

This is Cooper, the voice said in Dews earpiece. Downstairs, one more body. Yep, going to get his ticket punched.

Dew reached the top of the stairs. He checked in each room, ready to fire instantly if he saw a weapon. Every room was messy, the casual decor of college kids. This wasnt one of the houses for the rich kids. This one was full correction, had been full of kids that actually worked to get through school. Even so, every room had a computer. Every computer had a neat bullet hole through the screen.

The last room, of course, held the answers. And the answers were some shit Dew Phillips really didnt want to see. A bloated body tied to a chair. A body missing both feet. Both hands. Half the head gone, a fucking hammer sticking out of the skull like a handle. Flies swarming, showing a real preference for the brains.

And on the floor, a pitted black skeleton sitting in a giant black stain on the green carpet.

Gonna need a steam cleaner for that, Dew thought, then instantly wondered if he was going just a little bit crazy. The skeleton lay on top of a .22 rifle. The back of the skull had a neat little hole in it. Fucking gook had shot himself in the eye.

Dew quickly looked around the room. What he saw on the back wall made him shake his head in near exhaustion. These infected victims, if you could manage to call the murdering assholes that, were some seriously crazy fuckers. This is Phillips. Primary objective found, deceased. Lets get this scene locked down tight, and as soon as we do, get Doctor Montoya over here. Squad One, lose the Racal suits and take up positions at the entrances, two at the front door, two at the back. No one gets in unless I let em in. Squad Two, start cataloging the crime scene. Get a shitload of pictures, and bring in the photo printer. Montoya is only going to be here long enough to see the scene firsthand, then I want her out and I want pictures ready for her to take with. And get into the universitys database and get me pictures of these kids when they were alive, shell need that for comparison. Lets move, people. The locals arent going to be happy when they hear about the body count.

Another miss. He wondered if Otto and Margaret would fare any better with the other lead from Chengs files. Couldnt be worse mass-murdering art student versus a seven-year-old girl with one of those strange fiber things, which itself had been removed six days ago.

Hopefully, they could find something important.

At least they didnt have to look at a scene like this.

The SARS story wouldnt cover six bodies. People might make a sad face when they hear about a seventy-year-old woman killing her son, or some random guy going nutso and whacking his family, but six dead college kids . . . that was another matter. A mass murder like this would be on every station in the country if Dew didnt lock this shit down tight, and right now.

Fortunately, even in a game of big swingers, Dew had the president of the United States of America hitting cleanup. And the president carried a damn big bat.

Dew knew exactly what he needed even before he pulled out his cell phone and dialed Murray Longworth.

38.

COUCH-POTATO BUG

The throbbing of the leg brought him out of his dead-man sleep. It was a double-pulse thump, just a hair off time with the rhythm of his heart.

Perry wasnt medically inclined enough to know what had happened, to know the disaster that lurked in his left leg just beneath the surface of his skin. He had no way of knowing that his Achilles tendon floated in two useless pieces, torn to shreds by the sharp hooks of the Triangles tail.

What he did know was that it hurt. Hurt like a bitch. Throbbled. Thumped. Thump-thumped. He had to take something for the pain. He groaned as he sat up on the couch and gingerly slid his legs over the edge, resting his feet on the floor. Despite the pulsating body aches, his head felt a bit better. But how much better could he feel knowing what twisted and grew and wormed about inside his body? They were killing him, of that there was no doubt but why? What did they want?

Where had these things come from? Perry had never heard of any parasite like this, one that somehow talked in his head, capable of . . . intelligence. No, this was definitely something new. Maybe it was some government experiment. Maybe he was a guinea pig for some sinister plot. Possibilities began to flood his mind. He wanted some answers.

Hey, Perry hissed. Hey, you fuckers.

y e s w e a r e h e r e

What do you want with me? There was a pause, then a . . . scratching sound in his head. Or maybe it sounded like static. He concentrated on the sensation it reminded him of turning a radio tuning knob very fast, so that static, music and voices all blended together into one indiscernible mass of sound.

A lumpy sound.

Perry waited for their answer, wondering what they were up to.

what do yo u mean

The voice was monotone, short and to the point. No inflection, a steady stream of syllables that shot forth almost too fast to understand. It was nearly comical, like the voice of an alien in a cheap sci-fi flick

the ones who spout trite and overused lines like resistance is futile and you humans are inferior or other such drivel.

You know damn well what I mean. Perry felt more than a little frustrated. Not only were these things anchored inside his body, but they were playing dumb to boot. Another pause, more scratching, more lumpy sound.

what do yo u mean

Perhaps hed been too generous when he called them intelligent. Maybe they werent playing dumb. Maybe they were just plain stupid.

I mean, what are you doing in my body? He pushed himself to stand up, using the arm of the couch to support his weight. Again the pause, the lumpy sound.

w e not know

Perry leaned heavily on the couch, head hanging down so low that his blond hair dangled in front of his face. His leg throbbed, thumpthumping off the inside of his skull and back down again.

How the fuck can you not know?

Pause.

Lumpy sound.

They were full of shit. That was the only answer. They had beamed

into his body or grown out of some evil mushroom or something and they had to be there for a reason, didnt they?

As he waited for their answer, he tried to listen more closely to the lumpy sound. He focused, and caught occasional words, but they came so fast he couldnt recognize them. It was like trying to see individual stones on a highway shoulder while driving at sixty-five miles per hour you could see them for a second and know what they were even if you couldnt identify them. It was as if they were scanning for the right words. Scanning their limited vocabulary, perhaps. Scanning through . . .

w e not know

. . . through . . .

w e not kno w why w e

ar e here

. . . through his brain.

They werent just in his body, they were in his fucking brain, using him like a computer to call up data.

Is that what I am to you? Perry screamed. Am I some kind of library? Spit flew from his mouth and his body shook in rage.

Pause.

Lumpy sound.

