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Hunger

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EGMONT

ONE

106 HOURS 29 MINUTES

SAM TEMPLE WAS on his board. And there were waves. Honest-to-God swooping, crashing, churning, salt-smelling, white-foam waves.

And there he was about two hundred feet out, the perfect place to catch a wave, lying face down, hands and feet in the water, almost numb from cold, while at the same time his wet-suit-encased, sunbaked back was steaming.

Quinn was there, too, lolling beside him, waiting for a good ride, waiting for the wave that would pick them up and hurl them towards the beach.

Sam woke suddenly, choking on dust.

He blinked and looked around at the dry landscape. Instinctively he glanced towards the southwest, towards the ocean. Couldn't see it from here. And there hadn't been a wave in a long time.

Sam believed he'd sell his soul to ride just one more real wave.

He backhanded the sweat from his brow. The sun was like a blowtorch, way too hot for this early in the day. He'd had too little sleep. Too much stuff to deal with. Stuff. Always stuff.

The heat, the sound of the engine, and the rhythmic jerking of

the Jeep as it laboured down the dusty road conspired to force his eyelids closed again. He squeezed them shut, hard, then opened them wide, willing himself to stay awake.

The dream stayed with him. The memory taunted him. He could stand it all so much better, he told himself, the constant fear, the even more constant load of trivia and responsibility, if there were still waves. But there had been no waves for three months. No waves at all, nothing but ripples.

Three months after the coming of the FAYZ, Sam had still not learned to drive a car. Learning to drive would have been one more thing, one more hassle, one more pain in the butt. So Edilio Escobar drove the Jeep, and Sam rode shotgun. In the backseat Albert Hillsborough sat stiff and quiet. Beside him was a kid named E.Z., singing along to his iPod.

Sam pushed his fingers through his hair, which was way too long. He hadn't had a haircut in more than three months. His hand came back dirty, clotted with dust. Fortunately the electricity was still on in Perdido Beach, which meant light, and perhaps better still, hot water. If he couldn't go for a cold surf, he could at least look forwards to a long, hot shower after they all got back.

A shower. Maybe a few minutes with Astrid, just the two of them. A meal. Well, not a meal, no. A can of something slimy was not a meal. His hurried breakfast had been a can of collard greens.

It was amazing what you could gag down when you got hungry enough. And Sam, like everyone else in the FAYZ, was hungry.

He closed his eyes, not sleepy now, just wanting to see Astrid's face clearly.

It was the one compensation. He'd lost his mother, his favourite pastime, his privacy, his freedom, and the entire world he'd known . . . but he'd gained Astrid.

Before the FAYZ he'd always thought of her as unapproachable. Now, as a couple, they seemed inevitable. But he wondered whether he'd have ever done more than gaze wistfully from afar if the FAYZ hadn't happened.

Edilio applied a little brake. The road ahead was torn up. Someone had gouged the dirt road, drawn rough angled lines across it.

Edilio pointed to a tractor set up to pull a plough. The tractor was overturned in the middle of a field. On the day the FAYZ came the farmer had disappeared, along with the rest of the adults, but the tractor had kept right on going, tearing up the road, running straight into the next field, stopping only when an irrigation ditch had tipped it over.

Edilio took the Jeep over the furrows at a crawl, then picked up speed again.

There wasn't much to the left or right of the road, just bare dirt, fallow fields, and patches of colourless grass broken up by the occasional lonely stand of trees. But up ahead was green, lots of it.

Sam turned in his seat to get Albert's attention. 'So what is that up there, again?'

'Cabbage,' Albert said. Albert was an eighth grader, narrow-

shouldered, self-contained; dressed in pressed khaki pants, a pale blue polo shirt, and brown loafers – what a much older person would call 'business casual.' He was a kid no one had paid much attention to before, just one of a handful of African-American students at the Perdido Beach School. But no one ignored Albert any more: he had reopened and run the town's McDonald's. At least he had until the burgers and the fries and the chicken nuggets ran out.

