

ST OP STOP STOPSTOP

Perry tried opening his eyes, but vision came only in strobelike bursts. The klaxon scream in his head was too much to bear. Hed lost again, he knew it, but he couldnt even mutter a single word. Couldnt

ST OP STOP

tell them he was so sorry

ST OP STOP

couldnt tell Daddy he would behave

ST OP STOP

couldnt beg Daddy to please God STOP ripping into my brain!

ST OP STOP

ST OP STOPST OP

He fell to the ground, motionless, not hearing the angry, irritated stomping coming from the ceiling above.

HOWDY, NEIGHBOR

Al Turner pounded his heel into the floor. Hed had just about enough of this shit. He pounded again, and the yelling stopped.

He absently scratched his ample, hairy gut, then slid a hand into his boxers to scratch his sweaty ass. Frigging hemorrhoids were killing him. They could put a man on the moon, but they couldnt make your asshole stop burning. Figures.

What the hell had gotten into that kid? Screaming his head off like that. The guy had always been so quiet, Al rarely gave him a second thought. Well, not since the kid had moved in, anyway, and Al had found out that Scary Perry Dawsey lived right below him. Al introduced himself, had Dawsey sign a football for his nephew and a couple of U of M shirts for himself. Dawsey had smiled, as if he were surprised that someone would want his autograph. The smile had faded when Al asked him to sign the Rose Bowl shirt. That had probably been a little crude, but then again Al didnt exactly subscribe to the Miss Manners school of thinking, right?

Hed never expected Dawsey to be so huge. Sure, football players all looked big on TV, but to stand next to them was another thing entirely. The kid was a fucking monster. Al had briefly entertained the thought that he and Perry could hit the bar every Saturday during football season, maybe hang out on Sundays to watch the games. Wouldnt Jerry at work be jealous of that, Al Turner hanging out just as casual as you please with one of if not the greatest linebacker to ever wear the maize and blue. But that had changed when he met the kid. Just standing next to Dawsey made Al feel like a seven-year-old. He didnt want to drink beers with that freak of nature. It was like those science shows on big cats fine to watch on TV, as long as you didnt have to meet one face-to-face in the fucking jungle.

Al twitched as his asshole flared with another round of burning. Felt like a goddamn red-hot poker was jammed in there. He grimaced and scratched. This shit could piss off the Pope, and Dawseys screaming fits werent helping his mood.

THE LOCAL YOKELS

In Dews experience, local cops rarely looked like happy campers. These particular local cops? Well, they looked downright pissed. Three Ann Arbor police cars were parked in front of Nguyens house. Theyd pulled right up on the lawn and sidewalk, passing the three gray vans that had parked on the curb. The former occupants of those cars stood on the sidewalk and on the snow-trampled yard, staring up at a pair of men dressed in urban camouflage and holding P90s. Dew had told the four men in Squad One to lose the Racal suits and take positions at the entrances, two at the front door, two at the back. Pissed-off local cops always looked like genuine bad-asses, but Dews boys looked like theyd kill a man just as casually as theyd squeeze out a fart.

The six Ann Arbor locals were ticked because they couldnt enter the house. Theyd been told jack shit. All they knew was that there were definite fatalities on their turf, and some government guy wouldnt let them do their job. Five cars had responded already; the three parked in front plus one at each end of Cherry Street, rerouting all traffic.

A blue Ford slipped slowly past the east roadblock and pulled up to the house. A thick-chested man wearing a brown polyester sport jacket got out and stomped toward Dew. Maybe fifty, maybe fifty-five. This guy didnt look like a happy camper, either. He had a jaw so pronounced and rounded that he could have passed as a cartoon character.

Are you Agent Dew Phillips?

Dew nodded.

Im Detective Bob Zimmer, Ann Arbor Police.

Drew shook Zimmers hand.

Wheres the chief, Bob?

Hes out of town at a terrorism training conference, Zimmer said.

Im in charge.

A terrorist-training conference? Damn, talk about your irony. Look, Phillips, Zimmer said, I dont know what the fuck is going on

here, and Im having a donkey shit of a day. I just got called to a house that had a gas explosion mother and son are dead. On the way there, I get

calls from the chief, then the mayor, telling me some feds are running the show, that some government asshole named

Dew Phillips is in charge. The mayor called me an asshole? Dew said. The governor I can understand, but the mayor? Im hurt.

Zimmer blinked a few times. Are you making a joke?

Just a little one.

Nows not the time, mister, Zimmer said. Then I get to this ladys house, theres four of those feds in chemical suits, saying they have to wait for the fire to die down so they can go through it. Then I get a call from the motherfucking attorney general of the fucking United States of fucking America, and then I hear youve locked down another house and wont let my men in.

Thats a lot of phone time, Dew said. I hope you didnt use up your minutes.

Zimmers eyes narrowed. You best quit your joking, Phillips.

Dew smiled. Gallows humor, forgive me. If I dont laugh, Ill cry, or something like that. So youve made some calls, youve talked to some people, and you understand that I have authority here, right?

Zimmer nodded. Yeah, but tell me whats happening in this house. Weve heard multiple fatalities. College kids. What the fuck happened here?

You dont need to know that.

The detective took a step forward until he was almost nose to nose with Dew. The sudden move took Dew by surprise, but he stood his ground.

Fuck you, Phillips, Zimmer whispered, quiet enough that he wouldnt be heard by the local cops standing only fifteen feet away. I dont care who called me. The chief, hes a nice guy and would cooperate, do whatever you tell him to do, but me? Im stupid and I like to pick fights I cant win.

That saying must look great on your Christmas cards, Dew said. How about this one: my name is Bob Zimmer and I dream of getting fired?

Zimmer just smiled.