He sat in vibrating frustration, unable to do anything or help himself in any way while the Triangles searched for an answer.

He screamed so loud that vocal cords ripped and snapped, What are you doing in my head?

w e ar e tr ying to find wor ds and things to talk with you

A rocket shot of pain raced up from his thump-thumping ankle, bringing his thoughts back to his strange leg wound.

He needed some more Tylenol. He drew a deep breath, steadied himself and took an experimental hop toward the kitchen.

The good foot hit the ground firmly, but the motion jarred the bad leg. A new, fresh round of pain flashed bright and loud, seemingly generous in sharing the shock with every part of his body.

Play through the pain. It was intense, but now that he knew what to expect, he could control it. He could block it out. He could be tough. He made the eight hops to the kitchen counter, gritting his teeth so hard that his jaw muscles began to feel the burn.

He focused, took a deep breath, and looked down at his muscular leg jeans dangling in two long denim flaps, dried blood flaking off his skin, little pieces hanging like red dandruff from his blond leg hairs. Hed fucked up the works pretty good, but what did it matter? Hed be dead soon anyway.

He grabbed the Tylenol bottle off the microwave top and shook out six pills. He gulped them down with a handful of tap water from the sink. He hopped back to the couch and gently sat down, grimacing against the pain.

It occurred to him that he still hadnt called work. What was it, Saturday? Hed lost track of the days. He didnt even have a clue how long hed slept.

A thought struck him. Where the hell had he contracted this Triangle disease? As far as he knew, he might have gotten it at work. Obviously the Triangles started small. Maybe they were airborne, or maybe they were delivered via an insect bite, like malaria.

Or maybe he was right about being a guinea pig, and maybe work was

in on it. Work, and perhaps even the apartment building. That sounded logical as well. Maybe everyone in the apartment building was stuck inside right now, contemplating the newfound guests growing in their bodies.

The things must have come from somewhere. Theyd landed on him, or an insect or even something artificial had delivered them.

Did that mean these things were custom-built for people? They were getting along a little too well with his body for this to be some fluke of nature. His body hadnt rejected them, that was for fucking sure. No, he doubted this could be accidental. Either more people in town or in the building had the same disease, or someone had singled him out as an experimental host.

Perrys mind swam in a tar pit of possibilities. He tried to put the thoughts away, because he simply didnt want to think about it anymore, didnt want to think about how fucked he was.

The pain in his leg eased a little as the Tylenol took effect. He felt cold. He hopped to his room and threw on a white University of Michigan sweatshirt, then hopped back to the living room and sat on the couch. He wasnt sleepy, wasnt hungry he needed a diversion to keep his thoughts away from the Triangles. He reached for the remote control and

clicked on the flat-panel TV. The Preview Channel said the time was 11:23 A.M.

He flicked through the channels, not finding much. Infomercials. Scooby Doo. Basketball, Wolverines at Penn State if it had been football, maybe, but he couldn't focus on basketball right now. Seinfeld reruns. Soon the NFL pregame shows would be on for the Saturday game, and he would be riveted to the TV. That would let him forget. And after the pregame, the games. But for now, a television wasteland. He was about to give up when he hit the jackpot: a Columbo movie.

He'd seen this one, but it didn't matter. Columbo with his old basset hound in tow shuffled his way about yet another mansion, rumpled tan trench coat hanging from him like he'd just hopped off of a freight train full of hoboes. He was trying to climb down from a balcony and was stuck in the nearby tree -which the killer must have used either to get into the bedroom or to get out of it-. The basset hound waited patiently at the base of the tree; Columbo awkwardly fell to the ground. As

he struggled to rise, the Mandatory Rich Person walked up and accosted him with the ever-so-familiar, Have you taken leave of your senses, Mister Columbo?

who is there

Perry almost jumped out of his seat when the Triangles spoke. What? he said, looking around the room, eyes darting to every corner.

who is there

Dread filled Perry. Was someone here to finish the experiment, perhaps kill him and dissect him? Or maybe take him away? Did the Triangles know something he didnt?

What are you talking about? Perry said. I dont see anyone, theres no one here.

ne w Voice ne www

v oice ne w voice

The TV droned with Columbos nasal growl. Sorry to disturb you again, maam, Peter Falk said to the Mandatory Rich Person, but I was wondering if I could ask you just a few more questions.

Columbo. They heard the TV. A laugh escaped Perrys lips, which surprised him. The Triangles didnt know what television was.

Or maybe . . . maybe they didnt know what reality was. More accurately, they didnt know the difference between fantasy and reality. They couldnt see a thing, but they could hear. They didnt know the difference between a real person talking and sound from the television.

Thats Columbo, Perry said quietly, trying to figure out how to handle this new plot twist. He didnt know what good this information would do him. It wasnt like it could save his condemned ass, but something in the back of his head told him not to let on about the TV. Perry decided to trust his instincts and turned the set off.

who is columbo who

Hes a cop, a police officer.

Perry felt the now-familiar pause and the burst of lumpy sound, which grew so loud he almost winced. The Triangles worked his brain like a big thesaurus, hunting for meaning.

In a way, the searching was worse than the pain, worse than seeing the things under his skin, even worse than hooks wrapped around his bones or the creatures sucking nutrients from his blood. They scanned his brain, using him like wetware, like their own personal computer.

The concept hit him with force. If they could scan through his brain, through the chemical-storage processes that locked memories down, then this was some seriously advanced shit. Perhaps they didnt know what TV was, but something was going on here that was beyond the cutting edge of science and

no cop no cop no cop n o no not tell him w e her e no no no no no

The Triangles burst of words interrupted Perrys thoughts and filled his soul with a wave of fear that ripped through him like a blast of November wind. His adrenaline surged against some perceived threat even as he realized it wasnt his fear, but theirs, the Triangles fear. Something about the crumpled Columbo had them scared shitless.

no no no no no

co ming to get us

Their fear felt corrosive, almost tangible, a jet-black snake squirming and writhing under the grip of some heartless bird of prey.