Even the ketchup. That was gone now, too.

The mere memory of hamburgers made Sam's stomach growl. 'Cabbage?' he repeated.

Albert nodded towards Edilio. 'That's what Edilio says. He's the one who found it yesterday.'

'Cabbage?' Sam asked Edilio.

'It makes you fart,' Edilio said with a wink. 'But we can't be too choosy.'

'I guess it wouldn't be so bad if we had coleslaw,' Sam said. 'Tell you the truth, I could happily eat a cabbage right now.'

'You know what I had for breakfast?' Edilio asked. 'A can of succotash.'

'What exactly is succotash?' Sam asked.

'Lima beans and corn. Mixed together.' Edilio braked at the edge of the field. 'Not exactly fried eggs and sausage.'

'Is that the official Honduran breakfast?' Sam asked.

Edilio snorted. 'Man, the official Honduran breakfast when you're poor is a corn tortilla, some leftover beans, and on a good day a banana. On a bad day it's just the tortilla.' He killed the

engine and set the emergency brake. 'This isn't my first time being hungry.'

Sam stood up in the Jeep and stretched before jumping to the ground. He was a naturally athletic kid but in no way physically intimidating. He had brown hair with glints of gold, blue eyes, and a tan that reached all the way down to his bones. Maybe he was a little taller than average, maybe in a little better shape, but no one would pick him for a future in the NFL.

Sam Temple was one of the two oldest people in the FAYZ. He was fifteen.

'Hey. That looks like lettuce,' E.Z. said, wrapping his earbuds carefully around his iPod.

'If only,' Sam said gloomily. 'So far we have avocados, that's fine, and cantaloupes, which is excellent news. But we are finding way too much broccoli and artichokes. Lots of artichokes. Now cabbage.'

'We may get the oranges back eventually,' Edilio said. 'The trees looked OK. It was just the fruit was ripe and didn't get picked, so they rotted.'

'Astrid says things are ripening at weird times,' Sam said. 'Not normal.'

'As Quinn likes to say, "We're a long way from normal,"' Edilio said.

'Who's going to pick all these?' Sam wondered aloud. It was what Astrid would have called a rhetorical question.

Albert started to say something, then stopped himself when E.Z. said, 'Hey, I'll go grab one of these cabbages right now. I'm

starving.' He unwound the earbuds and stuck them back in.

The cabbages were a foot or so apart within their rows, and each row was two feet from the next. The soil in between was crumbled and dry. The cabbages looked more like thick-leafed houseplants than like something you might actually eat.

It didn't look much different from a dozen other fields Sam had seen during this farm tour.

No, Sam corrected himself, there is something different. He couldn't quite figure out what it was, but there was something different here. Sam frowned and tried to work through the feeling he was having, tried to decide why he felt something was . . . off.

It was quieter, maybe.

Sam took a swig from a water bottle. He heard Albert counting under his breath, shading his eyes with his hand and multiplying. 'Totally just a ballpark guess, figuring each cabbage weighs maybe a pound and a half, right? I'm thinking we have ourselves maybe thirty thousand pounds of cabbage.'

'I don't even want to think about how many farts this all translates to,' E.Z. yelled over his shoulder as he marched purposefully into the field.

E.Z. was a sixth grader but seemed older. He was tall for his age, a little chubby. Thin, dishwater-blond hair hung down to his shoulders. He was wearing a Hard Rock Cafe T-shirt from Cancún. E.Z. was a good name for him: he was easy to get along with, would banter easily, laugh easily, and usually find whatever fun there was to be found. He stopped about two dozen rows into the field and said, 'This looks like the cabbage for me.'

'How can you tell?' Edilio called back.

E.Z. pulled one earbud out and Edilio repeated the question.

'I'm tired of walking. This must be the right cabbage. How do I pick it?'

Edilio shrugged. 'Man, I think you may need a knife.'

'Nah.' E.Z. replaced the earbud, bent over, and yanked at the plant. He got a handful of leaves for his effort.