Im old, I own my house, and I invested wisely. You have me fired and I get to go fishing every damn day. This may be a shock to you, on account of my obvious cosmopolitan nature, but I dont exactly get a daily how-ya-do call from the attorney general. I wanna know the danger level to my boys, and to this town, and I want to know now.

As if anything else could go wrong, here it was. A man Dew couldnt bully. The guy wanted to protect his men first, worry about his career second. Dew knew he didnt have to say jack to Zimmer, shouldnt say jack to Zimmer, but they already had two cases in Ann Arbor: if this was the place the shit would hit the fan, Dew wanted allies who knew the terrain.

Dew took a half step back to end the face-to-face stalemate. Its bad, Bob. Real bad. Youve got six dead kids in that house.

Zimmers lip curled up in a snarl. He also kept his voice low, a quid pro quo that instantly showed hed keep most of the information to himself. Six? If this is another little joke, nows the time to say gotcha.

Dew shook his head. Six. Four by gunshot, possibly tortured first. One other tortured for sure, probably killed with a hammer to the head.

Jesus H. Christ. Thats five. The sixth?

The gunman, did himself, Dew said, then felt a surge of inspiration. But we dont know if he acted alone.

Are you telling me theres someone else out here? That why your men were at the other house?

We dont know for sure. As soon as we get more information on that, well let you know.

And why? Zimmer said. Why are the feds involved?

The dead gunman inside may have connections to a terrorist cell. We think he was building a bomb. Maybe the other kids in the house found out, maybe they were part of it.

And what did this terrorist cell want with a soccer mom and her son?

We dont know, Dew said.

Youve got to give me more than that.

No, Bob, I sure as fuck dont. Ive already stuck my neck out giving you this much. So stop pushing me.

Zimmer looked away, then nodded. Okay. So what do you need from us?

We need another hour. Then the scene is all yours. There will be another car here shortly, an agent and two science types to make sure theres no biocontaminants inside the house.

Biocontaminants? Like anthrax and shit?

Dew shook his head. We dont know. Were setting up a temp biohazard lab at the University Hospital. Were taking at least one of the bodies there. Once the eggheads are done with their sweep, you can ID the kids and call the parents. The muscles in Zimmers massive jaw twitched. Well provide whatever support you need. And if you find the motherfucker whos responsible for this . . . well, wed be just plain happy to take care of him.

THE POISON PILL -PART TWO -

The Triangle on the collarbone no longer functioned. The fork had done too much damage, and the seedling simply shut down. When it died, it stopped making the chemical that maintained the crusty cap atop the reader-balls. The deadly catalyst inside each ball kept eating at the capbut now there was nothing to replace the material that dissolved away.

One by one the reader-balls burst, spilling the catalyst into the Triangles body.

The catalyst caused two reactions: first, it dissolved cellulose; second, it caused apoptosis.

Apoptosis means that the cells of the body self-destruct. Normally this is a good thing. Billions of cells choose to self-destruct every day, because they are damaged, infected or their usefulness is at an end. The process can also be triggered by forces outside the cell, such as the immune system. Every cell in the body carries this self-destruct code. The catalyst turned on that code in every cell it touched.

When those cells dissolved and released their cytoplasm into the surrounding area, they passed on this self-destruct signal.

The result? Liquefaction. It started slowly, a few cells here and there, but each dead cell compromised the cells around

it, creating an exponential increase that within forty-eight hours would dissolve an entire human body. Fortunately for the host, the remaining Triangles kept producing the chemical that not only replenished their individual reader-ball caps, it also counteracted most of the apoptosis chain reaction in his body. Unfortunately for the host, however, the concentration of the catalyst in his collarbone was too strong to be stopped.

There, the cellulose slowly dissolved, the cells slowly destroyed themselves, and the liquefaction began.

And so did the rotting . . .

IMPRESSIONISM

Come on, Doctor, Clarence Otto said, his voice tinny in her Racal suits headphones. Suck it up. Now isnt the time for you to go weak on me.

Margaret made it out of the living room, but only with the help of Agent Clarence Ottos strong arm. He also wore a Racal, the plastics zipzipping against each other as he helped her walk. Shed seen plenty of dead bodies, but the three bloated college kids in the living room, tied to those chairs, their faces swollen, bluish-green skin all of it was getting to be too much. And right after that little boy that infested, crazy, sad little boy burning himself alive. The only good news was that Dews men had been able to cover that one up. Just a gas leak, nothing to see here except for two dead bodies, move along, please.

Amos had taken the little girl to the temp biohazard lab at the University Hospital. Margaret could only imagine the childs fear they were trying to reach the father, but no luck yet. Amos would interview her and get what information they could, but at the end of the day she was just a little girl who didnt even understand that her mother had been dead for two days.

Margaret clumsily shuffled through six photos, pictures of faces blown up from college ID shots. Six smiling faces, faces that would never smile again. One of the photos made her pause. The others had a posed smile, but this one showed a genuine laugh. It was a rarity, an excellent ID picture that captured someones real personality. The name on the bottom read Kiet Nguyen.

The killer.

A tap on her shoulder. She turned to look at Dew Phillips. Once again he wasnt wearing a suit the sole unprotected person in a house full of Racal-covered soldiers and agents.

Ive already got pictures of all this shit, Dew said. Come on upstairs. I figure youll want to see this.

Otto and Margaret walked up the creaking stairs and followed Dew into a bedroom. Inside, a Racal-wearing photographer took endless shots of a body tied to the chair. This one wasnt as bloated as the others, clearly a more recent kill. But the missing hands, the missing feet, the hammer sticking out of the skull, the pitted black skeleton lying on the floor . . . When would this end? Would it end at all?

Im not talking about that, Dew said, pointing to the skeleton. Im talking about those. He jerked his thumb to the other side of the room, to the wall.

