrows in the concrete.

Suddenly Sam fell.

He did not cry out. He didn’t stop firing. But he hit the concrete with a loud crunch. He cried out in pain, struggled, but did not rise.

Gaia walked calmly toward them, and Caine raised his hands to hit her with everything he had . . . and the inside of his head exploded. Caine fell to his knees, clutched his head, and screamed in unbearable pain.

“Gaaaahhh!”

Like knives. Like a wild beast tearing its way into his skull through his eyes. Like being crushed in some massive vise. It was impossible to believe nothing was touching him.

He shrieked. “Stop it! Stop it!”

But the pain did not stop.

Through a swirling migraine distortion Caine saw Sam pulling his broken body around to face Gaia. Gaia used her telekinetic power to lift the crashed van and drop it just in front of Sam, cutting him off from view, blocking his field of fire.

“Stop it!” Caine begged.

Gaia stood over him, glowing faintly green, feet planted wide, and watched as he writhed in agony, as he bent double, holding his head in his hands, and screamed.

On it went, and his voice was hoarse from screaming. On and on it went as his entire body went into spasm, as he lost control of himself, slavered and drooled and wet himself.

If he could have taken his own life . . .

And still it went on.

Then the pain stopped.

Caine lay on the concrete road. He gasped air through a raw throat. His heart jackhammered in his chest. His entire body was slicked with sweat.

“Father,” Gaia said.

“Don’t hurt me,” Caine whispered. He didn’t have the will to look up at her.

Gaia laughed. “Have you seen Mother? I seem to have lost her.”

“Don’t do it again. Just don’t do it again.”

“I asked a question.” Steel in her voice.

Caine couldn’t recall a question. Words? Had she spoken words? His body still shook. He still clutched his head, as if somehow his hands could shut her out.

“Have. You. Seen. Mother?”

“No. No. Diana . . . I thought she was with you. Did you . . . ?”

“Did I kill her? Is that what you want to know?”

Caine was afraid to nod, afraid that she was toying with him, afraid she was looking for a pretext to hurt him again.

“Not yet,” Gaia said. “Soon. Probably.”

That slight uncertainty gave Caine a glimmer of hope. But still he did not look up, afraid to give any offense.

“I dropped my food,” Gaia said. “Pick it up and carry it for me.”

“Your—aaaaahhhh!”

This time the pain only lasted a second. A reminder. A whip snapped at a difficult horse.

Caine saw the leg. It had been gnawed.

“Take it and walk in front of me. If you even turn around, I’ll hurt you and make it last until your mind is gone. My power grows, Father. You can no longer defy me. No one can. Not even *her*.”

Caine did not know who she meant by “*her*.” Did she mean Diana? Gaia glared toward Perdido Beach.

Caine took the leg by the ankle. It was heavy. It smelled like a barbecue grill that needed cleaning. Shaking, he lifted it and headed toward town.

Would Sam be able to kill her as they passed by?

Please let him kill her.

They walked around the van, and there was Sam. His body was twisted at a comical angle. He was propped on one elbow and raised the other to strike. But he couldn’t keep his hand elevated. Something was wrong in the bones of his shoulder, the bones of his back. His face was white.

Gaia calmly lifted Caine and held him suspended ludicrously between herself and Sam. Sam would have to burn through Caine to reach her.

As they drew nearer, Gaia flicked a finger and knocked Sam onto his back. His head hit pavement with a sickening crack.

“Lie there until I’m ready to come back and kill you,” Gaia said. “It won’t be long.”

She put her earbuds back in and walked behind a beaten Caine.

TWENTY

23 HOURS, 8 MINUTES

THE ISLAND, WHERE she looked at a startled Leslie-Ann.

The power plant, where she saw no one.

The forest. Same. No one. But lots of fire. She bounced out of there quickly.

The beach, where she saw a dead fish and some driftwood.

The so-called hospital, where one sick girl was wandering, calling for Dahra.

The lake. Dead bodies bloated in the water. Others like fish washed up onshore.

Taylor paused there.

What. Was. What.

What was she?

She had memories. Like old predigital photographs curled with age. She looked at them and understood them. But they weren't really hers. They belonged to Taylor. She was Taylor, but she was not that Taylor.

A random spot in the desert. No one.

A wrecked train. No one.

A field of artichokes. Worms seethed from the ground, touched her, and retreated.

What. Am. I?

Taylor saw that someone was following her, but not someone she could quite see.

No one could move like Taylor. But he could.

She bounced to the ruined ghost town by the mine shaft. He bounced with her.

What. Are. You? Invisible bouncer?

She had an idea then. She bounced twelve times instantaneously, spending only a half second in each place.

He was there.

Following her.

What are you? he asked her.

I don't know, she answered.

Maybe I can help you, the invisible one said. I made you this way. I didn't mean to. Maybe I can fix you.

Taylor felt. She hadn't felt lately, but now she felt. Something. Like she was water and someone was plunging a hand into her. She gave way: she formed around the probing.

For a moment she was gone. Then back. For a moment she felt disturbed, and then not.

Suddenly she gasped. She drew air into her mouth. It was surprising. She hadn't breathed lately, though she remembered breathing before. That other Taylor.

"I can't remember what I did to make you this way."

She heard the voice, though she saw no one here.

"But I'm trying."

She reached up and touched her hair with a golden hand. "My hair," she said, the words a shock to her. The voice coming from her thoughts felt alien. "It's wrong."

"Like this?" Little Pete asked, because now she knew it was him.

She touched her hair, and it was no longer a single rubbery sheet. It was black hair. Her hair.

“This is better,” she said.

“Your eyes,” he said.

“Yes?”

“Is this better?”

She felt that strange touch, that solidity where she was somehow liquid. And suddenly she saw him. He didn't look like Little Pete. He looked like a swirl of light, like a thousand fireflies swarming together.

“I can't do more right now,” Little Pete said. “I am weak, and the Darkness will notice. It looks away from you now. It has forgotten you.”

Some part of Taylor, some reawakened part of her, some fragment of the old Taylor, realized that she was not back to what she had once been. Her eyes saw things and her ears heard things differently than in the old days, before. But there was breath in her lungs. And a heartbeat in her chest.

And she had hair.

“I hurt you, even though I didn't mean to. I can't ask you to help me,” Little Pete said.

“You don't have to,” Taylor answered. “I know the Darkness. I know it hates the Healer. I know what side I am on.”

TWENTY-ONE

18 HOURS, 57 MINUTES

EDILIO HAD HEARD Lana's warning by way of Astrid. But attack? With what? With who? People were just now coming back in from some of the fields. Brianna was still down. Sam missing, Caine missing, Jack reluctant, Orc willing but exhausted.

Attack? Where?

No, that might be good advice in other circumstances. Not with what he had available. Besides, he had an instinct. If Gaia wasn't already here, it was because she was waiting for darkness. She might be a monster, but she was a monster used to darkness, not to broad daylight. She had attacked the lake at night, despite having Brianna's speed. She had waited for night.

She would wait for darkness again.

Edilio was well aware that he was playing a hunch, and playing with all their lives. Like every general since the dawn of time, he was assessing his forces, trying to understand his enemy, putting his bet down and rolling the dice.

He had made his arrangements. He was on automatic now, not thinking about Roger, not thinking about the images of corpses floating on the lake.

If he'd been there, maybe . . .

"Dekka, how long can you maintain a gravity-free zone?"

"As long as you want, Edilio."

She was being too nice, feeling sorry for him.

"I want you to be out of sight," he said.

"But anytime I do my thing, everything floats up. Dirt, plants, rocks . . . It's not exactly invisible."

"I know. I was thinking if you kept it just to the concrete on the road. Just like a narrow slice. Nothing to float there. Also, it's starting to get dark, and the ash from the fire . . ."

Dekka nodded. "I can do it."

Edilio had chosen a spot right at the edge of town, near Ralph's grocery store. Open ground was his enemy: he needed places to hide shooters, he needed a complex terrain, and he needed to be concealed.

There was an overturned moving van. It had long since been looted, of course, and the household goods were strewn all around the area: leather easy chair, cracked by the sunlight; a dining-room table with wood bleached by exposure; a mattress in plastic wrap; boxes of books and boxes that had once held clothing. Knickknacks, lawn furniture, a bundle of brooms and mops, all of it tossed around on the road and the shoulder. The van itself was two-thirds empty, and what was left was just a jumble of small tables and chairs and cardboard. It was dark inside.

"Are Orc and Jack here yet?" Edilio called over his shoulder.

"Just walking up," Dekka said.

"Okay, Dekka, find your spot, do your thing. About twenty yards down the road. You can hide behind that burned-out Volkswagen."

Orc and Jack—one lumbering, the other stepping cautiously—appeared. Edilio

pointed at the roof of the moving van, which was now a wall. “I want six holes punched in here, just big enough for a shooter to see through and shoot from.”

He walked away and heard six hard blows.

Did he have six capable shooters? He looked around. He’d started the day with twenty-four of his trained people. Somehow he was now down to seventeen. Some had gone to pick food, driven by hunger more than cowardice. Ten were lying in wait around the town plaza—plan B. More might join when the field hands came back. He had seven here. Six for the van, one to use as a sharpshooter with a scoped rifle fifty feet down the road.

“Don’t shoot until you see Gaia stumble or start to kind of float, right? When she walks into Dekka’s field. Once that happens, you shoot.” He held up a cautionary finger. “Shoot smart, like you’ve practiced, right? Aim every shot. Don’t stop until you’ve run out of ammo. Don’t assume she’s dead. Don’t forget, she can heal like Lana.”

Orc and Jack emerged from the van and Edilio said, “You get some sleep, Jack?”

“A little.”

“A little is all anyone got.”

“Yeah, but I—”

“Jack, I know you don’t want to fight.”

“I just—”

“I don’t care,” Edilio said flatly. “It’s no longer your choice. I’m drafting you.”

“You can’t—” Jack started to say.

“The one person I care most about is floating dead in a lake,” Edilio said. “Pretty soon everyone will be dead. That includes you, Jack. Everyone you know.”

Jack’s defiance withered as Edilio met his eyes and didn’t let go.

“Good,” Edilio said. “Here’s the way this goes.”

He laid out his plan, which hinged entirely on Gaia not spotting the ambush. Diana had told them all she could about her daughter, so they knew Gaia was nearsighted. Maybe that would help. Maybe, too, the fact that Gaia only had bits and pieces of human knowledge, so she hadn’t seen a hundred ambushes laid in a hundred movies and TV shows.

It was a pitiful plan. Gaia would burn through them like a hot knife through butter. They would be forced to run for it and they wouldn’t make it. Any who did survive would be caught in a panicky cross fire in the town plaza, where ten shooters hid in windows and doorways.

Well, ten minus however many had run off.

Edilio walked up the road to the very edge of Dekka’s gravity cancellation. He checked the clip in his automatic rifle. He slowly slid back the bolt to see the round already chambered. He stroked the safety with his index finger.

Where were Sam and Caine?

Where was Brianna? Would she be able to come?

How had Edilio ended up as bait?

That idea sent a wave of nausea through him. Bait. Like a body floating in a lake.

Mother Mary, take care of him. Please take him to heaven and let him be happy.

Tears filled his eyes. No. No time for that.

A figure appeared in the middle distance, walking down the road, red in the last

slanting rays of sunset. Now two figures. One walked in front of the other.

Well, at least now he knew what had happened to Caine. Had he gone over to her side?

They had little enough chance against Gaia. Against Gaia and Caine together?

Well, Edilio thought, I'll be seeing you soon, Roger.

He wished he had his rosary with him. *Santa María, Madre de Dios, ruega por nosotros pecadores, ahora y en la hora de nuestra muerte. Amen.*

La hora de nuestra muerte. The hour of our death. . . .

Edilio raised his automatic rifle and fired six shots at Gaia.

Sam had endured pain before. This was not as bad as the whipping Drake had given him, but it was bad. And each time he hauled himself another few inches down the road it made him cry out. He couldn't even be sure what had been broken. But he knew that he could not feel one leg and the other tingled like a banged funny bone. And he felt a twisting, grinding agony in his back and shoulder.

He didn't even know how long he had been like this. There were periods of unconsciousness of unknown duration. He seemed to fade in and out, nightmare sleep followed by pain-racked awakening.

At this rate he would get to Perdido Beach . . . never. He had at least a mile to go just to get to Ralph's, six inches at a time. He would die of hunger or thirst long before he reached help. Gaia had turned Caine, or maybe just tortured him into submission. It didn't matter which, because if Caine helped her, or even if Caine just stayed out of the fight, the odds would grow impossible.

"Unh!" he cried as he pulled himself forward.

He could get up on one foot and hop, maybe that would be faster, but if he fell, the pain would be awful.

Maybe he shouldn't think ill of Caine. He had no idea what agony Gaia could cause his brother. He was unwilling just to risk a fall onto a broken leg; maybe Caine feared something worse.

Astrid. At least Gaia would not stretch out her death. Gaia would kill everyone as quickly and efficiently as she could. She would burn the town down to do it. Force everyone from hiding and kill them with a light like his own.

"Unh!"

He was useless, here at the end, useless. The great and powerful Sam Temple, crawling like a mutilated insect down a road as the sun set out over the ocean. The final sunset of the FAYZ.

It was unfair. They had all believed the end was in sight. To be slaughtered like those poor kids at the lake, all of them just cut down, crushed. All those lives . . .

Astrid.

He'd actually had fantasies of the two of them walking out of this place hand in hand. He had run endless scenarios, wondering how they could stay together outside, out there.

And she had been worrying about the aftermath, how they would all be seen by the world. Well, maybe this was better. Maybe it would just be better to—

No, to hell with that. No, they deserved to live. They all had paid and paid and paid their dues a thousand times over. They deserved to live.

Someone.

He looked up, flinching, fearing it was the gaiaphage.

The creature before him was bizarre, a golden-skinned, eerily smooth-looking thing.

“Taylor?”

Her eyes blinked. They had changed, somehow. She had changed. She still had that impossible golden skin, but her hair . . . and her mouth was different, somehow more human.

“Taylor! Don’t bounce! Stay!”

Did she understand? Lana must have finally found a way to heal her. Although she was no longer the old Taylor who had flirted and teased him so often: unreliable, flighty, gossipy Taylor.

“Taylor, help me,” he said.

“I will,” she said.

“You can talk!”

“Yes,” she said, and she seemed a bit baffled by it.

“Okay, listen, Taylor. I need something to write on. Paper, a pen, a pencil, anything you can get me to . . .”

And she was gone. No nod of the head, not a word.

He dragged himself again, but his arms and shoulders were aching from the effort, cramping from the unusual work demanded of them.

He stopped.

They were all going to die. And he, the big protector, the warrior, wouldn’t even be there for the final battle. Eventually Gaia would come back down the road, find him, and finish him off, kill him as easy as stepping on a bug.

Why hadn’t she already?

Wait a minute, why hadn’t she killed him? It made no sense. She should have.

Taylor was suddenly in front of him. In her hand she had a single Post-it note. Orange. And a pencil.

“Thank you.”

Who should he write to? A last “I love you” for Astrid? She would sneer if he used this final opportunity for a stupid romantic gesture. No, no good-byes. Not yet.

He tried to think clearly. Edilio would have a battle to fight. Dekka would be in it, too, and if Sam asked her, she would come to save him, no matter what. He couldn’t do that to her and the others. It had to be someone resourceful. Someone with no powers necessary for the battle. Someone he could trust.

He began writing. The first word was “Quinn.”

Edilio was in the road, holding an automatic rifle.

It was an ambush. Caine saw it immediately. Not that he saw anyone out there aside from Edilio. But Edilio wouldn’t be standing there in the middle of the road if it wasn’t an ambush.

The leg was in Caine’s arms.

Gaia was behind him.

She was singing. Badly. The song was hard to decipher, not something he had ever heard before, or at least nothing he recognized. Gaia sounded as if she was singing,

“Mmmm. Bop. Bop. Bop.”

“Mmmm. Bop. Bop. Bop. There’s a person up there,” Gaia said. She took out her earbuds.

“Yes,” Caine said. He didn’t dare speak another word unasked. He tried to think, but inside he was cringing, waiting in mortal terror of the pain.

What was Edilio up to? Did he think he could outfight Gaia?

Only Edilio was visible. They didn’t have Sam over there, obviously, which meant they probably had Dekka and Brianna, Jack and Orc. Could they really take on Gaia?

Maybe. If he helped them.

Maybe. If at the right moment he committed: all-in. And if they failed? What she would do to him . . . She wouldn’t let him die; he would beg for it, but she would just go right on and he would—

“Who is it?” Gaia asked.

Would she know if he lied? He couldn’t hesitate. “I think it’s Edilio.”

“What are his powers?”

“None,” Caine said. And thought, Unless you count having the courage to stand out there facing the gaiaphage.

“Then keep moving, Father,” Gaia said.

“He does have a gun.”

“Do you think I fear a gun?”

You should, you arrogant . . . “No, but I do,” Caine said.

“Ah. I see. I can’t have you killed yet,” Gaia said.

Suddenly shots rang out. One, two, three, four, five, six.

Gaia laughed gleefully as the bullets buzzed by. “My leg is sufficiently healed. Stay down, Father, I still need your power. You can’t die just yet!”

She blurred away like Brianna.

Quinn.

Hurt bad. On highway. Reach me from that little cove if u can.

Sam.

Quinn read the note twice. The truth was, this Taylor—this weird Taylor 3.0 standing here—creeped him out. She wasn’t in as bad a shape as when he’d last seen her down the hall from Lana’s room—Taylor 2.0—but she was still pretty strange.

The truth was also that the note moved him. Sam was calling on him. *Him*. After all the ups and downs he’d been through with Sam. Of course it was because the others were more important for the fight. Of course. Still.

“Worth using a bit of diesel,” Quinn said, trying to sound all cool about it. “Thanks, Taylor. I hope you—” But she was gone. And frankly, he was relieved. Quinn had come a long way since the first days of the FAYZ, but he was still not fond of weird, impossible creatures.

“How is it I got more normal and everything else got weirder?” he asked the night air.

Somewhere fairly far away there was the sound of gunfire.

Dekka waited, heard the sudden burst of gunfire, and saw Edilio running past in staged

terror—well, not entirely staged terror; it had to be at least partly very real terror. She herself was quivering with fear. She dared not even peek around the side, could not give away the ambush. One chance to get it right.

Then suddenly gunfire from half a dozen guns.

She popped up and yes! Yes! Gaia had hit her force field. Gaia was still running, but running in the air, flailing, getting nowhere.

The gaiaphage—she refused to think of it as a little girl—was about head height now, orange in the rays of a setting sun. She still hadn't realized what had happened to her.

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

She saw a chunk of flesh blown from Gaia's arm. But the bullets were missing. Gaia was rising too fast and too high now to make an easy target. Dekka had to moderate the field, drop her again, bring her back down into range.

Twin beams of brilliant green light stabbed from Gaia's hands, and the firing from the moving van faltered. No one had been hit, but now Gaia was using the altitude to her advantage: she was able to spot the shooters and was firing back.

It was like some terrible parody of a rock concert laser show. Bright beams of light melted runs in the road surface, then reached the moving van and sliced it neatly into three uneven pieces.

Dekka heard an unearthly scream and saw people bolting from the van. Blinding light followed them as they ran.

Edilio had stopped and now stood, legs apart, rifle steady, taking aim.

BLAM!

And Dekka saw the bullet clip Gaia's ear. Blood sprayed.

The monster cried in pain, and Dekka shouted in fierce joy.

"Yeah! Yeah!"

But Gaia was not seriously hurt. And now down came Gaia, dropping too quickly toward the ground. Gaia had used her own mirroring of Dekka's power to restore gravity.

Dekka strained, focused with all her might, but Gaia was too strong. Bleeding and howling in rage Gaia touched down and leveled a shocking telekinetic blast at the moving van, which knocked the three segments apart, exposing the remaining shooters. They broke and ran.

Gaia stretched out a hand, raised a car from the pavement, and used it almost like a bowling ball: rolled it down the road and crushed three of the runners. There was no time for screams. They were bugs squashed on the highway.

Edilio still stood, firing, defenseless, almost daring Gaia to kill him.

"Jack! Orc!" Edilio shouted over the sound of his own gun.

A wooden telephone pole, thirty feet long, trailing telephone lines, flew like a javelin. Gaia ducked and the blunt end missed her, but as the pole flew, it dropped and caught her shoulder, slamming her hard around.

She pushed the pole away and it rattled onto the road, rolled a few feet, and stopped.

Edilio still kept up his fire, but now Gaia hit him with an invisible fist and knocked him a hundred yards off the road into the dark.

"No!" Dekka roared, and went for Gaia with nothing but her fists as weapons.

Gaia grabbed her face in one hand and laughed as Dekka punched air.

“You’re the one with the power over gravity, aren’t you? I could almost do without you,” Gaia said. Blood still spurted from her ear. Almost absentmindedly, Gaia reached her free hand to touch it and stop the flow. “So don’t annoy me.” She twisted Dekka’s face and sent her sprawling.

Suddenly Gaia was a blur. Picking herself up Dekka saw a boy simply explode from the force of a blow he’d never seen coming. A girl, screaming, was tripped and then thrown with a sickening crunch into a wrecked car. The last of Edilio’s shooters.

Gaia paused then, blurring back into sight, and held a hand against the bullet wound on her ear. The chunk taken out of her arm had already stopped bleeding.

From out of the darkness at the side of the road, Edilio fired again.

BLAM! BLAM!

Gaia snarled and swept a telekinetic fist like a haymaker punch and the firing stopped.

“Edilio!” Dekka cried.

“Ah, so that was Edilio,” Gaia said. “I’ve heard of him. I should have killed him, but I thought he might be a mutant.” Gaia did not blur out again; she was clearly focused on healing herself.

Dekka looked around for a weapon, anything. “Jack! Jack!” she cried, but no answer came.

She saw Caine, still carrying a human leg, coming down the road, uncertain.

“Caine!” Dekka cried, her voice ragged. “Help us!”

Caine looked like a different person. A zombie version of himself. He dropped the leg and looked down at his hands as if they were not his.

All firing had stopped. Gaia stood alone, triumphant.

Then from the shadow stepped a living slag heap.

Gaia did a double take. “What are you?”

“Orc.”

“You’re not human,” Gaia said dismissively. “I don’t even need to kill you. Run away.”

“No.”

Gaia cocked her head, curious, as she chewed her food. “Aren’t you afraid?”

Orc shook his massive head. “The Lord is my shepherd.”

Gaia walked right up to him, peering carefully at his gravel skin and taking special interest in the patch of human skin that remained on his face. “Interesting effect. I don’t quite see how you happened.”

Orc swung a ham-sized fist at her.

Gaia sidestepped with Brianna’s speed. She dodged Orc’s next three blows as well.

“Not at all the usual mutation,” Gaia said, fascinated. “You could join me; I doubt Nemesis could use you.”

Orc was panting from the effort of missing Gaia.

“No,” Orc gasped.

“Mmmm. Well, then, I guess I’d better kill you, just to be safe.”

“That’s gunfire!” Brianna yelled.

Lana said, “Brianna, no! You’re not done healing.”

“What, this?” Brianna pointed at her disfigured face. “Pff. Just a flesh wound.” She winked with her good eye. “Where’s my stuff?”

Lana nodded toward a pile in the corner: the familiar modified runner’s backpack with the sawed-off shotgun and machete.

“Kick ass, Breeze,” Lana said, but she was talking to air.

Down the hall in a second. Down the steps in less. Through the lobby. And now she could really turn on the speed as she blew down the hill, tripped, and went tumbling head over heels.

Brianna did not get up with super-speed. She stood slowly. Both knees were bleeding, as were the palms of her hands.

Brianna touched her swollen eyes.

“Depth perception, Breeze,” she chided herself. “Depth perception.”

She slowed through town, doing no more than sixty miles an hour down Ocean Boulevard past a darkening sea that was just swallowing the sun. She hung a hard right on San Pablo, blew through the town plaza, slowing just enough to hear the fierce cheers of “Breeeze!” from shooters positioned in windows and on rooftops. She gave them a jaunty wave.

She hit the highway and cranked a left toward the sound of gunfire, passed a fleeing kid, noticed that the entire northwest was on fire and the air smelled of smoke, yanked out her machete, and had merely enough time to think, This could go bad, before she saw Gaia and Orc.

Gaia had a hand on Orc’s throat, and Orc, forced to his knees, was punching air as Gaia twisted her head this way and that to dodge blows. Gaia was laughing. Her blue eyes were alight.

Brianna blurred to a stop.

“Hey. Gaia. Remember me?”

Gaia tossed Orc aside as though he weighed no more than a toy.

TWENTY-TWO

17 HOURS, 25 MINUTES

THE FIGHT LASTED six seconds.

In that time Brianna rushed, swung her machete, and missed.

Gaia swung a fist as powerful as Jack's and caught just a corner of Brianna's shoulder, spinning Brianna away to sprawl on the concrete.

Brianna was up in a flash, snapped her shotgun up, fired, and hit Gaia in the chest with a load of buckshot that knocked Gaia staggering back with seven small holes in her.

Brianna rushed, yelling, "Die!" stuck her shotgun into the stunned Gaia's mouth, and pulled the trigger.

And there was no explosion. Dud shell.

Brianna's one good eye widened and Gaia's hand was on her neck. Impossible to get away. Brianna swung her machete, but the angle was all wrong, so she caught Gaia's neck, too low and too weak. Blood was everywhere.

But Brianna's head was woozy. The weakness was spreading through her.

She struck again, and Gaia easily blocked this blow, ripped Brianna's machete from her hand, and threw it aside.

Gaia's face, those cold blue eyes, were all Brianna could see. But she felt Gaia's hand pressing palm-out against her heart and knew . . .

"NO!" Dekka screamed.

But there was a hole burned right through Brianna. A smoking hole where her heart should be.

Brianna's body fell limp. Suddenly so small.

Gaia fell back, touched the buckshot wounds, but then realized the arterial spray from her neck was the bigger problem. She was bathed in her own blood.

"NO!" Dekka screamed again, and charged, with Orc at her side, with Jack suddenly yelling, rushing up from the side of the road, all straight at Gaia.

Gaia fired the killing light but missed, and now retreated in confusion, her already weak vision blurred by her own blood.

She tried to turn on her speed, but she felt it ebbing. Of course: she had just killed the girl with the power of speed! She'd had no choice: another few seconds and she herself would have been dead.

Gaia turned to run, but the gray monster would be on her in seconds. She kicked wildly and hurled herself through the air, canceled gravity to slow her descent, touched down, and kicked off again into the darkness, trailing an arc of blood behind her.