'You see what I'm saying,' Edilio commented.

'Where are the birds?' Sam asked, finally figuring out what was bothering him.

'What birds?' Edilio said. Then he nodded. 'You're right, man, there've been seagulls all over the other fields. Especially in the morning.'

Perdido Beach had quite a population of seagulls. In the old days they had lived off bits of bait left by fishermen and food scraps dropped near trash cans. There were no more food scraps in the FAYZ. Not any more. So the enterprising gulls had gone into the fields to compete with crows and pigeons. One of the reasons so much of the food they'd found was spoiled.

'They must not like cabbage,' Albert commented. He sighed. 'I don't honestly know anyone who does.'

E.Z. squatted down before the cabbage, rubbed his hands in preparation, worked them down beneath the leaves, down to cradle the cabbage. Then he fell back on his rear end. 'Ow!' he yelled.

'Not so easy, is it?' Edilio teased.

'Ah! Ah!' E.Z. jumped to his feet. He was holding his right hand

with his left and staring hard at his hand. 'No, no, no.'

Sam had been only half listening. His mind was elsewhere, scanning for the missing birds, but the terror in E.Z.'s voice snapped his head around. 'What's the matter?'

'Something bit me!' E.Z. cried. 'Oh, oh, it hurts. It hurts. It –' E.Z. let loose a scream of agony. The scream started low and went higher, higher into hysteria.

Sam saw what looked like a black question mark on E.Z.'s pant leg.

'Snake!' Sam said to Edilio.

E.Z.'s arm went into a spasm. It shook violently. It was as if some invisible giant had hold of it and was yanking his arm as hard and as fast as it could.

E.Z. screamed and screamed and began a lunatic dance. 'They're in my feet!' he cried. 'They're in my feet!'

Sam stood paralysed for a few seconds, just a few seconds – but later in memory it would seem so long. Too long.

He leaped forwards, rushing towards E.Z. He was brought down hard by a flying tackle from Edilio.

'What are you doing?' Sam demanded, and struggled to free himself.

'Man, look. Look!' Edilio whispered.

Sam's face was mere feet from the first row of cabbages. The soil was alive. Worms. Worms as big as garter snakes were seething up from beneath the dirt. Dozens. Maybe hundreds. All heading towards E.Z., who screamed again and again in agony mixed with confusion.

Sam rose to his feet but went no closer to the edge of the cabbage field. The worms did not move beyond the first row of turned soil. There might as well have been a wall, the worms all on one side.

E.Z. came staggering wildly towards Sam, walking as if he were being electrocuted, jerking, flailing like some crazy puppet with half its strings cut.

Three, four feet away – a long arm-stretch away – Sam saw the worm erupt from the skin of E.Z.'s throat.

And then another from his jaw, just in front of his ear.

E.Z., no longer screaming, sagged to the ground, just sat there limp, cross-legged.

'Help me,' E.Z. whispered. 'Sam . . .'

E.Z.'s eyes were on Sam. Pleading. Fading. Then just staring, blank.

The only sounds now came from the worms. Their hundreds of mouths seemed to make a single sound, one big mouth chewing wetly.

A worm spilled from E.Z.'s mouth.

Sam raised his hands, palms out.

'Sam, no!' Albert yelled. Then, in a quieter voice, 'He's already dead. He's already dead.'

'Albert's right, man. Don't do it, don't burn them, they're staying in the field, don't give them a reason to come after us,' Edilio hissed. His strong hands still dug into Sam's shoulders, like he was holding Sam back, though Sam wasn't trying to escape any longer.

'And don't touch him,' Edilio sobbed. '*Perdóneme*, God forgive me, don't touch him.'

The black worms swarmed over and through E.Z.'s body. Like ants swarming a dead beetle.

It felt like a very long time before the worms slithered away and tunnelled back into the earth.

What they left behind was no longer recognisable as a human being.

