

He stared out the window, careful to stay in the shadows, and wondered if they knew he was watching. But that didn't make sense: if they knew where he was, they'd come after him.

Unless they were already watching him.

Perry's eyes narrowed. He flicked his gaze about the apartment. Could there be a secret camera in here somewhere? A bug? Were they listening to him? They'd been watching him in his apartment, of that he had no doubt, so maybe they were set up to monitor Fatty Patty as well. If that was the case, his great escape was nothing more than jumping out of the fire and back into the frying pan.

And, come to think of it, how did he know for sure that she even had the Triangles at all? Maybe she didn't have any. Maybe this was a setup. Maybe she had some machine that told his Triangles that this was a safe haven. Maybe she was just there to keep an eye on him. Maybe they were combing through his apartment gathering data while they knew damn fucking well that he sat up here with Fatty Patty, chewing away on a chicken sandwich and Fritos.

Perry's gaze nailed her to the yellow chair. She had that expression gazelles wear after being brought down by a lion, before the bite to the jugular, before the final coup de grace. He set his plate down on the coffee table.

Where are they? Perry asked quietly.

Wha . . . what? New tears filled her eyes and rolled down her fat cheeks. Did she still think this was a game? He picked up his butcher

knife and patted the flat of the ten-inch blade against his palm each time the blade slapped lightly against his skin, she winced as if hit by a tiny electric shock.

Don't fuck with me, Perry whispered, smiling all the while, not because he liked this or because he was trying to scare her, but because he was in control. Where are they? Show me.

Her chubby face changed as the words fell into place like the clicking tumblers of a lock.

You mean my Triangles, right? She rushed the words out with an incredibly servile tone. He felt a powerful stab of homesickness, the eagerness to placate, the desperate desire to avoid a beating; it reminded him of his mother.

His mother talking to his father.

You know damn well that's what I'm talking about.

I'm not playing games, I swear. She was terrified, he could see that as plain as day. Despite her tangible fear, she kept her voice low and controlled. That was good.

She stood up and pulled off her huge nightshirt. She did it quickly and without noise, but the expression on her reddening face revealed humiliation. Her tits hung pendulously huge, round mountains with massive aureoles and nipples the size of a dime. She was still fat, yet her stretch-marked skin seemed far too big for her body. Perry revised his earlier estimate of 225 pounds before the Triangles, Fatty Patty must have weighed 260 if she weighed an ounce. She had the Triangles, all right, three on her stomach. Tears streamed down her face and leaped from her quivering chin to fall in bright sparkles on her tits. She turned to the left without being asked. He saw the Triangle on her left hip, its black eyes staring coldly back at him, blinking every few seconds.

It was a much deeper shade of blue than his. Something black and solid like thin rope stretched out from under each of the Triangles' sides, snaking under her flesh with one spreading farther around her hip.

Her skin didn't look healthy at all. Pus-oozing blisters marked the Triangles' edges. Above the Triangles' body, her skin showed signs of stretching, as if the creature had grown too large for the pliable tissue to contain. When he looked at his own Triangles, their eyes held a glassy, unfocused stare. The one on her hip was different. It stared back at him malevolently, the triple-blinking eyes conveying the universal emotion of hatred as clearly as the beam of a high-powered flashlight through a snowy winter night.

Fork you, buddy, Perry said quietly. When he made his move on Fatty Patty, he'd kill that one first.

Lose the pants and spin, Perry said. She didn't hesitate; she dropped the pajama bottoms and stepped out of them. She wasn't wearing panties. She spun slowly, revealing a Triangle on each ass cheek and one on

the back of her right thigh. They all stared at him with an unmistakable hatred. He wondered what they were saying about him, what messages they were sending into her head.

It struck him as odd how healthy all her Triangles looked. The pus-oozing sores were her own, of course. It had never occurred to him that

someone might not fight, that someone might just let it happen. The

concept was pathetic, but apparently she'd done just that. Daddy was right. Everything Daddy had ever said, it seemed, was

right. Perry wondered in amazement how he could have ever thought different.

You weak-ass bitch, Perry said. You didn't try and do anything, did you? You just let them grow?

She stood in front of him, naked, trembling with fear and humiliation, her hands unconsciously covering her pubic region.

What was I supposed to do? Cut them out of me?

Perry didnt answer. He set the knife on the coffee table, his stare a clear warning against any sudden movements. He pulled off his shirt. The duct tape had turned black around the edges, a little line of stickum nicely framing the silver straps that held the blood-soaked washcloth in place. He picked up the knife and slid the blade under the duct tape.

The tape parted with only a small ripping noise. The knife danced as he repeated the process, severing each strip. The washcloth, thick with coagulated blood and the jellylike black goo, fell to the floor. The smell hit both of them instantly an invisible demon that climbed into their noses and down their throats, pulling at the contents of their guts. Her hands went to her mouth as Perry laughed. He breathed deeply of the noxious, rotting odor of death.