"No, no, no! Brianna!" Dekka sobbed, cradling the burned head in her arms. The obscene hole in her chest did not even bleed; it had been cauterized.

Brianna's eyes were still open. In a hundred movies Dekka had seen the survivors shut the eyes of the dead, but no, she couldn't do that. Those were *Brianna's* eyes. She couldn't be gone. She couldn't be dead, not the cocky, funny, terrifyingly brave little girl Dekka loved.

“Get Lana!” Dekka raged. “Get Lana!”

“We’ll get her,” Edilio said softly, but Dekka knew better. Lana healed the injured; she did not raise the dead. Brianna’s lioness heart had burned from her body.

Dekka looked up at Edilio, tears streaming so she could barely make out his features. He knelt beside her and put his arms around her.

Still holding Brianna, Dekka buried her face in Edilio’s shoulder and sobbed uncontrollably.

Orc did not stop chasing Gaia. But he couldn’t see her, and after a while he couldn’t hear her. Maybe she was hiding. Maybe she was just too fast. Jack caught up with him.

“Where did she go?” Jack cried.

“I don’t know.”

They stopped running. They stood side by side on the dark highway. Neither knew what to do. Neither could bear the thought of going back and seeing Dekka cry. And seeing the body of the girl who had more than once fought their battles and saved their lives.

Anything but that, anything but that.

“I changed my mind, Lord,” Orc said to the night sky. “It don’t matter if people see me. Please let us out of here. This place is too sad.”

Sam had passed out, or maybe it was just sleep. Hard to differentiate. He expected to wake up at any moment to find Gaia gloating down at him.

Instead when he woke it was to realize that Quinn and one of his crewmen were lifting him up off the pavement. Taylor stood a short distance away, saw, then disappeared.

Sam said something brilliant like, “Huh?”

And then either passed out or went back to sleep. Hard to differentiate.

He wasn’t quite conscious enough to put names to the sounds of a low-power motor or waves slapping the bow, but they were comforting.

He woke once more as they were bundling him up onto the dock. He said, “Astrid?”

“She was okay last I saw her,” Quinn said.

“Then evr’tin’ ’kay,” Sam slurred.

“I wish that was true, my friend,” Quinn said.

TWENTY-THREE

15 HOURS, 57 MINUTES

“**WHERE ARE YOU** in all this, Caine?” Edilio asked him.

They stood on the road, staring out into the dark. Dekka still wept. No one had tried to take Brianna’s body away from her.

Orc had come back from a futile attempt to find Gaia. Jack was standing a few feet away from Brianna. There were tears running down his face, but he hadn’t been able to find a way to go closer. Jack and Brianna had had a complicated relationship. He had flirted with her in his own awkward way; they had made out once or twice, neither of them really enjoying the experience much. Brianna was too fierce for Jack, and he was too geeky for her. But he had cared for her. Just not with the intensity of Dekka.

So he just stood, awkward, bearing silent witness.

“Me?” Caine said. He sounded exhausted. Defeated. He was staring at Brianna. “We fought side by side once, me and Breeze. Against the bugs. She was badass.”

Edilio made an impatient sound. His voice was ragged. “Listen, Caine, I have no time. For all we know that monster will be back in five minutes.”

Edilio saw pride flare in Caine’s eyes, but then it died. “The truth is she . . . it . . . it has its hooks in me,” he said. “It’s stronger now. Or maybe I’m weaker. Either way, the pain she hits me with . . . you don’t want to know what it’s like.”

Edilio could see the truth of it in his haggard expression.

“Without you and Sam both we probably can’t beat her,” Edilio said.

“Yeah, well, Sam’s lying out there busted up. Maybe dead for all I know.”

“Then we have to get him,” Edilio said urgently.

“Walk down that road right now?” Caine asked. “Are you out of your mind?”

“I’m not sitting here while—”

“Go out there and she’ll pick you off easy,” Caine said. “Take anyone with you and you’re just getting them killed, too.”

Caine looked around, lost. “If I try to fight her, she’ll make me crazy. You don’t know . . . Anyway, Sam and I already tried . . .” He shook his head. “We can’t beat her. We can’t beat the gaiaphage; we never could. It was always going to end this way with all of us being hunted down, one by one. We were always the sheep and it was the wolf.”

“Shut up, Caine,” Edilio said in a voice so soft it was almost a whisper.

Anger, a dangerous anger, flared in Caine. “Who are you to talk to me that way?”

“You’ve been the problem, Caine. From the start. You’re the one who kept us from ever really being able to unite, to fight this thing. You and your ego and your stupid need to control everyone. Don’t you come here now all sheepish, all head hanging down and tell me you’re scared.” Edilio stabbed a finger in Caine’s chest. It was such an un-Edilio moment it surprised both of them.

Edilio knew his own fear was pushing him now, because he knew Caine wasn’t wrong about the likely ending. Still, he needed Caine’s power on his side to have any slight hope. And he definitely needed hope.

“I lost someone I loved at the lake,” Edilio said, his voice full of emotion. “Maybe

seventy kids died up there. Just now, six, eight more. Now, Brianna dead. More to come. Well, some of that is on you, Caine. So you are going to step up. You hear me? You are going to step up.”

Edilio had nothing else to say, and Caine seemed to have no answer. So Edilio turned back to Dekka and Jack and said, “That’s it for grieving. We do more grieving later if we’re alive. Right now we fall back and get ready for plan B.”

“There’s a plan B?” Jack asked.

“You’re another one,” Edilio snapped. “You’re not going to tell me again that you won’t fight, because I swear to God I’ll shoot you myself.” Then in a more measured voice he said, “Yes, there’s a plan B. We fight that evil creature every step of the way. Caine, Orc, Jack, Dekka, follow me.”

He didn’t look back to see if they were following him.

He didn’t need to.

It was just luck that Sam was gone and Alex was not when Gaia rejoined the highway, fuming, and crying in pain and frustration as she dealt with her wounds and confronted the fact that in killing Brianna she had deprived herself of a power.

Stupid!

No, not stupid: necessary. They were stronger than she’d thought. They were more dangerous.

And then she heard movement in the darkness. She had her hands up, ready to kill, when it occurred to her who it might be.

The adult human, the food, stepped into view. He was carrying something in his one remaining arm. A head.

Drake!

“Come here!” Gaia demanded.

Alex came up in a mix of hesitancy and sudden, rushing steps. The sight of him made her salivate. She was very hungry.

But Drake, ah, he could be useful. Had she had him in these last few fights, she wouldn’t now be skulking this way.

“What happened to you?” Gaia demanded of the head. “You were supposed to feed me.”

“Brianna happened,” Drake whispered.

“Ah. Then you’ll be happy to learn she’s dead.”

Drake’s shark mouth twisted into a ghastly grin. For some reason there was a lizard’s tail protruding between his eyes.

“I wonder . . . ,” Gaia whispered to herself. She had Drake, she had Alex, she had the healing power, and she was hungry. It was a puzzle. The solution that occurred to her in a flash of genius was imperfect, but it might work, given time. And if it worked, she’d have a faithful and dangerous ally.

And a meal.

She stepped closer to Alex, who bobbed his head and grinned a sickly, cringing, frightened smile.

Gaia smiled back to calm him. Then with a single swipe of her deadly light she cut the head from his shoulders. It hit the ground with a surprisingly loud thump.

The Drake head dropped from Alex’s dead fingers.

And, finally, Alex's body collapsed in a heap.

There wasn't much blood: his heart was no longer pumping.

Gaia dropped to her knees, lifted Drake's head, and pressed it against the stump of Alex's neck.

Drake tried to speak, but now his airway was blocked.

"Transplant," Gaia explained. She held the head in place and focused her healing power. Would it work? Drake was no longer fully human, and Alex was dead, but only just.

At the same time, her own wounds had been barely patched, not healed. She was pushing at the very limits of her great powers now, fighting pain and the weakness of her damaged body. And she would never get through it all without something to eat.

So she stretched out her leg and awkwardly rolled Alex's head closer to her.

Diana knew things had gone badly as soon as she saw Caine walking into town behind Edilio with his head down. She was running to him before she could stop herself. Like a fool, like a stupid tween rushing some pop star. Right across the plaza.

But even when she was standing right in front of him, right where he couldn't fail to at least see her legs, he wouldn't look up.

She reached to touch him on the arm, hesitated, did it anyway. "Caine."

"Hey, Diana. How's it going?" It was the worst of commonplaces. It wasn't even words, really, just sound.

"How's it going?" Her sarcasm didn't seem to affect him. "You mean, aside from giving birth to a monster who is going to try to kill us all and will probably succeed?"

He nodded. "Yeah, aside from that."

"Aside from that, things are pretty bad, Caine."

He nodded. "Yeah." Then he raised his face but only to look away, to the left, to the right, everywhere but at her, behind to the town hall and the ruined church, as if he couldn't quite figure out where he was and desperately wanted to be somewhere else.

Well, Diana thought, she also wanted to be somewhere else. Pretty much anywhere would do.

"How long have we got?" Diana asked him.

He shook his head. "I don't know. She can be hurt. She's not invulnerable. But in the end she'll get us. Sam's crippled. Brianna's dead. Orc and Jack are—"

"Brianna's dead?" Diana interrupted. Now she was squeezing his bicep, fingers digging in. He didn't seem to notice.

"Yeah. I actually, uh, admired her, you know. The two of us—"

"Caine, Gaia's powers are borrowed from other moofs. She gave me some big story about fields and connections or whatever, but the thing was, that's why she didn't go after you and Sam in that first fight, why she didn't stay and finish you: she needs you alive."

Now Caine met her gaze with an expression of disbelief and dawning horror. "That's why she didn't kill Sam; she just left him helpless. Why she didn't kill me. So why did she kill Brianna?"

"I don't know. Maybe she had no choice. Maybe she was confused. I don't know." Then, her mouth twisting into a bitter smile, she added, "It's not like I really know her. She's not . . . I know I gave birth to her, but . . ."

At last he looked at her and really seemed to see her. There had always been a guardedness between them, a layer of dishonesty, of show. Caine was not a person who could let himself be vulnerable.

To her surprise, Diana realized that was gone. For the first time, Caine wasn't wearing a mask. For the first time, when she looked into his eyes she saw undisguised sadness.

He drew her to him. For once, maybe for the first time, it had nothing to do with either power or desire. They were two people at the end of the world. They were two losers waiting for their final defeat.

Diana went willingly to him. He put his arms around her and she refused to cry, refused because how would that make anything better? Their time was over: their chances had all been used up.

"We have to make sure Edilio really understands all this," Diana said. "About Gaia . . . about the gaiaphage, and these powers. Edilio's been shaken up. Maybe too much to really . . ."

She looked at him and saw his eyes shutting her out. His withdrawal wasn't total, but it was undeniable.

"Diana, you want to make sure Edilio understands this? Do *you* understand it? Diana, if I'm dead and Sam's dead and Dekka and Jack are dead, the gaiaphage isn't very dangerous." He made a disbelieving sound. "It will be 'kill the moofs' all over again. It'll be that moron Zil and his Human Crew all over again."

"So we do nothing? We wait until Gaia's killed everyone but you? And then, at the end, she comes for you?"

"Maybe by then the barrier's down," Caine said.

"But maybe it's not, and you and Sam are the last ones standing, surrounded by nothing but dead bodies."

It was as if a cold wind had blown through the space between them. He was Caine again.

"Isn't that the game we all play, Diana? We all try to stay alive. Even though in the end we all die."

Diana turned away and only then realized that Astrid had been standing just a few feet away, quiet, listening.

Caine saw her, too. "What's your advice, Astrid the Genius? When she comes, when that monster child of ours comes to kill us all, it will be Sam's little laser show she does the most damage with. So what do you have to say, oh great fountain of morality?"

Diana stared at Astrid. Caine was right, and Astrid knew he was right. Of course, Diana thought, Astrid had seen the implications quicker than anyone. That's why Astrid had tried to derail the big meeting in the mayor's office.

Astrid, still manipulating, Diana thought bitterly. And yet, wasn't she just defending the boy she loved? Was that so terrible?

A little kid came rushing up and pulled Astrid away.

"See?" Caine said, as though Astrid had proved his point. "When it gets down to it, when it gets down to the endgame, everyone just wants to buy another five minutes for themselves and their . . . and the people they care about."

It was Sanjit's little sister, Bowie, who had found Astrid and pulled her away. "Lana says you should come."

"Why?" Astrid asked.

"Sam. Quinn just brought him to Clifftop. And he's hurt."

Astrid ran from the town plaza to Clifftop with her heart in her throat. She burst in, breathless and red in the face, and nearly stepped on one of the injured in the hallway.

Lana looked up as Astrid came tearing in and, before Astrid could speak, said, "He'll live."

But Lana was not with Sam: Sam was in a corner, on the floor, practically shoved underneath a coffee table. Quinn was with him.

"Hello, Astrid," Quinn said.

She ignored him, knelt beside Sam, and took his face in both hands. "Sam. Sam!"

"He's been out for a while," Quinn said.

"What happened?"

"It seems he ran into Gaia outside of town. Broke him up pretty bad."

Astrid twisted her head around and yelled at Lana, "Why aren't you helping him?"

"Because he's not going to die and this one is!" Lana snarled back.

"We need him!"

"You all needed Brianna, too. How did that work out for you?"

Astrid jumped to her feet and for a moment was so out of control she nearly swung at Lana. Lana did not flinch. Sanjit moved smoothly between them.

"Hey, hey, hey, come on. Come on."

"You want to do something useful, Astrid, talk to your brother," Lana said.

Astrid recoiled.

"I know all about Nemesis," Lana said. "I know what's on the line. You asked me to reach out to the gaiaphage—well, let me tell you, Astrid, that touch goes both ways. It's not pleasant, Astrid." She was barely squeezing the words out through gritted teeth. "It's not fun sliding up next to evil . . . hearing in your head the voice of a thing that tried to enslave you. To kill you. It hates me. It's practically salivating at the idea of crushing me. Do you get that, Astrid the Genius?"

Astrid was taken aback by the venom in Lana's voice, the pale fury on her face. Lana had aged in just the short time since Astrid had seen her last. Astrid knew she was seeing the face of some kind of suffering that she couldn't really understand. But the fear, the fear on the face of this tough girl . . . that she understood.

"Lana, we can kill Gaia," Astrid said.

"And Little Pete can kill the *gaiaphage*," Lana said. "Little Pete is the power: you know it, I know it. The *gaiaphage* is desperately afraid; that's why it's attacking. It's afraid of Pete. It's slaughtering people out of fear of Little Pete."

"You know what Little Pete *needs*?" Astrid demanded. "Do you know what you'd be asking?"

Lana fell silent. She looked at the child she'd been touching. With her free hand she felt his neck, searching for a pulse.

Then she laid her head on his chest, ear to his heart. Finally, she sat back. "I didn't realize how damaged . . . I should have started sooner."

It took Astrid a moment to realize what she had just seen. She stumbled back, stopped herself, met Lana's haunted gaze.

“Yeah. That’s my life now,” Lana said. She raised a trembling finger to touch her own temple. “And now with *it*. With it back in my head. Extra fun.”

Lana stood up, nearly lost her balance, stretched to crack her back. “Well, *now* I have time for Sam. Plenty of time for Sam.” She accepted a glass of water from Peace and dropped down beside Sam.

“See those scissors?” Lana pointed to a pair of heavy shears on a table. “Bring them here and cut away his shirt. We have to start with his back.”

Astrid did as she was asked. She gasped seeing the bone protruding stark and white through Sam’s shoulder. But when they rolled him tenderly onto his side she saw the twisted jumble of his spine and almost lost hope.

“Yeah, that’s not good,” Lana said. “You’re going to have to help me. We need to straighten him out a bit, get the spine lined up. It goes a whole lot quicker if you at least get all the pieces back in place first. Where is Dahra? I could really use . . .” Then she remembered. “Two down, both hurt on lonely roads,” she said softly. “One dies. One lives, at least for now. The God you don’t believe in anymore rolls the dice.”

Sam groaned in his sleep when Astrid cut the last of the fabric away.

“She was a good person, Dahra,” Lana said. Her lip trembled. “She was a good person, that girl.” She looked around the room, at kids softly crying, moaning, asking for water. “Bunch of good dead people.” Then, shaking her head as if trying to throw something off, she yelled, “Sanjit! Send Peace to find some kind of a board. Like a shelf would do.”

Lana lit a cigarette, sucked in deep, and blew it out in Astrid’s direction. “You ever notice something, Astrid? No two moofs have the same power. There’s not two kids with super-speed, just one. Not two or three or five or ten with Sam’s laser thing, just him. One Jack, one Dekka.”

“Yes,” Astrid acknowledged cautiously.

“One healer.”

“Yeah, we all noticed that,” Astrid said, making no secret of the fact that she wished someone less volatile was that one healer.

“But this Gaia monstrosity seems to be able to heal itself, and to shoot light beams, and to do the whole telekinesis thing. Interesting, isn’t it? Kids have been telling me stories while I lay my little magic hands on them. Okay, now take Sam by the waist. Grab on, because this is going to be really bad.”

Astrid did as Lana directed. *Don’t start crying*, she told herself. But it hurt seeing the body she loved broken this way.

“You’re going to pull, see, so I can try to push the bones back into line. And you’re going to keep pulling until I tell you different. Got that?”

“I do,” Astrid said.

“Pull.”

Astrid pulled and Sam thrashed and Lana yelled at Astrid for loosening her grip so Astrid tightened her grip and pulled hard and Sam opened his eyes and yelled and flailed with his hands so Sanjit ran over and grabbed his hands, fast, because Sam’s hands could be very dangerous, and Quinn came around to help Astrid pull.

Lana pushed vertebrae back into place with a sickening wet crunch, then slid a wooden shelf beneath him and let Quinn and Sanjit work together to wrap strips of sheet around and around, locking Sam into place.

Sam quieted and lapsed again into unconsciousness.

“He may have internal injuries,” Lana said. “I can fix the back and the shoulder, maybe. We’ll see about anything else.”

“I should get back to Edilio, see if he needs . . .,” Astrid said and stood to leave.

“Yeah. You should go,” Lana agreed. “And then you better figure out which is worse, smart girl: That we give someone up as a living sacrifice to Little Pete. Or the other thing.”

Lana was smirking now, angry and challenging. Astrid didn’t want to ask, because she knew the answer. But she couldn’t not ask.

“What *other* thing, Lana?”

“The thing where we kill Sam, and Caine, too, if we can find him, to disarm the gaiaphage.”

Astrid stood stock-still.

Lana laughed her cynical laugh. “Yeah, you’re the genius, but that doesn’t make me an idiot.”

Astrid nodded. Her focus went to the big pair of shears, and beyond to the automatic pistol at Lana’s waist. She bit her lip hard and then said, “Sam?”

“I’m not going to hurt him,” Lana said. “That’s not what I do. Remember? I’m the Healer.”

TWENTY-FOUR

14 HOURS, 22 MINUTES

“I WANT MY whip back.”

Drake’s head had melded perfectly well to Alex’s neck, although there was a definite red line, like . . . well, like surgery had been done and not quite healed.

Alex’s own head, now a fleshless, tongueless, and empty skull, lay in a ditch.

“Be glad you have a body at all,” Gaia snarled.

“I am glad,” Drake said, trying to sound obsequious. “But I can’t fight beside you like this.” He pointed with his remaining hand at the stump of his other arm. “It happened once before. It could happen again.”

Gaia seemed uncertain. It was a strange expression for the face of a goddess, Drake thought. But then Gaia herself was strange for what she was. He knew better than to take the beautiful, olive-skinned, blue-eyed face at face value. He knew he was still looking at the creature formerly represented by a seething carpet of green particles. But she was a beautiful girl now, almost his own age by all appearances.

As beautiful as Diana had been before starvation took its toll. As beautiful as Astrid and just as smug and arrogant.

It confused him. Because he instinctively wanted to hurt her. Fantasy images came to his mind and shocked him. She would kill him if she knew.

It was not a good idea to lust after a god. Even worse to imagine the whip coming down on her—

No, he ordered himself. *Stop*. She was not Diana or Astrid. She was nothing like them. She was still it. She was still the Darkness. Still the evil that had welcomed him, given him a place, given him a purpose.

“I need my arm,” Drake said, willing to push on this point at least because without his whip hand he was weak. Without his whip hand, what weapon did he have? Without it he was just Drake, not Drake Whip Hand.

“Why do you want it so badly?” Gaia asked. “What would you use it for?”

“To fight beside you, defend you, protect . . . To . . .”

Her face was blank, but her eyes bored into him. “Tell me the truth.”

If he lied . . . she could destroy him right here, right now. How much did she guess? He had to answer. Truth or lie. “Diana first,” Drake hissed. “Astrid more slowly.”

Gaia shook her head. “Later. If.”

“If?”

“If you bring me the Healer,” Gaia said. “She is . . . She resists me. She looks for a way to deprive me . . .” Suddenly she seemed to think better of opening her thoughts to him. “Just bring her to me. Then you can do what you like.”

She put her hand on the stump of an arm. “I don’t know what will grow,” she said.

“It will come back,” Drake said. “It has to.”

Astrid stood at the top of the cliff that gave Clifftop its name.

There were boats out there, out in the dark ocean. She could see the lights going

by.

When she craned her neck to the left she could see the glow coming from the camp, from the Carl's Jr., the lights of the new hotels.

It was all so desperately, terribly near. How far to cheeseburgers and fries and cars that weren't burned out and policemen to call when danger threatened?

Not a quarter of a mile.

Electricity and freedom from fear. Food and warmth. Her mother and father, cousins and aunts and family friends, and all of them saying, *So what was it like? And I bet you're glad to be out of there.*

Were you afraid?

So afraid.

I guess you saw some bad things?

So many I can't even tell you. So many I can't remember them all. And some that I can't get out of my head.

I have scars. Want to see my legs and arms and back? Scars.

Want to see my soul? Scars there, too, but you can't really see them.

I'm sure you did your best.

Did I? Are you sure I did my best? Because I'm not.

I lied. I manipulated people. I hurt people at times. I was cruel at times. I betrayed trust.

I threw my brother to his death. Yes, to save my life and other people's lives; does that make it okay?

"In the old days I would have talked to you, God," she said. "I would have asked for guidance. And I would have gotten nothing, but I'd have pretended, and that would have been almost like the real thing."

Lana would heal Sam. And then he would march out to fight Gaia.

And Gaia would kill him. But only after she had killed Edilio and Sinder and Diana and Sanjit and Quinn and and and . . . *Then* she would kill Sam, but before that she would kill Astrid, so that Sam would see, and he would cry out in despair, and only then would Gaia kill him.

Sam would die, and he would die knowing he had failed to save Astrid.

As if summoned from her thoughts Astrid saw Sinder passing around the side of the hotel, heading perhaps to join the desperate crowd huddled down by the highway. Was Sinder's mother there? Astrid hadn't really ever talked to the girl about her life before the FAYZ.

A lot of them she had never come to know. A lot she would never now be able to know. She closed her eyes and saw the terrible light from Gaia's hands. She smelled again the burning of tires and varnished plywood, canvas and flesh.

If Sam died right now, right this minute, it would weaken Gaia, and the rest of them might survive.

"I made that choice once before," she said to the dark sky. "I did that with Petey, didn't I?"

The sky had no answer. The sky was bright to the south with burger lights, and to the west the ships glided by, carrying cars, iPads, and oil, and old people who wanted to see whales.

To the north the red glow of fire. It was brighter each minute. It must have spread

beyond the forest now. Was it racing across the dry grassland? Was it burning across the fields that had fed them?

Fire? She wanted to laugh. Well, why not? Why not fire? This was the FAYZ, after all.

Somewhere out there the monster plotted their deaths. And if Astrid was going to do anything at all to stop it, it would mean sacrificing someone, either some nameless victim or Sam.

What was the lesson? What was all this teaching her? That sometimes there were no good choices?

“I learned that a long time ago,” Astrid said.

She had told Sam—insisted on it—that he had to do whatever it took to win, even if it meant attacking Diana, even if it meant burning down the world, but only survive, only live, Sam, because I can’t do it without you.

Live.

I can’t walk out of this place without you.

Astrid closed her eyes, shutting out the ships and the stars and the burger lights and the distant fire.

“Petey . . .”

Caine made his way down to the dock. The answer was obvious: if he was going to survive, he had to get to the island. Out of here. Away from Gaia. Not that Gaia couldn’t find him there, but as he’d told Diana, the trick wasn’t to live forever, but to be the last to die.

And to never suffer that pain again. He couldn’t think about it; he couldn’t or he would feel an echo of it, and even that was agony.

There was a kid on guard, one of Quinn’s people, posted there to make sure no one tampered with any of the fishing boats.

Caine didn’t hurt him, just used his power to smack him against the wooden planks until he stopped yelling. Then he tied him up and stuffed a rag in his mouth to keep him quiet. Gaia would find him, too, and kill him in due course. But his death might come a bit later just because he was incapacitated.

Hey, that was a good thing. Right?

Caine saw the boats that had been reserved for emergency use. There should still be a little gas left. It wouldn’t be much—they’d been running on fumes just a few days ago when Caine had been king.

The memory brought a grim smile to his lips. King Caine.

Things changed, didn’t they? Now he was ready to try and creep away to hang on to a another few hours of life. Run away.

King Caine to Rat Caine in a heartbeat.

Well, Penny had already knocked the crown off his head, hadn’t she? He recalled the humiliation of waking up to find his hands cemented and a crown stapled to his scalp. Pain, too. But he’d had pain, he knew pain, and while staples in your scalp were no picnic, they were nothing to compare with the agony of having that hard concrete chipped slowly away with a hammer.

Yeah, that had been bad. Change-your-whole-outlook kind of bad. Still, the humiliation of powerlessness had been worse.

But not worse than what Gaia had done to him. Nothing to what she had done.

In his arrogance he had thought he was free of the gaiaphage. But he never would be, would he? As long as that monster existed, it would have a back door into his brain and could make him crawl and cry and beg for death . . .

He made a whimpering noise. Like a scared child. Well, he was a scared child, wasn't he?

He hopped down into the boat. There was no gauge on the tank, so he looked around for a while, wishing he had Sam's power of light. It took him a few minutes to find what he needed, something thin enough and long enough to stick in the fuel tank and check the amount. It was a broken piece of fishing pole, a one-foot length of dark fiberglass. It came back up showing about an inch of gas sloshing in there.

Out in the ocean Caine saw something large going by—a tanker, maybe, carrying hundreds of thousands of barrels of gas.

"Must be nice," he said.

"What must be nice?"