'There's a rope here,' Albert said, stepping down at last from the Jeep. He tried to tie a lasso, but his hands were shaking too badly. He handed the rope to Edilio, who formed a loop and after six misses finally snagged what was left of E.Z.'s right foot. Together they dragged the remains from the field.

A single tardy worm crawled from the mess and headed back towards the cabbages. Sam snatched up a rock the size of a softball and smashed it down on the worm's back. The worm stopped moving.

'I'll come back with a shovel,' Edilio said. 'We can't take E.Z. home, man, he's got two little brothers. They don't need to be seeing this. We'll bury him here.

'If these things spread . . . ,' Edilio began.

'If they spread to the other fields, we all starve,' Albert said.

Sam fought a powerful urge to throw up. E.Z. was mostly bones now, picked not quite clean. Sam had seen terrible things since the FAYZ began, but nothing this gruesome.

He wiped his hands on his jeans, wanting to hit back, wishing it made sense to blast the field, burn as much of it as he could reach, keep burning it until the worms shrivelled and crisped.

But that was food out there.

Sam knelt beside the mess in the dirt. 'You were a good kid, E.Z. Sorry. I . . . sorry.' There was music, tinny, but recognisable, still coming from E.Z.'s iPod.

Sam lifted the shiny thing and tapped the pause icon.

Then he stood up and kicked the dead worm out of the way. He held his hands out as though he were a minister about to bless the body.

Albert and Edilio knew better. They both backed away.

Brilliant light shot from Sam's palms.

The body burned, crisped, turned black. Bones made loud snapping noises as they cracked from the heat. After a while Sam stopped. What was left behind was ash, a heap of grey and black ashes that could have been the residue of a backyard barbecue.

'There was nothing you could have done, Sam,' Edilio said, knowing that look on his friend's face, knowing that grey, haggard look of guilt. 'It's the FAYZ, man. It's just the FAYZ.'



106 HOURS 16 MINUTES

THE ROOF WAS on crooked. The blistering bright sun stabbed a ray straight down into Caine's eye through the gap between crumbled wall and sagging roof.

Caine lay on his back, sweating into a pillow that had no case. A dank sheet wrapped around his bare legs, twisted to cover half his naked torso. He was awake again, or at least he thought he was, believed he was.

Hoped he was.

It wasn't his bed. It belonged to an old man named Mose, the groundskeeper for Coates Academy.

Of course, Mose was gone. Gone with all the other adults. And all the older kids. Everyone . . . *almost* everyone . . . over the age of fourteen. Gone.

Gone where?

No one knew.

Just gone. Beyond the barrier. Out of the giant fishbowl called the FAYZ. Maybe dead. Maybe not. But definitely gone.

Diana opened the door with a kick. She was carrying a tray and balanced on the tray was a bottle of water and a can of Goya brand

garbanzo beans.

'Are you decent?' Diana asked.

He didn't answer. He didn't understand the question.

'Are you covered?' she asked, putting some irritation into her tone. She set the tray on the side table.

Caine didn't bother to answer. He sat up. His head swam as he did. He reached for the water.

'Why is the roof messed up like that? What if it rains?' He was surprised by the sound of his own voice. He was hoarse. His voice had none of its usual persuasive smoothness.

Diana was pitiless. 'What are you, stupid now as well as crazy?'

A phantom memory passed through him, leaving him feeling uneasy. 'Did I do something?'

'You lifted the roof up.'

He turned his hands around to look at his palms. 'Did I?'

'Another nightmare,' Diana said.

Caine twisted open the bottle and drank. 'I remember now. I thought it was crushing me. I thought something was going to step on the house and crush it, squash me under it. So I pushed back.'

'Uh-huh. Eat some beans.'

'I don't like beans.'

'No one likes beans,' Diana said. 'But this isn't your neighbourhood Applebee's. And I'm not your waitress. Beans are what we have. So eat some beans. You need food.'

Caine frowned. 'How long have I been like this?'

'Like what?' Diana mocked him. 'Like a mental patient who can't tell if he's in reality or in a dream?'