Sketches and paintings covered the wall. She turned quickly, taking in the whole room in a new light paintings, sketches, everywhere. This was the room of an artist. She turned back to the far wall. Three canvas paintings dominated the wall, all two feet by three feet.

The first, a close-up of that pyramid thing from the back of an American one-dollar bill. The highly detailed painting showed the circle, all done in shades of green. Someone had tacked a dollar bill to the wall, backside facing, obviously for comparison. Two things immediately stood out the first was the glowing eye atop the pyramid. There wasnt one triangular eye, but three, lined up corner to corner, so that the three glowing eyes made for one larger triangle. Their bases made yet another triangle of negative space. The other change was the Latin phrase in the banner below the pyramid. What should have read *Novus ordo seclorum*, or new order of the ages, instead read *E unum pluribus*. The classic motto of the Founding Fathers: From many, one.

The second painting looked more rushed, not as detailed. Black paint on the white canvas. Two stylized trees, maybe oaks or maples, reaching their branches toward each other. Between them on the ground, a single blue triangle.

The third painting, right in the center of the wall that one stunned her.

Bodies twisted together. Well, no, not all bodies, some body parts. Here, a hand severed at the elbow, there, a thigh torn free from both hip and knee, strands of ragged flesh dripping half-coagulated blood streamers toward the ground. Horrid, twisted bodies, bound together with coils of razor wire that sliced bloody notches in tan skin. Triangles adorned all the bodies and the body parts, blue-black, more like textured tattoos than something that was part of the skin, or under the skin. A few faces looked out some dead, some living and screaming. A strand of razor wire pulled tightly against the open mouth of a man, his eyes scrunched tight in agony.

The bodies acted like some kind of building material, creating an arch made of agony, fear and death. The arch rose up and gently curved to the right, off the canvas. Margaret found herself looking beyond the canvas, her mind subconsciously trying to fill in the curves path. In the background of the scene, she made out the descending leg of another arch multiple arches, at least two, but there might be many more outside the frames reference.

She suddenly realized that two of the faces and, judging by the skin tone, many of the body parts were Kiet Nguyen himself.

This is your self-portrait, Margaret said. This is what you did with your time, before you killed all those kids.

Thats Nguyen? Otto asked. Youre sure?

Margaret handed him the photo.

Sonofabitch, Otto said as he looked from the painting to the photo and back again. Damn, Doctor, youve got sharp eyes. Okay, so if thats Nguyen, who are the other people?

Margaret nodded inside her Racal suit. She was getting used to Ottos ability to ask the obvious question, make the simple connection that she and Amos sometimes didnt see.

Oh my God, Margaret said. She pointed to one of the faces, high up on the arch. This one was upside down, connected to a white mans body whose head and shoulders were on the canvas but whose feet extended beyond the frame.

Is that Martin Brewbaker?

At the sound of the name, Dew hurried over. He leaned close to the canvas.

Goddamn, Dew said. That is the little psycho. How the fuck did Nguyen know that guy?

Margaret shook her head. I dont think he did, Dew.

Of course he did, Dew spat. Im looking at Brewbakers face right there. The kid painted it, and thats that.

Is that Gary Leeland? Otto said, pointing again to the canvas.

Margaret and Dew both leaned close.

Holy shit, they said in stereo.

Margaret waved the photographer over. I need shots of this, the whole thing, and get all the detail. Use a new disk, Im taking it with me.

She turned to leave, then stopped. Something about that dollarpyramid bothered her. She turned back and walked toward it, until she was only a foot from the painting. Something about the Latin phrase.

Nguyen had painted the phrase, E unum pluribus. But that wasnt right. In Latin, From many, one, was E pluribus unum.

Switch the phrase around, to E unum pluribus, and what did you have?

From one, many.

45.

THE LIVING-ROOM FLOOR

He didnt know who sang the song, but he knew the words.

Somebody knockin at the duh-or, somebody ringin the bell. Somebody knockin at the duh-or, somebody ringin the bell.

Perry found himself in a dark hallway, the lilting melody filling the air with not only sound, but also a warning. The place seemed alive, pulsating, throbbing with a shadowy warmth; it seemed more like a throat than a hallway. At the halls end stood a single door made of a spongy, rotten green wood covered with a vile, mucal slime. The door thumped in time with his own heartbeat. It was a living thing. Or maybe had been living once.

Or maybe...maybe it was waiting for its chance to live.

He knew it was a dream, but it still scared him shitless. In a life where waking hours are draped in the costume of horrid nightmare, where reality has suddenly become questionable, its easy to be scared by dreams.

Perry walked toward the door. Something unspeakable lay behind it, something wet, something hot, something waiting for a chance to rage, to murder, to dominate. He reached for the handle, and the handle reached for him; it was a long, thick, black tentacle, wrapping around his arm, pulling him into the spongy green wood. Perry fought, but for all his might he was yanked forward like a child by an angry father.

The door didnt openit sucked him in, joyous in a sudden meal of body and mind. The green wood engulfed him, the dank rot caressed him. Perry tried to scream, but the oozing tentacle forced its way into his mouth, cutting off all sound, cutting off his air. The door enveloped him, held him motionless. Mindless terror pulled at him, dragging his sanity under . . .

When he awoke , the fork remained stuck in his shoulder. The sweatshirt had tried to pull back to its natural position, catching on the fork and pushing it at an angle; the end of the utensil rested against his cheekbone. The wound didnt hurt because it was completely numb. He didnt know how long hed been out.

He grimaced as he grabbed the fork with his right hand and gently

removed it from his trapezius it made a wet, sucking sound as it came out. Thick trickles of blood coursed down his collarbone and curled under his armpit. The front of his sweatshirt had changed from white to bright red with thin streaks of the dark purple. The stab wound alone wouldnt have been that bad, but twisting the fork had ripped open a large chunk of flesh. He gently fingered the wound, trying to ascertain the damage without setting off the pain button. His fingers also hit the corpse of the Triangle, which was no longer firm, but soft and pliable.