Take it easy! Perry winced at the bizarre feeling of alien emotions coursing through his own mind and body. Its okay, hes gone, I got rid of him. He thought it might be easy to make the fear go away if he told them about TV, told them there was no police officer

co ming to get us

in the apartment, but his instincts told him to keep that trump card. He might find some use for it later.

cop is gone cop is gone no no no

Hes gone! Now take a chill pill and shut the fuck up! Perrys hands involuntarily went to his head, trying to hold in his brains against the pounding tumult of shouts and anxiety slashing through his skull. Contagious fear. Perry felt the cold fingers of panic wrapping around his chest. Hes fucking gone! Now relax and stop screaming in my head!

co ming to GET us

They sounded different, and not just because of the fear. They actually had some tone to their words now, something deep, and a certain slowness that he found vaguely familiar.

he s co ming to GET us

He felt their terror. It was nothing like the emotionless monotone hed first heard theyd increased their intensity, or maybe just lost their restraint.

no TELL him w e her e

I wont tell, okay? Perry lowered his voice, tried to relax himself in hopes that it would, in turn, relax them. Its okay, hes gone now, you just have to take it easy.

The claustrophobic fear instantly vanished, as suddenly as if hed been in a dark room and someone had flicked on the lights.

thanks thanks thanks

Why the hell do the police scare you so bad?

coming to GET us

Why were they afraid of the police? That made no sense. Perry supposed this might mean he wasn't alone, might mean that someone knew about the Triangles and wanted to destroy them. But why hadn't he heard about it? Surely the police couldn't keep a secret like this from the press. And how could the Triangles know of hostile police in the first place? They'd grown from nothing, all the while in his apartment they had no contact with the outside world. Could they have some preprogrammed memory of potential threats?

They didn't recognize the words cop or police right away they'd had to scan and scan hard to find the meaning that frightened them so badly. But they found something in Perry's Unabridged Brain Dictionary, something that they knew. At least, they thought they knew.

What do you mean, he's coming to get you? Does someone know you're here? Perry felt the Triangles search his mind, his memories, for the right words. The more they searched, the more familiar he became with the feeling, like an eye slowly adjusting to the dim light of a dark room.

men are looking for
us KILL us yikes Yikes
YIKES

Yikes? The word stuck in Perrys head. Yikes. They used the word yikes. And they had shouted it along with kill. Why were they suddenly talking so funny? The monotone was gone there was actual inflection in the words. The speech had taken on a slower, dreamier quality, to the point where the Starting Five talked almost with a drawl.

But the important thing wasn't the new speech, it was their paranoid fear of cops. Was this some kind of instinctive memory? How could it be that they didn't know why they were in his body, but they knew enough to fear the police? Were they just plain lying to him? What did they have to gain by being honest about anything? But he'd felt their fear of the police. Or maybe . . . maybe it wasn't police at all. Maybe it was men in uniforms.

Perry realized that when he thought of cops or police, his initial mental image was that of a Michigan state trooper. Those guys were always fairly big, with immaculate uniforms, robotic politeness and a very prominent gun.

This was probably the picture the Triangles read, because it was the first thing he thought of when he heard the word cop. And his mental image of the state troopers with their perfect uniforms and attitudes and guns wasn't really that of a cop as much as it was that of . . .

Of...

A soldier.

Were the Triangles afraid of soldiers? Two possibilities flashed through

Perrys mind. Either the Triangles knew what soldiers were by experience or instinct, or they had a broader knowledge of the world around them than they let on. Somehow they knew things that Perry didn't.

A brief flicker of hope flared up in his chest. The Triangles feared soldiers. Was there some group that knew of the Triangles? If so, did it mean that Perry wasn't the only one suffering through this horror?

Why do you think they're coming to get you?

Pause.

Lumpy sound.

the y W ANT to kill us

kill Kill KILL

How do you know that? How can you when you don't even know where you come from?

A double pause.

talking to friends

Friends. Were there other Triangles? Were there other people infected with these things? Maybe he wasn't the only one maybe this was bigger than just him.

What do these friends say?

Only a short pause this time.

hungry feed us

Your friends are hungry too?

hungry feed us feed

Feed FEED

Oh, you're hungry?

feed Feed FEED

Feed feed

Forget about the food, Perry said insistently. Tell me about your friends. Where are they?

FEED NO W

The command sounded like a cannon exploding inside his head. His eyes shut tight. His teeth ground in reaction to the pain.

FEED NO W

Perry let out a small, choked groan, he couldn't think straight, he couldn't grip what he needed to do to

FEED NO W NOW NOW

NOW NOW NOW NOW

NOW

Shut the fuck up! Perry shouted as loudly as he could, his voice a deep, guttural blast of pain and anger. Well eat, well eat! Just stop screaming in my head!

okay feed us no w okay

feed us no w no w now

Like the return stroke of a bowstring after release of an arrow, his mind snapped back to normal. A single tear trailed down his cheek. Their shouting had been so intense he'd been unable to move, almost unable to speak.

no w N o w N o w

Perry jumped up as he heard their intensity start to creep higher. He'd hopped the eight hops to the kitchen before he gave it a second thought, his body acting from fear of that pain.

He was snapping to attention like a soldier under orders, not thinking, only doing as he was told, like some good

little Nazi carrying out the master plan. Jawohl, Herr Kommandant. Ill kill the Jews and the Gypsies and the Czechs because I have no mind of my own, and its okay because someone told me to do it. He was a robot, a remote-controlled servant. It humiliated him, somehow dug away at his pride as a man. A man, after all, was in charge of his own destiny, not at the whim of some slave driver, some controller.

He tried to console his damaged pride by telling himself he was very hungry and would have eaten anyway it wasnt because the Triangles had told him to. But that was bullshit. Right now he felt like a puppet on a string, doing a funky little dance each time the Starting Five tweaked at one of his nerves. Worse than a puppet he felt like he was ten years old again, jumping with fear every time his father spoke.