He nodded. The smell of the beans was sickening. But he was suddenly hungry. And he remembered now: food was in short supply. Memory was coming back. The mad delusion was fading. He couldn't quite reach normal, but he could see it.

'Three months, give or take a week,' Diana said. 'We had the big shoot-out in Perdido Beach. You wandered off into the desert with Pack Leader and were gone for three days. When you came back you were pale, dehydrated, and . . . well, like you are.'

'Pack Leader.' The words, the creature they represented, made Caine wince. Pack Leader, the dominant coyote, the one who had somehow attained a limited sort of speech. Pack Leader, the faithful, fearful servant of . . . of it. Of it. Of the thing in the mine shaft.

The Darkness, they called it.

Caine swayed and before he rolled off the bed, Diana caught him, grabbed his shoulders, kept him up. But then she saw the warning sign in his eyes and muttered a curse and managed to get the wastebasket in front of him just as he vomited.

He didn't produce much. Just a little yellow liquid.

'Lovely,' she said, and curled her lip. 'On second thought, don't eat any beans. I don't want to see them come back up.'

Caine rinsed his mouth with some of the water. 'Why are we here? This is Mose's cottage.'

'Because you're too dangerous. No one at Coates wants you around until you get a grip on yourself.'

He blinked at another returning memory. 'I hurt someone.'

'You thought Chunk was some kind of monster. You were

yelling a word. Gaiaphage. Then you smacked Chunk through a wall.'

'Is he OK?'

'Caine. In the movies a guy can get knocked through a wall and get up like it's no big deal. This wasn't a movie. The wall was brick. Chunk looked like roadkill. Like when a raccoon gets run over and over and over and keeps getting run over for a couple of days.'

The harshness of her words was too much even for Diana herself. She gritted her teeth and said, 'Sorry. It wasn't pretty. I never liked Chunk, but it wasn't something I can just forget, OK?'

'I've been kind of out of my mind,' Caine said.

Diana wiped angrily at a tear. 'Answer the question: can you give an example of understatement?'

'I think I'm better now,' Caine said. 'Not all the way better. Not all the way. But better.'

'Well, happy day,' Diana said.

For the first time in weeks Caine focused on her face. She was beautiful, Diana Ladris, with enormous dark eyes and long brown hair and a mouth that defaulted to smirk.

'You could have ended up like Chunk,' Caine said. 'But you've been taking care of me, anyway.'

She shrugged. 'It's a hard new world. I have a choice: stick by you, or take my chances with Drake.'

'Drake.' The name conjured dark images. Dream or reality? 'What's Drake doing?'

'Playing junior Caine. Supposedly representing you. Secretly hoping you'll just die, if you ask me. He raided the grocery store

and stole some food a few days ago. It's made him almost popular. Kids don't have a lot of judgement when they're hungry.'

'And my brother?'

'Sam?'

'I don't have another long-lost brother, do I?'

'Bug's gone into town a couple of times to see what's going on. He says people still have a little food but they're getting worried about it. Especially since Drake's raid. But Sam is totally in charge there.'

'Hand me my pants,' Caine said.

Diana did as he asked, then ostentatiously turned away as he pulled them on.

'What defences do they have up?' Caine asked.

'They keep people all over the grocery store now, that's the main thing. Now Ralph's always has four guys with guns sitting on the roof.'

Caine nodded. He bit at his thumbnail, an old habit. 'How about freaks?'

'They have Dekka and Brianna and Taylor. They have Jack. They may have some other useful freaks, Bug isn't sure. They have Lana to heal people. And Bug thinks they have a kid who can fire some kind of heat wave.'

'Like Sam?'

'No. Sam's like a blowtorch. This kid is like a microwave. You don't see any flames or anything. It's just that suddenly your head is cooking like a breakfast burrito in a KitchenAid.'

'People are still developing powers,' Caine said. 'Any here?'

Diana shrugged. 'Who knows for sure? Who's going to be crazy enough to tell Drake? Down in town a new mutant gets some respect. Up here? Maybe they get killed.'