I love the smell of Napalm in the morning, Perry said. It smells like victory!

Thin jets of vomit spewed from between her fingers, spraying across the room and landing on the couch as well as the end table and the carpet. The reek seemed to billow out of his shoulder like mustard gas.

Perry hoped it was just the remnants of the Triangle tail rotting into a putrid black ooze that produced the smell, not pieces and parts of himself. But in his heart he knew that was a pipe dream. Was the one on his ass rotting, too? The frayed, fibrous, unbreakable noose around his soul grew tighter and tighter he couldn't leave them in, and he couldn't take them out.

Fatty Patty lay on the floor, convulsing and retching, making quite a stink of her own. He ignored her, instead staring out the window. Third story. It wasn't like twenty stories or anything definitely fatal, but it was nothing to sneeze at. Especially if you landed on your head. He tried to remember if there were bushes below. He'd heard stories about men surviving ten-story falls because they'd landed in some shrubbery. He hoped there were no bushes.

He moved closer to the window. It was dark outside; the light from the kitchen turned the window into a weak mirror. He could see himself through the venetian blinds slats. One good running start would take him clear through, carry him to the sidewalk below in a shower of jagged glass. Perry reached for the blinds cord and pulled down.

The slats lifted, and his wide-eyed reflection stared back at him from only two inches away. The mirror image made his brain ground to a halt his eyes, they were still blue, but the irises weren't round.

They were triangular.

A half breath slid into his lungs, then his throat locked up. Bright blue, triangular eyes . . . what the fuck, what the fuck?

Perry closed his eyes tight. He was hallucinating, that was all. He rubbed hard with his fists, then opened his eyes again. The breath slid out of him, slowly, then back in, deeply. His irises were round again. No, not again, they had been round all the time; it had just been another hallucination, that's all. He blinked rapidly, feeling a semblance of control ease into his chest, then he shut his eyes again and gave them one more hard rub. He knew what he had to do. Time to jump, time to get this shit over with. He shook his head to clear it, then looked out the window

and found himself staring at a full-body reflection of his father. The skeleton-skinny man stared back, his gaunt face cracked by a smiling, angry expression. Perry remembered the look well; it was the look Daddy always wore just before the beatings began.

What are you doing, boy?

Perry blinked, shook his head, and looked again. His father was still there.

Daddy?

I ain't your daddy, boy, and you ain't my son. No son of mine thinks of giving up. You giving up, boy?

Perry searched for an answer but found none. Daddy was dead. This was a hallucination.

Just because I'm dead doesn't mean you can't embarrass me, you little shit, the reflection said. Did your daddy give up when Captain Cancer came calling?

No, sir, Perry said. The ingrained response to his father's question came quickly, automatically.

Goddamn right he didn't. I fought that sonofabitch to the bitter end. And do you know why, boy?

Perry nodded. He knew the answer, and he drew strength from it. Because you're a Dawsey, Daddy.

Because I'm a Dawsey. I fought till I was nothing more than the walking bag of bones you see here. I fought, you little cocksucker. I was tough. I taught you how to be tough, son, I taught you well. What are you, boy?

Perry's face hardened. The hopelessness vanished, replaced by angry determination. He might die, but he'd go out like a man.

I'm a Dawsey, Perry said.

In the window, the weak reflection of Daddy smiled his toothy smile.

Perry let go of the cord; the venetian blinds zipped closed, once again obscuring his reflection.

He turned and looked down at Fatty Patty, who was still coughing and gagging, rolling her naked roundness in her own vomit. Triangles looked up at him from her ass cheeks. He felt no pity for her, only disgust at her weakness. How could anyone be so pathetic as to just sit back and let this happen without even trying to fight?

It's a violent world, princess, Perry said. Only the strong survive.

If she couldn't be bothered to fight for herself, Perry sure as hell

wasn't going to do anything to save her. Besides, he wanted to watch the hatching. You can't win, after all, if you don't know your enemy.

She convulsed for the next five minutes, her jerky contortions flipping her onto her back. Perry wondered what might be wrong with her; the smell was overpowering, sure, but it couldn't make someone go into an epileptic seizure, could it? What was her problem?

The question seemed to answer itself. The Triangles on her stomach began to twitch and jitter under her flabby skin, as if she suffered muscle spasms. But he saw instantly that the twitching wasnt from her muscles.

The Triangles were moving on their own.

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THE HATCHING Perry sat on the couch, transfixed by Fatty Pattys ordeal.

The y ar e hatching!Hatching!Hatching!

The Triangles twitched under her skin, slowly picking up speed, jittering faster and faster. Her convulsions stopped suddenly; she rolled onto her back, fingers sticking into the air, locked like skeletal claws. Her face wrinkled in a wide-eyed blast of panic and a teeth-baring, breathless scream. It was a look of such utter, unbearable agony that Perry couldnt suppress a shudder.