The hooks of this one were undoubtedly still stuck in his body, maybe wrapped around his collarbone, maybe wrapped around a rib or even his sternum. If that was the case, ripping it out might cause one of the hooks to puncture a lung, or even his heart. That wasnt an option. But it was dead, over which he felt an indescribably sick satisfaction. The fact that he would have to carry a corpse around embedded in his shoulder, however, tugged at the back of his mind, tweaking at the last vestiges of normality clinging to his tortured soul.

He carefully stood up and hopped to the bathroom. His ruined leg didnt hurt as much now, but it still throbbed complaint. Too bad he couldnt ride this game out on the bench, let one of the second-stringers come in and fill in his position.

Play through the pain.

Rub some dirt on it and get back in there.

Sacrifice your body.

Lines of dried brown blood patterned the linoleum floor. Chunks of

orangish skin still floated in the tub, although the water level had dropped. He could tell the original depth by the tub ring left from tiny scab flecks.

Blood trickled from his shoulder. He grabbed the bottle of hydrogen peroxide from the cabinet behind the bathroom mirror. The bottle was almost empty, just enough left to clean the wound. Setting it down on the counter, he tried to pull off his sweatshirt, but a shooting pain in his left shoulder stopped him. He slowly raised the arm it was sore and painful, but it still worked, thank God.

He clumsily peeled off the blood-wet sweatshirt using just his right arm, then dropped it on the floor and kicked it into the corner where he didnt have to look at it.

Perry wanted a shower, but he didnt want to clean the tub, and he was too grossed out by the floating scabs to stand in the ankle-deep water. Hed have to make do.

He grabbed a clean washcloth out from under the sink he wasnt about to use anything that had touched the scabs or the Starting Five. Only now it wasnt the Starting Five anymore, was it? Perry smiled with the small victory. Now they were four. The Four Horsemen.

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

His smile vanished. The new name didnt exactly make him feel any better.

His head pulsed like a dying star. He wet the white washcloth and tried to wipe the smeared blood off his chest, ribs, shoulder and out from under his armpit. He dabbed at the wound itself; the washcloth quickly turned a sick shade of pink.

The wound didnt look all that bad. The Triangle, however, looked awful. Its face was ripped open along with the skin that had covered it. At first it was hard to tell the difference between his flesh and the flesh of the dead Triangle, but after looking closely he could see that the things tissue was paler than his own, a gray-pink fading to white. It sure didnt look healthy. But then again Perry figured that if hed been stabbed to death with a fork, he wouldnt look that great either.

He poured peroxide over the wound. Most of it ran quickly down his chest to soak into his pants and underwear. It was chilly. He didnt care. He dabbed at the fizzing wound with the washcloth.

He had only three Band-Aids that would be just enough to cover the wound. He pinched together the ripped skin over the Triangles dead head, then used the Band-Aids like sutures to pin everything down. The white absorbent patches on the tan strips instantly turned pink. It was just superficial blood now; it would clot up in only a minute or two.

The smell of Band-Aids briefly lifted his spirits. That smell carried a childhood association, the feeling that you were done hurting. When he was a kid, hed get cut or scraped, hed bleed and his mom would put a Band-Aid on it. Whether it was the Band-Aid or the TLC, the pain would be greatly reduced and hed be back to playtime in nothing flat unless, of course, his father wanted to teach him a lesson about crying.

Signs of weakness were not allowed in the Dawsey household. Perry

couldnt count the number of beatings prefaced by his fathers angry declaration, Ill give you something to cry about!

Despite the pain, the Band-Aids did provide a little positive energy. The plastic scent filled his nostrils, and he couldnt help but relax a bit.

As he grew calm, he realized that it was quiet. Not just in the empty apartment, but in his head. There was no fuzzy noise, no lumpy sound, not even a little bit of static. There was nothing. He didnt bother to kid himself that they were all dead he could still feel them. He felt a low buzz at the back of his skull. They werent dead, but it felt different. Maybe they were . . . asleep.

If they were asleep, could he call someone? The cops? Maybe the FBI? The little bastards were deathly afraid of people in uniform what kind of uniform, Perry didnt know. If they were out, he could try something.

He had to try.

Hello? Perry whispered, testing the waters. Fellas? Are you there?

Nothing.

His mind raced like a windup toy that bounced off wall after wall, moving around quickly but with nowhere to go. He had to think. His cell phone was the obvious choice; it wasnt like he could get in his car and drive away from the danger.

But who to call? Just how many people knew about these Triangles?

Call . . . who? The FBI? The CIA? There was obviously an airtight lid on leaks to the media regarding this situation, or hed have heard about it long ago. He hopped quietly to the kitchen table and grabbed his cell phone. He hopped back to the couch and pulled the phone book out from under the end table. He started to flip to government agencies in the Yellow Pages, then inspiration hit him.

He quickly turned to the red pages, the alphabetical listing of all the businesses in the area. He flipped to the Ts. There they were. There were two entries.

Triangle Fence Co. in Ypsilanti and Triangle Mobile Home Sales in Ann Arbor. Who the fuck would name a business Triangle? What sense did that make? There had to be a connection. One or both of these had to be government fronts. That made sense it made perfect sense! People in Perrys predicament were, sooner or later, going to pick up the phone and try to find help. And wouldnt everybody get the hunch to see if anything was named Triangle in the phone book? And the

government had to be ready to jump on the situation, so they probably had an office in every decent-size town in the country or at least in the area of the invasion. So people would call, and then the Triangle Fence boys would come out in their Triangle Fence shirts with Bob and Lou stitched over the Triangle Fence Co. patch on their left breast -for effect, so none of the locals would think anything of it, because all repair/installation guys have their name on their shirt-. They would come in to the house and quietly take Perry out to the van and drive him somewhere with Men in White Lab Coats, who would quickly and painlessly take the Triangles out of Perrys body. Sure, hed be sworn to secrecy and all, but that was a small price to pay. This was a chance. This was hope. If nothing else, it was an

opportunity to make sure that these little fuckers got what they deserved.