'Yeah,' Caine said. 'That was a mistake. Coming down on the freaks, that was a mistake. We need them.'

'Plus, in addition to some possible new moofs, Sam's people still have machine guns. And they still have Sam,' Diana said. 'So how about if we don't do something stupid like try and fight them again?'

'Moofs?'

'Short for mutant. Mutant freaks. Moofs.' Diana shrugged. 'Moofs, muties, freaks. We're out of food, but we've got plenty of nicknames.'

Caine's shirt was laid over the back of a chair. He reached for it, wobbled, and seemed about to fall over. Diana steadied him. He glared at her hand on his arm. 'I can walk.'

He glanced up and caught sight of his reflection in a mirror over the dresser. He almost didn't recognise himself. Diana was right: He was pale, his cheeks were concave. His eyes seemed too large for his face.

'I guess you are getting better: you're becoming a prickly jerk again.'

'Get Bug in here. Get Bug and Drake. I want to see them both.'

Diana made no move. 'Are you going to tell me what happened to you out there in the desert with Pack Leader?'

Caine snorted. 'You don't want to know.'

'Yes,' Diana insisted, 'I do.'

'All that matters is I'm back,' Caine said with all the bravado he could manage.

Diana nodded. The movement caused her hair to fall forwards, to caress her perfect cheek. Her eyes glittered moistly. But her lush lips still curled into an expression of distaste.

'What's it mean, Caine? What does "gaiaphage" mean?'

He shrugged. 'I don't know. I've never heard the word before.'

Why was he lying to her? Why did it seem so dangerous that she should know that word?

'Go get them,' Caine said, dismissing her. 'Get Drake and Bug.'

'Why don't you take it easy? Make sure you're really . . . I was going to say "sane", but that might be setting the bar kind of high.'

'I'm back,' Caine reiterated. 'And I have a plan.'

She stared at him, head tilted sideways, sceptical. 'A plan.'

'I have things I have to do,' Caine said, and looked down, incapable, for reasons he couldn't quite grasp, of meeting her gaze.

'Caine, don't do this,' Diana said. 'Sam let you walk away alive. He won't do that a second time.'

'You want me to bargain with him? Work something out?'

'Yes.'

'Well then, that's just what I'm going to do, Diana. I'm going to bargain. But first I need something to bargain with. And I know just the thing.'

Astrid Ellison was in the overgrown backyard with Little Pete when Sam brought her the news and the worm. Pete was swinging. Or more accurately he was sitting on the swing as

Astrid pushed him. He seemed to like it.

It was dull, monotonous work pushing the swing with almost never a word of conversation or a sound of joy from her little brother. Pete was five years old, just barely, and severely autistic. He could talk, but mostly he didn't. He had become, if anything, even more withdrawn since the coming of the FAYZ. Maybe it was her fault: she wasn't keeping up with the therapy, wasn't keeping up with all the futile, pointless exercises that were supposed to help autistics deal with reality.

Of course, Little Pete made his own reality. In some very important ways he had made everyone's reality.

The yard was not Astrid's yard, the house not her house. Drake Merwin had burned her house down. But one thing there was no shortage of in Perdido Beach was housing. Most homes were empty. And although many kids stayed in their own homes, some found their old bedrooms, their old family rooms, too full of memories. Astrid had lost track of how many times she'd seen kids break down sobbing, talking about their mom in the kitchen, their dad mowing the lawn, their older brother or sister hogging the remote.

Kids got lonely a lot. Loneliness, fear, and sadness haunted the FAYZ. So, often kids moved in together, into what amounted almost to frat or sorority houses.

This house was shared by Astrid, Mary Terrafino, Mary's little brother, John, and more and more often, Sam. Officially Sam lived in an unused office at town hall, where he slept on a couch, cooked with a microwave, and used what had been a public restroom. But

it was a gloomy place, and Astrid had asked him more than once to consider this his home. They were, after all, a family of sorts. And, symbolically at least, they were the first family of the FAYZ, substitute mother and father to the motherless, fatherless kids.