Still had the Ragu. He fished it out of the fridge and pulled a box of Rice-A-Roni from the cupboard. He was almost out of food and would have to shop very soon. Wouldnt that be a hoot? The condemned man, dying of some freaky parasite, pushing a cart at Krogers and picking out the last meal he would cook for himself. Now thats a liberal death row.

A flash of cooking inspiration came to him as he put the Rice-A-Roni back and grabbed the half-full bag of Cost Cutter rice. No noodles, but the Ragu looked just too darn good to pass up. Fishing a measuring cup out of the cupboard, he set a pot to boil.

no w N o w now

The words drifted menacingly through his head.

Just hold your horses. Dinners going to be ready in about twenty minutes.

no w no w now

Its not ready yet, Perry urged, his voice pleading. He poured the Ragu into a mismatched pot and set it to simmer. Like I said, youll just have to wait a few minutes.

The lumpy noise probed at his brain.

what is a minute sonofabitch

A minute. You know, sixty seconds. It seemed so obvious it was difficult to explain. It was odd the Triangles wouldn't know the concept of time. Do you know what a second is? What time is?

second no time yes

That reply came back fast, with only a touch of lumpy noise. They knew what time was. He'd have to illustrate a second. He looked at the clock on the stove if they could see that, it would be easy to explain.

You can't . . . A chill washed over him, cutting off the question. Suddenly he wasn't sure if he wanted an answer. You can't...see...

can you? See through my eyes? He hadn't given much thought to exactly what these bastards could do. They could read his mind, in the literal sense, so could they pick up and read optical impulses from his brain? Pick them off in midstream?

no we cannot see

The answer was a relief, but a short-lived relief, cut in half by the rest of the answer:

not yet

Not yet.

They were still growing. Maybe they were simply going to take over his mind, pushing Perry's own consciousness out of the way one step at a time. Maybe they were slowly choking out his brain, just as a gangly, fibrous weed in a garden methodically robs sustenance from a rose. The rose may be beautiful, glowing and soft, but the weed . . . the weed is the survivor, the one that grows in harsh soil, rocks, bad weather, low light. The one that faces impossible conditions and not only survives, but flourishes.

Perry was suddenly quite sure he knew what was happening the Triangles were growing into him, taking over his body and his mind, keeping the shell, leaving the outside world none the wiser. Invasion of the Body Snatchers. It was the typical Hollywood script. And why not? It made sense. Why send armies and conquer the earth when you could slowly replace the human race? More efficient, more economic. Neater. Tidier. No messy bodies to clean up. Better even than the infamous neutron bomb that killed all the people and left the buildings standing.

Soon they'd tap in to his eyes. What next? His nose? Hell, maybe they were already smelling the rice simmering on the stove. Or maybe his mouth they could speak to him through his own voice. Then what? His muscles? His very motions? Just how efficient were the little bastards?

And how long were they going to be little? Maybe they weren't separate at all. Maybe they were just different parts with different missions. Living jigsaw-puzzle pieces all planning on connecting in the swingingsingles Triangle bar known as Perry's Place.

A warm flash of fuzzy noise interrupted his doom-and-gloom thoughts. how long is a second

how long is a minute

how long

Perry desperately wanted to avoid that mental screaming, that insistent chain saw of Triangle demand grinding through his thoughts.

Okay, let's figure this out. He talked quickly, hoping to prevent any agitation. See, a minute is sixty seconds, and a second is a very short piece of time. The fuzzy noise seemed stuck on a high-pitched buzz as he talked, they searched the database to keep up with the meaning of his words. And a second is, like, this long . . . here, I'll count to five using seconds. Pay attention to how long each count is, and that's a second. One . . . two . . . three . . . four...five. A flash of childhood memory reared to the surface, the jazzy counting song from the show The Electric Company -one-two-three four, five, six-seven-eight-nine-ten, eleven tweh-eh-eh-elve.

That was five seconds, get it? The high-pitched searching grew louder, followed only by the briefest buzz of a low pitch. second is short

minute is sixty

seconds hour is sixty

minutes correct

All inflection left the Starting Fives voice. He could only assume that the word correct had been part of a question and not a statement, as there wasn't even the smallest lilt in the words that echoed through his head. Whatever the reason for their brief digression into spaced-out land, they had returned to their emotionless monotone.

Correct. He'd never mentioned the concept of an hour. They had pulled it out of his brain, probably based on its association with the minute and the second. Their ability to scan his brain grew faster and faster.

It hit him quite suddenly, with the shuddering force of truth and revelation that people were just complicated machines. They were no different than computers. The brain was simply a control center and a storage device; when you needed to remember something, the brain sent some kind of signal to recall stored data, exactly like telling a program to open a file. The command was sent, and another part of the computer

twenty-four hours in a day

looked for data with code that matched the command, found it and sent that information to the processor where it was read and displayed on

the screen. The brain was exactly the same thing. Memories were stored in there somehow, some chemical process

tied up in the cerebrum or cerebellum or what have you. With the right technology, you could read that stored data as easily as you could read the stored data in a hard drive, or the stored data on the pages of a book. They were all just mediums for keeping track of simple bits of information that

several days in a week

formed something more complex. But just like matter -compounds, then elements, then atoms, then protons and electrons-, everything could be broken down into smaller and smaller parts.