She had snuck up on him without his seeing or hearing her. Diana, a dark shadow above him, outlined by stars.

He started to say something to her, but nothing came. She was on the dock. He was in the boat below her.

Diana.

Finally he said, "What are you doing here?"

"Finding you," she said. "You took off."

"You didn't find much," he said bitterly, and immediately regretted it. It sounded self-pitying. Well, it was, wasn't it?

"This is where we landed, coming from the island," she said.

"Yes. In triumph. The conquering hero," he said. "King Caine. I was just remembering that."

"With that monster in my belly," Diana said.

"Not your fault," he said tersely. "Not mine, either."

"I wonder."

"We had . . . Listen, we made love, right? Isn't that what we're calling it? No one warned us we were conceiving a body for the gaiaphage."

"Did we make love?" Diana asked him.

"Jesus, Diana," he pleaded.

"Tell me, Caine. Did we make love or did we just have sex? It's a simple question."

"No, it isn't," Caine said.

He heard Diana's sardonic laugh, and at that instant he knew the answer to her question. He heard that snarky, almost cruel laugh and he knew, and it filled him so suddenly full of emotion that he almost cried out.

"No, it's not an easy question between us," Diana admitted. Then: "Did we make love, Caine?"

"Okay. Okay, yes, Diana, we made love."

"Say it to me, Caine," she said.

"What's the point?" he pleaded. "I'm running away. I'm saving myself and leaving you behind. I'm a rat deserting the sinking ship. I'm a coward holding on to his

pathetic life for an extra hour or two. I'm scared to death; I can't stand up to it anymore. I'm done. Why do you want me to say it?"

She didn't answer.

She had bathed him when he was lost in madness, had spoon-fed him, had been there each time he woke to rave, to rave about the hunger in the dark.

She had backed him in all his wild plans. She had stood by him, despite, oh man, despite so much. So much.

He couldn't see her face, just her outline, but he could picture her face in detail. In his mind he saw the full lips and the smirk and the way she sometimes pressed her lips together as if physically repressing laughter. And he saw her cheeks and the perfect line of her jaw and the neck that no male had ever seen without wanting to kiss.

And he saw her dark eyes.

And he saw her breasts.

And he saw her thighs and . . .

And somehow Diana, being Diana, knew every thought going through his mind, and she said, "I've had a baby. Things aren't quite the way you left them. And it's going to be some time before I'm ready for what's going through your evil mind."

"Okay," he said.

"'Okay,' he lied," she mocked.

He shook his head. She had him. Again.

"Just what are you ready for?" he asked.

"I'm a bit stiff," she said. "Hard to climb down there."

He raised one hand, and she rose slowly from the dock and then slowly descended, sliding down just inches from his face. He let her feet touch down in the boat, felt the weight of her as the boat rocked.

She tripped a little, or maybe she didn't but only pretended, who cared: he took her in his arms. Yes, she felt different. Her belly was larger. Her breasts larger as well. The rest of her felt pitifully thin.

"How's your mouth?" he asked, wanting badly to kiss her.

"Why, what do you have in mind?"

He laughed.

"Say it. But . . ."

"But what?" he asked.

She whispered it, sounding too vulnerable. "But only if it's the truth, Caine. Only. If."

"I love you," he said.

"Yes," she said, satisfied.

He kissed her, and yes, her mouth still worked.

Then, serious, he said, "So we don't go to the island?"

"Why were you going?"

He sighed. "I had two answers in mind. One, I was running away like a rat. That was the main answer. I can't . . . I'd rather die. I can't let her do that to me again. So I was running away."

"Two answers?" Diana asked.

"Look, number one . . . no, numbers one through nine were running away. But the other answer, the one that was much less at, sort of, the forefront of my mind, but that

was a possibility . . .” He ran out of steam after all that evasion. “Look, part of me was thinking about those stupid missiles of Albert’s.”

“You think they would kill her?”

He shrugged. “It’s all I could think of that would surprise her. Catch her off guard.” He sighed. The truth welled up inside him. The fact that he loved her. And the fact that it wouldn’t save him.

“We don’t make it out of here, do we?” he said.

Diana shook her head. “No, my love.”

They stood for a long time in each other’s arms. Then, at last, Caine fired up the motor and the boat headed toward the island.

And Diana, with Perdido Beach falling away behind her, with tears rolling down her cheeks, with the light of the onrushing fire reflected in her dark eyes, whispered another boy’s name.

“Little Pete . . .”

His name was Peter Ellison, but everyone had always called him Little Pete.

Sometimes Petey.

And now he heard his name. Like prayers floating up to him from the ghosts.

A voice he knew.

A voice he did not know.

A third voice that reached to him in a way like the Darkness sometimes did, silently, through that emptiness that connected all who had been touched by the Darkness.

In different words, in different ways, they each said,

Take me.

Take me, Petey.

Take me, Little Pete.

Take me, you little freak.

TWENTY-FIVE

4 HOURS, 44 MINUTES

PUG, THE CRAZY thing, had actually fired one of the missiles at them as Caine and Diana neared the island.

The missile was not much good against a person with the power to move things with his mind—something Caine knew he would have to remember later. Maybe the element of surprise . . . maybe Gaia wouldn't know what they were . . .

Yeah. Maybe. And maybe not. In which case, plan B.

Caine did not much like plan B.

But as he lay beside Diana in the big bed, the same one where they had conceived Gaia, he knew he had, finally, no alternative. He was trapped between pains: the pain that Gaia could bring, and the pain that would come if he lost Diana.

Why had she forced him to admit his feelings? Women. Didn't they know that emotions were meant to be suppressed?

"Love sucks," Caine muttered.

Diana nuzzled against him, her lips on his neck, sending chills all through his body.

A line of night-blue between separated curtains became a line of gray. Dawn, and time to go.

He slid carefully, silently, out of the bed. Where were his clothes? He'd left them right here, right on the floor, knowing he would have to dress silently to escape undiscovered.

"I hid them," Diana said.

He turned to face her. "And why would you do that?"

"So you couldn't sneak away. Really, Caine: how long have I known you? Also . . ."

"Uh-huh?"

"Also I like you like this."

He swallowed hard, feeling strangely vulnerable and a little silly. "You said we couldn't . . ."

"Mmmm. True. But I still like looking at you. It's a good thing you're so rotten," she said with a long sigh. "Scares off most girls. I never would have had a chance with you if you'd been a decent human being."

"I wasn't running away," he said.

"I know. I know what you were doing, Caine. And thanks for the thought. But I want to be there to see the end. I want to see you stop her."

"Yeah," he said, straining to put some slight shred of optimism into the word. "If you're coming, then we have to go."

"Or the reverse of that . . . We have a few minutes," she said. "Come here. It won't take more than a few minutes."

Connie Temple had given up waiting for Astrid to arrive at the rendezvous Dahra had arranged. She had spent the night at a motel, then come back in the morning, just in

case. She wrote a note and stuck it on the end of a stick where the northeastern shoreline of the lake met the barrier. The note said, *Sorry I missed you. Connie Temple.* There was a PS. Just the single word “Sam,” followed by a question mark.

It seemed somehow ludicrous. Like putting a Post-it on the refrigerator door for Sam, back in the old days.

As she was leaving, she noticed a body on the beach that she had not seen before. Maybe someone sleeping, maybe some survivor, most likely a body washed ashore. She watched until she was sure it was not Sam.

Boats were heading out from the outside marina, more lookers drawn by rumors of a slaughter at the lake. She couldn’t bear to think of mothers like herself possibly seeing the bloated body of a child floating just inches away, unreachable. A TV truck had come in the night. She saw cameras with long-distance lenses.

She climbed into the borrowed SUV and drove back down south. She tuned the satellite radio to a news station.

“The fire is clearly now spreading beyond the Stefano Rey. California fire officials are rushing firefighting teams to the perimeter of the anomaly. They are concerned that should the containment fail, the fire would spread immediately to the large forest outside the so-called FAYZ.”

Connie switched stations.

“. . . monstrous and evil children, and the idea that they should be allowed to walk out of that satanic place and infect decent God-fearing people with—”

On the third try she got a calmer voice. NPR. But the subject was still the same. The anomaly. The FAYZ. It was all anyone was paying attention to.

“. . . physics. As has been long theorized, especially by Dr. Jacobs at the University of California, Berkeley, these phenomena demonstrate that in some way we do not begin yet to understand, the laws that define our universe have been altered. What’s troubling, of course, is that if it can happen once, it can happen again. We can never again be entirely confident—”

Enough. She’d had her fill of clever people with impressive degrees trying to explain what was happening. People like that had convinced the government to try and implode the sphere with a bomb.

Finally she found the nineties-rock station and let that play the rest of the way while she tried to think. She was sleepy and nearly running off the road, so it wasn’t easy.

If the dome fell, if Sam and Caine walked freely out into the world, there was a better-than-even chance that they would be arrested shortly thereafter.

There wasn’t much, if anything, she could do about that except to warn the kids inside to start getting their stories straight. The local district attorney had soft-pedaled the matter of arrests and investigations, but other state officials were grandstanding, and Congress looked as if it would stick its nose in as well.

The idea that the kids inside should come through all they’d survived and then go to prison was intolerable. But with something like three hundred kids—fewer now—it would be child’s play for prosecutors to get some, at least, to testify against others.

And truth be told, didn’t some of those kids need to be locked up?

She pushed that thought aside, but the image of Sam with his deadly light blazing from his hands . . . the little girl he’d tried to kill . . . the other one he had incinerated

. . . The fact that before all this ever started, he'd lashed out and burned the hand off her ex-husband, his stepfather . . .

She'd watched YouTubes of all the interviews with kids inside. Those that mentioned Sam described him as a leader, a fighter, someone who had saved them more than once. Inside the FAYZ he was a hero.

But one interview had stuck with her. It had been given by a young boy who called himself Bug and could almost disappear, or at least fade into the background to become nearly invisible. He'd said Sam was a killer.

He almost killed me once, Bug had said.

The stories of her other son, Caine, were much darker. Kids looked nervously over their shoulders when they talked about him.

But he's not the worst, the super-speedy little celebrity who called herself the Breeze had said. *He's evil, absolutely. But he's not psycho like Drake.*

Yes, maybe some really would need to be locked up. Like rabid dogs or rogue tigers.

What could she do? Get a lawyer for Sam? She didn't have that kind of money.

But wait, others would have that kind of money. Wouldn't they? The kids in the FAYZ needed lawyers; they needed friendly politicians; they needed celebrities to speak for them. All that nonsense, they needed it. Public relations. Advisers.

All of which meant money. Lots of money.

Connie arrived back at the small trailer she'd shared with Abana Baidoo for almost a year. She found Abana sounding optimistic.

"I talked—well, you know, wrote notes to—another kid inside who said Dahra is loved by everyone. Running the hospital, a good girl."

"Yes," Connie said.

"Where have you been?"

Connie knew she should tell Abana that she had sent Dahra to the lake. But it would just worry her, probably needlessly. Most likely Dahra had not made it to the lake. Most likely she'd sent word or sent someone else or . . .

And she couldn't. She couldn't tell her friend she'd sent her daughter to a massacre.

"I went to the lake. I heard Sam was up there and I . . . I went up there."

Abana looked closely at her, head tilted quizzically, sensing something wrong. "There's some video of a crazy old woman saying she saw fires up there."

Connie shook her head. "Not crazy. Something awful happened up there."

That much she had to tell Abana. It would all come out anyway, but she didn't have to tell Abana that she, Connie Temple, had sent Dahra there. So she told her what she had seen, and Abana started crying and then so did Connie.

They drank a fair amount of wine after that. The TV was on but muted. Connie saw a video of what they'd been talking about earlier on the radio: images of what was clearly a massive forest fire raging in the Stefano Rey and now spreading beyond it.

Then the news switched to long-range camera shots of the lake. The anchor was somber, obviously warning people that they were about to see something disturbing.

And then the picture shifted to a body floating facedown in the lake.

Abana was not looking at the TV; she was laughing over something funny that Connie didn't really understand. So it was not then, not at that moment, that Abana

would see her daughter, Dahra, floating facedown in the lake.

The sun rose and Edilio was still alive. It surprised him. He had spent the last part of the night on the steps of the town plaza. He'd gotten a little sleep, hunched over, head between his knees, but not much. He looked around owlshly, wondering how many of his people were still in place. How many had bailed? The thought of walking down to the barrier depressed him, because he was afraid he'd see all his soldiers there.

Albert was just striding up, looking peeved, which was more or less his regular expression.

"I've done an inventory on food," Albert announced without preamble. "It's not good. I don't suppose you have any idea how long we have to hold out?"

Edilio blinked. "No, the gaiaphage has not given me the schedule either for how long until the barrier comes down or how long until she attacks again. Sorry."

Albert sniffed. "You've learned sarcasm, Edilio."

"I've learned a lot of things, Albert."

Albert nodded at a pair of kids wandering past the long-destroyed fountain. "See that kid? Hair's falling out. We already have pretty severe malnutrition."

"Why do you think I brought you back?" Edilio snapped.

Albert held his hands out in a *See what I mean?* gesture. "You've drafted everyone to play soldier. I know business isn't your thing, Edilio, but I need labor. I need people picking the crops. If they're holding guns, they're not picking crops. If they're not picking crops, they're not producing food, and if they're not producing food, they're not eating. And not eating is what causes malnutrition."

Despite the pedantic and obnoxious way he said it, Albert was not wrong, so Edilio bit his tongue and took the lecture.

He nodded. "Yep."

"The point is, don't blame me," Albert said. "I did my part."

"They're not playing soldier, Albert. They're scared to death. They've gone down to the barrier to be with their families when they die."

"Well, that's stupid, isn't it?"

"Is it? We had a busload of field-workers not come back, remember? Anyway, the fire's coming."

Albert shook his head impatiently. "Actually, if you send them into the fields, they're probably safer than here. Concentrating them here in town, or worse yet down at the barrier, just makes it easier for the gaiaphage. Plus everyone starves. Including me. I'm already sick of Parmesan cheese. It smells a little like vomit, if you think about it."

The thing was, Albert was right. Starvation was a sure thing. "You're right," Edilio conceded. "Get anyone you can to the fields. Tell them I said so. Bribe them. Threaten them. Do your thing, Albert."

It was bizarre, but the truth was that the most useful thing people could do was go to work. Even with the beast stalking Perdido Beach, someone had to pick the cabbage.

Sinder could put her finger on the moment when she broke.

She had come to help Lana with Taylor. And she'd been feeling honored,

somehow, by the request, and by the opportunity to work alongside the Healer.

Once upon a time, a million years ago, Sinder had been a Goth girl, very into dark fantasies, very into the clothes, the makeup, the look, and most of all the *I don't care about the rest of you people; I'm living my life* feeling.

Yeah, I'm weird: deal with it.

Then: the FAYZ. And black fingernail polish was no longer available. Neither was food. Or water. Or safety.

She had seen terrible things. She had lost friends.

Eventually she had found a place at the lake, and discovered that she had a power, maybe the best of all powers. What she touched grew. So, of all the strange, impossible-to-

imagine outcomes, the FAYZ had given Sinder a whole new life. As a gardener.

Even now it almost made her smile.

Carrots, cabbages, radishes, anything they could find seeds for, she could grow. Not like *pop!* overnight. Not like some special effect. Just like she had a really amazing green thumb, and when she spent time in her vegetable patch with Jezzie, she could grow some serious veggie. Some unusually big, fast-growing veg.

She had left the patch in Jezzie's care. They had been farmers together, hoeing, weeding, watering. Talking about life.

Then had come the burned, wounded, terrified survivors of the lake. And Jezzie was not with them. None of Sinder's friends were with them. Everyone she was close to had been slaughtered.

And that was when Sinder broke.

She had crept away in the night—no one cared. She had walked toward the bright lights of *out there*. They were magic, those lights. The FAYZ was so dark. Like being in some ancient village, back in the Middle Ages, or maybe in some forgotten jungle. It was always so dark.

But out there! The motel signs, the Carl's sign, the camera lights, the flashing police lights, the headlights and taillights . . . She half closed her eyes and it became a single beacon of light, like a pulsing searchlight aimed right at her.

As she had headed down the hill, she had seen all the rest of them, all the kids. How many? More than a hundred, surely. The light from out there was like a cold sun shining on their faces.

Mostly people weren't bothering to try and communicate. Most had seen their parents and written notes and waved and all of that.

Sinder had not. Sinder hadn't thought she could bear it. But now in the light of day she searched the crowd out there. So many faces, some looking in, some looking away. They all looked so clean. They all wore clothing of the correct size. They were unarmed. And they all had food. They were having breakfast sandwiches and donuts and coffee.

Sinder's stomach churned. But she was so much better nourished than most of these kids. They were skin and bones, a lot of them. Kids at the lake had been eating better than those in town.

Yeah, well, most of them were dead now, so what good had it been, feeding them?

Was her mother or father there? She searched the crowd, hundreds of faces. Then she saw the HD monitor that advertised "Reunion Center." She went to it.

A bored-looking twentysomething out there looked at her quizzically, then, seeing the question in Sinder's eyes, held up a placard. Searching for Loved Ones?

Yes, Sinder thought. I am. Loved ones. Living loved ones. I have plenty of dead loved ones.

Your Name?

Sinder had no paper. She wrote it in the dirt. The woman made the universal symbol for phone call. Then she pulled out a phone and started texting.

Sinder nodded her head gratefully. The woman signed that she should sit and wait patiently.

Sinder did just that. Then, to kill time while she waited, and to take her mind off the nervousness that came with the thought of seeing her parents again, she searched for some living thing she could help grow. Unfortunately the area had been trampled pretty thoroughly. Not even an intact blade of grass.

"How are you feeling, Sam?"

He opened his eyes, looked up at Astrid, seemed momentarily baffled as to where he was, looked back at her, and smiled. "Better now."

He struggled to sit up.

"No, no, take it easy. You're better, but you're not well yet." She stroked his hair, and he let her. "Also you're strapped to a board."

Suddenly he was alarmed. "Gaia?"

"She's hurt. She ran off."

"But not dead."

Astrid shook her head.

"Something's burning," he said, sniffing the air.

"Yes," Astrid said. "Yeah. The forest is burning. I don't know how far it's gone."

Sam closed his eyes and nodded. "Me and Gaia. I wasn't even thinking, I just fired . . ."

"Trying to stay alive?"

"How about Caine?"

Astrid began to unwind the shreds of cloth that held him to the board. The way he was straining to get up it was obvious his back was working.

"Are you ready for all this?" Astrid asked him.

"Lay it out for me," he said, and smiled wanly at her and sat up. "You're so beautiful. And my shoulder still hurts."

Astrid filled him in on what had happened. She avoided talking about the fact that Sam, by his very existence, was empowering Gaia. Nor did she talk about her futile and now seemingly ridiculous attempt to contact Little Pete. She stuck to the facts: Caine and Diana reportedly run off to the island; Edilio bracing for Gaia's next attack; fire visible in the northwest; kids in the fields but scared to death.

She waited until he had absorbed all of that before telling him the last fact.

"Sam. Brianna is dead."

He just stared at her. Then, in a soft, almost childlike voice, he said, "Breeze?"

"She stopped Gaia. It looked like Brianna almost killed her. The second time she . . . But this time . . ."

There were tears in Sam's eyes. "My God. How is Dekka?"

“Like you’d expect. Destroyed. Roger’s dead, too, so Edilio . . . It’s been really bad, Sam. Really bad. It’s like we’re in a war.”

“We are,” he said. “I don’t understand why Gaia didn’t kill me.”

Astrid said nothing.

Lana came over then, so Sam didn’t notice Astrid’s silence. “How do you feel, Sam?”

“Better than I should,” he said. Then: “I know you did all you could for Breeze.”

Lana shook her head. “I never had the chance to. The gaiaphage hit her point-blank through the heart with your light. Burned a hole six inches across. That’s not something I can heal.”

“What do you mean, my light?” Sam asked.

Astrid shot a dirty look at Lana, but it was too late. Sam wasn’t going to be put off.

“You need to tell him,” Lana said. Her voice wasn’t unkind, but it was uncompromising.

Astrid said, “It seems Gaia has some connection to your power. There’s a . . . I don’t know what to call it . . . no one knows what to call it, because it doesn’t exist in the world out there . . .” She was stalling. He saw it. So Astrid said, “Diana says Gaia let you and Caine live because if you die you take the power with you.”

Sam’s face turned to stone, completely immobile. Astrid wanted to say something, but the words wouldn’t come. Lana flicked a dead cigarette butt into the corner of the room.

Sam held up his hands, looking at them as if he might find some meaningful answer in his palms. Finally he spoke in a near whisper. “My light killed those kids at the lake, all those kids? And Breeze?”

His gaze went inexorably to the big automatic pistol hanging at Lana’s waist.

“I know what you’re thinking, Sam,” Astrid said finally, “but no. No.”

“I’m not thinking anything,” Sam said softly, lying.

“You cannot take your own life,” Astrid said, putting steel into her voice. “It’s a crime. It’s a sin.”

“I thought you were done with all that religious belief,” Sam said.

“It’s worse than a sin *or* a crime; it’s a mistake,” Lana said. “At least for right now.” She knelt down to be closer to eye level. Patrick sidled up beside her. “Let’s say Gaia suddenly doesn’t have the light thing. Right? She still has Dekka’s power and Jack’s power and Caine’s power. Caine’s bailed. Which means how do you think we’re going to kill this monster? Jack’s not very useful lately, Caine’s gone, so it’s Gaia versus Dekka and Jack? How does that come out?”

Astrid didn’t like the *At least for right now* part at all. But she kept quiet and let Sam think it over.

“Then I have to take her on right away,” Sam said. “Before she can go after anyone else. I have to do it now.” He stood up and staggered a step. Breathed deep, steadied himself, and headed for the door.

“Best I can do for you,” Lana said privately to Astrid.

Astrid knew she wasn’t talking about the healing but about what she had said to Sam. She nodded in respectful acknowledgment and followed Sam out.

Where are you, Petey?

Why won’t you talk to me?

“Maybe because I killed you?” she whispered mordantly. Yeah. Maybe that was it.

TWENTY-SIX

2 HOURS, 56 MINUTES

THE DAY WORE on. Edilio arranged to send water and a mouthful of food to his troops in their concealed firing positions.

The farmworkers began drifting back without reports of attack and bearing at least some meager crops—insect-eaten cabbages, not-quite-ripe artichokes, even a few delicious beets.

With the church steeple ruined, the highest point in Perdido Beach was Clifftop, but Dekka could do better. She lifted herself high into the air over, directly over, the town hall steps so as to avoid a whirlwind of trash and dirt, and surveyed the scene with a pair of binoculars.

When she came back down, Sam and Astrid had arrived.

Sam hugged Dekka, and the two of them stayed that way for a long time, saying nothing. Both had loved Brianna.

To Edilio, Sam said, “I’m so sorry, man. I wish I’d . . . You know what I wish.”

Edilio fought back a fresh rush of tears, nodded, waited until he was sure he could speak, and said, “I’m glad you’re back, boss.” He pivoted to Dekka. “What did you see?”

“The fire, mostly. It’s big. It’s nothing but smoke up north. Like a wall of smoke.”

“It’s not exactly clear here,” Astrid said. The fire smell was stronger, and the sky was already silvery with ash and smoke that had drifted to town. “Do you think it’s moving beyond the forest?”

“I’m not Smokey the Bear,” Dekka said with a shadow of her old peevishness. “I don’t know about forest fires. But it seemed like I could see a line of smoke closer in. It’s like darker, heavier smoke behind and more of a light-gray smoke closer in. Don’t ask me what that means.”

To Sam, Edilio said, “I’ve got shooters all around the plaza. With Brianna gone . . .” He glanced at Astrid to see whether she had told Sam. Then, “Okay, you know. Supposedly with Breeze gone it means Gaia won’t have the speed. So we’ll see her coming. We should be able to shoot. And she doesn’t like bullets; we know that much. I saw at least one bullet hit her.”

“Wait,” Astrid said, frowning. “Wait, who are we forgetting?”

“What do you mean?” Sam asked.

“You, Caine, Dekka, Jack . . . who else has a power that she might exploit?”

They stood staring blankly at each other for a long minute.

Then Edilio snapped his fingers. “Paint!” He yelled orders to some of his people, who, glad for the excuse to temporarily abandon their posts, went scurrying off across town.

And at that point Quinn appeared, walking up from the beach and carrying a backpack.

“Catch anything?” Sam asked him. The two boys embraced.

“Dude,” Quinn answered, shrugged modestly, and added, “No big thing.”

“Very big thing, brother. Very big. I’m here because you brought me here. Now:

why is your backpack squirming?”

“Oh, that,” Quinn said nonchalantly. “I believe we fished up Drake’s foot.” He dumped it on the ground, causing a definite sensation. It was a foot that had grown a dozen writhing tentacles.

The thing flailed and squirmed, and the tentacles tried to go centipeding away, but it was directionless, mindless, and ended up just making Edilio jump out of the way.

“Kill it,” Dekka said.

Sam held his hands, palm out, toward the bizarre remnant of the unkillable Drake. Light blazed. A sickening cooked-flesh smell rose.

The thing, the foot, squirmed madly. But it burned. It burned first like a steak dropped into charcoal. And then it caught fire and burned like a marshmallow held too close to a campfire. Then it burned like a house that is near collapse.

Then it fell into a pile of ashes.

And still Sam burned it. Until the waves of heat scattered the ashes.

“Well,” Sam said. “At least we know that would have worked had it been necessary.”

“Too bad it wasn’t Drake himself,” Dekka said. “But my little Brianna did him in. Yeah. Breeze took down Drake and saved our butts, twice. Oh, man. I thought I was cried out.”

“Dekka,” Sam said, putting his arms around her, “we will never be cried out.”

“We have a lot of people to bury,” Edilio said. He was looking at the crude grave markers in the town plaza. The first had been a little girl who died in a fire just a few feet from this spot, when Edilio had taken on the job of burying the dead.

“Brianna wouldn’t want to be in the ground,” Dekka said. “She’d want to, I don’t know. Cremation, maybe. You could do it, Sam.”

“He’s thinking,” Gaia said. “Nemesis. He’s thinking. I can sense it. He’s weak, weakening, so close. But he’s thinking, and hiding his thoughts from me.”

She swallowed hard, and Drake was frankly contemptuous. It was crazy that the gaiaphage should be afraid of Little Pete, the Petard. He wasn’t going to say that to the gaiaphage, that was for sure, but still he could hardly conceal his disappointment.

It was the gaiaphage that had gone weak since inhabiting this girl’s body. She, it, seemed almost paralyzed by fear. Drake’s arm was back! Back, baby! Gaia had given it back to him, better than ever. He snapped it and broke a branch from a bush. Time for war. Time to kill. He was back!