Astrid heard Sam before she saw him. Perdido Beach had always been a sleepy little town, and now it was as quiet as church most of the time. Sam came through the house, letting himself in, calling her name as he went from room to room.

'Sam,' she yelled. But he didn't hear her until he opened the back door and stepped out on to the deck.

One glance was all it took to know something terrible had happened. Sam wasn't good at concealing his feelings, at least not from her.

'What is it?' she asked.

He didn't answer, just strode across the weedy, patchy grass and put his arms round her. She hugged him back, patient, knowing he'd tell her when he could.

He buried his face in her hair. She could feel his breath on her neck, tickling her ear. She enjoyed the feel of his body against hers. Enjoyed the fact that he needed to hold her. But there was nothing romantic about this embrace.

At last he let her go. He moved to take over pushing Little Pete, seeming to need something physical to do.

'E.Z.'s dead,' he said without preamble. 'I was touring the fields with Edilio. Albert and E.Z. had come along for entertainment. You know. No good reason for E.Z. to even be there, he just wanted to ride along and I said OK because I feel like all I ever do is say no,

no, no to people, and now he's dead.'

He pushed the swing harder than she'd been doing. Little Pete almost fell backwards.

'Oh, God. How did it happen?'

'Worms,' Sam said dully. 'Some kind of worm. Or snake. I don't know. I have a dead one in there on the kitchen counter. I was hoping you'd . . . I don't know what I was hoping. I figure you're our expert on mutations. Right?'

He said the expert part with a wry smile. Astrid wasn't an expert on anything. She was just the only person who cared enough to try and make sense in a systematic, scientific way of what was happening in the FAYZ.

'If you keep pushing him, he'll be fine,' Astrid said of her brother.

She found the creature in a Baggie on the kitchen counter. It looked more like a snake than a worm, but not like any normal snake, either.

She pressed gingerly on the bag, hoping it really was dead. She spread waxed paper on the granite counter and dumped the worm out. She rummaged in the junk drawer for a tape measure and did her best to follow the contours of the creature.

'Eleven inches,' she noted.

Then she found her camera and took a dozen photos from every angle before using a fork to lift the monstrous thing back into the Baggie.

Astrid loaded the pictures on to her laptop. She dragged them into a folder labelled 'Mutations – Photos.' There were dozens of

pictures. Birds with strange talons or beaks. Snakes with short wings. Subsequent pictures showed larger snakes with larger wings. One, taken at a distance, seemed to show a rattlesnake the size of a small python with leathery wings as wide as a bald eagle's.

She had a blurry photo of a coyote twice the size of any normal coyote. And a close-up of a dead coyote's mouth showing a strangely shortened tongue that looked creepily human. There was a series of grotesque JPEGs of a cat that had fused with a book.

Other photos were of kids, most just looking normal, although the boy called Orc looked like a monster. She had a picture of Sam with green light blazing from his palms. She hated the picture because the expression on his face as he demonstrated his power for her camera was so sad.

Astrid clicked open the worm pictures and used the zoom function to take a closer look.

Little Pete came in, followed by Sam.

'Look at that mouth,' Astrid said, awestruck. The worm had a mouth like a shark. It was impossible to count the hundreds of tiny teeth. The worm seemed to be grinning, even dead, grinning.

'Worms don't have teeth,' Astrid said.

'They didn't have teeth. Now they do,' Sam said.

'See the things sticking out all round its body?' She squinted and zoomed in closer still. 'They're like, I don't know, like minuscule paddles. Like legs, only tiny and thousands of them.'

'They got into E.Z. I think they went right through his hands. Right through his shoes. Right through his body.'

Astrid shuddered. 'Those teeth would bore through anything. The legs push it forwards once it's inside its victim.'

'Thousands of them in that field,' Sam said. 'E.Z. goes in, they attack him. But me and Albert and Edilio are outside, we haven't stepped into the field, and they don't come after us.'