It was looking more and more like the Triangles were constructed to read those little parts . . . to be able to fetch Perrys stored memories off the hard drive he'd been carrying since before his birth: his brain. The sheer

four weeks in a month
complexity of the Triangles ability was daunting. And they learned quickly; their search times seemed to grow progressively faster. They were also learning not only to pick up the single memory or word he had spoken, but associated words and memories as well. So far it looked like they could only tap into his long-term memory: time concepts, vocabulary, words with images attached in order to define meanings.
These creatures
twelve months in
a year
had the ability to read his brain like a hard drive, but they had no initial concept of simple things like
ten years in a decade
time, or the technology of television, or that voices could be projected, not real.
Something was missing from this mystery, or perhaps something was just a bit out of place. He still didn't know what the Triangles were, where they came from or how long he had until they took over his body.
But maybe he could stop them. Maybe . . . if he got help. The mythical Soldiers were out there, and they knew. They knew about the Triangles. They wanted to kill the Triangles. Fuck up the Starting Five and send them packing. The big question, Perry old boy, the big twenty-thousand-dollar question is who are these soldiers?
This wasn't Hollywood. There were no Men in Black to save the day with a handsome smile and a witty comment. No X-Files agents crashing through his door to cast plaintive looks his way. No superhero from another planet with a special gun to blast the boogers right out of his body. He didn't know whom to call, where to go, but there had to be somebody out there.
ten decades in a century
A sudden thought froze him. If they could scan his brain, how much longer until they could read his active thoughts? And when that happened, what would they do if they knew he wanted to contact the Soldiers? They'd scream so loud his brain would turn to puree, drip out of his ears and dribble out his nose like snot.

Maybe they were listening right now.
He had to stop thinking about it. But if he didn't think about it, how was he going to contact anybody? He couldn't even think about killing the Triangles they'd fry him from the inside out first. Cook his brain like a microwave potato. But he couldn't stop thinking, could he? And if he did stop, if he did tune such thoughts of survival from his brain, then he was surely doomed.
Stress steadily built up inside him, gaining steam like a wall of bricks crashing down from an exploding building. The buzzer on the stove loudly announced that the rice was done. His mind grabbed on to this new distraction like a drowning man clinging to a life preserver, gripping it with all he had, focusing all his thoughts on the thrilling subject of dinner.
Perry didn't realize that it was a temporary escape. He didn't realize that his mind was already beginning to crack and fissure under the stress of the impossible-to-believe situation that unfolded around him and inside him. The floodwaters were slowly rising, inevitable, unstoppable, irresistible and the high ground would only stay above the waterline for so long.

39.
MOMMYS LITTLE GIRL
Clarence Otto stopped the car. Cell phone pressed to her ear, Margaret looked out the window at a neat, two-story brick house on Miller Avenue. White shutters and trim. Dead-looking ivy branches covering one side of the house in the summer that side would be a flat wall of leafy green, the very epitome of old-school collegiate housing. Amos sat in the backseat, clearly annoyed at the whole process. While he was indefatigable in the confines of a hospital, being outdoors in the cold brought out his surly side.
We just pulled up to the girls house, Margaret said into her cell phone.
Tell Otto to stay sharp, Dew said. I've got six bodies over here, it's spinning out of control. Your backup team is there? Margaret turned in the seat to look back, even though she knew what she'd see. Gray van, unmarked, parked right behind them.
It's here. Well let Otto lead, of course, but I think we're okay the girl just had the Morgellons fibers, no triangles. Fine, just stay sharp, Dew said. These guys are psychos. And as soon as you're done, get over here.
What have you found?
Dew paused. Seems our college boy was an artist. I think you'll want to see this.
All right, Dew. Well be there as soon as we can.
Dew hung up without another word.
What did he say? Amos asked.
Six more bodies, Margaret said absently. The other side of town. We're heading over there when we're done here. In the backseat Amos hung his head. This was wearing on him, Margaret knew. Behind his sunglasses, Agent Clarence Otto showed no sign of emotion, but the muscles in his jaw twitched slightly.
Are you ready? Otto asked. She nodded.
They approached the house, Margaret and Amos keeping two steps behind Otto. Otto knocked on the door with his left hand his right hand hidden inside his jacket, resting on the hilt

of his weapon.

There was little chance of danger. Cheng's report showed he had given the girl a careful examination, and would have certainly seen anything resembling a triangle or triangle-to-be. They still had to keep things as quiet as possible if they kicked in the door to find a perfectly normal family, a little bit more of the secrecy would die, and Americans would be a little bit closer to discovering the nightmare blossoming in their midst.

Snow covered the ground and the leafless trees. Most of the houses on this street had white lawns, thick with undisturbed snow. Some, like this one, had lawns trampled over and over by tiny feet, the snows beauty crushed by the tireless energy of playing children.

The door opened. In the doorway stood a little angel blond pigtails, blue dress, sweet face. She even held a rag doll, for crying out loud.

Hello, sweetie, Otto said.

Hello, sir. She didnt look afraid at all. Nor did she look happy or excited, just matter-of-fact.

Are you Missy Hester?

She nodded, her curly pigtails bouncing in time.

Ottos empty right hand came out of his jacket, slowly dropping to hang at his side.

Margaret stepped to Ottos right, so the girl could see her clearly. Missy, were here to see your mother. Is she home?

Shes sleeping. Would you like to come in and sit down in the living room?

She stood aside and gestured with her hand. A regular little hostess.

Thank you, Otto said. He walked inside, head turning quickly as he seemed to scan every inch of the house. Margaret and Amos followed. It was a small, simple affair. Aside from a scattered layer of brightly colored toys, the place looked immaculate.

Missy led them into the living room, where Margaret and Amos sat on a couch. Otto chose to remain standing. The living room gave a view of the stairs, the front door and another doorway that led into the dining-nook area of a kitchen.

How about your daddy? Margaret said. Is he home?

Missy shook her head. He doesnt live with us anymore. He lives in Grand Rapids.

Well, honey, can you go wake up your mom? We need to talk to her and to you.

The girl nodded, curls jiggling, then turned and ran up the stairs.

She seems perfectly healthy, Amos said. Well take a good look at her, but she doesnt seem to show any signs of infection.

Maybe cutting out the threads works in the new strain, Margaret said. Morgellons cases have been going on for years without any triangle growths. Something had to have changed.