He opened his cell phone and dialed.

A womans pleasant voice answered, Triangle Fence Company. Perrys words were a whisper, yet each syllable sounded cacophonously

loud in the quiet apartment. Um, yes. I need help with . . . with . . .

He grasped for words should he come out and ask? What should he say? Was the secretary in on it? Was his phone bugged?

Help with what, sir? the pleasant voice asked.

Perry quickly and quietly folded the phone, hanging up without so much as a click. Just how was he supposed to ask? Was there a code word? His phone could be bugged. If he asked for help, would the Triangles know somehow? Would they punish him?

Stop it! How could they have bugged my phone? They dont even have arms. And theyre not testing me, they cant betheyre going to kill me anyway. They wouldnt be testing my loyalty or anything when Ive already killed three of them. Thats not logical. Think, man, tune them out . . . think!

Perry breathed with slow control. A choking feeling of anxiety circled his consciousness he might have only moments left in his big chance. And if the phone was bugged, it meant that someone knew of his condition and wasnt doing anything about it, which meant that any call he made was a waste of time anyway. He had to calm down and act now if he had any chance for survival. Time was running out.

He opened the phone again, this time dialing Triangle Mobile Home Sales. It only made sense of course it would be the mobile-home place. They could drive out in an RV, you could hop in for a test drive

and off you went. None of your neighbors would be the wiser, not even a little bit suspicious. It all made sense now.

Triangle Mobile Home Sales, a gruff male voice answered. This was more like it.

Yes, Perry said quietly, cupping the phone to his chin with his free hand. I was wondering if you could help me.

Well, that depends on what you need help with, the gravelly voice responded, a tinge of lighthearted humor hanging in the words. What can we do ya for?

Depends on what you need help with, the man had said. Now why would he say that? This had to be the right one. Had to be.

I had seven to start with, but I got three, Perry said in a rush. I think the others are still growing. I dont know how much longer I have.

Excuse me? Seven what?

Seven Triangles, Perry said, unable to keep the grin off his face.

Triangles?

Yes! Thats right! Perry fidgeted in his seat, as if his body couldnt contain the renewed energy coursing through his veins. Youve got to help me. Tell me its not too late for me!

Mister, Im afraid I dont know what the hell youre talking about. Help you with what?

The Triangles, man! Perry didnt hear his voice rising in volume. Stop playing games. I dont know your fucking code or keyword or whatever, Im not James Bond, okay? All I know is that these things are growing in me and I cant stop them. Fuck your password shit, just put some people in one of those mobile homes and get them over here!

Perrys blood went cold as he heard low-volume buzzing in his brain. It was softer than hed ever felt before, but it was there.

The Triangles were waking up.

Mister, I dont have time for these games. I dont appreciate

Im not fucking around here! Perrys voice rang thick with desperate frustration. Goddamn it! Im out of time Im out of time! Youve got to

who ar e y ou talking to

Perrys heart lurched in his chest. Adrenaline shot through his body.

He reactively flung the cell phone across the room, where it landed softly on the carpet.

Panic clutched him as if he were a rabbit frozen in the headlights of an onrushing semi.

who ar e y ou talking to

No one! I..was just talking to myself, thats all.

why ar e y ou talking to yourself

No reason, okay? Just drop it. Perry hopped up and moved to the bathroom; suddenly he needed to piss very badly.

He felt the highpitched buzz in his head, loud and intense.

They were searching, and it was stronger than before.

He stopped at the bathroom door, mentally grasping for a way to avoid what he knew had to be coming the mind-scream. He had to get that out of his thoughts. A song. Think of a song. Something intense . . . something from Rage Against the Machine. Bombtrack.

Perrys brow furrowed as he focused his concentration on the song. -Burn, burn, yes ya gonna burn were the only words he could remember.- Perry thought it as loudly as he could, not allowing anything else to enter his brain. -Burn, burn, yes ya gonna burn!- He let the words of Rages singer, Zack de la Rocha, rip through his mind as if he were at a concert, drunk out of his gourd, swarming with thousands of other people in a violent mosh pit.

why did y ou kill

Perry was concentrating so hard he almost didnt register the question. why why why why why
He couldnt believe it. They wanted to know why hed killed the three Triangles. Fury welled up inside him, pushing
aside his concentration, drowning his fear, crushing his panic. They had the audacity to ask why?
why why why whywhywhywhy
Because he was in me! What other fucking reason do I need? He was inside my body and I wanted him out. I want
you all out! he wasn t hur ting y ou

neither are we

Not hurting me? I can barely walk, my shoulder is fucked up and my house is covered with blood. My blood! our blood too you did

it to yourself

Fuck you, you little cocksuckers! I didn't do it to myself! I have to get you guys out of me before you eat me up from the inside! I may look like the amazing walking incubator to you, but it's not going to happen!

calm down relax calm down relax

Relax? Sure, I'll relax, when the rest of you fucks are dead! Somewhere in his weary mind, he realized that his rage had boiled over, slipped beyond his control. He wanted to hit something, anything, hit something and break it into a million pieces. If I have to cut myself into chunks to get every last one of you, I'll do it and I'll laugh you hear me? I'll laugh my ass off the whole time!

calm down so meone

coming calm down

No one's coming, you bastards! He shook with unbridled, primitive fury. He made little hops to keep his balance.

so meone is here calmdown calm down

Three knocks on the door ended the debate.

46.