Back! Hah hah hah! But his master was healing, and slowly. And worst of all, complaining. Like a typical female.

“She’s fighting me,” Gaia said. “I can feel her blocking me.”

Shook up, that was it. The mighty gaiaphage, all shook up. Well, that’s what came of turning yourself into a girl.

“When do we go?” Drake demanded. “They’re waiting to die.”

“When it’s dark,” Gaia said sullenly. “When the barrier comes down I have to walk out of here. In this body. I can’t be recognized by every human out there. I will need time. I will need to gather my powers . . . find a new form . . . a place to hide, out there.”

A place to hide? Drake coiled his arm around his new body. He was stronger than

before. His whip was longer, quicker. A better, badder Whip Hand. And ready to go!

"I get Astrid to myself," Drake said.

"You don't make demands of me!" Gaia raged.

Drake laughed. His voice was strange now, with portions of Alex's throat melded to his. He sounded older than he had before. "You're afraid of the people outside?"

"This body keeps me alive. This body allows me to concentrate my strength. But this body is weak. I had not realized how weak. It makes its own demands. It needs food. It excretes. It hurts." Gaia shook her long black hair. "It bothers me."

"You look like her, you know. Like Diana. The way she looked before. Back when she thought she was hot."

Gaia frowned.

"Yeah," Drake said. "Yeah. You look hot and nasty. Like her."

He knew immediately that he had gone too far, said too much.

Gaia's blue eyes were like lasers. "You want to hurt me," she whispered.

Drake shook his head violently. "No. No, that's not what I—"

"You. Want. To *hurt* this body."

"Not *you*," Drake said, desperately. "Not the real you."

"You think you know the real me?"

Drake shook his head again. He didn't want to go any deeper into this. He just wanted to feel the satisfying slap of his whip hand on flesh. That was all. He just wanted to hear the cries of pain and terror. He wanted to find that blond witch, that smug so-called genius, and watch her fear grow, watch her—

"It comes closer, the fire. In the smoke . . . that's when we attack." Gaia looked off toward the wall of smoke in the north.

"I thought you were worried about Nemesis."

"I worry about nothing," Gaia said, but there was impatience in the toss of her head, worry in her eyes.

"He has a sister. Someone he cares about. Your Nemesis. Her name is Astrid. She could be a hostage. She could give us leverage over the Petard."

Gaia's eyes widened. "A loved one? Does he?" She smiled. She had very white teeth, almost perfect but for a single too-far-forward canine. "But if you kill her she's useless as a hostage."

"She's no fun dead," Drake said, and then laughed. "Let me go after her. I'll bring her to you."

"A hostage," Gaia said thoughtfully. "A hostage." She looked at Drake suspiciously. He could feel her dark mind brushing against his, probing for some trick. But there was no trick. He would bring Astrid alive.

Barely.

Eventually.

Drake saw her reach the decision. He saw a frown, a worried look. And then Gaia glanced around as if looking for someone. Then back at Drake.

It struck him that she didn't want him to go because she didn't want to be alone. He struggled to conceal his growing contempt. This girl's body had given the gaiaphage the emotions of a girl. The weakness of a girl.

When he was done with Astrid . . . and done with Diana . . .

Gaia?

“Go then,” Gaia said finally. “Bring her to me.”

Astrid found Sam in the church. What was left of the church. He was sitting on an overturned pew, gazing toward the shards of a stained-glass window in a ruined frame. The cross had been propped up yet again by someone, so it wasn't lying on the floor but was rather leaning in a corner, its base stabilized by rubble piled there.

He must have recognized something about the sound of her movements, because he didn't bother to turn around.

“Anything?”

“Nothing,” she said. “Edilio's losing his mind waiting, I think. He's got Orc and Jack and Dekka all doing the rounds to try and get kids to stand fast, trying to get some more kids to come back from the barrier. I don't think it's working. And Albert's actually riding a bike out to the fields to try to get kids to keep working.”

They both smiled at the picture of Albert in his chinos and button-down shirt exhorting kids from atop a bike.

“He's looking for redemption,” Sam said.

“That's unusually observant of you,” she said.

He smiled. “Occasionally I observe.”

She sat down next to him. “Well, he needs redemption.”

“We're in the right place to be talking about it, huh?” He looked around the church as if just noticing where he was. “That was the story, right?” He nodded toward the cross.

“Don't, Sam,” she said.

“You think you can read my mind, don't you?”

“You don't need redemption,” she said.

“So what do I need?” he asked, trying to make a joke of it.

“One more win,” she said.

“One more win.” He hung his head. “I've had more than my share, haven't I? I've been way luckier than I should have been. I mean, how many times should I have died? I can't even count them all.”

“Don't do this, Sam.”

“What was I doing it for? Just so I would survive?” He shrugged. “Mostly, huh? But also sometimes so other people would live. Not meaning to make it sound all self-sacrificing or whatever.”

“Yes. You also kept a lot of other people alive. Yes. So enough, all right? You promised me, remember? You promised me you'd do whatever it took to stay alive.”

He sighed. “Here's the thing, Astrid. It's like . . . like a math problem or something, you know? Like if you're doing an equation or whatever, and there's an answer, and there's only one answer, and so you're stuck with that, aren't you?”

“This isn't math. Besides, you're a math ignoramus. Remember?” She was getting angry because the alternative to feeling angry was to feel desperate.

“I am a math ignoramus, aren't I?” He smiled as if at a distant memory. Or at something that would never matter again. “But I've won a lot of battles. I've gone in a lot of times and I've figured out the winning move. And that's worked pretty well so far, right? Well, the problem is that I see the winning move here. I see it just as clear as your very perfect nose.”

“It’s not a winning move if you end up dead.”

“Ah, it hasn’t been before, no. But I keep running the equation, Astrid. And each time I see that maybe we can beat the gaiaphage. But not if she has my power. That’s the trick here. Would that be irony?”

“No, damn it, that would not be irony, Sam. That would be throwing your life away. That would be suicide.”

“I know you’re kind of over the religion thing, but what he did”—he nodded toward the cross—“that was still a big thing to do, wasn’t it? Was that suicide?”

“Really?” she asked with acid sarcasm. “You’re Jesus now?”

He laughed softly.

“You want to know the truth, Sam?” She pulled his face to her. “No, it wasn’t suicide when Jesus did it. It was fake. If he really was the son of God, then he was risking nothing and he *knew* it. He knew he had a couple of bad hours but then it was going to be all over and he’d pop back into heaven and have a really amazing story to tell all his friends.”

“He has friends?”

She would not be distracted with jokes. “You? If you die you’re dead. We’ve seen dead now, Sam, we’ve seen a lot of it, and it’s ugly and permanent.”

He turned to her and she saw the tortured look on his face. “That light, Astrid? That light I shoot out of my hands? It’s like it’s mine. It’s like I invented it. Or at least I own it. And that light killed Brianna. And it’s going to kill a bunch of other kids. You know it and I know it.” He ran a hand back through his hair, slowly, like it mattered that he felt each hair.

“No,” she said. “They’re going to die because Pete won’t talk to me.”

There was a long silence after that.

“I wondered if you would try that,” he said at last.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said, brushing it off. “Nothing. I was talking to air.”

Now Sam was mad. “You should have talked to me about it first. What if he had done it? What if Little Pete had taken over your body and your mind?”

“He didn’t, so—”

“What do you think happens if he does it? Whoever does it ends up like her, like Gaia, except that Gaia was just a baby and didn’t even know. What do you think happens if Little Pete does this? What do you think happened to that baby girl when the gaiaphage—”

“We don’t know if it would be like that.”

“You don’t know it wouldn’t,” Sam snapped. “You’re a hypocrite, you know. You tell me to keep myself alive. Well, for what? So I can know that you gave your life instead?”

His words brought no answer. A silence fell between them. A rat ran by. It didn’t scare either of them. In fact it made their mouths water just a bit. Both had eaten rat and been glad for the chance to do it. The bad old days of the FAYZ, back before Albert took over.

“Like these are the good times,” Sam said without explanation. But Astrid knew what he was thinking.

“Don’t go out in a blaze of glory, Sam.”

“Don’t nail yourself to a cross,” he said.

“Listen to us,” Astrid said, and laughed.

He shook his head. “I lost Brianna, Astrid. And she wasn’t the first.”

“Who made you responsible?” He didn’t answer, so she said it. “I did. Didn’t I?”

“Astrid . . .”

“I did,” she said more definitely, accepting the truth of it. “I pushed you to lead. I made it your business. I used you to protect my little brother, and then in the end I was the one who sacrificed him. Now I’m trying to make good on all that. I’m trying for redemption, too, Sam, and instead there you go, once more unto the breach, Sam to the rescue even if he dies doing it.”

“You didn’t make me responsible. You don’t have that power. This”—he held up his hands, and light glowed from his palms—“this made me responsible. Having power made me responsible. I had the power and you had the brains. So we were chosen. That’s the way it works, isn’t it? People who can have to help those who can’t. The strong defend the weak from the strong. I don’t think you invented that, Astrid; all you did was make me see it. Well, I see it. There it is. The FAYZ gave me this light, and the FAYZ made it necessary. And now the light isn’t helping, is it? Now that monster is going to walk into town and kill people I care about and people I love.”

Astrid stood up. She was shaking. “I can’t . . .,” she said.

Sam stood and tried to hold her, but she pulled away. “If one of us is getting out of here, it has to be you, Astrid. If I get out, it’s trouble anyway, you know that. The world out there is waiting for a scapegoat.”

“You promised me,” she said. “You’ve always kept your promises to me, Sam. Keep this one. I’m holding you to it. You swore. You swore to me.”

From outside there came the sounds of yelling. Someone was crying, “Fire! Fire!”

“Go,” Astrid said, dismissing him. “And keep your word to me, Sam, or you’re a damned liar.”

He left, not sure how to respond to that. He was relieved to have something tangible to do.

It felt good to be running free down the beach. Lying in a box at the bottom of the lake Drake hadn’t expected to ever have it all back. A body. Not his, but his now, and it was in good shape and strong.

And so much more important, he had his whip. He had his whip hand!

Whip Hand!

No one was watching the beach. They were all huddled in terror in town. And the best thing was, they weren’t expecting him, were they? Astrid would have bragged all over town how she had looked down at a helpless Drake and laughed and laughed. She must have thought she was safe from him at last. No more Drake. All Drake’s threats were nothing now, hah hah.

What he would do to her.

The longing for that moment almost made him weak. He wanted it so badly. Had he ever wanted anything as badly as he wanted to hear Astrid beg for mercy?

But no, he couldn’t kill her. He had to keep her alive, which was better. Life meant pain. If there was one thing Drake had learned his entire life—well, at least since his mother had remarried—it was that life was pain. And there was such joy in causing pain.

He had seen the pleasure his stepfather had taken in beating Drake's mother. And his mother must have almost enjoyed it, too, right? She kept doing things that pissed her husband off. Like she expected it. Like she wanted it. Law of the jungle, his grandfather told him once. The big and strong kill and eat the small and weak. And Drake knew his grandfather was speaking from experience. He could see it in the old man's eyes. That old man had brought the pain in his life.

Drake climbed over the rocks that separated Town Beach from the much smaller Clifftop beach. He would climb the cliff, sneak past Clifftop, and come into town from the last direction Astrid would expect.

As he climbed, he felt the strength in this new body. He felt the power in his regrown whip hand as it lashed up, finding bushes and ledges and hauling him upward as swiftly as any rope.

Spider-Man! Hah!

Whip Hand!

As he climbed, he looked north and saw the fire. The fires of hell. Hah hah! Perfect. Let it all come down in pain and fire! He felt his ambitions broaden.

He was resurrected. He was resurrected to kill.

He was Jesus with a whip, an unkillable Satan coming with smoke and fire to destroy! In his mind it was a lurid comic-book panel: Drake Whip Hand, wreathed in fire, with Astrid and Diana cowering, whipped and begging for mercy.

And at some point he forgot all about Gaia.

TWENTY-SEVEN

1 HOUR, 29 MINUTES

ASTRID WATCHED SAM go and tried to calm the wild emotions she felt.

He wasn't wrong. That was the hell of it. He wasn't wrong. It would be his own light that killed. It was his light that had burned a hole in Brianna's heart.

But this could not be the answer. Not after everything that had happened. This could not be the answer.

It is the answer, Astrid. You know it.

She followed him out as far as the door—well, the wreckage of a doorway—and saw him rushing across the plaza to where a fire had caught somehow in a drifted pile of trash.

A couple of kids were already taking care of it, and Sam wasn't necessary. The truth was, the cries of "Fire!" almost served as a distraction, something to—

The whip was around her throat. She screamed but no sound emerged. She tried to breathe, but nothing came.

She reached for a standing pillar of stone; her fingernails clawed at it. She kicked at a piece of wood, hoping it would make some sound to draw Sam's attention. The buildings around the plaza were supposed to be full of Edilio's people: one of them must see!

Sam had only to turn around . . .

Astrid dropped, putting all her weight on the tentacle arm, hoping to pull him off balance. But he was too strong.

Drake drew her back into the shadows of the church. She was kicking, trying to scream, her lungs already burning from lack of oxygen.

"Hello, Astrid," Drake said.

And she lost consciousness.

"We need a bucket brigade," Sam said to Edilio. "There must be some kind of air current up high in the dome. It's picking up sparks from the forest fire and dropping them all around."

"I'll get all my spare people on it right away," Edilio snapped. Then, "Sorry."

"I know you're stretched thin, man."

"Thin? I'm stretched invisible, Sam. There are maybe two, three dozen kids in the fields. I have maybe twelve left actually holding guns. And the rest? You know where they are."

"It's the waiting," Sam said, looking to the northwest, the direction of the highway. "Why doesn't she just attack?"

"Maybe she knows we're panicking. Or maybe she's waiting for the fire to do her work for her."

Sam looked up. The sky was still afternoon blue, but there was a gray tint to the air. "If she's out there to the northwest of town like we think, then she's closer to the fire than we are. Maybe we'll get lucky and—"

He stopped when he saw Edilio's skeptical look.

“Yeah,” Sam said. Then: “I have to go after her. If I wait, then she uses my own power to kill kids. I have to try to take her down myself.”

Edilio spread his hands as if to say, *But . . .* There was no but. It was the truth, and they both knew it.

“The only other alternative is, you know, to, um . . . deprive her of my power. It may give me a chance, her needing to keep me alive. That may give me an edge.”

Again Sam was waiting to hear the counterargument. He was waiting to hear Edilio explain how wrong he was to believe that he had to die to stop Gaia. But that wasn’t what he heard, or what he saw in Edilio’s eyes.

“She’s stronger than you are, Sam. It’s like fighting yourself and Caine and Jack and Dekka, all at once.”

“Yeah.”

“Talk to Astrid about it.”

“I already talked to Astrid.”

“And she’s okay with a suicide mission? Because I’m not. You go out there, go to win, huh? Don’t go out there thinking you’re doing us a favor by getting killed.”

Sam sighed. “It’s the endgame, my friend.”

“Sam . . . ,” Edilio began, but that was all he had, that one word, that one-word plea for a different solution.

“Take care of Astrid for me. Try to keep her safe and don’t let her follow me.”

“I haven’t been very good at keeping people safe,” Edilio said.

“No, man, what happened to Roger is not your fault or your failing. The grief is enough. It’s enough. You don’t need guilt on top of it.”

Edilio looked grateful, but not like he believed it.

“Listen, Edilio, if she gets past me, she won’t have the light anymore,” Sam said. “You understand? But she will still be very dangerous. When I’ve fought Caine, the worst thing wasn’t him dropping stuff down, because you see the arc of it going up then coming down, right? Him throwing stuff horizontally: that was worse because it was faster. Look out for that when . . . *if . . .* she gets here.”

Edilio put out his hand and Sam took it.

“It’s been interesting, hasn’t it?” Sam said, trying for a smile.

“It’s been a great honor to stand with you,” Edilio said.

“Tell her I’m sorry I broke my promise,” Sam said, so softly Edilio almost didn’t hear. “Tell her I love her.”

Sam didn’t hurry. He knew where he was going. He wasn’t happy about going there. No rush.

He walked the highway. How many times before had he made this walk? How many times had he passed this wrecked car and that overturned truck?

Someday if, when, the barrier came down, someone would clean it all up. The tow trucks would come. *Beep-beeping* as they backed up to slip their lift beneath some battered hulk of a car. Maybe there were a few car windows that hadn’t been broken, but not many. All the tires were partly or completely deflated. The gas tanks were long-since siphoned. Many of these cars had kept running until the gas was gone.

In some of these cars babies in car seats had died of starvation. In some of these cars kids had died when the driver poofed at seventy miles an hour. Would the CSI

types have to come in and reconstruct it all? Would they identify the unidentified bones?

Someday families would try to come back only to find their home ransacked, torn up, sometimes reeking of human feces. There would be graffiti on their walls and trash stuffed in their toilets. And in many cases they'd find their homes burned down. Zil's fire had taken something like a quarter of the town, and other houses had been knocked down to make firebreaks.

People would marvel at the destruction and tut-tut and shake their heads because they wouldn't know what people had lived through in this place.

Those people returning to Perdido Beach wouldn't understand what desperate battles had been fought.

Yeah, sorry about pulling fuel rods out of the nuclear power plant and tossing them down a mine shaft. Why did we do that? Well . . . hah. You're never going to believe why we did that.

You say Coates Academy looks like it's been through an artillery duel? Well, in a way it has been.

Yes, there is at least one whisky still in the woods.

Yes, there are unburied corpses.

Those cat and dog bones? The ones that are charred as if someone cooked and ate a beloved household pet? Well . . . we got a little hungry.

Sorry about the graveyard in the town plaza. So damned sorry you can't begin to understand how sorry.

Sorry.

He was walking toward fire, into thickening smoke.

That was how he had crossed the line the very first time, so long ago, when an apartment off the town plaza had burned and he'd heard a cry for help. No one else had gone running toward the fire, so he had.

"All downhill after that," he said to no one.

That was the first burial in the town plaza. Sam had stepped up to try and save the nameless girl, and when he had failed, it was Edilio who had finally dug the grave and placed the marker. Edilio cleaning up after Sam's failures. That hadn't changed.

Battles avoided and battles joined. He had seen the rise of Caine and his fall. He had seen the threat from Zil's antimutant bigots grow and nearly destroy them all, and he'd seen Zil lying dead.

He'd seen Mary, good, sweet, decent Mary who looked after the littles, lose her mind under the influence of demons both internal and external.

He'd seen the zekes consume poor E.Z. He'd seen kids cough their own lungs out. He'd seen the bugs explode from a body half-eaten.

And how many dead? The little girl from the fire, she had been just the first. His first failure to save a life.

Duck. Good old Duck.

Thuan.

Francis.

How many of them? More than he could remember.

He'd seen the unknowns become pillars of strength. What a cliché that phrase was, but how else to describe Edilio? When the barrier came down he would probably be

deported to Honduras.

Thanks for your heroism; now get out of the country, kid.

He had seen the weak become strong as granite. Quinn.

And Lana, what hadn't that girl been through?

Dekka, fearless, passionate Dekka, his right hand, his companion in battle, the sister he'd never had.

Through it all there had been Astrid. Difficult as always. Complicated as always. Superior, condescending, thoughtful, manipulative, beautiful, and passionate Astrid. The love of his life.

All worth it, just to have loved and been loved by her.

Coming down the road toward him was a flatbed truck. It was moving slowly but steadily. He could see that its wheels were not touching the road. It trailed smoke. The flatbed was piled with burning trees and tires and debris. It was an inferno that would have roasted any driver.

Gaia walked beside it, a hand raised to focus Caine's power and lift the massive truck.

She stopped, and the burning truck stopped as well. Gaia smiled.

"So," she said. "You're ready to die."

"Well, it was a short life. But it was a pretty good one," he said.

"I don't really want to kill you," Gaia said.

"I know. And I know why. But I'm not giving you a choice."

"Why fight me, Sam?" She had to shout to be heard above a sudden roar of the fire as a log collapsed on the others. Sparks exploded, fireflies to come drifting down on parched fields or continue to draft upward and maybe fall on the town.

Finishing Zil's work.

"Because you're going to kill my friends," Sam said.

Gaia shrugged. "They're a threat to me. I have a right to survive. Don't I? Don't all living things have a right to survive?"

"We're not here for a conversation."

"You know how many there are of me, Sam?" Gaia held up one finger. "One. Just one. I am the first and only like me. I am unique in the universe. Your friends? There are billions just like them."

She moved the truck forward and began to walk.

"There's no one like any of them," Sam said. "I doubt you can understand."

"Do you even know what I am?" she asked, mocking with a wry smile. "I was created to bring life. I was a seed sent out into the galaxy. But when I took root here, on this planet, all that changed. Is that my fault?"

Sam found himself taking a step back. He knew better than to argue. He hadn't come here for a debate. But he knew where this fight was going. And when the end is there, right there in front of you, is it so weak to want to drag it out for a few extra seconds?

"You're a killer. Killers lose their rights."

"Hah!" Gaia laughed. "Of course humans don't kill. You haven't slaughtered other species for food. Or wiped them out just for sport. You don't eat other creatures. Don't be ridiculous. What if I told you that you could join me, Sam? That you don't have to die."

She moved closer. Her movements were sensual, self-aware, calculated to mesmerize him.

“Look at me. I’m a human, too, aren’t I? This is human.” She gestured at her body.

“You’ve already killed whatever was human there,” Sam said, but he was still talking and he was still moving backward.

“It will be human flesh you burn.”

“It will be you, the gaiaphage, I kill.”

“Do you think you’ll kill me, Sam? I don’t think you expect to. You came here to be killed.”

“If necessary,” he said dully.

“Let’s see if it’s necessary.” Her hand came up, but Sam wasn’t so mesmerized he was unready. He dodged left and the invisible punch only grazed him.

He fired with one hand, still moving fast to his left. But Gaia had learned. She tracked his movement and the beam missed.

He swept the beam of light horizontally and she rose easily above it. Her invisible counterpunch didn’t miss this time. It knocked him twenty feet away. His lungs were empty and wouldn’t draw air, but he couldn’t let her stop him, not this way, not in a way that left him crippled again.

Win or die.

He rolled in the dirt as she laughed.

“I don’t have to kill you, Sam. You do have to kill me.”

He fired even as he rolled, and the result was a weird laser show of twisting green beams that singed Gaia’s hair and otherwise did nothing.

“We’re too far from town,” Gaia taunted. “Surely you want your last battle to be witnessed and admired. Besides, I don’t want my kindling to burn down to nothing. Come on, Sam, let’s go into town. I’ve never seen the place. I go to exterminate. Don’t you want to see?”

Sam jumped up, fired, but she dropped hard right, dodged around his beam, and with effortless power lifted one of the burning logs from the truck and threw it at him. It was a staggering display of power. The log weighed tons.

No time to get out of the way. He fired with both hands and burned through the fire-weakened log. Two massive, separate torches blew past him, burning his skin and crisping his hair.

WHUMPF!

The log sections crashed behind him on the road, showering him with sparks that stuck to his shirt and hair. The smoke billowed around him.

He choked and blasted randomly, blindly, all around him. Her cry of pain was the sound of hope. But he couldn’t see what damage he had done.

Suddenly she was on him, bursting through the smoke, not with Caine’s telekinetic power but with Jack’s brute strength. Her hand grabbed his arm; he didn’t resist, which would have cost him that arm, but leaped straight into her. Her own pull overbalanced her and she fell back.

With no other easy choice, he punched her in the face.

She pushed him off her and he flew through the air. He had time to see the burning logs and Gaia lying on her back, and then he hit the truck’s cab, hard, bounced off, and lay winded on the ground.

Gaia was on him in seconds, leaning over him. “Come on, Sam, you can do better than that.” Her hand closed on his throat. He could feel the immense power behind that grip. “No death for you. No, you’re going to come along and watch.”

She lifted him more easily than she’d have lifted a baby. There was a length of chain on the bumper of the truck. It was red-hot. He heard and smelled the flesh of her hands burning as she wrapped it around him, heard her cry out in pain but accept it just so she could hurt him. He screamed in agony as she laid the red-hot steel against him, as it burned through his clothing and seared his flesh.

“No glorious death for you, Sam.”

He felt himself floating along above the ground, and then he fell down a long, dark tunnel.

When he regained consciousness, he first felt the burns from the chain. Then the weight and strength of it, holding his arms tight against his body. He could move his hands, he could still fire his killing light, but he could not aim.

Floating. Wrapped in chains that stuck to his skin as they slowly cooled.

When he twisted his head, he saw Gaia walking down the middle of the highway.

Behind her the burning truck floated.

She noticed him stirring.

“Watch this,” she said. She raised a hand and one log broke free from the flaming mass, rose in the air, and then hurtled like a missile across the parking lot to smash into the shattered glass and tattered banners at the front of Ralph’s store.

“Fire is a very good distraction, don’t you think?” Gaia said.

He couldn’t speak. Whatever consciousness he had was almost a dream state, a hallucination.

“I realized, when I saw the forest burning, how fascinating the firelight is. It’s beautiful, and people stare at it, don’t they? It destroys things and kills people, but humans love it. Is it because they crave their own destruction, Sam? I want to understand your kind. I am going out into the wider world, and I must learn. But first things first. First, to escape this shell, this egg in which I have gestated, all eyes will be on the fire, all eyes blinded by the smoke, and when I walk out of here, out into your large world with its billions, no one will even see. It’s the beauty of light, don’t you see, Sam? It reveals, but it also distracts and blinds. It’s even better than darkness.”

“Don’t do this,” he begged in a choked voice.

He saw two people running from the burning grocery store. Some kids had been living there—skaters. The skaters loved it for all the smooth tile floors and the way the shelves and freezer cases could be turned into ramps.

Sam turned quickly to avoid looking, to avoid giving the two kids away, but it was too late.

Gaia stretched out her hand, and the nearest of the kids, a boy who insisted on being called Spartacus, came flying toward them, yelling in surprise.

He was twelve years old. He had hair down to his waist worked into mismanaged dreads. He wore a T-shirt that was more hole than cloth and oversized shorts.

“Watch the pretty light, Sam,” Gaia whispered to him, right into his ear.

“No!” he cried.

“You’ve been a problem for me, Sam, right from the start. You were one of the first ones whose names I learned. I saw images of you in their minds, in the mind of the

Healer, in Caine's mind, even distorted versions that Nemesis showed me sometimes. You defied me. Didn't you, you willful little boy?"

