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CHAPTER

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twenty-four

THURSDAY, 1:23 A.M.

David's bladder woke him. He considered sleeping through his need but decided he couldn't. Groggily, he flipped back his blankets and sat up. Everything ached: his broken arm, his forehead where Xander had conked him with the sextant, the top of his skull where the wall had landed when Phemus pushed it down, his cheek where Phemus had punched it, his palm where he had grabbed Phemus's obsidian blade, his shoulder where

the warrior's arrow had nicked it in the jungle world, and all of his muscles . . . just because they did. If they stayed in the house much longer, he'd end up one big walking wound.

In the next bed, Xander snored in a slow, steady rhythm.

*So much for all that stuff Xander said about not getting a wink of sleep, no way, no how,* David thought.

And if Xander hadn't yapped about going through the linen closet/locker portal to use the school's computers, David wouldn't have drunk the water, and he wouldn't be up now.

*Thanks, Xander.*

Groaning as quietly as possible, David stood. He stumbled to the door and opened it. The hall light was blazing. He shielded his eyes with his hand. Keal was still in the chair. David thought he was staring down at the magazine in his lap, then he realized the man was asleep.

David stepped into the hall. A floorboard creaked.

"Whoa! Hey!" Keal said, his head snapping up. He brought up the magazine as if it were a weapon. His eyes focused on David. "What—?"

"Potty break," David said. He walked past Keal and into the bathroom.

Washing his hands, he looked at the boy staring out at him from the mirror. Not the self he knew and loved. This one was almost as pale as the creatures they had seen in the future world. He had dark circles under his eyes. The left side was darker and bigger than the right; it was a true black eye, not

just tired. Below it, his cheek was still discolored: red, yellow, blue. The hair on one side rose straight up. He thought, *Poor kid, whoever you are.* He leaned close. Same hazel eyes. At least that part of him was unchanged.

He switched off the light and went into the hall. Keal's chin was touching his chest again.

Something clanged in the other direction. He looked. The far end of the hallway was dark. The lights in the corridor leading to the third-floor stairwell had shorted out when the walls collapsed. The ceiling down there creaked. A door banged.

David swung his head around, sure that the sound would have awakened Keal. But no, the man hadn't budged.

*Wake him,* he thought.

*Just a sec.*

In this house, if everyone got up whenever there was a noise, no one would sleep. Ever.

He stood without moving just outside of the bathroom. The toilet was gurgling softly. He strained his ears to hear past it.

Something bumped. Definitely. Too quietly to be on this floor. Had to be upstairs.

*Okay . . . so?* Last night someone or something had thumped around up there for half the night. That's why Xander had wanted to install the camera. Whatever had made the noise hadn't ventured into the main part of the house. David didn't think so, anyway. They hadn't opened the master bedroom

door, where he, Xander, and Toria were bedded down. But last night two walls had separated the third floor from the second. Tonight the walls were gone. Would the thing upstairs take that as an invitation to come down?

David shook his head. He didn't even know if it *was* a "thing." It could be nothing more than the doors up there opening and shutting. They'd witnessed that before, when the doors ripped off the locks he and Dad had put on them.

*The camera.* Xander hadn't finished mounting it, but it was there, above the doorway between the hallway and the landing. David had seen Xander tightening the screws when Phemus and his cohorts had come up behind him. If he could get to the MCC, he could take a peek at the monitor.

But the MCC was so close to the stairs, the collapsed walls nearly reached its door. Did he dare get that close?

He started walking. Slowly. On his toes. He let his arm brush the wall as he moved toward the end of the hall.

He looked back at Keal. Why not wake him?

*Because I'm not a baby. I'm strong and courageous. Strong and courageous. Could you say you were brave if you never acted bravely?*

He took another step, then another. He was in front of Toria's open door now. Her night-light filled the room with a faint yellow glow. Her little body barely lifted the blankets off the mattress.

As he passed the banister, he glanced at the chandelier that hung over the foyer. He remembered the way it had thrown

glowing diamonds on the walls when he and Xander had cast their flashlights on it. That was when they had first seen Phemus, standing at the end of hall, watching them.

His stomach clenched up. The end of the hall wasn't *completely* dark. Light from the overheads showed him the far wall. If someone were standing there now, he'd see him. But if someone were standing just around the corner . . .

*Strong and courageous.*

He kept moving. Nearing Dad's room. Almost to the end.

This was when people in a movie audience would say, *Don't go there, stupid!*

Dad's door was open. His father's breathing was slow and deep.

Something rattled. David didn't think it came from the bedroom.

He whispered, "Dad?"

Nothing.

*Opportunity number two to get help,* David thought. *Just say his name louder. Do it.*

He walked past.

He had a thought: you could never trust noises in this house. What if the sounds he'd heard weren't coming from upstairs? What if someone was creeping up the main staircase? Or sneaking up behind him?

He spun around so fast, his cast banged the wall. Keal's head came up. It slumped down again. No one else in the hall.

ROBERT LIPARULO

He could see a bit of the main stairs. No one was looking at him from there.

He thought he heard Dad mumble. Then the steady breathing resumed.

Three distinctive sounds reached him: *thump-thump-thump*. Footsteps. He was sure they'd come from upstairs.

If they were upstairs, then they weren't down here. He hurried to the corner and peered around it. It was darkest where the walls used to be, farthest from the glow of the main hallway lights. The bottom of the stairs, the only part he would have been able to see, was also pitch-black. But he could make out the edge of one of the steps, maybe the third one from the bottom. The scantest of light was spilling down from the third-floor hallway.

He tiptoed diagonally across the hall toward the MCC's door. More stairs came into view, each one better lighted as they progressed toward the landing. He slipped into the room. The desk on which the monitor rested was six or eight feet in. He reached it and switched on the monitor.

*Come on, come on.*

The footsteps again. Soft, stealthy.

The monitor glowed a solid blue. The wireless camera receiver was off. He grabbed the little box and punched the switch. Snowlike static rolled on the screen. When the snow cleared, a face stared out from the monitor at David.