HOWDY, NEIGHBOR -PART TWO -

Perry stared at the door, not sure he'd actually heard it, hoping he hadn't.

Then came three more knocks.

columbo Columbo columbo columbo

Shut up! Perry hissed through clenched teeth, the stress wiring his jaws tight. It's not Columbo.

Hey in there! the voice called in. A male voice. He recognized the distinctively deep baritone of Al Turner, who lived in the apartment directly above Perry's. Would you stop your screaming? You're driving me nuts.

Al Turner was Mr. Blue Collar. One of those guys who, despite having passed the thirty-year mark, still measured his manhood by how much alcohol he could consume on a night out with the boys. A car mechanic, or something like that.

Don't bother ignoring me, I know you're there! Three more knocks. He was pissed. Perry heard the anger in his voice.

Are you okay? What's going on in there?

Nothing, Perry called back through the closed, locked and chained door. I'm sorry, I was having an argument on the phone. Perry felt relief with that top-of-the-head lie. That would work. That made sense. That was logical.

Al yelled back through the door, Yeah? I've heard nothing but yelling from down here, and it's starting to get on my nerves, you know?

Perry had been screaming his head off for one reason or another in his battles against the Triangles and kill him

he'd never thought about how much noise he was making. Al was

kill him

probably at wit's end from all the commotion.

Sorry Al, Perry said. I'll keep it down, I promise. Woman problems, you know?

You can open the door, man. I don't have a gun or anything. Al's voice sounded calmer.

I'm buck naked, Al, just got out of the shower. Thanks for stopping by, I'll keep

kill him

it down.

Perry heard footsteps shuffle down the hallway. That had been as rude as can be, Perry knew, but he wasn't about to open the door and let Al see the Blood-O-Rama inside the apartment.

kill him

They'd said kill him again and again. Perry hadn't heard them the first few times . . . or maybe he hadn't wanted to hear them.

Perry whispered, Why the hell would I kill him?

he knows,

he's a threat,

kill him kill him

He is not a threat! Perry heard his voice rise again before he caught himself in mid-sentence, making threat come out several decibels lower than the rest of his words. He's my neighbor, he lives upstairs.

High-pitch.

Fuzzy noise.

Perry assumed they were accessing the term upstairs, or perhaps the building's layout. He was growing adept at knowing what they searched for; their retrieval process seemed to make images flash into his mind as well, bits and pieces of what they wanted.

he lives right above us fucker he knows kill him he knows kill him

Shut up, Perry said calmly, quietly, but with as much authority as he could muster. He might be as good as dead,

but he wasn't going to take Al with him. You can just fuck off, how's that? I'm not going to kill him. Forget it and stop asking. It's not going to happen. The only one I'm thinking of killing is myself and you four along with me. So shut up.

The lumpy sound came again, low and long. Perry laughed inwardly. It was like they were lovers; the Triangles searched for the right words to avoid an argument.

don't kill us or kill yourself fucker don't worry trying to stop Columbo

Trying to stop Columbo.

Trying to stop the Soldiers.

Had the right people at Triangle Mobile Home Sales gotten the message? Maybe he should have called 911 a long time ago maybe they could have gotten the things out when it still mattered, because it was too late now.

Perry felt tired and drained. It really was like an argument with a lover. Whenever he had a knock-down, drag-out fight with a girlfriend, anger and other emotions flew around his head like dead leaves in an October storm. Such arguments exhausted him. He didn't need to sleep after sex he needed to sleep after fighting. This felt exactly the same. It was only about 6:30 P.M., but it was time to turn in.

He entered the bedroom but didnt want to sleep there; the sheets remained spotted and streaked with blood. He was in there only long enough to grab a clean gray long-sleeved Detroit Lions T-shirt. Then he hopped to the bathroom, pounded four Tylenol and headed to the couch. He let himself fall into the inviting cushions.

He was out within seconds.

MARGARET SETS UP SHOP

Margaret called the shots. They commandeered a med/surg floor at the University of Michigan Medical Center. Med /surg is fancy-pants hospital slang for medical /surgical. Without Murrays approval shed ordered not just one, but two portable BSL-4 labs installed in the wing. That SARS was a nasty sucker, couldnt be too careful, right? The hospital administration put up a fight, demanding to know the risks, the health status of the community and a bunch of other nicey-nice shit that Margaret simply did not have time to deal with.

She had an executive order. She had the deputy director of the CIA in her back pocket. These people were going to give her what she wanted, and that was that.

They had to be ready. Two cases in Ann Arbor, and theyd been so damn close to catching a live one. If they got another chance, she might get her shot to see just what the hell these triangles were.

Agent Otto came through the door, carrying a five-foot-long cardboard tube.

Margarets pulse jumped up a notch she wasnt sure if it was from seeing Otto, the portfolio, or both.

Did you get the printout, Clarence?

He flashed his wide, easy smile. No problem, Doc. I think I made some Kinkos employees happy. Im guessing its not every day they get sworn to secrecy at midnight and use their large color printer for national security.

She helped him pull the rolled-up printouts from the tube, and they started taping the final artistic works of Kiet Nguyen up on the wall.

PROGRAMMING

Perry would never know how close he came to getting real help. The NarusInsight STA 7800, the machine that scanned all the calls, picked up the word triangle from his call to Triangle Mobile Home Sales but did not find any of the context words that would alert the CIAs watcher. Had Perry changed a few words, possibly even just one word, if hed said, I had seven to start with, but I killed three, instead of, I had seven to start with, but I got three, help would have already been on the way.

But Perry didnt use the right words. The system didnt forward the call to the watcher. Still alone in his fight for survival, Perry slept.

He slept like the dead.

The Triangles did not.

