

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. Topnotch 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 stoplight. "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 S P O K E 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.