She was laughing, laughing at her own cleverness, laughing at the way Spartacus cried and begged and at the way Sam pleaded, at the way he turned his face away, at the futility of it.

Gaia grabbed Sam's head in the crook of her arm. She pried his eyes open with fingers dragging on his forehead. "Watch. Watch it all. Your light, Sam. Because you didn't have the courage to end your own life, did you? You wanted me to do it for you. The hero who missed his chance. Watch now, Sam. I'm going to slice him apart, and his every scream will be your fault."

"You're insane!"

"Compared to what?" she asked. "I haven't gotten out much."

The light burned from her free hand and like a power saw begun cutting into the boy's head, and he screamed and Sam roared and Gaia laughed, and Sam's hands were close enough, he could twist them just enough, and his own hands blazed with the green light cutting into Spartacus's heart.

Gaia cried out in ecstatic joy. She dropped the dead boy and with her telekinetic power twirled Sam around in the air like a top and laughed.

"Made you kill! Made you kill!" she yelled. "This will be fun."

She danced in a circle and shouted up at the smoke-darkened, spark-lit sky. "Too late, Nemesis, too late!" Like a child. Taunting. "Too late!"

TWENTY-EIGHT

1 HOUR, 10 MINUTES

“SHE’S COMING.”

Edilio stood atop the town hall. It was the highest spot in the downtown area since the church was nearly leveled. Dekka was beside him, Jack and Orc just a few feet away.

She was coming with fire. Fire against a background of fire. She wasn’t waiting for the Stefano Rey fire to reach town; she was bringing it, inspired by it.

A massive flaming torch of a truck floated at a stately pace down the highway, like some awful parade float. *Next up in the parade, ladies and gentlemen, the float from hell.*

Edilio raised binoculars and twisted the focus knob. What he saw made him catch his breath. A person floated before her, a person wrapped in chains.

He knew who it was. He couldn’t see the face, but he knew.

Mary, Mother of God, if ever you were going to intercede, now would be a very good time.

The air was already hard to breathe for the smoke, and now terror crushed the air from his lungs. He could hardly control his body. The gaiaphage was on the march and they would all die. All of them. Just like Roger, they would all die, no chance, no salvation, they would die die die die . . .

“Okay,” Edilio said, tough, unflinching, because that’s what the others all wanted from him. “Let’s go do it.”

He led the way, automatic rifle hanging from his shoulder, finger on the trigger guard, ready, scared. He trotted down the steps: *Don’t miss, don’t trip, Edilio; they’re watching you, they’re scared, they’re so scared because they know it’s over, they know death is here for them and there’s no defense against it.*

Don’t trip. Careful.

Out the front door, out onto the patio that overlooked the plaza. There were kids there, the few who hadn’t yet run to the barrier, and yes, still some up in the windows with gun barrels visible.

You’ll run when you see, he thought; you’ll run and scream and so will I.

“Listen up,” he shouted in a voice so calm it could not possibly be his. “Remember to make every shot count. Aim. Fire. Aim again. Fire. Keep that up until you run out of ammunition.”

“Edilio!” someone cried out, but it wasn’t a question: it was a slogan, it was a rallying cry.

“Edilio! Edilio!”

They shouted from their dark windows.

Like he was seeing her in a dream, he made eye contact with Dekka, who nodded and said, “Edilio!”

Quinn appeared, carrying a gun. He was grim. A spark floated past his face, illuminating his eyes.

“There’s a boat coming in,” Quinn said.

Edilio nodded like he understood, but he understood nothing except that he had no power to resist what was coming.

Drake dragged her down Second Avenue, not seeming to have any plan or direction, really, just to drag her.

Astrid was in and out of consciousness, eyes misted red, hands scratching weakly at the powerful whip arm around her throat. A false night had fallen, a night that stank of smoke.

She must have passed out, because when she opened her eyes she was in a house. Vague, disjointed memories of footsteps on a porch, of a door kicked in, of herself hurled against a dining-room table.

Over her head a brass-and-crystal chandelier—much abused over the months—swung back and forth. Someone who had occupied the house at some point had hung Barbie dolls and action figures from the chandelier with bits of colored yarn. There was a smell of sewage to join the reek of smoke.

He threw Astrid onto the table, faceup. She gathered her strength and screamed, “Help! Help me! *Help me!*”

Drake came into view from behind her head, stepped around so she could see him and he could look into her eyes.

There was something odd and disjointed about him. The body didn’t match the head. He was taller than he’d been, stronger, more muscled. His head was pale; his neck was tan.

A lizard’s tail whipped madly, protruding from his brow, right between his eyes.

The windows glowed orange and red. The fire was coming.

Endgame.

“Help me! Help me!” Astrid screamed.

Drake nodded in satisfaction. “That’s good. That’s very good. I’ve waited a long time to hear you—”

She rolled away from him, trying to get off the table, but his whip arm had her and dragged her back. She kicked and punched and none of it mattered. He enjoyed it.

He laughed.

She fell silent.

So he whipped her across her belly and she screamed in pain.

“Better,” he said.

“You’re a sick person, Drake. You sick creep!”

“Who, me? Hey, who was it who put whose head in a beer cooler and weighted it down with rocks? *I’m sick?*”

“Go ahead and kill me, because if you don’t, when Brittney comes she’ll let me go.”

He cocked a pistol finger at her. “You know: I thought about that. I get a few seconds of warning before the changeover, so what I’ll do is kill you as soon as I feel it coming on. But until then . . .”

He slashed at her again. Again. Again, and she tried not to scream, but she did, she screamed: she screamed and he laughed.

“Sam will burn you to ashes!” she gasped out.

“That would be the only thing lacking now,” Drake said, sounding genuinely

disappointed. “I wanted him here. It would be way better if he could see. If he could watch. It’s a hard thing to watch someone you care for being hurt.”

She heard something there. Something.

“Who did you watch being hurt?” she asked, desperate to engage him, stall, distract . . .

“Really? You want to get into my head? Figure out what makes me *me*? You’re not here to play shrink. You’re here to suffer.”

He slashed at her again. Astrid cried out. The pain was too awful to endure. She wished for unconsciousness. She wished for death. She sobbed quietly.

Petey.

Jesus.

Anyone . . .

But she felt no presence. Just the psychopath in the shadows cast by firelight.

“Gaia wanted me to bring you to her. So she could use you as a hostage. But I don’t take orders from her anymore. I wasted too much time following. I followed Caine. I followed the gaiaphage. But she’s not the gaiaphage, not really, not in that body, not with that face . . .”

“She’s pretty,” Astrid managed to say, gasping out each word. “Is that what you hate? Is that the sickness in you?”

Drake barked out a laugh. “Do you have any idea how many shrinks have tried their words on me? You think you can do better? It has to be some sickness, some syndrome, right? Put a label on it and everything will be all better.” He laughed at the idea. “Are you as clueless as the rest of them, Astrid? It’s simple. Here it is, here’s the answer, Astrid the Genius: it’s fun to hurt people. It’s such . . . it’s such joy, Astrid. Such joy realizing that all the power is yours, and all the fear and pain is right there, in your victim. Come on, smart girl, you know what it’s called. You know the word for it. Come on, say it.” He cupped his hand to his ear, waiting for the word.

“Evil,” Astrid said.

Drake laughed, threw up his hand wide, and nodded his head. “Evil! There you go. Good for you. *Evil*. It’s in all of us. You know that, too. It was in you. I saw it in your eyes as you looked down at me in that cooler. Evil, hah. We all want to have someone powerless beneath us while we stand over them.” His voice had grown husky. “We all want that. We all want that.”

He slid his whip arm over the painful wounds on her belly.

“I wish Sam was here to see. But he’s probably dead by now.” He sighed. “And if he’s not, well, we’ll tell him, won’t we? We’ll tell him every little detail.

“Be sure to scream,” he said.

“You too,” she said.

He looked at her, puzzled, his face inches from hers.

Astrid jerked her face forward, clamped her teeth down on Drake’s nose, and bit down as hard as she could.

At Sheridan Avenue a group of kids broke and ran from a house. Gaia cut them down.

Sam turned his palms inward, toward himself. He couldn’t turn them far enough to aim for his own head or internal organs. His only chance was to use the light to cut through a leg artery and bleed to death.

Better than watching his power be used to murder.

“If there really is a God, forgive me,” he said, and clamped his palms to his thighs and . . .

The pain was searing. The beams of light burned into his thighs.

Gaia was on him in a flash. She twisted his hands away as Sam roared in pain.

Had he done it? Had he cut an artery? Could it be over now, please, please could it be over now?

“No, no, no, I don’t think we can have that,” Gaia said.

Sam struggled against the chains, struggled against her grip on him, but his strength was nothing compared to hers.

Gaia slapped him hard, a backhand blow that sent him reeling into a state that was neither conscious nor unconscious. He was vaguely aware of Gaia rewinding the chain, this time tightly binding his hands together so that they were palm to palm. This left his shoulders free, but he had missed his only chance.

He began to cry. He had failed. Finally, permanently, he had failed. And hadn’t he always known he would? Wasn’t that why he had resisted for so long becoming the leader?

Wasn’t that why he’d been relieved, finally, to turn much of it over to Edilio?

He wasn’t a hero. He never had been. School Bus Sam, the great myth that had caused kids to turn to him at first, that hadn’t been heroism: it had just been quick thinking and self-preservation.

Everything he had done, it wasn’t courage: it was all just a desperate effort to stay alive, wasn’t it? In the end wasn’t that all it was?

And now, failure.

Failure, and he would watch them all die, one by one, die because he had chosen life over heroic sacrifice.

Gaia had tired of levitating him before her as some kind of prize. She was angry now. She threw him twenty feet down the highway. He landed on his back and smacked his head against the concrete.

She ran up to him, laughing, and kicked him, crushing ribs and sending him rolling down the highway, chains clanking, crying like a baby, beaten.

“Aaaaahhhh!”

People running. Sam could barely see them through the smoke. Three girls who had never been anything important in the life of the FAYZ, three regular kids, Rachel, Cass, and Colby, three sisters who had never fought, never been in on any of the battles, had just kept their heads down and done what work they were given, now rushed madly, hopelessly, at Gaia with tire irons and clubs.

Gaia seemed startled. She raised one hand and froze them in place. “Look at this,” Gaia marveled. “Are they brave or stupid, Sam Temple?”

Sam blinked tears from his streaming eyes.

“Let them—” he started to say, but began to cough.

“I couldn’t quite hear that,” Gaia taunted.

Sam closed his eyes. Through his eyelids he saw a flash of green light. There were no cries. Just the wet-sandbag sound of bodies hitting the ground.

“Open your eyes, Sam Temple,” Gaia said. “I cut them in half. With your light. With your power.”

She pushed him with her foot to send him rolling.

“On to the rest. On to—” She fell silent suddenly. He opened one soot-streaked eye and saw that Gaia was looking around, nervous. Like she felt someone watching her.

“Where is the whip hand with my hostage?” she asked aloud. Then to Sam, as if he might have the answer: “Where is Drake with the sister of Nemesis?”

“Astrid!” Sam gasped.

“Hear me, Nemesis!” Gaia cried, choking then recovering. “Hear me! I have your sister!”

“I don’t see her,” Sam said.

“Never worry, Sam Temple: Drake will get her.” But Gaia chewed at her thumbnail, a very Caine gesture Sam had seen before.

“You seem scared,” Sam said.

Gaia snarled at him and raised her own hands as if ready to kill him herself. Then she laughed shakily. “Ah-hah. Trying to provoke me?”

But she was rattled. She had felt something. She had felt something she didn’t like.

“Nemesis?” Sam asked her.

Gaia didn’t answer. She was done playing games. She was done enjoying herself. She grabbed Sam’s chain and began dragging him down the road, then broke into a run.

Caine and Diana docked the boat at the marina. The fire, which had been to the north, now seemed to be everywhere at once. Bursts of sparks rose high from the direction of the highway. The air was filled with ash, hard to breathe, hard to keep your eyes open. Impossible to believe that somewhere the sun was still shining.

“Should I tie off the boat?” Diana asked.

Caine didn’t answer. He levitated himself from the boat to the dock. Then, with equal ease, he lifted the missiles in their crates and landed them safely on the wood planks.

“Give me a hand,” Diana said. She held her hand up to him.

He looked down at her. “I don’t think so, Diana.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

He raised one hand and pushed the boat gently away from the dock.

“What are you doing?” she demanded.

“Going out in style,” he said.

“Caine. Caine. What are you doing?”

“There’s no good reason for both of us to die.”

“Caine, you’re being silly,” she said as firmly as she could.

“You know this is the end. I want to be with you. I don’t want our monster child hunting me down and finding me at the end all alone.”

He shrugged. “I know you asked Little Pete to take you. I know you offered yourself up.”

“How? How did you know?”

He shrugged.

“But he didn’t,” Diana said. “He didn’t, which—”

“Yeah. Well. He had a better offer.”

“What?” The word came out as a sob. “Caine . . . No. No. We do this together.”

“Nah, I don’t think so,” he said with strained nonchalance. “I think it will be like it is with Gaia. I think when Little Pete does his thing, well, I don’t think I’ll be around then. So I don’t see how we do this together.”

“Don’t, Caine. Don’t you do this,” Diana pleaded.

“You have to understand, Diana: I’m not trying to be noble. It’s just the only way I have to beat it. The gaiaphage. It thinks it has me. It thinks it owns me. It thinks it cracks the whip and I have no choice but to obey. And the pain . . .” He shrugged again. “So. So, we want old green-and-evil to be surprised when it finds out, right?”

“Caine, this is not what we . . . No. No.”

He stretched out his hand and she rose through the air, almost as if she was flying to him.

They were in each other’s arms, Diana shaking, Caine strangely calm.

“Sam’s probably out there somewhere being his usual heroic self,” Caine said. “I can’t let that boy save the world all alone. I’d never live it down.”

“Don’t do this, baby, don’t do this,” Diana begged as she stroked his face.

“Listen to me. I wrote something, back on the island. Two somethings, actually. One is for you to give to Sam, if he makes it out somehow, or Astrid, or someone, you know, trustworthy. And the other is for you. If you get a chance, you know, go and get them from the desk in that room.”

“We’re not beat yet, Caine,” she pleaded. “We haven’t lost yet.”

“I was a king for a while. I wasn’t a very good one. I wanted all kinds of things. I wanted, well, you know. Power. Glory. To be feared. All that good stuff. But you know what? When the gaiaphage did it to me, when she made me cry and grovel and beg for mercy, I realized: There’s no end to this for me. There’s no end to the FAYZ. If we get out alive, there’s still no end. And what happens to me out there in the world?”

“No, you’re wrong: they can’t blame you for everything that happened.”

He laughed. “Yeah, well, actually, they can. A king, a warrior, whatever I was, I want to go out in a blaze of glory. I’ve risen as high as I’m ever going to. And if I survive, I’m just going to end up as prisoner number three-one-two-whatever. You coming to see me on visiting days.”

“But I will come see you. And I will wait for you.”

“No,” he said firmly. “I get my big finish. And you get your life. Move on, Diana.”

“You’re not fooling me,” she said. “I know why you’re doing this—”

“Because I want to win,” he said.

“Yes.”

“And because I want to write the end of my own story.”

“Yes. And because you want redemption,” she said raggedly.

He shrugged. “If that’s what you want to believe.”

“And because you love me.”

Suddenly Caine was unable to say more. He waited, trying to master his emotions. They kissed, with Diana’s tears running down his cheeks. Then, using the power he had, he pried her loose and gently deposited her in the boat, now drifting out of reach of the dock.

“Hey,” he said. “Don’t tell anyone about those last two, okay? You tell anyone who ever asks: right to the end, Caine was in charge.”

He turned away quickly, lifted the deadly cargo, and trudged toward a burning

Perdido Beach.

“Not yet, Little Pete,” he whispered, touching his cheeks and feeling her tears on his fingertips. “Not just yet.”

TWENTY-NINE

42 MINUTES

GAIA BURNED AND killed the length of the access road before turning right on Sheridan Avenue. Heading for the town plaza. At the corner of Golding she paused to attack the school.

She burned it in detail, firing the deadly light through long-shattered windows. She burned until the smoke began to billow and terrified kids who had sheltered there came running out.

Some made it.

Others did not.

She turned on Alameda, still carrying Sam by his chains, dropping him when she wanted both hands free to spread destruction.

“You definitely got the most useful power, Sam,” she said. “I’m very glad you’re still alive.”

Many of the houses in the area were already burned, others had been knocked down, but a few still stood, and these Gaia burned out. People fled like rats, leaping over fences, piling over mounds of rubble, and for Gaia it was almost a game, a shooting gallery.

People screamed and died. Or just died.

The counterattack came at the corner of San Pablo and Alameda.

Guns fired from the roof of the town hall.

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

Carefully aimed, but it was a hard shot in the smoke, with cinders in the air. Gaia fired back but was no more successful.

Gaia grabbed Sam in one hand and raised him over her head like a human shield. The firing from the rooftop stopped.

“Keep shooting! Keep shooting!” Sam cried.

“Shoot! Shoot! Shoot!” Edilio’s voice. Sam couldn’t see him. Was he behind the fountain?

Now again the firing started, but from a different angle, from the center of the plaza. Bullets whizzed past. Bullets pinged off concrete.

Gaia fired back with her free hand, but she wasn’t hitting anyone, either.

It was a melee, a madness of guns blazing and light beams searing and all of it swathed in swirling smoke.

Edilio had cleared the streets—there were no cars for Gaia to toss around, nothing to grab and use . . . except for the rubble of the church. She dropped Sam, ran to her left, and as she ran . . . *disappeared*.

Sam knew immediately what had happened. Bug.

Somehow Gaia had learned about Bug. Had she been saving up for this moment? No, that would be insane. She’d have used the power earlier if she’d known. Someone had to have told her.

Drake?

But Drake was dead. Wasn’t he?

With invisibility Gaia would regain the edge she'd lost with Brianna's death. Invisibility would leave Edilio's people baffled and—

"Paint!" Edilio roared before losing his voice to a fit of coughing. Then, recovering: "*Hit her!*"

Two kids hidden in the church's rubble threw balloons of paint. They splattered ineffectually on the ground. More were thrown from rooftops, and then from nothingness came the green light, killing one kid, burning the belly of the other. The wounded boy broke and ran.

But the deadly beams had revealed Gaia's location.

"Jack!" Edilio managed to gasp, and Jack rose from behind the fountain and bounded in a single jump from the fountain to the steps of the church. He spun, two spray-paint cans flowing, and yes, there! Just a swatch of red and a patch of white that gave away an arm and an impression of a torso.

The guns didn't need an order. They blazed. From the day care, from the McDonald's, from the roof of the town hall.

But now Gaia had broken timber and slabs of plaster and steel support beams to work with. Using her telekinetic power she threw a whirlwind of debris at the fountain. There were cries in the dark, and the firing from there stopped.

Then a bullet fired from the roof of the town hall caught her ankle, and she bellowed in rage and pain. The blood that sprayed was all too visible.

She snatched up a crossbeam that weighed hundreds of pounds and played her laser fire down its length, let it go, grabbed it with her telekinetic grip, and threw it through the front door of the town hall.

The firing continued.

Sam saw it and heard it from his position in the middle of the street.

Suddenly Jack was beside him. He lifted Sam in his arms and ran.

It was a bullet that caused Jack to fall. One misdirected bullet hit him in the lower back. His legs went out from under him. He dropped Sam, then fell atop him.

"Jack!"

"I'm okay. It's just . . . my legs. I can't move my legs."

Sam saw fear in Jack's eyes. Jack, who had never wanted the power he was given.

Jack who had never wanted anything but to play with his computers.

"Oh, man," Jack said.

He seemed to pass out for a moment, but then rallied. "Let me get you out . . .," he said, and blood was in his mouth now, cutting off speech.

Jack, Computer Jack, as he had long been known, gripped the chains around Sam and pulled with all of his incredible strength.

He coughed blood onto Sam's chest.

A single link in the chain snapped.

And Jack was gone.

Sam squirmed, trying to work free of the broken chain. He saw Gaia, nothing but a creature poorly outlined in paint and blood, a human-shaped swirl within the smoke, raise high a steel support beam, ready to hurl it with Jack's strength.

Her arms bent, the beam fell, and she leaped out of the way and ran, as bullets flew, into the church.

Drake screamed. The sound of it, the wind from it, was in Astrid's face. She bit down as if she was hanging on to life itself by her teeth. She was.

Drake punched her in the side of the head.

She blocked him, softening the blows with one battered hand.

He tried to wrap his whip hand around her throat, but she was too close and he couldn't pull away, and her teeth were not just holding, they were cutting into flesh, ripping at him like a dog.

He tried to stand up, tried to get leverage, but he couldn't get distance, and now instead of blocking his blows she gripped his head with both hands and forced her thumbs into his eyes.

Drake bellowed and squirmed and beat at her, and her mind was swimming, the blows were taking a toll, bashing her temple; his whip was trying to lash at her exposed legs, but no, no, she wasn't going to let go, and her jaw was clenched with all the strength she had and her top teeth and bottom teeth were getting closer, closer, and Drake screamed curses, but he couldn't get away.

Her thumbs pushed his eyeballs, hard-boiled eggs, dug past them, dug around them, dug fingernails into the space between eyeball and skull.

And she was screaming, too: the words weren't clear, her mouth was full, and her jaw was clenched painfully, but it sounded just a bit like, "Die! Die!"

All at once, with a shake of her head, his nose ripped off.

Her thumbs were up past the knuckle; she felt the fragile bone cage crack.

Then, in one convulsive move, she pushed him off her. He rolled onto the floor, stood, and she backed away. She spit out the nose.

One of his eyes dangled from a thread.

The other oozed something like jelly from a split in the pupil.

Between them the lizard's tail whipped madly.

He swung his own whip, lashed the air, but blindly. He caught the chandelier, ripping loose some of the Barbies hung there.

He wasn't dead. She didn't have the power to kill him. He would regenerate: he would come for her again.

And then, there was Taylor.

The appearance of the golden-skinned girl, the anomaly-amongst-anomalies, just froze Astrid. It was utterly incongruous.

Taylor looked down at the lashing, screaming, losing-it Drake and said to Astrid, "Peter. He sent me. To save you."

"Thanks," Astrid gasped, and picked bits of Drake's nose out of her teeth.

"He's very weak. I think he only has minutes—"

"Little Pete? I asked him to take me," Astrid said.

Taylor shook her head, a too-slow, reptilian move. She seemed to be enjoying the way her hair flowed across her neck and forehead. "Not you. He is scared of you. Peter is scared of you. But he likes you."

"I get that sometimes," Astrid said. "Tell him thanks."

Taylor disappeared from the room. Astrid turned to flee, hesitated, picked up a chair, and slammed it down on Drake's head as hard as she could, breaking one of the heavy legs in the process.

Then she fled.

Somewhere close by, guns were firing.

The plan, such as it was, had worked.

Gaia was in the church. The idea had been that she would be drawn to the only debris she could use as weapons. The hope would be that she'd go all the way in.

And now Dekka sprang her trap.

Gaia stood, bleeding, visible now as she relinquished Bug's power of invisibility. She stood gasping from the pain, seething in rage, frustrated again, and surrounded, literally surrounded, by all the heavy, hard, sharp-edged debris of the semi-collapsed church.

Dekka was at the altar.

"You murdered someone I love," Dekka said, and raised her hands high. Thousands of pounds of wood and steel, plaster and glass, pews, roof tiles, and accumulated filth rose in a rush, a pillar of swirling junk.

Up and up, and Gaia rose with it.

Forty feet up and Gaia had recovered her wits well enough to take aim at Dekka, and then, just as Gaia began to fire, Dekka dropped it all.

WHOOOMP!

It fell and bounced and crashed and splintered with a noise like the end of the world.

Dekka jumped back to avoid being hit, but she still took a dozen small impacts from flying debris. She couldn't see Gaia, but she wasn't taking chances. She raised high the debris and dropped it again.

And raised it and dropped it again. Hammer blows.

On the fourth attempt Dekka saw Gaia floating above it all, bloodied, bruised, her clothing torn, her hair filthy, but not dead, very much not dead.

Gaia looked down at her, aimed, held Dekka directly in her line of fire, and laughed. "Very clever," Gaia said. "It almost worked. But I won't kill you. Not yet."

Gaia floated calmly down as the mess settled around her, slowly, under her control now.

Dekka drew a pistol. Gaia flicked it easily from her grip and sent it flying away.

"Anything else?" Gaia asked.

"You're getting weaker," Dekka blustered.

"Mmmm. So are all of you."

"You can't afford to kill me."

"No. But I can do this." Gaia used her father's power to raise a pew, a long, heavy oak bench, and blast it into Dekka's chest, pinning her against the altar.

Dekka lay still.

Gaia turned away, limping and in pain. Why was this proving so hard? She'd lost speed, now she'd lost Jack's strength, and worst of all, most dangerous of all, she'd lost control of Sam. He had gotten away, and he might come for her again. Or he might take his own life. Either way . . .

She had to heal herself and quickly.

Little Pete was doing something . . . something . . . she could feel it. She could feel his resolution. She could feel his anticipation. But she could also feel his ebbing strength.

So many left to kill. She would have to hurry.

The firing had stopped.

Edilio couldn't see much of anything, blinded by smoke tears, trying to make sense of a battlefield. All he knew was that the firing had stopped when Gaia disappeared into the church.

Then he saw Jack and Sam. Sam had rolled Jack over so that instead of the small hole in his back what was visible was the exit wound, an explosion of viscera poking out through his shirt.

"Jesus, Mary," Edilio said.

From the church came the loud crash of debris falling.

Edilio dropped down beside Sam. Sam was alive but looked almost as bad as Jack. There were burns on his body and arms. His shirt was tatters, a filthy, bloody rag.

Edilio began pulling at the chains.

"Edilio," Sam gasped.

"I got you, man," Edilio said.

"Do it, Edilio."

Edilio shook off the request, pretending not to know what Sam was asking.

From the church a second loud crash.

Voices above called out, "Edilio! What should we do?"

"Do it, man. I tried. I don't think I have the strength to try again, man: do it for me," Sam begged.

"Dekka's got her," Edilio stalled as he pulled the last chains away. The links tore at burned flesh as he pulled them free.

"She'll come out of there and—"

"Damn it, I can't kill you! You're asking me to commit murder!" Edilio exploded.

Sam stared. Nodded. "Yeah. Give me your gun, Edilio. I think I can do it with a gun. The other thing, though . . . It'll be easier with—"

"I can't do it," Edilio said, shaking his head, weeping.

"She's going to kill everyone—"

A third crash from the church.

"I'm going to go shoot her myself," Edilio said.