Theyre just being built better, Otto said. No disrespect to either of you, but you think too much. Murray hit it right on the head. Sometimes the most obvious answer is just that, the answer.

Occams razor does seem to apply, Amos said.

Whats that? Otto asked.

Amos smiled. Never mind. It just means youre probably right.

All three of their heads turned as a little boy appeared in the open doorway to the kitchen. He couldnt have been more than seven, maybe eight he wore a cowboy hat, gun holsters on his hips, chaps with fringe and a slightly crooked black mask the full-on Lone Ranger costume. Otto tensed at the sight of the six-shooters in the boys hands, but each had a barrel capped with bright orange plastic. Cap guns. Toys.

Hold it right there, pardners, the boy said. He made his little voice all gravelly, trying to sound tough, but he just sounded cute.

Otto laughed. Oh, were holding it, Lone Ranger. Is there a problem?

Not if you keep your hands where I can see em, mister.

Otto raised his hands to shoulder height, palms out. Youll get no trouble from me, Ranger. No trouble tall.

The boy nodded, the very picture of seriousness. Well, lets just keep it that way, and well all get along realllll nice like.

Missy bounced down the stairs, making far more noise than should have been possible out of a tiny, six-year-old body.

My sister will take real good care of yall, the boy said. I got me some business to attend ta.

Be safe, Ranger, Otto said.

Cute kid, Amos said as the boy slid back into the kitchen and shut

the door behind him. They heard him banging around, yelling at imaginary robbers.

But something about the boy gave Margaret a bad feeling. Theyd rushed things, been sloppy they hadnt even checked to see how many people were in the family. The father was gone. One brother. Was there another? Any sisters?

Mommy wont wake up, Missy said. Ive been trying for a couple of days, but she wont wake up. And she smells funny.

Margaret felt a coldness flush through her stomach.

The girl took a step forward. Are you from the gov-ren-ment?

Amos slowly stood up.

Otto calmly walked between the girl and Margaret. Yes, honey, were from the government. How did you know?

Because my brother said you would come.

Margaret wanted out of there. Now. They had come for the girl, but it never crossed their minds that someone else in the house might be infected.

Oh, no, Amos said. Do you smell natural gas?

Margaret did, suddenly and strong, coming from the kitchen.

Get the girl out of here, Otto said. His voice was quiet, calm, but totally commanding. Do it now.

Margaret stood and ran the three steps to Missy, then hesitated. She didn't want to touch the little girl what if she had those things? What if they were wrong, and she was contagious?

Margaret, Otto hissed. Get her out of here.

She ignored her instincts and picked the girl up, her skin crawling as she did. She took one step toward the door, but before she could take another, the kitchen door opened.

The little boy walked out, holding a cap gun in each hand. The smell of gas billowed out of the kitchen. He still wore the cowboy hat, but not the mask. He only had one eye. The other socket held a misshapen blue lump, under the skin, that had pushed out his eyelids and eyebrow to obscene proportions. The lump stretched the eyelid out and open, showing a blackish, gnarled textured skin underneath. Whatever it was, it had grown between the boys eye and his eyelids his eye was back there somewhere, behind that . . . thing.

Youve been bad, the little boy said. Im going to have to gun . . . you . . . down.

He raised the cap guns.

Amos raced past Margaret, heading for the door. She turned and ran with him, still carrying the girl. Heavy footsteps told her that Agent Otto was right behind her.

Margaret ran out the door as she heard the caps firing, the boy pulling the trigger over and over again. She made it out the front porch and was down the steps when the gas finally ignited.

It wasnt a big explosion, so much as a really large whuff. It didnt even blow out the windows like on TV, just gave them a good rattle. She kept running and felt the heat on her back just because it didnt explode didnt mean it wasnt hot, didnt mean the house wasnt burning, and didnt mean the little boy wasnt already engulfed in flames.

40.

DINNER IS SERVED

Perry loaded up his plate and managed to hop to the couch without spilling any of the rice-Ragu concoction. He slumped into the waiting cushions, winced at the waves of pain that shot through his leg, then gripped his fork and dug into the meal, not knowing if it would be his last.

The Ragu wasnt thick enough to make the rice clump, so it was more like a heavy soup than Spanish rice. But it was still tasty, and it quelled his stomachs grumbling. He shoveled it in as if hed never seen food before in his life. Man, wouldnt a Quarter Pounder and some supersize fries hit the spot right now? Or Hostess cupcakes. Or a Baby Ruth bar. Or a big old steak and some broccoli with a nice white-cheese sauce. No, scratch all of the above, a bajillion soft tacos from Taco Hell would be the most satisfying thing on the planet. Cram em down with Fire Sauce and a bottomless cup of Mountain Dew. It wasnt that his rice was bad, but the texture just didnt ring of solid food, and his stomach longed to be filled like a water balloon on a steamy-hot summer day.

Summer. Now that would have been a nice season to die. His timing, as usual, was terrible. He could have contracted this illness in the spring, or in the summer, or at least in the fall. All three seasons were unbelievably beautiful in Michigan. Trees everywhere either bursting with new-growth greenery or exploding in the spectacular, jewel-reflection colors that heralded the coming winter. Dying in summer would have been good Michigan is just so green once you get outside the cities and towns, out onto the innumerable country roads. The highways to northern Michigan and the Upper Peninsula are a black slash of pavement cutting through an endless sea of forest and farmland that sprawls out on either side.

Farmland, forest, swamps, water . . . the three-hour drive from Mount Pleasant to Cheboygan was interrupted by little more than roadkill and highway-stop towns like Gaylord that presented a splotch of buildings and cars before they were gone, fading away in the rearview mirror like the vestiges of a tasteless dream that dissipates into the buttery solution of delicious sleep.