The subconscious mind is a powerful device. Repeating things over and over to yourself, visualizing a success again and again, virtually programs your brain to go out and make those images a reality. The opposite also holds true if youre convinced youre a loser, that you always seem to lose your job, that you cant save money, that you cant lose weight, you tell yourself these things over and over, and guess what? They come true as well. The subconscious mind takes the things it hears over and over and makes them reality. The subconscious mind doesnt know the difference between success and failure. The subconscious mind doesnt know the difference between what helps you and what hurts you.

The subconscious mind doesnt know the difference between good and evil.

All night long, Triangles repeated the phrase in Perrys head. More than a hundred times. Definitely thousands, perhaps tens of thousands or even a hundred thousand. Over and over.

kill him kill him kill him

It was a short phrase, and they didnt even really have to say it all they had to do was send it to his auditory nerve, a high-speed data dump into Perrys programmable subconscious.

There were others close by, others of their kind. Sometimes they heard voices, like their own, but not coming from within the hosts body. Some hosts were far away. One was very, very close.

They knew nothing of where they came from or what they were, but the stronger they became, the more they knew why they were here.

They were here to build.

And soon the Triangles would join with those of the nearby host, become one group, one tribe, then move to join even more of their kind. The glorious construction would begin. But first they had to keep the host alive, keep him out of danger, keep him away from the Soldiers.

kill him kill him kill him

Mental and physical exhaustion held Perry in a deep, deep sleep. He was stone-cold out for just under fourteen hours. The Triangles incessantly repeated the phrase until the Tylenol kicked in, they caught a solid buzz, and drifted off with visions of the glorious construction that would soon become a reality.

REACH OUT AND TOUCH SOMEONE

Bill Miller stared at the TV. Columbo was on the Sunday-Morning Mystery Movie, but he wasnt really watching. His fingers drummed against the remote control.

What the hell was Perry doing? Didnt answer his phone. Didnt answer instant messages. Didnt answer his door. Bill hadnt gone this long without talking to Perry since theyd first roomed together in college. Something was wrong.

Really wrong, like Oh,fuck, my parachute wont open wrong.

Bill had called a dozen times so far, leaving a message every time but never getting a response. Hed watched his IM client, seeing if Perry would log on: nothing. Hed even left a friggin note, like some psycho girl.

Perry was obviously home, and he wanted to be left alone. But man, this was Sunday. Fucking football Sunday. Their tradition dated back almost a decade, through tertiary friends that came and went, through seven girlfriends -five on Bills side, two on Perrys the only game that Bill had a chance of winning against the super-athlete-.

Well screw this. Perry didnt get to hide in that tiny apartment, not when football Sunday was on. Bill needed to see him, needed to know everything was all right. Perry was capable of such violent outbursts one incident might put him in jail. Bill had to reach him, just to make sure his friend wasnt about to fuck up his life yet again.

Bill picked up the phone and called his best friend one more time.

COOKING UP A STORM

Somebody knockin at the duh-or, somebody ringin the bell.

He recognized the voice. Paul McCartney. Must be some Beatles tune, from when they were all whacked out on drugs and spouting that Peace and Love shit.

It was that fucking door again. Still rotting and spongy soft, although this time Perry wasnt walking down the dark hall. He was standing still, yet the door kept getting closer.

The door was coming for him.

A hundred tiny tentacles jutted from the doors bottom like the arms of a black anemone, wiggling, pulling, always moving forward. The door came toward him, slowly but steadily, the spongy green wood hungry for a meal.

Perry turned and ran, but at the other end of the hall stood another green door, this one also moving closer, this one also hungry.

Nowhere to go. One door or the other . . . or both. No matter what he did, what waited behind those doors would take him. In the dream, Perry started to scream . . .

Perry awoke, his eyelids flickering against the early morning light that sifted harshly through his window. Hed fallen asleep sitting up, head resting on the back of the couch. The position had made his neck stiff and tight. He rubbed at it with his good arm, trying to loosen up the muscles. He scraped his tongue against the roof of his mouth in an automatic effort to relieve the pasty feeling that comes from bad sleep. It wouldnt go away until he could get some water.

His cell phone rang loudly. Barely awake, he answered it before he could think of the consequences.

Hello?

hello hello sonofabitch

Perry! Youre home! Where the hell have you been, man? Ive been here . . . Perry blinked his eyes against the rude sunlight. He slowly pushed his lethargic body upright. His voice still carried the

grogginess of the morning, the sound of words that came out automatically without the guidance of an attentive brain.

Been in my apartment. w e k n o w w e v e been her e too

Youve been gone for days! The voice on the other end rang with anxiety and excitement. We thought youd skipped town or something. Youve been home all this time?

It was almost like a split personality, a sprint between intelligence and stupidity. Half of his mind raced in a dead panic -the pain is coming!-, rushing to wrest control from the other half, the I-just-woke-up-andIm-damn-stupid half that was currently talking on the phone, oblivious to the disastrous situation rapidly surging to the boiling-over point.

Perry, you there?

Perry gave his head a little shake, still trying to clear the cobwebs.

Who is this?

who is who, what ar e y ou talking about

Its Bill, stupid. You know, Bill? Your best friend? Maybe youve heard of me?

The intelligent, panicked part of Perrys mind slammed into control with the force of a missile hitting a passenger jet. He flung the phone away as if it were a tarantula. It landed on the floor only a few feet from him.

Hello? The word came faint, thin and tinny from the receiver. who is her e, who ar e y ou talking to, who is here Bills voice sounded impossibly distant and small. Like an abused dog cowering at the sound of its masters angry call, Perry flinched with each word that trickled from the phone.

Hello? Perry?