"Edilio!" Sam called after him.

Edilio spun around, stabbed a finger at Sam, and said, "I'll kill. I'll kill. That's enough. It's enough! I won't murder!"

"It's all the same," Sam muttered weakly, as Quinn appeared out of the smoke.

Edilio took two steps back, grabbed Quinn by the shoulder, and said, "He's not in charge. Don't listen to him. You understand? You listen to me."

Whether Quinn understood what was going on or not, he knew the power of conviction when he saw it. "Yes, sir," he said.

"Tell you what, Sanjit," Lana said.

"What, Lana?" he asked.

"See this?" She held up her cigarette. "This will be my last one. I promise."

Sanjit shook his head slowly. "What are you talking about?"

Lana looked around the shambles of a room. There were twenty-one victims: Some

were dead and hadn't been cleared away. Others would live, for now, at least. There were more in the room next door. More still in the hallway.

Lana felt hollowed out. The endless hurry to save this one or that one, the sleeplessness, the soul sickness that came from seeing death and disfigurement, it was all finally too much.

And still she felt it. She felt its mind, its will, its glee as it killed.

She took a long drag on the cigarette and blew the smoke out, savoring it. "Last one."

"What are you doing?"

Lana put her hand on Sanjit's face. He made a tentative reach for the pistol at her waist. She was surprised. She pulled it out and handed it to him.

"No, not that," she said, smiling. "I don't think that's in me. Different fight I have in mind. The time has come. Listen to me, Sanjit. I'm going outside. Don't follow me."

She left then, walked down the hall, ignoring the pleas of the desperate, down the stairs, and out onto the lawn.

She took another drag, squared her shoulders, closed her eyes, and said, "This is going to hurt."

Gaia's goal was not a fight. Her goal was slaughter.

Kill them all. Kill every last one of them.

Gaia did not rush out to meet the guns in the town plaza. She blew out the remains of the back wall of the church and stormed onto Golding Street.

Time. She felt it slipping away, and it would take too long to hunt down the shooters right now, too inefficient. Kill more sooner, that was the right move. Kill more now.

Seconds and seconds and she couldn't run because there was a bullet in her leg and that leg did not want to run; it wanted to fold up under her.

Never mind, she would heal herself when they were all dead, and then, yes, there would be time, but her body, the body she had stolen, filthy weak sack of blood that kept leaking out, it was weakening, wasn't it? She could feel it. The blood leaking out of her. Had to stop and heal that, at least, had to stanch the bleeding.

She bent over and pressed her hand against the wound, hobbling down the street as she did, an awkward, laughable-looking creature.

And Nemesis was doing something, moving, preparing, wasn't he? She could feel him. He was a shadow of himself, weak, a ghost. Just die!

Just finally die, you stupid little boy!

The blood still leaked between her fingers. Why wasn't the healing working?

She reached the highway and there were people, kids, running in panic toward the brilliant lights of the barrier.

A burned-out gas station.

An overturned FedEx truck.

Panicked children.

"Die!" she roared, and fired after them. "Die!"

Her body woozy. And the healing . . . too slow. Why wasn't . . .

And then Gaia knew. She felt the mind pushing against hers, fighting her. Not

Nemesis.

No, the *Healer*. Wrestling her for control of the healing power. Blocking her. Wanting her to bleed to death! Trying to kill her!

Gaia struck at her, invisible tentacles through the indescribable space that connected them. She saw the Healer in her mind, saw her face, her actual human face as though she was there on the road standing between Gaia and her victims.

Lana. Something was burning in her mouth. Smoke was coming from her nose. And she was unafraid. She was ready for the pain the gaiaphage could cause her.

Well, then, I wouldn't want to disappoint!

She saw Lana staggered by the lashings of pain, the burning thing falling from her mouth, hands pressed against the agony in her head, but fighting back, draining Gaia's strength, delaying, *delaying*.

With every last ounce of her strength Gaia struck at the Healer. She felt the Healer's pain, felt the Healer's weakening, and Gaia crowed, tilted her head back, and howled at the red-glowing sky in triumph.

Someone was shooting at her from behind a truck.

She rolled the truck over, crushing the shooter.

This time when she bent down to touch the bleeding hole, it sealed. The blood would no longer flow, but she could do no more; the healing power was ebbing fast as Lana pushed back again, fought Gaia for control.

How does she fight me?

Still time. Still time. Nemesis had not done it yet. Nemesis had not found his home. Not . . . just . . . yet.

And there it was finally: the barrier. It would mean showing herself. Not at all how she had planned this. Her body, her face, they would be revealed. It would make things much harder later, when Nemesis died and she walked free. But she had been stymied, attacked, burned, shot, hurt again and again, nearly killed . . . No time for half measures. No time for clever plans. Time to ensure that Nemesis died and took this trap of a place down with him.

Like spooked cattle the humans gathered there. So many of them. So easy to slaughter.

They cowered. They cried for mercy. It would be easy.

Gaia felt the peace inside her. She felt the joy of the moment. She felt victory.

I don't need to heal if I can kill.

She raised her hands. Spread them wide apart.

And fired two beams of killing light. One to the left. One to the right. Slowly she brought the beams toward the center.

The people screamed as the beams began to slice into those on the left and right flanks.

They climbed over one another to escape.

Seconds and it would be over.

Connie Temple stood in the press of frantic parents and hangers-on and thrill seekers who spread across acres of land beside the barrier.

She had been worrying for days about what would happen if the barrier came down. She'd occupied her mind with concern for the future, and with the gnawing

guilt from fearing that she might have sent her closest friend's daughter to her death.

Now she watched the TV monitors on the satellite trucks with mounting despair. They had showed satellite footage of the spreading conflagration. They'd shown the video of a little girl ripping a man's arm off and eating it. They'd shown endless "interviews" with terrified, starving children. There had been long-distance drone video of something that looked like a monster made of stone and, in these last hours, what was undeniably a gun battle in Perdido Beach.

The whole world was watching. And the whole world was helpless. In the end it wasn't going to matter at all what she said or did or felt. In the end it would all come down to the kids in that awful fishbowl.

She thanked God the barrier had been opaque for so long: had she been able to see, had the world been able to see, the parents would have been driven mad.

She stood now just ten feet from the barrier. Almost within reach were children crying, screaming soundlessly, begging.

And just beyond them a lovely teenaged girl, with arms raised, who now fired bright beams of light. The dazzling green beams struck the barrier and passed through the transparent force field.

The people outside never realized their own danger until the left-hand beam burned through a National Guard Humvee.

And then, yes, everyone then knew that death was coming not just for their children, but for them, too.

Like a herd of panicked cattle they surged away from the barrier, screaming.

Connie Temple did not move. She couldn't. She had to watch this final slaughter. A witness, even if she died for it.

On the left and on the right, the first of the children inside burned. And the first of the adults outside screamed as hair caught fire and limbs fell severed to the ground.

And something large pelted down the hill, a monstrosity, a nightmare creature.

THIRTY

25 MINUTES

YEA, THOUGH I walk . . . valley of the shadow of death . . .

Orc was not a great runner. He weighed hundreds of pounds. His gravel legs were not quick.

His staff will comfort me . . . Angels and so on . . .

But the downslope helped a little. And the smoke didn't bother him so much. Maybe his throat was different.

I will fear no evil . . .

She didn't hear him coming.

The Lord is my shepherd . . .

A hundred yards left.

Her lights burned slowly toward the center, and she threw her head back and laughed and laughed as the crowd outside panicked and ran and died and the crowd inside crawled over one another like desperate animals to escape the slaughter and were cut in half.

Thou art with me. Not just thy staff.

Thou.

Orc hit Gaia like a truck.

She flew. Hit the ground facedown amid the panicked children. The impact rolled Orc into the barrier, squashing a girl beneath him. He hit the barrier and it sent a shock through him, so he jumped up, raging against it, searched for Gaia, saw her rolling onto her back, saw her face distorted with fury, saw her raise her hands.

He was off balance, trying to get to his feet, when she fired.

Both beams hit him mid-chest.

Orc collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut.

He lifted one massive stone fist to try and shield the patch of human skin that still covered part of his mouth.

People inside and out scattered in panic. The air was filled with screams.

Orc was on his knees. Two holes had been burned right through him. He looked at Gaia, who stood now, enraged, and advanced on him.

"I'm not scared of you," Orc said, slurring the words like in the bad old days when he was a drunk. "I'm going to dwell . . . I forget . . . forever."

Gaia advanced on him, but the crowd, the huddled, terrified mass, had used the distraction to break and run.

Gaia felt the fear creeping back in.

And then the missile exploded against the barrier.

Lana stumbled down from Clifftop. It felt like forever since she'd been away from that foul room, that now-terrible place.

She could see in the distance fire eating at the edge of Perdido Beach. She tasted the smoke.

"Not much point quitting if the air's going to be one big cigarette," she muttered.

Her battle was over. She felt it inside. The gaiaphage had ceased to struggle against her. She had fought and won her own little war.

Suddenly Patrick came bounding up beside her.

“So, Sanjit sent you to look after me, huh?” She reached down and patted his head. “You and me, boy. You and me.”

There came a loud explosion, a flat but powerful sound, just off to her right.

There would be people hurt by that kind of a thing.

For the last time, the Healer headed toward the sound of suffering.

The missile hit the barrier immediately behind Orc. His body took most of the blast.

It blew him apart. TV cameras caught the moment when a thousand little stones went flying like shrapnel. The rock was blown from his back and much of his chest, from his shoulders and most of his head. It was as if he was a mud-crusted shoe knocked against the wall. The mud gravel was knocked away in patches.

His internal organs were crushed. His eyes bled. For a terrible moment a body, the body of a young man, with pink flesh rising from still-stony legs, tried to push itself up off the ground. Surely just a physical instinct, surely not a conscious effort, because he could not be alive.

Charles Merriman, long known as Orc, tried to rise, and instead fell dead.

Orc’s massive body had shielded Gaia from the worst of it.

She lived, still, but the shrapnel and the fire had stripped the skin from much of her body, a terrible mimicry of Orc’s own destruction.

She was a creature of blood, red from head to foot.

But she lived still.

Sinder ran from the terrible scene. She tripped over bodies, got up, and ran some more.

She glanced back once and saw Orc hit.

She could hardly breathe for the beating of her heart and the sobbing that tore at her.

Her feet pounded earth, tripped, stood, ran, glanced back again and saw Gaia coming.

A beam of light shot past Sinder and she screamed. A girl to her right made a soft gasp and fell. The hole in her neck was smoking.

Feet on concrete now, the road, running. Clifftop! To the left, but uphill, and Gaia was coming, and another deadly beam of light, so close Sinder felt the heat of it on her cheek and cries and shouts and the sound of people gasping for breath, gagging in the smoke.

And suddenly, Caine rising up behind a wrecked car. He was holding something long and white.

The panicked crowd parted around him. Sinder ran on, glanced back, saw Gaia still running and firing, and Caine grim and steady.

“Damn,” Caine breathed. “That is one tough monster Diana and I made.”

The rest of the missiles were off to the side of the road in their crates. He kind of didn’t think he’d get a chance to reload.

Edilio was there, unpacking a second missile, but nope, Caine thought, Edilio isn’t

going to get the shot, either.

Gaia saw him.

“You,” she said.

“Yeah, me,” Caine said, disappointed. “Well, I thought it was worth a try. Better than my backup plan.”

“Your backup plan?” Gaia asked.

Caine nodded. And for a moment he hesitated, seeing Diana in his mind.

Diana.

A good final thought, that.

“Now, Little Pete,” Caine said. “Right now.”

Little Pete was ready, but he was still worried. Living inside a body had not been good for him. His brain had been his enemy all his life. And the only peace he had ever known was in this fading twilight unreality he had shared with the Darkness that called itself the gaiaphage.

But the gaiaphage had attacked him. The gaiaphage had hurt him, even while crooning softly to Pete to just fade away.

Little Pete didn't remember much that his parents and sister had taught him back before. But he remembered that it is not okay to hit.

It is definitely not okay to hit.

Then he had seen the ghostly shapes of all the people starting to flicker and disappear. All those game pieces, all those avatars, just disappearing, and they were being destroyed by the Darkness, weren't they?

The gaiaphage wasn't just hitting Little Pete.

Which was wrong.

It was hitting other people, too.

He had tried to fight back using Taylor, but he'd been too weak to make her whole, and too weak to stop the slaughter.

And then he'd heard his sister calling to him. *Little Pete, take me and fight it.*

But he didn't really trust her very much.

Other voices had drifted to him, calling him through the emptiness, even as the Darkness tried to tell him no, no, Nemesis, just fade, fade into nothingness and be happy.

A girl he didn't know had called to him. *Take me. I deserve to die.*

But then had come the voice that said, *Come on, you little freak, wherever the hell you are, whatever the hell you are, let's get this done with.*

Pete had seen the scars on him, the fresh marks of the gaiaphage.

You and me. Blaze of glory, Little Pete. Blaze of glory.

Pete didn't know what a blaze of glory was, but it sounded good.

Now, Little Pete. Right now.

The Darkness was wrong. It was not time for Peter Ellison to fade away. It was time to hit back.

Caine had not wanted to feel it happening. He'd wanted it just to be over quick. Bam, over. But he did feel it.

He felt like maybe he'd stepped into a hot shower and was having that lovely sense

of relaxation as the water warms the back of your neck, and you close your eyes, and you sigh away the night's bad dreams.

It was warm: that was the surprise. It was warm and it made him sigh. It was like . . . well, not exactly like anything he'd felt, but maybe closest to the way he'd felt after he made love to Diana, and lay beside her, and smelled her, and felt her breath on his cheek, and she would put a hand on his cheek and . . .

You're giving me a good memory to go out on, aren't you, Pete?

Well, good choice, Caine thought.

Huh. I can't feel my body, Caine thought.

Huh.

I . . .

Diana was wet and cold. She had finally jumped into the water and swum to the dock and pulled her battered self out of the water.

She had run as well as she could through smoke, through the streets toward the sounds of panic and death. She'd run into Sam. He was in the plaza calling for Astrid.

"Astrid! Astrid!"

He spotted Diana.

"Have you seen her? Have you seen Astrid?"

"No, Sam. Have you seen—"

They had heard the swoosh of the missile. And they had listened hopefully for the explosion.

For a second's time they had held on to hope. And then had come the sound of screams.

Sam looked half dead, but he took her hand, and she took his, and they ran toward the sound. Whether he was her protector or she was his, it didn't really matter. They were two scared kids, running the wrong way, running toward the sound of death, while fire chased them through the streets.

Gaia still stood. She still lived.

A million years in the blackness of space.

Fourteen years in a hole in the ground, growing, mutating, becoming the gaiaphage.

Not dead yet. The body it inhabited was beyond agony, but the gaiaphage lived, and it could still kill.

And there before her was Caine, somehow smiling. Not a cynical smirk: a genuine, happy smile.

And there, rushing up the road, Diana yelling, "No, Caine. No!"

Even Sam, still alive, excellent: her powers would be undiminished.

"Hello, Darkness," Caine said.

Gaia's face fell. Her bloody, feral grin faded to be replaced by lips drawn tight in fear. Her killer blue eyes widened as she looked at Caine who was no longer Caine.

"Nemesis," Gaia said.

THIRTY-ONE

11 MINUTES

A **MILLION YEARS** ago, and a bit more, a lifeless moon had been infected with a carefully structured virus. That moon had then been exploded, sending out countless fragments, seedlings, like the seeds of a dandelion, blowing across the billions of miles of space.

It was to bring life where no life existed. It was an optimistic gesture. But in one place, that hopeful experiment went terribly wrong. One seedling hit a nuclear pile on the planet Earth, and dragged shattered bits of human DNA into the crater.

Slowly the virus and the chromosomes and the radiation cooked up a monster. The virus spread, but instead of creating life it began to infect the very fabric of reality. It spawned mutations. It created its own unhinged version of evolution.

Some living things were affected, and others were spared.

One was especially vulnerable: a strange little boy whose own brain made him a prisoner, whose own mind made life painful and terrifying. Unbearable.

It would be a while before the gaiaphage began to suspect that it had unwittingly created its own nemesis. When the warping of physical laws sent the nuclear plant spiraling into a meltdown, that little boy, overwhelmed by sensory input he could not understand, sirens blaring and screens flashing warnings, created the barrier. In a flash of inconceivable power Peter Ellison simply removed all the noisy, troublesome grown-ups, silenced all that overload, and protected himself as best he could.

The gaiaphage's malignant effect was contained. The world had found its defense against alien infection. The antibody was a then-four-year-old boy with powers made possible by the gaiaphage virus.

Nature had found the way to defend itself.

And now, at last, gaiaphage and Nemesis stood facing each other.

"Why didn't you just . . . fade?" Gaia demanded plaintively.

"You hit me," Nemesis said. It was a little boy's voice coming from Caine's mouth. "And that's not okay."

Sam let go of Diana's hand, seeing Astrid ahead. He saw her blond hair from the back and almost wept with relief. But then he saw that she had been hurt.

"Astrid!" he cried.

But she held up her hand, silencing him. He looked past her then and saw Caine and Gaia, no more than a hundred feet apart.

Diana stepped closer.

"Diana, move back." Edilio, trying to get her to a safe distance.

Diana shook her head. "I don't think so, Edilio. He wanted a blaze of glory. He deserves an audience."

Gaia raised her hands, fury and fear on her blood-red face. Blistering green light blazed from them.

At the same moment, Nemesis returned fire, but his light came from every direction at once. It was a white light that shifted into blue and purple and red. It came

down as lightning from the sky, a thousand thunderstorms.

The entire FAYZ burned as bright as a star.

Gaia's light hit Nemesis as she herself absorbed the awesome fire.

The girl and the boy burned bright and yet still fired.

And burned and still fired.

Their hair and clothing were gone.

Their flesh crisped.

Their eyes boiled out of their skulls.

And still the terrible light.

Their legs melted beneath them like candles. Holes appeared in their torsos. And only when they fell, each into a heap of glowing ash, did the light die.

"Well," Diana said, with tears running down her cheeks. "That was a blaze of glory."

There was a moment, a frozen, eternal moment, when no one breathed, and no one spoke.

Then: a sudden rush of wind. Wind! There had been no wind since—

"*RUN!*" Sam cried. "The fire! Run!"

Wind blew in like the leading edge of a hurricane, rushed into the disturbance created by the sudden disappearance of the barrier. The wind fed the flames, set small fires roaring to new heights, turned bigger fires into pillars of flame that shot high into the sky.

The population of the FAYZ, choked, terrorized, and battered, rushed in a wild panic down the highway. It was a stampede, and Sam was nearly swept along. But he held on to Astrid, held on to her and looked at her face and saw the bruises.

"Who?" he demanded.

"Sam, it doesn't matter; it's over," Astrid shouted to be heard above the roar of wind and fire.

"Who?" he demanded again.

"Drake. He wasn't dead. He may still not be dead. But Sam, there are police now, and—"

But Sam had broken free. He walked into the swirling smoke.

Astrid could barely breathe, but she would not let him walk away. Not when the end was this close. It was Edilio who left her no choice. He grabbed her around the waist and hauled her bodily down the highway until she stopped struggling.

"He told me to take care of you," Edilio said.

Those were the last words they could speak, as the smoke thickened, choking them, blinding them. They staggered on together, seeing nothing but glimpses of people rushing by, just following the ribbon of concrete beneath their feet.

Then the smoke lessened. The wind was blowing itself out, and a countervailing breeze now flowed from the south.

And then, there they were, Astrid and Edilio, standing at the edge, at the very end of the FAYZ wall.

And then through.

Out.

One hundred and seventy-one people—babies in arms, toddlers, kids—ran and

stumbled into the arms of waiting parents. They ran to be scooped up by waiting paramedics.

Some kids ran, ran down the road, down the highway, screaming past the TV trucks, past the flashing lights of emergency vehicles, pushing and shoving through the well-meaning and the ill-intentioned alike because there was no safe distance for them, not until they could no longer hear or see any part of the place.

THIRTY-TWO

0 MINUTES

SAM FELT THE heaviness in his lungs lessen. His eyes were still on fire, but he was able to open them.

He didn't know where to look, only the person he was looking for.

"Drake!" he yelled. "Come out and fight me, Drake!"

The person who appeared was not Drake. Lana and Patrick stepped out of the smoke.

"The barrier is down," Sam said. "Fire's coming fast. Have you seen Drake?"

"Last I heard he was dead. But in this place . . ." She shook her head and looked somewhere between amused and resigned. "Sam, if the barrier's down, you don't have to do this."

"He hurt Astrid," Sam said. "She's alive. But he took her. He hurt her."

"And here you are the tragic hero, after all," Lana said dryly. She was unusually droll for Lana. The world was ending and she was being witty. "You may find you need this. And you know what? I think I'm done with it."

She slipped something heavy into the waist of his jeans, and then walked away with her dog.

Sam felt the butt of Lana's automatic pistol. Was it true? True that he didn't have to do this? True that he needed the gun?

"Drake!" he yelled.

He heard the town burning. Snap. Crackle. Pop. The heat was intense, right on the line between barely tolerable and not. It was like standing too close to a fireplace, feeling it dry your skin, and knowing that another five degrees and you'd no longer be dry: you'd be burned. There were sparks everywhere in the air. The whole town would burn.

"*Drake!*"

The whip slashed his back, a pain like being branded by a hot iron.

He spun, and Drake's fist smashed him in the face.

Sam went down on one knee, aimed his hands, and fired.

Nothing happened.

Drake seemed as shocked as Sam. He made a single, sudden laugh. "Not so dangerous now, are you, Sam?"

Drake struck again, and the whip burned across Sam's shoulders. Sam lurched forward.

"I had fun with your girlfriend, Sam," Drake said.

Sam tried again. But the light did not come. He was powerless. He drew the pistol.

"Come on, you know better than that, Sam, Sam, the hero man. You know bullets don't kill me."

"Gaia's dead. The FAYZ is ended," Sam said, and leveled the pistol at Drake's face. "So I don't know what will work and what won't. Why don't we find out?"

But a line had appeared around Drake's neck. It was blood red, like a gruesome smile. Like the mark a hanged man might bear. It was widening, a gap forming

between what had been Drake's neck and Alex's neck.

Drake hadn't noticed yet. He grinned and slashed Sam hard, landing the whip's blow again across his shoulder, curling around to tear at his back.

But when he retracted his whip arm, it was shorter. A foot-long segment had broken off. It lay like some nightmare worm on the sidewalk.

"No," Drake said, but the sound of his voice was weakened by air sucking in through his neck.

Drake tried to strike again, to bring Sam down, but his whip arm was limp; it barely moved. It was curling from the end, seeming to crisp like parchment held too close to the fire.

"I'll get out of here," Drake said in a fading whisper. "I will find her. And I will make it last for days, Sam. I'll make her scream, Sam. I'll make her—"

Sam's finger tightened on the trigger. It would be good to pull it. Drake was disintegrating before his eyes, and yet still, *still*, it would be good to pull that trigger. To feel the gun buck in his hand. To see the impact.

At that moment, as Sam stood poised between shooting and not, Drake's head toppled off its grafted body and hit the ground.

One. Two. Three. Four. And the body collapsed.

The terrible whip arm looked like the skin a snake sheds during molting.

Sam picked up Drake's head. The eyes fluttered, as though there might still be life.

Sam walked stiffly up the steps to the church, where the fire burned hot. He forced himself forward into the heat, feeling the hair on his head turn crisp, eyes so dry he couldn't blink. And tossed Drake's head into the flames.

"Okay," he said to no one at all. "Now, I can get the hell out of here."

THE TOLL

THREE HUNDRED AND thirty-two kids between the age of one month and fourteen years had been confined within the FAYZ.

One hundred and ninety-six eventually emerged.

One hundred and thirty-six lay dead.

Dead and buried in the town plaza.

Dead and floating in the lake or on its shores.

Dead in the desert.

In the fields.

Dead of battles old and recent. Of starvation and accident, suicide and murder.

It was a fatality rate of just over 40 percent.

AFTERMATH 1

SAM TEMPLE WAS taken by helicopter to a hospital in Los Angeles, where there were specialists there in burn injuries. He wasn't consulted: he was found on his knees, obviously in shock, extensively burned. EMTs took over.

Astrid Ellison was taken to a hospital in Santa Barbara, as was Diana Ladris.

Other kids were shared out among half a dozen hospitals. Some specialized in plastic surgery, others in the effects of starvation.

Over the next week all were seen by psychiatrists once their immediate physical injuries were addressed. Lots of psychiatrists. And when they weren't being seen by psychiatrists, they were being seen by FBI agents, and California Highway Patrol investigators, and lawyers from the district attorney's office.

The consensus seemed to be that a number of the Perdido survivors, as they were now known, would be prosecuted for crimes ranging from simple assault to murder.

First on that list was Sam Temple.

Astrid tried many times to phone him from her hospital room, but calls to his hospital were being blocked. No, the nurses explained each time, they could not get him to the phone. No, they could not deliver a message. Not their fault. Talk to the district attorney's office.

Astrid was able to visit Diana, who she found out was being cared for in the same hall, just three doors down.

Astrid walked slowly, cautiously, her body stiff from bruises and stiffer still from the bandages on her whip burns. They'd given her a cane to use.

She was not going to walk with a cane.

They'd offered her heavy-duty painkillers.

She'd rejected them, restricting herself to a few ibuprofen. The last thing she wanted was to be out of her mind, off in la-la land, when shrinks and cops and family were forever questioning her.

She had not told her parents about her own role in her brother's death. She had only told them that he had died a very good death.

Astrid had seen their pain. She had also seen their hidden but still-visible relief. They would not have to readjust to their out-of-control autistic son. That had hurt the most. But who was she to judge?

She found Diana's room. Diana was sitting in her bed using a remote control to idly flip through the channels on the wall-mounted TV.

"You," Diana said by way of greeting.

"Me," Astrid said.

"Can't believe it," Diana said. "All this time. And there's still nothing on."

Astrid laughed and lowered herself slowly into a chair. "You know how they say hospital food is so awful? Somehow I'm not having that reaction."

"Tapioca beats rat," Diana said.

"I never minded rat as much as that dog jerky we were getting for a while. The stuff Albert had them flavor with celery salt? That was the culinary low point for me."

"Yeah, well, I had a lower low point," Diana said, sounding angry. Or maybe not

angry, maybe hurt.

Astrid put a hand on Diana's arm, and Diana did not shake it off.

"How is Sam?" Diana asked.

"They won't let me talk to him. But they're going to release me in a couple of days. I'll find him."

"Won't your parents try to stop you?"

Astrid considered this, then barked out a laugh. Diana joined in.

