

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 warehouse like 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 coma like 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. Dove Bars. 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 Dove Bar.

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 Ladris; 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 Ladris 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."