He reached down and flipped the phone shut.

who is there, who is

there, who who who is

it columbo

Perrys breath still came in shallow, quiet bursts. Like a kid caught doing something very wrong, his mind raced for an excuse, a lie, anything that would keep him out of trouble.

who is there, who is

there, who is there

No one is here, Perry said quietly.

columbo is here isnt he

No! Perry fought back panic, tried to keep his voice low he didnt want another visit from Big Al upstairs. No one is here. It was just the telephone. Its nothing to worry about. High-pitched noise ripped through his thoughts as the Triangles rooted around in his brain. Perry sat very, very still, wondering if a blast of angry shouting would hammer the inside of his head.

Low-pitched noise followed as the Four Horsemen added new words and phrases to their growing vocabulary. telephone so y ou can

talk to ones who ar en t
her e right

Perry worked his way through the Triangle sentence. They put right at the end of the sentence. They were asking a question.

Yes, thats right, so we can talk to ones that arent here. He remained frozen on the couch like a hunted rabbit, waiting for the pain to sear through his head, a weed whacker trimming up his brain.

w e do that without

telephones talk to Triangles

Are you talking to some of them now? Perry carefully led the conversation away from the telephone call, still wary of the mindscreeching although he sensed no anxious emotions from the Triangles. It seemed that they understood the concept of a phone and realized that no one was in the room. There was a bit of high-pitched fuzzy noise before the Horsemens response.

calling one up now ,
 we are talking to them
 Are they nearby? High-pitch sounded in his head.
 how far is nearby
 You're familiar with the concept of distance? He felt them looking up the word distance. Unbidden, images flashed through his mind maps, a hundred-yard dash, third-grade story problems.
 yes. how far is nearby .
 show us
 He'd have to start them out on inches and feet. Nearby was a relative concept and he wasn't sure how he'd explain it. He hopped toward the junk drawer to get a ruler. As he moved, the faint wisps of a foul smell drifted across his nose, and then it was gone. He sniffed again but caught no further traces of the scent. He brushed aside a roll of duct tape and pulled the ruler from the drawer.
 He steeled himself. What he was about to do educate them made it even more real, even more hopeless. It was like admitting that they were just as normal as the Detroit Lions on Thanksgiving Day or Saturday-morning cartoons. He slid up the sleeve on his left arm.
 There sat the Triangle, bright blue under his skin. But the eye slits were still closed.
 show us.
 I can't. His . . . his eyes aren't open yet.
 so we can see.
 not all. not yet.
 So which one of you can see? My back? My . . . my balls?
 no, your ass, show us
 No.
 show us
 No fucking way.
 SHOW US
 The low-level mindscreeam hit him, causing more fear than pain. What he had to do sickened him, but he had no choice.
 He dropped his pants and bent over, gripping the counter edge for support. He held the ruler behind him at ass level, parallel to his butt cheeks, directly in front of the Triangle buried in his posterior.
 Do you see this? Perry felt embarrassed, like a teenager whose pantsed in front of the girls, or someone caught masturbating. He felt his face flush red. He was standing there in his kitchen, pants about his knees, bent over like some silkyboy waiting for a bull fag to take it to him. He'd certainly rather have some three-hundred-pound convict sticking it up his ass than deal with the situation he had now. Even AIDS would be better than going out this way.
 yes what is it
 He felt loud, high-pitch noise. Excitement rolled into his thoughts, an overflow emotion from the Triangles. He'd had all the Triangles covered up from the first moment they could see. The Triangle on his shoulder had enjoyed only a few moments of vision before Perry fucked up its whole day. Aside from an eyeful of fork, this ass-eye view was really the first thing they'd ever seen.
 It's called a ruler. It measures distances. Perry closed his eyes and laid his head down on the counter. It felt cool against his warm face. See the lines and the numbers?
 He felt them accessing the new words.
 yes lines and numbers yes
 Their excitement level soared, leaking into his own mind. Perry fought it down. Anger crept into his thoughts he wasn't going to let their emotions overtake him.
 Okay. The big lines represent inches. That's a unit of measurement. The numbers count how many inches there are. There's twelve inches on this ruler, twelve inches is called a foot, which is a larger unit of measurement. Understand?
 The fuzzy noise in his head was a speedy blur, then it was gone.
 yes.
 twelve inches in a foot
 Okay. Now, there're the twelve inches in a foot, and if you have three feet
 three feet is a yard
 They were at it again, checking his brain like the Perry Public Library. It was a redefinition of being used, and one hundred yards in a football field
 there was nothing Perry could do about it. Nothing. His anger continued to grow, his temper slowly mushrooming like a nuclear pile approaching critical mass. Perry shut his eyes tight and tried to
 5,280 feet in a mile
 control the emotions, but there were too many: excitement, frustration, humiliation from being bent over the counter with his ass exposed like some prison bitch waiting to be taken, and rage at having his brain and memories fingered through like a Comptons Encyclopedia.

His fathers voice came to him, unbidden. This time it sounded real and vibrant, not a memory but something angry and new. Look at yourself, son. Bent over like some nancy-boy, youre a goddamned disgrace. I oughta teach you some manhood, boy. You gonna let them treat you like that? You gonna let them? Huh, boy? You gonna let them PUSH YOU AROUND LIKE THAT?

A narrow-eyed snarl slipped across Perrys face. He reached his left hand over to the stove and cranked the front right burners knob to high.

He stood and pulled up his pants. Their disappointment overflowed into him, as pure and as powerful as the excitement had been. let us see. let us see

You wanna see? See the fucking shit stains in my underwear.

let us see let us see the ruler

Shut the fuck up, youve seen enough. Part of Perry hoped theyd continue. He wanted to hurt them, teach them some manners. Another part of him -the part that had been all of him until a week ago, the part that was fading fast- struggled to bring his temper under control. He was split right down the middle, and he didnt give a ratfuck which part came out on top.

let us see See SEE

Perry flinched as the Triangle volume started to rise. A mindscreeam fast approached. The part of Perry that hoped for a peaceful resolution shrank away to nothingness.