"Oh, my God, we have parents again," Astrid said, wiping away a tear. "We're kids. We're teenagers again."

A nurse poked her head in. "Listen, ladies, it's not visiting hours, but there's someone here to see you."

"Who?" Diana asked.

The nurse looked left and right like she was afraid to be overheard. "It's a young woman. She seems very determined. In fact, I almost called the police because she scared me."

Astrid and Diana exchanged a look.

"Black or white?" Astrid asked.

"She happens to be white."

"Lana!" Astrid and Diana said in unison.

"You'd better send her in," Diana said. "You don't want to say no to Lana. That would be, um, reckless."

"And she's saved more lives than every doctor and nurse in this hospital," Astrid said.

Lana arrived a moment later, looking strangely clean, with her hair cut, and wearing clothing that was not stained or filthy or cut or patched together. She did not have a pistol. She did not have a cigarette.

"Oh, my God," Diana said to Astrid. "Lana's a girl."

"Yeah, hysterical. Cracking me up," Lana said with her very familiar, very hard-core snarl. "What, there's only one chair?"

"Who have you seen?" Astrid asked.

"I saw Dekka. She's with her folks. And if I said she wasn't happy about things, that wouldn't really begin to cover it. She wants to see Sam. Everyone wants to see Sam. Talked to Edilio on the phone. He's in hiding. Worried about *la migra* coming for him and his family."

"Edilio is in hiding," Astrid snapped. "Edilio has to worry about being kicked out of the country. Our Edilio."

"He's got a volunteer lawyer—"

But Astrid wasn't done. "They should be putting up statues to Edilio. They should be naming schools after that boy—no, no, I'm not going to call him a boy. If he's not a man, then I'll never meet one."

Lana nodded approvingly, obviously enjoying and sharing in Astrid's outrage.

"And you, too," Astrid said to Lana. "No, don't even wave me off."

"Whoa," Lana said. "I had a power. I didn't make that happen. I used it. No big deal."

"I don't suppose you can still . . .," Diana began, waving a hand toward Astrid's bandages.

Lana shook her head, not sadly, but with evident relief. “Nope. No, I cannot. I am no longer the capital ‘H’ Healer. I am Lana Arwen Lazar, period, *finito*. Just some girl with a weird name. I thought maybe I might miss it. Guess what? No. No, not even a little. You know what I do now? I eat. And I sleep. I throw sticks for Patrick. And then I do it all over again. That’s my plan, for the rest of my life. Eat, sleep, play with dog.”

“Have they got the shrinks all over you?” Diana asked.

“They tried,” Lana said with a curl of her lip. “I don’t see them coming back at me anytime soon.”

All three laughed at that. But Diana grew serious. “Honestly? I don’t mind the therapy much. I, uh . . . I don’t know.

I just. It’s okay. For me, anyway.”

They fell silent then. The only sounds were of gurneys in the hallway, a child crying somewhere, a male and a female voice laughing flirtatiously.

Astrid looked at Lana, now leaning against the window, and Diana, lost in thought, and reminded herself that at times she had hated Diana. She had told Sam to kill her if necessary. And she had disliked Lana as a short-tempered bitch who sometimes abused her privileges.

She let her mind move beyond these two. Orc, who had been the first to kill in the FAYZ, the first murderer. A vicious drunk. But someone who had died a hero.

Mary. Mother Mary. A saint who had died trying to murder the children she cared for.

Quinn, who had been a faithless worm at the start and had been a pillar at the end.

Albert. She still didn’t know quite what to think of Albert, but it was undeniable that far fewer would have walked out of the FAYZ without Albert.

If her own feelings were this conflicted, was it any wonder the rest of the world didn’t know what to do with the Perdido survivors?

“Sorry, I kind of dragged the mood down,” Diana said wryly.

“I’m going to write something,” Astrid said.

“What do you mean?” Lana asked.

“I’m going to write about us. About all of it. Maybe a magazine story, or, I don’t know. Maybe even a book. But what happened to the . . . No, wait. No, that’s not even the right way to start. I don’t want everyone acting like we were victims. I’m going to tell the story. All of it I know, anyway.”

The other two girls looked at her, and to Astrid’s surprise neither of them told her she was being a fool.

“Might be a good idea,” Lana conceded.

“Maybe,” Diana said a bit more hesitantly. “It’s going to all come out anyway. One of us should tell the story. In fact, Astrid, it should be you. Just tell all of it. *All* of it. The bad, the worse, and the worst.”

“And maybe one or two good things,” Astrid said.

“One or two,” Diana agreed softly.

Eight hundred and nine homes had been destroyed. Three dozen businesses had been wiped out. Forty square miles of forest burned. Nearly five hundred cars, boats, buses damaged, almost all unsalvageable.

The cost of it all, plus the cost of cleanup, lost revenues from business, and the rest

was estimated to be three billion dollars. At a minimum.

Albert Hillsborough had come through uninjured. He had come through famous. He'd been interviewed on CNBC and by the *Wall Street Journal*. He'd been invited to a party at the home of the chairman of Goldman Sachs. Important people kept telling him they had their eyes on him.

Even his family treated him strangely, and the truth was, he just didn't fit with his family anymore. He didn't fit, somehow, in the world of shared bedrooms and dinner-table discussion and school.

School. He knew he had to go. But really? He was going to be a high school freshman?

Really?

He rode now in the backseat of an SUV. There was a golden-arches logo on the side. Behind them a second SUV, and behind that two semis loaded with everything the modern filmmaker needed.

McDonald's had volunteered to pay for Albert's college if he would appear in some short videos about the importance to him of keeping the Perdido Beach McDonald's alive as long as possible.

All the way up from Santa Barbara, where his family now lived, he watched flatbed trucks hauling wrecked cars away from Perdido Beach. And in the other direction went the construction equipment. The cleanup was under way. It was like the aftermath of a hurricane.

But civilian cars were still not allowed on the highway. No one was yet allowed to drive through Perdido Beach: it was still too dangerous. They were still finding bodies, not to mention the occasional straggler. Just that morning an injured, traumatized boy had been found wandering in the forest, near death.

Helicopters buzzed overhead. Surveyors and news reporters and filmmakers. The National Guard camp was still in place. The flashing police and ambulance lights were gone, and most of the TV trucks had moved on. But there were still armed men scowling from behind sunglasses.

Yeah, where were all you tough guys when we could have used you?

As they neared the edge of what had been the FAYZ, Albert began to feel uncomfortable. He squirmed in his seat and kept his eyes focused inside the SUV.

They'd assigned him a handler, a public relations person named Vicky. She was a pretty young woman, a mother herself, she said, and so she felt for the kids, what it must have been like. She had chatted with Albert on the drive up, and every time she had said how she understood, how she could imagine, how terrible . . . he had changed the conversation.

Now she noticed that his hands were fists and his jaw was clenched tight.

"Is something the matter, Albert?"

"No. I'm fine."

"I can imagine that coming back here—"

"No. All due respect, I don't think you can imagine."

By the time they crossed the line, he felt his lungs straining. He was taking air in forced gasps.

He saw the first buildings, very few intact anymore, most of them burned. And he saw, in memory, at least, himself with the life oozing out of him from bullet wounds,

months earlier but so fresh in his mind. He remembered knowing that death was very, very close. He remembered the certainty that he would be extinguished.

“Would you like a bottle of water?”

He looked at the bottle. Stared at it. “I’m fine.”

“Are you hungry? It’s been a while since lunch.”

Lunch had been at a McDonald’s in Santa Barbara. It had been so clean. It had smelled like food. It had sounded happy and alive. In the bathroom, the toilet flushed. Water ran in the sink.

He had passed a trash can on the way back to his table and stopped just to look at it. It was full of food. Leftover burgers, the last few fries, smears of ketchup on cardboard. He’d had to hold back tears when he saw it.

“Candy bar?” Vicky asked, and held a Snickers out to him.

At that moment they slowed to turn off the highway and head cautiously, carefully, through recently bulldozed streets, toward the town plaza. That’s where the McDonald’s was. His McDonald’s.

A candy bar. People had killed for less.

“I used to sell rats to starving kids,” Albert said.

Vicky looked alarmed. “I wouldn’t say that to the camera.”

“No,” Albert agreed.

“You did what you had to do. You’re a hero,” Vicky said.

It took a while to set up the equipment in the plaza. Albert would not get out of the vehicle. He made an excuse about enjoying the air-conditioning. About wanting to listen to the radio.

But as the afternoon wore on, they called for him to come onto the set.

The set.

They had cleaned it up inside. Not all the way, no, they couldn’t do that without weeks of work. But the debris, the filth, the pitiful decorations had been artfully rearranged. The service counter was gleaming incongruously. The menu had been uncovered and one panel replaced. The obscene graffiti had been cleaned off or painted over.

It was the sanitized version of the FAYZ.

He overheard the director talking to one of the cameramen. The cameraman was explaining that he couldn’t get a good long shot on the exterior because someone had set up a fake graveyard right in the plaza.

“Kids just playing around, I guess, but it’s morbid; we’ll have to get rid of it, maybe bring in some sod to—”

“No,” Albert said.

“We’re almost ready for you,” the director assured him.

“That’s not a fake graveyard. Those aren’t fake graves. No one was *playing around*.”

“You’re saying those . . . those are actually . . .”

“What do you think happened here?” Albert asked in a soft voice. “What do you think this was?” Absurdly, embarrassingly, he had started to cry. “Those are kids buried there. Some of them were torn apart, you know. By coyotes. By . . . by bad people. Shot. Crushed. Like that. Some of those kids in the ground there couldn’t take it, the hunger and the fear . . . some of those kids out there had to be cut down from the

ropes they used to hang themselves. Early on, when we still had any animals? I had a crew go out and hunt down cats. Cats and dogs and rats. Kill them. Other kids to skin them . . . cook them up.”

There were a dozen crew people in the McDonald’s. None spoke or moved.

Albert brushed away tears and sighed. “Yeah. So don’t mess with the graves. Okay? Other than that, we’re good to go.”

AFTERMATH 2

THERE WERE POLICE guards outside Sam's hospital room. They stepped in occasionally to make sure Sam hadn't disappeared. For the most part they were nice enough. And the check-ins were less and less frequent.

Police and prosecutors were not allowed to talk to Sam without either his mother or a lawyer present. His mother, Connie Temple, was also on TV fairly frequently, talking up the just-formed FAYZ Legal Defense Fund. So he had long stretches of time when he was not being questioned by police, prosecutors, or parent.

He spent those free hours trying not to think too much. And yet thinking too much. There was a tsunami of memories waiting to drown him.

Video of the final hours of the FAYZ had done a lot to change attitudes about the survivors. People had seen the entire dome glow red with fire. They had video, lots of video, of Gaia. They had confirmed that the murderous teen they'd seen at the end was the same person as the child who had ripped a man's arm off. And eaten it.

Something about watching video of a murderous girl using lasers to slaughter children—and to kill three adults on the outside—had made people wonder whether the kids in the FAYZ deserved just a little slack.

Prosecutors did not believe in slack. They wanted an arrest and a trial. They had one target above all others.

At the moment that target was eating tacos his mother had brought in despite hospital orders against outside food.

"Oh, God, this is good," Sam said as juicy beef and crisp lettuce dribbled out onto the tray on his lap.

"Still not tired of eating?" Connie asked him.

"I will never be tired of eating. I'm going to eat until I'm huge. Food, hot water, clean sheets. At least I'll get those three in prison."

Connie pushed herself up out of the chair, angry. "Sam, don't talk that way."

He bit into a second taco. Chicken this time. "Mmm. They want someone to put away. They need a scapegoat. It's me."

"You're not being serious with me. I'm trying to treat you like an adult."

Sam put the taco down. "Are you? You're trying to treat me like an adult? Okay. Let's have an adult conversation, Mom. Tell me how I had a brother, but you kind of forgot to mention it. Tell me how that happened. A lot of bad things happened because of that."

"This isn't something—"

"He gave his life in the end. Caine. Your son. He's dead. You've seen the video."

"Yes. And I feel terrible—"

"Don't get me wrong: he was a bad person. Your son Caine. He was a very bad guy. You want a murderer? Well . . ." He stopped himself. "In the end, he gave himself up to Little Pete. He took the hit. Atonement, I guess. Redemption. Whatever."

"Then tell that to the district attorneys. Tell them it was Caine. There are plenty of other kids out there talking, putting it on Caine."

Sam pushed the food away angrily. He slid his legs over the side. His mother

moved to help him, but he waved her off. “No. Don’t. I’m fine.”

He stood up. His legs were fine, at least. It was just the burns from the red-hot chain. It took so much longer to heal when you didn’t have Lana. Half his body was covered in bandages and a webbing that held them in place.

“I want to see Astrid,” he said.

“You know they won’t let you talk to anyone, Sam.”

“As soon as I’m better. They’re not keeping us apart.”

“Sam, you have more important things to worry about than your girlfriend.”

He turned on her, suppressed anger now boiling up. “My girlfriend? Like we’re talking about someone I dated? Like some girl I took to a movie?”

“I didn’t mean—”

“Tell me. Tell me *why*.”

Connie looked around, spotted the pitcher of water, and poured a trembling cup. “This isn’t going to put me in a very good light.”

Sam said nothing. He had waited so long to find out. Since the first surprise realization that he and Caine were brothers. Fraternal twins, born just minutes apart.

“There was . . . There were . . .” She took a sip, shook her head slightly, trying to get up the nerve, unwilling to look at him. “I was married. I was not faithful.”

Sam blinked. “Caine and I were born at the same time.”

“Yes. Yes. There was my husband. He worked at the power plant. He was a very intelligent man. Very . . . good-looking, kind, decent. But I was young, and I wasn’t very smart about such things. I had an affair with a very different man. He was exciting. He was . . . forgive me . . . sexy.”

Sam winced. The images this conversation was calling up were not ones he wanted to see. He was suppressing enough; he didn’t need more.

“So there was my husband, and the other man. And when I realized I was pregnant, I also realized either of them might have been your father, or David’s.”

“David?”

“Caine. His adoptive parents gave him the name Caine. To me he was David. When your—when my husband died . . . when he was killed . . .”

“Mom. Did he die in the power plant?”

She nodded. “The meteor strike.”

Sam looked at her. She tried to meet his gaze and decided instead to drink more water. Sam hesitated. Did he want to know? What good would it do?

“Why did you give Caine up? David. Whatever you called him.”

“Maybe it was some kind of postpartum depression. I mean, I didn’t think so, but maybe it was depression. Some kind of delusional state . . .”

Sam waited.

“He was evil. Sam, that’s what he seemed to me. He was a beautiful baby. But . . . but I could *feel* something . . . some connection to a terrible darkness. He scared me. I worried I might hurt him.”

“It was your husband who died in the meteor strike,” Sam said, carefully not using the word “father.” “The man I knew as Dad.”

“Yes.”

One question remained.

“Tell me this,” Sam said, looking past her, out the window at the Southern

California sun. “Caine and I don’t look much alike. One of us must have looked more like your husband. And one of us must have looked more like the other man.”

Connie Temple swallowed hard. She looked strangely young and vulnerable to Sam. He could almost see a teen mother there.

“David . . . Caine . . . was the spitting image of my husband.”

“Okay,” he said, feeling deflated.

“But it’s not that simple,” Connie said.

It was purely by accident that Edilio Escobar happened to see the TV report of a boy found wandering in the burned-out forest of the FAYZ.

He was eating. He’d been eating more or less without stop, because he couldn’t focus on anything else, couldn’t think about the future, or even tomorrow. He couldn’t talk to his parents. His mother just cried a lot, and his father, well, his father didn’t really want to know. His father had work. His father was not ready for stories of his son’s life.

The truth was, as much as they loved him and welcomed him back, he was a liability to them. He was a big neon finger pointing at the family of undocumented workers.

They were living in a trailer in Atascadero. Too many bodies in too little space. It was clean, but it was also an overstuffed, hot steel box surrounded by other overstuffed, hot little boxes, many of them also full of people who did not need the attention that Edilio drew.

Edilio would have to figure something out. But he was exhausted. All the way down to the marrow, he was exhausted.

His mother kept the beans and rice and lemonade coming. *Someday, Edilio*, he told himself, *you will get tired of beans and rice and lemonade. But it won’t be anytime soon.*

He looked up from the narrow table, saw his mother at the stove, then looked above her to see his automatic rifle wedged in atop the cupboards.

Full of food and hollowed out. That’s how he felt. He was wondering if they could get away with selling the gun. Ought to be worth a hundred bucks or so. That would maybe take some of the strain off his family’s finances.

He had not told his mother about himself, his personal self. He’d kept the stories simple. He’d answered the mostly clueless questions of friends and neighbors. He was polite, but not volunteering much. Not arguing when they came up with wild theories. Sooner or later it would all come out.

But he might not come out. It was one thing to be gay in the FAYZ—people had bigger worries on their mind than who liked who. It was another thing to come out to his family. And it would be still more difficult if he had to be openly gay in the completely unfamiliar, macho culture of Honduras.

La migra could come at any moment. There were plenty of people who didn’t like the idea of Edilio as some kind of folk hero. Too many interviews with survivors had mentioned him as a leader in the FAYZ. He was conspicuous.

“I can’t eat any more,” Edilio said, pushing the plate away.

“You want to go out and play?” His mother posed the question in Spanish. She tried to speak English with him, but mostly she ended up back in her comfort zone.

Go out and play.

Despite himself, Edilio had to smile. Like he was a six-year-old. “No, Mama, I’ll just see what’s on TV . . .” And that’s when he looked up and saw the video.

The video showed a helicopter landing in a clearing in the charcoal forest. A young man, a boy, at first running away, then caught by paramedics. Resisting. Then, it seemed, breaking down, before being finally led by kind hands to the helicopter door.

There was no audio: the TV had been muted.

Edilio’s heart stopped beating the instant he saw the frightened figure. The video was shaky and poorly focused. The boy’s face wasn’t clear. But Edilio knew.

The chyron at the bottom of the screen said the unidentified survivor had been taken to a hospital just south in San Luis Obispo.

“I need to go to SLO,” Edilio said.

“San Luis? *Por qué?*”

Edilio sighed. For several minutes he just couldn’t speak. His heart felt ten times its normal size. He had given up. A voice in his head berated him: *Why did you give up, Edilio? After all that’s happened, didn’t you learn not to give up?*

He picked up a paper towel and pressed it against his eyes. He no longer felt as if he was on the verge of a heart attack. He felt, rather, that he might be on the verge of an uncontrollable laughing fit.

“Mama, sit down, okay? I have something kind of big to tell you.”

Connie left after telling Sam all he had asked her to tell him. Not what he had wanted to know, but that’s what happened when you got answers.

He sat in his hospital bed feeling winded. Feeling lost.

He wanted to talk to Astrid. He needed to talk to Astrid. But what could he do? They were blocking his calls and—

“Really, Sam?” he demanded of the empty room. “That’s all it takes to stop you now?”

The hospital was an older building on the University of Southern California campus, massive and imposing, but it still had windows that could be opened for fresh air.

An open window. Sheets. He stuck his head out and looked down. He was twelve floors up, but just two stories above the roof of a wing of the hospital.

He went into the tiny bathroom and removed most of his bandages. It hurt. He was not healed. And what he planned to do next would hurt even more. But the scabs probably wouldn’t do more than leak a little. That was nothing: *Remember when . . . No, Sam, he told himself, don’t remember when.*

He dressed in his street clothes, quickly wound the sheets into a loop, slid it over a pipe near the window, and without pausing to worry too much about it, swung out and slid down.

He pulled the sheet down after him. Then he bent over and let the pain subside. Yep. That hurt, all right.

He had left a note on his bed. The note said, *Poof!* He hoped the police guards would find it funny.

On the roof of the secondary hospital wing he could literally walk up to windows in the main building. He saw patients inside. One of them, an old man, waved. Sam

waved back. A woman just stared. He smiled.

He found one window open. It was to a doctor's office. He slid inside and took a quick inventory. In the closet was a suit on a hanger. No wallet, no money, unfortunately. Frustrating. It was hard to do much here in the out there unless you had money.

There was a computer. It was password protected, but the password turned out to be "password."

"People did not get any smarter while I was away," Sam said with a laugh.

Now, the question was: Who would help him? And who could he find a number for? He only remembered one number from the old days, and what were the odds that Quinn had a phone? Or that it was the same number?

He opened a messaging app.

It's Sam. I need help.

He went on then, searching the office while waiting, expecting a notification that the message was undeliverable. He found five dollars in a junk drawer in the doctor's desk. Yay. The doctor wouldn't even notice.

There came a ding. A reply! It said, **Sam? Sam T?**

Hey, Fisherman, Sam typed. I'm busting out of the hospital.

The reply came quickly. **Obviously to go surfing.**

Sam laughed. Wow. Just how much would he love to be surfing right now?

Before he could answer, another message came. **On my way. Q.**

Quinn did not have a car and he was too young to drive. But he did have a mother who had already heard Quinn's account of life in the FAYZ.

"This is the same Sam?" she asked. "Our Sam? Your Sam?"

"My Sam," Quinn said.

"Get in the car."

Quinn kissed her spontaneously for that. It was an hour's drive. The Gaither family had relocated to Santa Monica, where his father had a better job than before. In fact, to Quinn's amazement they lived just ten blocks from the Santa Monica Pier.

Sam had instructed them to enter the parking structure, but not the one nearest the hospital. That one would be searched. Instead he'd given them the location of a parking structure adjoining a different campus building.

As instructed, they drove to the third floor, southeast corner, and honked their horn, just a couple of taps.

Sam emerged from a parked car and slid into the backseat behind Quinn.

"Dude," Quinn said.

"Thanks, Mrs. Gaither," Sam said. "I don't think they've even noticed I'm gone yet. But they may have, so I'm just going to duck down behind the seat."

"Don't you worry about it," Mrs. Gaither said. "This campus is wide open. We'll get you out of here."

They drove for half an hour and then, finally, Sam raised his head cautiously. Quinn tossed him a stocking cap. "Put that on."

They were on a freeway jammed with cars, doing a stop-and-go, heading north. Toward Santa Barbara. Toward Astrid.

Mrs. Gaither turned the radio on to NPR, and naturally Quinn reached over to

switch to a music station. But he was a little slow, and when he heard what was being reported, his hand froze.

It was a press conference. The voice speaking was calm, assured, audibly intelligent, and very familiar.

“My name is Astrid Ellison. A-S-T-R-I-D. E-L-L-I-S-O-N.”

“And most of you know me.” This was Todd Chance. “And you know my wife, Jennifer Brattle.”

Astrid was seated between them. Between two of the most famous people in the world: the couple sometimes known as Toddifer. They were both beautiful, especially—from Astrid’s perspective—Todd Chance. About fifteen years too old for her—okay, twenty years too old—but still and all a startlingly handsome man.

And Jennifer was cute. In her own way.

It was Jennifer who spoke next. “As you all know, our property, San Francisco de Sales Island, where we maintained a home, was part of the FAYZ. Our children, thankfully, are all alive and well and now at our other home in Malibu.”

“We returned to the island just yesterday and found that it had been occupied during the time we were . . . away.” And that seemed to be the end of her prepared remarks, because she looked beseechingly at Todd.

“The house is fine. Well, a little bit of a mess. And our yacht, well . . .” He pushed his fingers back through his mane of blond hair. “That’s not the point, though. We’re here to talk about what we found. I mean, two letters that were left in a desk in our bedroom.”

There were eight TV cameras in the overly gold hotel ballroom where the press conference was being held. Microphones were mounted in front of Todd, Astrid, and Jennifer.

Astrid still wore a few bandages. And an amazingly clean cotton shirt and totally intact jeans and shoes. Shoes that had not been looted from some stranger’s home. Impractical shoes you couldn’t easily run in.

These are not fleeing shoes, Astrid had realized when she put them on.

“One of the letters was addressed to Diana Ladris, another survivor,” Todd continued. “We’ve given that letter to her. It’s private. But the other was addressed to us. To me and to Jennifer, which was a surprise, obviously. It’s um . . . well, actually, we’ll just have Astrid read it. She knew the boy who wrote it.”

I knew him, all right, Astrid thought. I wanted him dead. And then this. The FAYZ continued to teach her lessons.

She picked up the photocopy of the letter. It was handwritten.

“Dear Mr. Chance and Ms. Brattle. Sorry about the mess. Great bed. Loved it. As a matter of fact, loved the whole house. Actually, I tried to kill your kids when I found them here. Yeah, funny story. Maybe not funny, hah hah.”

Astrid heard nervous laughter from the media people, or maybe just from the hotel staff who were hovering around the edges grabbing a glimpse of the Hollywood royalty.

“Anyway, I missed and they got away. I don’t know what will happen to Sanjit and that stick-up-his butt Choo and the rest, but whatever happens next, it’s not on me. However . . .”

Astrid took a dramatic pause.

“However, the rest of what happened was on me. Me, Caine Soren. You’ll probably be hearing a lot of crazy stories from kids. But what they didn’t know was that it was all me. Me. Me me. See, I had a power I never told anyone about. I had the power to make people do bad things. Crimes and whatnot. Especially Diana, who never did anything wrong on her own, by her own will, I mean. She—and the rest of them—were under my control. The responsibility is on me. I confess. Haul me away, officers.”

Astrid suddenly felt her throat tightening, although she’d read the letter many times already, and knew what it said. Rotten son of a . . . And then *this*.

Redemption. Not a bad concept.

Well, partial redemption.

“It’s signed Caine Soren. And below that, ‘King of the FAYZ.’”

It was a full confession. A lie: a blatant, not-very-convincing lie. But it would be just enough to make prosecutions very difficult. Caine’s role in the FAYZ, and the reality that strange powers had actually existed in that space, were widely known and accepted.

Of course Caine had enjoyed writing it. It was his penultimate act of control. He was manipulating from beyond the grave.

“Now,” Jennifer said, interrupting the long silence, “we want to discuss the deal we’ve just signed with Astrid to develop a book and then movie, telling the true story of the FAYZ.” She began reading off a prepared statement. “Astrid Ellison was a central figure, right from the start. She had long since earned the nickname Astrid the Genius, and . . .”

And Jennifer went on, and then Todd, and Astrid smiled when it seemed appropriate, and made a humble face when that seemed appropriate, and her thoughts went far away, far from the ballroom and the cameras.

She didn’t even realize that tears were running down her cheeks until she felt Todd offer her a tissue.

“Oh,” she said. “Sorry. I was just . . . It happens sometimes—”

And then she looked up, toward someone at the back of the room.

Diana’s letter was much shorter. Just four lines.

Diana:

I’m sorry for hurting you. I know I did.