Summer was warm, at least early summer. Later on in the season, the true nature of Michigans swamps revealed themselves in sweltering humidity, clammy sweat, swarms of mosquitoes and blackflies. But even that posed little problem, as you were never more than five or ten minutes drive from a lake. Back home, swimming in Mullet Lake, cool water leaching away the oppressive heat. Sun blasting down, turning white bodies red and leaving streamers in the eye from where it bounced off the surface like a million infinitely bright, tiny supernovas.

As perfect as summer could be, winter was equally oppressive. Sure, it was beautiful in its own right, with snow-covered trees, sprawling fields converted to expanses of white nothingness bordered by woods and dotted with farmhouses snugly nestled into the landscape. But beauty didnt hold much over substance when that substance was freeze-your-balls-off cold. Up north the winters were spectacular. Down in the southern part of the state, where population expansion never ceased, the forests and fields were only something he glimpsed on the way to work. Here, winter made life miserable. Cold. Freezing. Wet. Icy. And even the snow looked dirty, pushed to the side of the road in mangy, gravel-embedded slush piles. Sometimes the trees were bedecked with an inch of snow on every last branch and twig, but most of the time they were barren, brown dead and lifeless. Thats why hed always wanted to make sure he was cremated when he died he couldnt imagine spending eternity in the frozen soil of a Michigan winter.

And yet his last days played out in that same Michigan winter. Even if the Soldiers could find him, what could they do for him? How far gone was this monotone cancer that shouted in his head like Sam Kinison on a bad acid trip?

He scraped the last grains of rice into his mouth.

Pretty tasty, eh? He tossed the plate carelessly onto the coffee table. Hey, he was dying, no point in cleaning up the mess, now was there? High-pitched fuzzy noise babbled in his head.

w e don t taste just absorb

Dont. A contraction. How about that? The Starting Fives vocab was improving.

He leaned back into the counchs familiar cushions. His stomach

rumbling gradually subsided, then ceased. Staring out at the blank TV screen, he was struck by a sudden question what to do?

During this entire bizarre scenario, hed never exactly had to worry about entertainment. Hed either been sleeping, passed out, cutting into himself like some freak from a Clive Barker movie or talking to the Starting Five. The one time hed tried to watch a little TV, good ol Columbo had gotten him into more trouble than he cared to remember. But with TV out of the question, what was he going to do? He had, of course, brought computer books from work in order to study at home, but hed be fucked if hed spend whatever hours he had reading about managing Unix networks or integrating open-source code. He did, however, like the idea of reading something, anything that might give him even a few moments reprieve from this awful situation.

He was about a third of the way through *The Shining* by Stephen King, but hadnt read a single page in weeks. Well, now was his opportunity. He wasnt going anywhere. And perhaps engrossing himself in the book would relieve his mind from the background battle of *Not Thinking About the Soldiers* -and how loud the screams would be if he did think about them-.

But first he had to clean the spaghetti sauce off his face and hands. Dinner had been a little messy. The stains on his sweatshirt he could care less about, obviously, but that sticky, tacky feeling on his face would distract him. He slowly rose from the couch and hopped to the bathroom, contemplating another trip down Tylenol Lane while he was at it. The pain in his leg was starting to get worse again.

He let the sink run until the water reached near-scalding temperatures, then washed off his face and hands. Gazing at his wet face in the mirror, he couldnt help but again think of the George Romero classic *Night of the Living Dead*. He could have been one of the walking departed: skin with a sickly gray pallor, deep circles hanging under his bloodshot eyes, dry hair askew.

But it wasnt all bad. His paunch had vanished. His muscles looked well defined for the first time in years. He could even see the beginnings of his six-pack. Hed lost at least fifteen pounds all of it fat in the past few days. He moved his arm and watched his deltoid flutter, muscle fibers visible and rippling.

Great fucking diet plan. Id like to see Richard Simmons compete with this. There was more to see than his musculature. He hadnt looked in on one of the Triangles in quite a while. He wasnt sure if he wanted to see what they looked like now. Maybe they were bigger, enlarging themselves as they continued their march on Mount Perry.

He had to look.

The one near his neck was the most convenient. Perry pulled back his sweatshirt collar, exposing the Triangle beneath. It lay just above the collarbone, near the trapezius.

That was the first muscle name hed learned. When he was a child, his father would grab the trapezius with a paralyzing grip that made Mr. Spocks little nerve pinch pale by comparison. Man-oh-man, how that had hurt. Dad usually accompanied the pinch with a phrase like, *Its my house, and youre going to live by my rules* or the ubiquitous, *Youve got to have discipline*.

Perry pushed away thoughts of his father and concentrated on the Triangle. It was bluer, now more like a new tattoo rather than a faded one, and firmer, the edges clearly defined. Just as his fluttering muscles became more obvious seemingly by the hour, the Triangles rough texture was beginning to show through the skin. He tested the skin with a poke from his free hand. Definitely firmer. He leaned in over the sink until his face was only six inches from the mirror, allowing himself the best look hed ever had at one of the little invaders.

He stared at the edges. At the slits. At the blueness. At the pores of his skin that still looked perfectly normal except for the thing underneath. He noticed the number of blue lines that extended out from the Triangle. Used blood. Deoxygenated. Same shade as the little veins on his wrists. Thats why the Triangles appeared blue they took in oxygen from his own blood through their tails or whatever, the blood worked its way up the tiny body and the deoxygenated blood dissipated on top just under the skin. It all made perfect sense.

The slits seemed much more developed than the last time hed looked. They had a pucker to them, almost like thin lips, or maybe more like . . . like . . .

A snippet of their voice flashed back to him no we cannot see... not yet.

Not yet.

Oh my God dont let that be what I think it is.

Once again, God wasnt listening.

Each of the three slits opened, revealing the deep, black, shiny surfaces underneath. If there was any question as to what they were, it disappeared when all three sets of lids blinked in unison.

He was looking at his collarbone, and his collarbone was looking right back at him.