'Territoriality?' Astrid frowned. 'Very unusual in a primitive animal. Territoriality is usually associated with higher life-forms. Dogs or cats are territorial. Not worms.'

'You're being very calm about all this,' Sam said, almost but not quite accusingly.

Astrid looked at him, reached with her hand to gently turn him away from the horrible image, forcing him to look at her instead. 'You didn't come to me so I could scream and run away and you could be brave and comforting.'

'No,' he admitted. 'Sorry. You're right: I didn't come to see Astrid my girlfriend. I came to see Astrid the Genius.'

Astrid had never liked that nickname much, but she'd accepted it. It gave her a place in the dazed and frightened community of the FAYZ. She wasn't a Brianna or a Dekka, or a Sam, with great powers. What she had was her brain and her ability to think in a disciplined way when required.

'I'll dissect it, see what I can learn. Are you OK?'

'Sure. Why not? This morning I was responsible for 332 people. Now I'm only responsible for 331. And part of me is almost thinking, OK, one less mouth to feed.'

Astrid leaned close and kissed him lightly on the mouth. 'Yeah, it sucks to be you,' Astrid said. 'But you're the only you we have.'

That earned her a bleak smile. 'So, shut up and deal with it?' he said.

'No, don't ever shut up. Tell me everything. Tell me anything.'

Sam looked down, unwilling to make eye contact. 'Everything? OK, how about this: I burned the body. E.Z. I burned the mess they left behind.'

'He was dead, Sam. What were you supposed to do? Leave him for the birds and the coyotes?'

He nodded. 'Yeah. I know. But that's not the problem. The problem is, when he burned? He smelled like meat cooking, and I . . .' He stopped talking, unable to go on. She waited while he mastered his emotions. 'A dead sixth grader was burning, and my mouth started watering.'

Astrid could too easily imagine it. Even the thought of burning meat made her mouth water. 'It's a normal, physiological reaction, Sam. It's a part of your brain that's on automatic.'

'Yeah,' he said, unconvinced.

'Look, you can't go around moping because something bad happened. If you start acting hopeless, it will spread to everyone else.'

'Kids don't need my help to feel hopeless,' he said.

'And you're going to let me cut your hair,' Astrid said, pulling him close and ruffling his hair with one hand. She wanted to get his mind off the morning's disaster.

'What?' He looked confused by the sudden change of topic.

'You look like a fugitive from some old 1970s rock band. Besides,' she argued, 'Edilio let me cut *his* hair.'

Sam allowed himself a smile. 'Yeah. I saw. Maybe that's why I keep accidentally calling him Bart Simpson.'

When she glared at him, he added, 'You know, the spiky look?' He tried to kiss her, but she drew back.

'Oh, you're just so clever, aren't you?' she said. 'How about I just shave your head? Or hot-wax it? Keep insulting me, people will be calling you Homer Simpson, not Bart. Then see how much Taylor makes goo-goo eyes at you.'

'She does not make goo-goo eyes at me.'

'Yeah. Right.' She pushed him away playfully.

'Anyway, I might look good with just two hairs,' Sam said. He looked at his reflection in the glass front of the microwave.

'Does the word "narcissist" mean anything to you?' Astrid asked.

Sam laughed. He made a grab for her but then noticed Little Pete eyeing him. 'So. Anyway. How's LP doing?'

Astrid looked at her brother, who was perched on a kitchen counter stool and gazing mutely at Sam. Or, anyway, in Sam's direction – she could never be sure what he was really looking at.

She wanted to tell Sam what had been happening with Little Pete, what he had started doing. But Sam had enough to worry about. And for a moment – a rare moment – he wasn't worrying.

There would be time later to tell him that the most powerful person in the FAYZ seemed to be . . . what would the right term be for what Little Pete was doing?

Losing his mind? No, that wasn't quite it.

There was no right term for what was happening to Little Pete. But, anyway, this wasn't the time.

'He's fine,' Astrid lied. 'You know Petey.'