I’m most likely dead now, and I guess if there’s any kind of fairness in the afterlife I’m probably in hell getting roasted. But if that’s where I am, I want you to know, I still love you. Always did.

Love,

Caine

She read the letter over and over again. Each time crying. Each time laughing.

The news networks and the local TV stations all led with the same footage. An obviously moved, very pretty young woman with blond hair and alert blue eyes

looking up. Eyes widening. Stumbling a little as she pushed back her chair and went around the table.

Shaky cameras turning too fast, following her as she ran to a boy at the back of the room who pushed through the press of people to reach her.

The embrace.

The kiss that went on for a very long time.

AFTERMATH 3

THREE MONTHS AFTER THE FAYZ

FIRST THERE WAS Caine's patently false "confession." Then there was the fact that the FAYZ Legal Defense Fund racked up three million dollars in its first two weeks. Then there was a judicial panel that took statements from eminent scientists and concluded that the FAYZ was in fact a separate universe and thus not covered under California law.

Finally, there was a shift in public opinion following the involvement of the two popular movie stars, the McDonald's documentary starring Albert Hillsborough, the likelihood of a major Hollywood feature film, and the kiss seen round the world. Polls now showed 68 percent of Californians wanted no criminal charges brought against the FAYZ survivors.

The kiss alone would have wrecked the career of any prosecutor or politician who had anything bad to say about Astrid Ellison or Sam Temple.

The survivors by and large went on with their lives.

Three of them committed suicide.

An unknown number found their way to alcohol and drugs.

None were unscathed.

But most found a way to survive, as they had for so long alone. They rediscovered their families; they attended school and church; they attended counseling sessions. They walked through shopping malls in wonder. They were occasionally seen to break down crying in the middle of a grocery store.

The phrase "It's a just a phase" fell out of use.

Lana went to Las Vegas to live with her parents. They refused to let her carry a gun. She eventually got used to it. Her powers were gone. When she cut her hand while peeling carrots, she couldn't do anything about it. This caused her to laugh for a solid five minutes, during which her parents thought she'd lost her mind.

Dekka Talent's family took her in, still not happy about her "lifestyle," as they called it, but unable to summon the nerve to berate her. Dekka could no longer control gravity, except by virtue of being the most impressive person in any room she entered. Dekka made contact with Brianna's grief-stricken parents and told them about their daughter. They gave her a photo of Brianna, which Dekka framed and hung beside her bed.

Edilio Escobar was reunited with Roger. It was months before Roger recovered, but Edilio waited. During a routine traffic stop for a broken taillight a highway-patrol officer checked the IDs of Edilio's parents and announced that he would have to report them as suspected undocumented aliens. Then he recognized Edilio and insisted on putting out a call to fellow officers. Four other patrol cars pulled up, and it was made clear that as far as the CHP was concerned, they'd be damned if they would take any action against Edilio or his family. Edilio ended up signing autographs.

It took a while to organize a public memorial for the kids of the FAYZ. By the time it was held in Pismo Beach, California, many of the kids had scattered. But Sam, Astrid, Diana, Quinn, Edilio, and Dekka, as well as dozens of others, various

celebrities, politicians, and locals, were there. Lana was not. She sent word that Patrick had an important deworming scheduled. Albert said he was busy taking meetings.

Sam was asked to speak and adamantly refused. He was mortally sick of being referred to as the hero of the FAYZ. Astrid had become the unofficial spokesperson for all of them, so she gave a short speech. In it she talked about Orc, Dahra, Duck Zhang, Howard, E.Z., Jack, Brianna, and Little Pete. Others too numerous to mention.

“There were heroes in the FAYZ. My little brother was one of them, although he didn’t even understand the word ‘hero.’ And there were villains. Most of us were a bit of both.”

Orc’s parents did not attend.

Diana had been at loose ends since getting out of the hospital. She’d been taken in by parents of FAYZ kids but hadn’t really had a place of her own.

After the service they grouped together with lemonades and iced teas in their hands, all of them dressed in “nice” clothing. None of them was armed. Not even so much as a spiked baseball bat.

“Nice speech,” Diana snarked. “Are you going to play yourself in the movie?”

“The director considered it,” Astrid said. “But it turns out I’m not quite the Astrid type. It was a somewhat surreal moment. *Koyaanisqatsi*.”

That earned her a collective sigh and many rolled eyes.

“I’m not asking her,” Dekka said.

“It means ‘life out of balance,’” Astrid explained. “*Koyaanisqatsi*.”

“And yet no one asked,” Dekka pointed out.

“You guys hear about the camper?” Edilio asked. “Way up north of the Stefano Rey. Says he saw this girl. Golden skin. Saw her and then, poof. Not there.”

“There are going to be stories like that for years,” Astrid said. “The FAYZ will spawn a thousand legends and myths. Not to mention that it’s screwed up the study of physics pretty well.”

“It would be interesting, though, wouldn’t it?” Quinn asked.

“Just a story,” Sam said. He held up his hand. “Nothing there. All that is over.”

They talked until the talk grew too painful. Then they hugged and went their separate ways, all but Sam and Astrid. And Diana. Sam took her arm as she started to leave.

“Listen, Diana,” he said. “We have an idea. Astrid has all this Hollywood money now.”

“Great for you. Now your girlfriend is smarter and richer than you,” Diana teased. “But not quite as cute.”

“Yeah, well, um . . . here’s the thing. My mother and I . . . well. We aren’t really close anymore.”

“I’m sorry. There’s a lot of that going around.”

“And Astrid has to be down in LA a lot anyway. So . . . so my mother has emancipated me. That means I’m legally on my own. Legally an adult.”

“Can you handle the responsibility?” Diana asked.

Sam grinned. “Well, it’s tough. So much pressure deciding do I want pizza or Chinese food.”

“Yeah, you’re not good at making those life-and-death decisions.”

“We have a place. The two of us. It’s not far from Quinn’s house, in Santa Monica.

The school's not bad. The beach is right there. And it's crazy, but it's too big for just the two of us."

Astrid came over and said, "Have you told her?"

"I'm in the process."

Astrid sighed. "Come live with us, Diana. Don't argue. Just say yes."

Diana looked at the ground to hide her emotions. Then she said, "Would I have to be hearing you two going at it night and day?"

AFTERMATH 4

THEIR ROOM WAS furnished from IKEA. They had a queen-size bed, two nightstands, two dressers, and many lamps.

Sam still did not like the dark. But he no longer feared it.

They had a TV, two laptops, fast internet service, and two iPhones. Through the window came the sounds of traffic. There was a great deal of food in the refrigerator and the cupboards. The bathroom was well stocked with medicines. Enough to supply a small clinic.

Just in case.

They lay together under clean sheets and blankets having taken long, hot showers. Earlier they had gone to a Thai restaurant with Diana. Neither had eaten much Thai food before, but they were on the path now to being lifelong foodies.

Food. It was beautiful. The three of them had gone to a Ben and Jerry's and ended up crying like idiots at all the ice cream.

Sam had still not shared everything with Astrid. He'd been holding on to the last of what his mother had told him, needing to make some sense of it in his own mind. But no matter how he turned the facts around, looking at them in this light or that, he still couldn't accept it all.

"I love you, Astrid," he said.

"Yes. I'm already in bed with you. You don't have to sweet-talk me." She put a cool palm on his chest and smiled.

"The gaiaphage," Sam said.

Astrid pulled her hand away. "Why are we talking about that?"

"Because my mom . . ." He sighed.

"Ah." She sat up, giving him a little room.

"I told you why she gave Caine up. She felt something was wrong with him. She felt guilty and believed he was almost a punishment on her. She gave him up for adoption to a couple who, unfortunately, also sensed something wrong. Or maybe they were just jerks, I don't know. Anyway, my mom said when his adoptive parents came to visit Coates, there wasn't much sign of affection."

"That would not surprise me," Astrid said cautiously.

"Anyway. I told you that she admitted to having an affair. I didn't tell you all of it. I asked her. It was silly to, but I had to know. Was my father my father? Who exactly was the man who died that day in the power plant?"

"I thought you might have asked her. I've been waiting for you to tell me. When you were ready."

"Stop thinking you're always one step ahead of me."

"Sam. Accept the fact that I'm always one step ahead of you."

He reached an arm around her and pulled her close again.

"So, according to my mother, one of us, Caine, was the spitting image of the man who died when the meteor struck. The man I thought was my father. The man whose DNA was absorbed and became part of the gaiaphage."

"That was the connection," Astrid said. "That's why your mother started to feel

there was something evil in Caine. It was the gaiaphage.”

“Except that it wasn’t that simple,” Sam said. “My mom went to work at Coates once she realized Caine was there, so close to Perdido Beach. She was a nurse, so she was able to get a blood sample. And she was able to compare the two of us genetically.”

“Oh, my God,” Astrid whispered. A step ahead.

Sam sighed. “It turns out, despite her having an affair, Caine and I were true fraternal twins. The human DNA that became part of the gaiaphage wasn’t just Caine’s father. It was from *our* father.”

“You and Caine,” Astrid breathed.

“My mother sensed Caine’s connection to the gaiaphage. But not mine. We had the same connection. We had the same DNA. But Caine grew up without . . . you know. Without . . .”

“Without love,” Astrid said. “All of his life.”

“But not at the very end,” Sam said. “At the very end he found it.”

She put her hand back on his chest, then moved closer still to kiss his neck. “It’s over, Sam. Finally.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I guess it is.”

“Turn out the light, Sam.”

Sam reached for the switch and turned out the light.

THE THANKS:

ANY BOOK, AND certainly any book series, involves more than the writer. Thanks to my lawyer and buddy Steve Sheppard, who helped me sell the series and was my consigliere throughout. Thanks to the wise Elise Howard, who acquired it at HarperCollins, and my first editor, Michael Stearns, one of the real good guys of publishing.

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As always, thanks to my wife, Katherine Applegate, for basically convincing me to be a writer, and our kids, Jake and Julia, just for being cool.

TO THE FANS:

Wow. We spent six books and three thousand pages together in the *FAYZ*. Kind of amazing, isn't it? Worn out? I am.

From the start I wanted the *Gone* series to be like one single, long story. I wanted characters who would grow with you over time, characters who might make you mad or disappoint you, characters you might hate, and hopefully a few that you'd respect, and like, and even love. That required extra patience and devotion on your part. I hope you found it worthwhile. I hope you had fun. I did.

I'm not retiring from writing. There's the *Magnificent 12*, which I think you'll find funny—yes, even if you're supposedly “too old.” None of my other teen series are an attempt to continue the *Gone* series; each is its own thing. But if you're looking for something to read, give them a shot.

I've enjoyed every minute I've spent with *Gone* fans on Twitter @TheFayz, on Facebook at www.facebook.com/authormichaelgrant, and at various visits around the United States and the world. You are a very smart, very interesting, very cool bunch of humans. It's been a pleasure entertaining you.

From me, from Sam and Astrid, Caine and Diana, Quinn, Edilio, Lana and Patrick, Dekka, Brianna, Albert, Computer Jack, Orc, Mary, Sanjit and Choo, Howard, Hunter, Little Pete, and all the rest (even Drake), thanks.

You are now free to leave the *FAYZ*.

PRAISE FOR THE GONE SERIES

Gone

“This intense, marvelously plotted, paced, and characterized story will immediately garner comparisons to *Lord of the Flies* or even the long-playing world shifts of Stephen King, with just a dash of *X-Men* for good measure. A potent mix of action and thoughtfulness—centered around good and evil, courage and cowardice—renders this a tour de force that will leave readers dazed, disturbed, and utterly breathless.”

—ALA Booklist (starred review)

Hunger

“Readers will be unable to avoid involuntarily gasping, shuddering, or flinching while reading this suspense-filled story. The tension starts in the first chapter and does not let up until the end. The story is progressing with smart plot twists, both in actions and emotions.”

—VOYA (starred review)

Plague

“Grant’s sf-fantasy thrillers continue to be the very definition of a page-turner.”

—ALA Booklist

Lies

“Grant continues to hurtle through an endlessly fascinating (and increasingly grim) story line; his chief achievement, though, is how the *X-Men*-style powers of his cast never overwhelm the mournful realization that their world is slowly degenerating.”

—ALA Booklist

Fear

“Adding a layer of tension is the underlying feeling that judgment day is drawing near, but who will be judge and who will be jury? Fans can count on more excellent storytelling, multidimensional characters who continue to develop in unexpected ways, and some mighty fine eye-popping moments.”

—VOYA (starred review)

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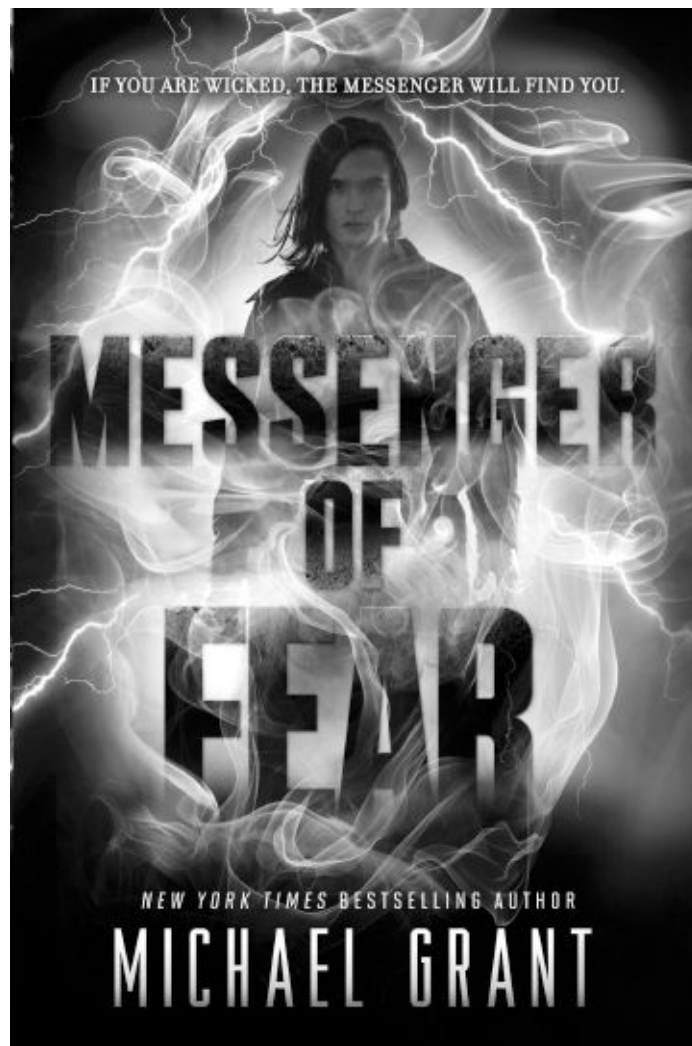
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EXCERPT FROM *MESSENGER OF FEAR*

CAN'T GET ENOUGH MICHAEL GRANT?
TURN THE PAGE FOR A SNEAK PEEK AT

MESSENGER OF FEAR,

THE FIRST BOOK OF HIS NEW SERIES.



1

MY EYES OPENED.

I was on my back.

A mist pressed close, all around me, so close that it was more like a blanket than a fog. The mist was the color of yellowed teeth and it moved without a breath of breeze, moved as if it had a will.

The mist swirled slowly, sensuously, and it touched me. I don't mean that it was merely near to me and therefore inevitably touched me; I mean that it *touched* me. It felt my face like a blind person might. It crept up the sleeves of my sweater and down the neckline. It found its insinuating way under rough denim and seeped, almost like a liquid, along bare skin. Fingerless, it touched me. Eyeless, it gazed at me. It heard the beating of my heart and swept in and out of my mouth with each quick and shallow breath.

The mist spoke to me, wordless, soundless, and yet so that I understood, and it said, *Shiver*.

I shivered, and goose bumps rose on the insides of my arms and on my belly, and the mist laughed as silently as it had commanded me.

I called out, "Mom?"

But the mist would have none of that. It took my word, stopped it, flattened it, made a mockery of it, and echoed it back to me.

I felt something prickling and tickling the side of my face and turned my head to see that I was lying in grass of such a color that it could never have known spring. It was the gray-green of bread mold, the color of decayed life. I could see only the nearest stalks, those pressed closest to my face. How had I come to be here? And where was *here*?

I searched my memory. But it was a box of old photos printed on age-curved paper. Here a face. There a place. Not quite real, too faded, too fractured, too far away to be real. Pictures, snatches of conversation, distorted sounds, and sensory echoes—the soft scraping sound of paper pages turned by an unknown hand, liquid poured from a bottle, the strike of a match, the smell of sulfur, the—

I had the thought then that I was dead.

It was not a certainty to me but an uneasy possibility, a doubt, a guess whose truth I was not willing to test.

Why were my memories so far out of reach? I had a life, didn't I? I was a person. I was a girl. I had a name. Of course I had a name.

Mara.

Yet even that seemed unsteady to me—a fact, perhaps, but a shaky fact. The word *Mara* did not carry with it some flood of emotion. It was a flat thing without depth or shape, just a word.

Mara.

Was that me? Let it be me. Let it be me because I needed a name, I needed something definite to hold on to.

I raised a hand to my face. I watched the fingers appear, swirling through that

unnatural mist. I touched my face and felt tears. I touched my face and *felt*. Both finger and cheek felt and therefore I lived. I lived.

Then, as if discouraged by my discovery, the mist began to clear. It withdrew from me, sliding away from my flesh like a wave retreating into the sea.

I wanted to stand up. I did not want to lie there any longer in the dead, gray grass. I wanted to stand and see, and then run, run far from this unsettling nightmare. Running would awaken me, and all of it, all my memory, all that I was would come flooding back. It must.

I was shaking so badly that the simple act of standing erect became a challenge. My limbs did not want to cooperate with each other, and I made a mess of it, rising first onto hands and knees and then stumbling, nearly falling, before finally rising to my full unimposing height.

I was in an open place. It was dark, darker than it had been in the mist, and no starlight, still less moonlight, shone down from above. But it was not complete darkness. Patterns of gray on black, and black on blacker still, emerged as I looked around me.

There was a building. Had it been there the last time I looked? No light escaped that building. Nothing about that building called to me to approach except for the fact that it was the only object in sight.

I moved one foot and another. That fact, the fact that I could put one foot in front of another, let me take a deeper breath, a less agitated breath. To move was to live, wasn't it? To move was to choose a path, and that meant I still had some volition, some control. I felt and I moved. Hadn't there been some lesson in class about the definition of life and hadn't it been that . . . sensation, movement, something else . . .

Had there been a class? A school?

Of course, no doubt. So why couldn't I see it in my mind? Why, when I asked myself that question, was the only image like a stock photo, filled with unfamiliar, too-bright, too-pretty faces?

Was I dead?

Never mind, Mara, I told myself, trying to accept that name as the truth. Never mind, *Mara*, you can feel and you can move. You can choose. *Mara*.

I could go in a different direction. I could choose not to walk to that building, that outline of black against black, that shadow within shadow. My feet made sounds like sandpaper as they brushed the brittle grass.

The structure was taller than a house, narrow and long. There was a suggestion of high windows ending in pointed arches. And a suggestion, too, of a strong, heavily timbered door, and above that door, atop the building, a sort of tower.

A steeple.

It was a church. That knowledge should have reassured me, but instead it drove a spike of cold terror into my belly, for I knew one thing: this church was no place of comfort and peace. There was a sullen, silent hostility from this structure. It was not calling me into God's presence; it was warning me to go away.

Yet at the same time I could now feel the door drawing me to it. It had a strange gravity, a force perhaps unknown to science that pulled me toward it not by magnetism but by acting on my fear, turning my fear into a vortex. I had to know what was inside that church. I had to know, though I feared the knowing.

You fear me, come to me, the church seemed to whisper to my heart. Your terror demands an answer. Come.

Come.

And flee.

I reached the door. There was a brass doorknob, strangely shaped, as though it was a carved figure. A head, perhaps. I touched it and my curious fingers could make nothing of the curves and ridges, though I thought I might almost make out the outlines of a face.

I turned the knob and it moved easily. I pushed open the door. An answer was close now, I felt, some piece of knowledge that I both dreaded and desired.

I stepped across the threshold and glanced up, sensing something overhead, and where I thought I would see rafters, there was the sickly mist again, a shapeless carrion feeder greedily awaiting my death.

I moved down the aisle, like a bride slow-walking between rows of family and admirers. There was no altar or cross or other symbol. There was only an oblong box set upon a low stone so that the top of the box would be just lower than my breast if I were to stand close.

It was a *coffin*.

Something told me it was not empty.

I was sure that I would see a familiar face in that coffin. I was sure I would see myself. But why would I be lying in a church that was no church?

Cold fingers of horror squeezed my heart, wrung the blood from it, and left me gasping for air. Each inhalation was a sniffle, each exhalation a shudder. My fingernails pressed into my palms, and the pain of it was proof that I was alive, or something like alive, and yet I knew, I knew what I would see in that coffin.

I took another step.

Another.

And I looked down to see a face. I stared in confusion. This was not me. Could not be me. I could not bring the image of my own face to mind, yet I knew this was not me.

Maybe she had been fifteen years old, maybe a year older; it is not easy to judge the age of a dead face. My age, perhaps?

That she was dead was not in doubt.

“Her name was Samantha Early.”

A voice!

I spun around, raising my hands already formed into aching fists. Adrenaline chased away the lethargy of dread as instinct took over.

He was a boy or young man. He stood a dozen feet away and did not move toward me or flinch at my upraised fists.

He was tall and thin. His face was pale as a ghost, pale almost to translucence, and made all the whiter by the long black hair that framed it.

He wore a black coat that fell to midcalf over an iron-gray buttoned shirt. His pants were black, and his shoes seemed to be tall boots of black leather, though they were dusty. The buttons of his coat were silver but not brightly polished. Each was a tiny skull, no bigger than a hazelnut.

On his right hand was a silver ring in a shape I could only vaguely make out. It

looked like a warrior, a woman, gripping a sword.

The other ring, the one on his left hand, was a face contorted in unimaginable terror. A young face, and in between nervous glances it seemed to change, as though the face was animated, alive.

I had as well the impression of tattoos at wrist and neck in the few visible patches of skin.

His eyes were the only color in that monochromatic picture. They were blue. They were a blue I had never seen before in any human eye. His eyes were the turquoise of the Mediterranean, like something from a travel poster of a Greek island.

I wanted to ask him where I was, but that would have made me seem vulnerable. It would have invited him to take some advantage of me. Better to be tough, if tough was something I could pull off. So instead I asked the question that was inevitable.

“Who are you?”

He looked at me and I had to force myself not to turn away. He looked at me and I felt quite exposed suddenly, as if his eyes were seeing the things I showed no one. I fought an urge to squirm, but still my shoulders hunched forward, and my eyes lowered, and my lips pressed tightly and my lungs labored to take in breath so that my nostrils flared.

All of it was beyond my ability to control.

“Her name was Samantha Early. It is a terribly apt name. Dead too early is young Samantha Early.”

Was I supposed to laugh? Was that some effort at a joke? But nothing about him suggested humor.

“Tell me who you are,” I said. My voice sounded pitifully thin. If there was any threat in that voice, then it was a laughable one.

“That’s not the question you want answered first,” he said.

He had a strange voice. It was as if his mouth was pressed close against my ear so that I could hear every shade of every word, the inhalation and exhalation, the play of tongue against teeth, teeth against lips, lips softly percussing the *b* and *p* sounds.

I recoiled a bit from that voice, not from fear but from a sense that its intimacy was somehow inappropriate.

“Are you reading my mind?” I asked.

There was the slightest narrowing of his eyes, and if not a smile, there was a softening of the stern lines of his mouth.

He did not answer. Instead he said, “Samantha Early. Age sixteen. Dead by her own hand.”

With that he laid his pale fingers softly, reverently on her cheek and then rolled her head to the side so that I could see.

“Oh, God!” I cried. It was a hole, just large enough that a little finger could have been stuck into it. The hole was in her temple, and it was the color of ancient rust. Around the hole an elongated oval of scorched skin and crisped hair.

It was the most terrible thing I had ever seen in my life. I looked then at her face. She was not pretty; her chin was too big, too meaty. Her nose was perhaps too forceful, and there were dark circles under her eyes. I felt, seeing this face, that she had endured pain. It was a sad face, though how can a face in death ever be happy?

I was so intent on her face that I failed at first to notice that the light all around me

had changed.

I looked up and saw that the church was gone. The coffin, that terrible object, that reproach against life itself, grew transparent.

And then, the pale flesh of the dead girl began to regain some aspects of life. It grew pink. And I was certain I detected the movement of her eyes beneath their lids.

I cried out, "She's alive!"

And just then, as though my exclamation was a signal, she sat up. She sat up and now, dreamlike, the coffin was no longer there. Feeling wildly unstable, I put my hand out as though to steady myself, but there was nothing within my reach but the shoulder of the boy in black.

My fingers closed around his bicep, which flexed at my touch. It was reassuring in its solidity. He was real, not some figment.

He shook his head and did not meet my eyes. "I am not to be touched."

It wasn't anger but a soft-spoken warning. It was said with what might have been regret but with absolute conviction.

I pulled my hand away and mumbled an apology, but I was less concerned about him than I was consumed with the horror of looking directly into the dead girl's eyes. She had risen to her feet. She stood. The hole still a testament to brutality, bloody, only now, now, oh . . . oh . . . It was *bleeding*. Wet and viscous, the blood drained from the hole in her head as the blood seemed to drain from my own limbs. Little globules of something more solid slid down the trail of blood, bits of her brain forced outward as the bullet had forced its way inward.

Her eyes were brown and empty, her face blank, her blond hair fidgeted in a slight breeze, and the blood ran down her cheek and down her neck and pooled at the hollow of her throat.

I wanted to say that we needed to call 911. I wanted to say that we must help. But the boy in black stood perfectly still, looking at me and not at the girl, the girl dead or living or whatever unholy cross between the two that defined Samantha Early.

Dead too early.

"The question you want answered," the boy in black said as though no time had passed, "is whether *you* are dead."

I licked my lips nervously. My throat burned as though I'd been days without a drink of water. "Yes," I said to him.

"You live," he said. "She does not."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MICHAEL GRANT has spent much of his life on the move. Raised in a military family, he attended ten schools in five states, as well as three schools in France. Even as an adult he kept moving, and in fact became a writer in part because it was one of the few jobs that wouldn't tie him down. His fondest dream is to spend a year circumnavigating the globe and visiting every continent. Yes, even Antarctica. He lives in California with his wife, Katherine Applegate, and their two children. You can visit him online at www.themichaelgrant.com.

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