Motherfucker, Perry said, panic once again creeping into his voice. When were these things going to stop growing? What was next? Were they going to grow out of him, grow little hands and feet or claws or tails?

His breath came in thin, shallow gasps. His eyes fuzzed out of focus, his mind seeming to go away somewhere for a quick break. Hopping had become so normal for him that he managed to get back to the couch and plunk down without breaking his trance.

His brain ran on autopilot, ran like a movie that played on and on and on while Perry sat back and watched, unable to change the channel, unable to look away from the flashing images.

He remembered a show hed seen on *The Learning Channel*. There was this wasp, an evil little fucker. It attacked a

specific type of caterpillar. The wasp didn't kill the caterpillar, only paralyzed it for a while during which time the wasp laid eggs inside the caterpillar. Inside, thank you very fucking much. The wasp, its mission complete, then flew off. The caterpillar woke up and went on about its leaf-munching life, apparently unaware of the vile disease incubating in its guts.

It was the most horrible thing Perry had ever seen. The wasp eggs didnt just hatch and rip their way out of the caterpillar . . .

They ate their way out.

When the eggs hatched, the new wasp larvae fed on the caterpillars innards. And they grew. The caterpillar struggled for life but could do nothing about the larvae eating it from the inside. The caterpillars skin bulged, rippled, moved as the larvae inside continued to eat, methodically chewing away at its guts with the same slow, robotlike precision that the caterpillar used to dispose of a leaf. It was appalling. It was a living cancer. And to make it worse, via some horrid instinct the larvae knew what to eat; they consumed the fat and internal organs while leaving the heart and brain alone, preserving the crawling buffet for as long as possible.

So perfect was the larvaes evolution that they didnt kill the caterpillar

until they finished their growth cycle as they ripped their way out of the caterpillars skin, glistening with the wet slime of the chewed guts, their victim kept squirming, writhing with what little energy it had left, amazingly alive even though its innards had been munched on like the Sunday breakfast bar at Big Boy.

Was that what faced Perry? Were they consuming him from the inside? But if that was the case, then why were they always screaming at him to eat? They werent going to take over his mind. That much was obvious if they could take over his mind, they wouldnt need eyes, now would they? Maybe this was just the first stage if they could grow eyes, why not a mouth? Why not teeth?

He calmed himself, forcing himself to focus, think logically. He was, after all, an educated man. A college boy, as Daddy would say. All he had to do was think, and maybe he could come up with some answers on his own.

He just didnt have enough information to form any kind of hypothesis, nothing to go on. No clues. Even Columbo would have been stuck with this one. Of course, Columbo would play the blithering buffoon, countering the suave, rich attitudes of his homicidal targets. Columbo would let stupidity show, wear his weakness on his sleeve, allowing his targets confidence to grow and grow and grow until they let something slip, something tiny, something that would normally go unnoticed. Unnoticed by normal eyes, but not Peter Falks cross-eyed stare. Thats what he had to do; play dumb, and get them talking.

Hey fuckers.

he y hello

What is it you fellas want with me?

what do y ou mean want

Why are you in my body?

w e don t know

So much for detective work. There was really nothing else to do. Just sit. Sit and wait. He was nothing more than a walking, talking buffet table. Sit and wait. Sit and listen.

You gonna let em push you around like that, boy?

Another voice . . . his daddys voice. It wasnt real, it wasnt a voice in his head like the Triangles, it was a memory. No, not a memory, a phantom. His daddys voice, as if his daddy were with him in spirit.

No, Daddy, Perry said, his voice a dry husk. I wont let them push me around.

He hooked his index finger under his sweatshirt collar and pulled it back violently, ripping it slightly, exposing the Triangle on his collarbone. He couldnt see it, but he knew that the icy-black eyes were blinking away, taking in the view of the living room and all the knickknacks that Perry had acquired since high school.

The fork still sat on the plate, a few rivulets of spaghetti sauce clinging to the tines. Perry grabbed it with a caveman grip, clutched it like a murderous dagger. He giggled once as he remembered the punch line to an old grade-school joke.

Fork you, buddy.

With all the force he could muster, he jammed the fork into his trapezius. The center tine poked through one of the black eyes with a tiny, wet, crunching noise.

The tines kissed off his scapula and out the back side of his trapezius, accompanied by a double-squirt of red and purple that landed wetly on the counchs worn-thin upholstery.

He wasnt even sure if he felt it. He didnt have to scream in pain the Triangles took care of that.

It wasnt even a scream, really, just a noise. A loud noise. A fucking hellfire and bear-the-cross loud noise, blaring like a klaxon alarm stuffed down his auditory canal to rest nicely against his eardrum. He rolled off the couch, thrashing his head in sudden and all-encompassing agony.

He rolled onto his back, reached up, grabbed the fork and twisted it, driving it up at an angle deeper into his shoulder. Perry couldnt know that on the second thrust the fork tines punched a neat hole through the Triangles main nervous column just below its flat head, killing it instantly. Had he known, he probably wouldnt have cared all he knew was that he wasnt a patsy, wasnt some pushover, he was Scary Perry Dawsey and was once again whipping ass.

You fucks! Perry screamed louder than ever before, perhaps needing to hear himself over the horrid death-shriek that raged through his head. How do you like it? Hows it feel?

stop stop stop stop

stop stop stopstop

The fuck Ill stop! Hows it feel? How does it feel? Tears found their

way out of Perrys tightly shut eyes. Pain raged through his body, but his conscious mind felt none of it.

fucker y ou will paystop Stop STOP

Bite it, baby! Perry fed on the pain like an alcoholic diving into that first off-the-wagon drink. Im doing this one and then Im calling the Soldiers to come get the rest! He twisted the fork again and started to say something, but lost the words as the fork stuck deeply into a tendon. He made the major mistake of giving in to the pain, rolling in useless protest his shoulder and the end of the fork hit the front of the couch, driving the prongs in ever deeper.