And he was next.

He felt sick, as if a gnarled hand squeezed and twisted his intestines. It was a physical reaction to a mind pulled in opposite directions. On one side he felt hopelessness, far worse than anything hed known since this ordeal began. He watched this fat woman writhe with terror, watched her face contort and scrunch as she tried to scream but couldnt find the air to do so. Her body shuddered in agony, making her flesh jiggle endlessly.

Despite this horror show, which held the promise of a painful death for him as well, he felt an impossible level of euphoria, a feeling that this was the beginning of something great and something wonderful. Joy and ecstasy ripped through his mind, better than any drug, vastly superior to sex this was clearly an overflow emotion, but it was so strong, so clear, so vivid and so pure he was no longer able to separate it from his own. At that moment, the Triangle feelings saturated his very being.

He thought of killing her, slicing her throat with the butcher knife, ending her misery. But he couldnt bring himself to stand up, to reach for the blade, because he had to know what would happen. Besides she was dying anyway, and wasnt a birth always a happy occasion?

A wave of fresh pain washed across her body, making her jerk like an electric-chair victim. She rolled a little from side to side, but mostly stayed on her back, that wide-eyed death stare fixed on some interesting

detail of the stucco ceiling. Perry watched, surprised and disgusted, as she suddenly pissed all over the floor.

The Triangles picked up speed; they seemed to pulse as they sought to break free. Their large heads pushed out against her pliant, stretching skin, then sank back for another try. With each thrust, Perry saw the Triangles outlines, saw that their bodies had grown to a shallow pyramid shape.

It reminded Perry of the good old days of Jiffy Pop on the kitchen stove, the swelling volume of popcorn slowly expanding the tinfoil covering. The Triangles werent going to stop they were clearly intent on popping out of her skin like a champagne cork, celebrating their new life in the new world.

Blisters burst one by one, coating her skin with thick, yellowish pus. Blood trickled from the edges of the Triangles, shooting out in thin jets each time they thrust outward.

The y ar e hatching .

Is it beautiful? Let us see! The y ar e hatching. Hatching!

Perry ignored his own Triangles, his attention locked on those of Fatty Patty. Her Triangles thrust out farther, her skin started to tear. They pushed their way out like little turkey timers at Thanksgiving, the red pop-up button telling everyone when the big bird was done and it was time to eat. The three on her stomach were the worst to watch they had started by only pushing up a quarter of an inch or so, a minor throbbing, a pulsating blister in her gut. Each throbbed up at a slightly different rate, now picking up steam, pushing out almost six inches in a quick jump, stretching the skin on her stomach like little triangular penises becoming erect and flaccid, erect and flaccid, erect and flaccid, spurting blood-threads in every direction.

He couldnt see the ones trapped underneath her wide ass, but he imagined they struggled, pinned by the weight of her body.

There were noises. Not just the pathetic little whines escaping the weak-willed woman, but faint clicking noises as well. They grew a bit louder every few seconds and seemed to coincide with the Triangles outward thrusts. With each click he felt his happiness and euphoria spike upward like a heartbeat pulse on an EKG machine.

The one on her hip, the one that had stared so malevolently, so inso-

lently, was the first to break free. It ripped out of her, not with a tearing sound but rather with a loud splurt followed by a splat as it hit the far wall, right where Perrys Sports Illustrated cover would have hung had they been in his apartment. The hateful creature stuck, wriggling and weak, temporarily trapped in its own slime.

It bore little resemblance to the Triangles that remained locked inside his own body. It still had the unmistakable Triangle head and the black eyes, but there any similarity ended. It looked no more like the larva lurking under his own skin than a butterfly looks like a caterpillar.

The black things hed seen snaking under her skin were tentacles of some sort, more than a foot long, and thick. They looked very strong and solid. The Triangle shape had grown into a shallow three-inch-high pyramid, each side of which held one black eye. The eyes no longer stared up now they looked out, so that if the thing walked on those tentacles, it would be able to see in all directions.

The creatures wriggling freed it from the wall. It fell to the carpet, where it struggled to right itself.

Perrys emotions flickered back and forth from fear and disgust to elation and indescribable joy, like a strobe light on a dance floor, leaving each alternating emotion a freeze-frame picture in his minds eye. This shit could drive a guy crazy. Somewhere an emotion of his own called to him to get up and kill this thing, but he remained fixed on the

couch, too overwhelmed to move.

The newly hatched Triangle attempted to stand on floppy tentacle legs. It looked very wrong and odd, because the legs had no rigidity. They werent at all like an insects skinny, multijointed legs or an animals muscular limbs, but something new and different. With a shake and a continuing wobble, the creature rose up on the tentacles; once up, the pyramid point stood about a foot off the ground.

The y will gr o w ,
the y will grow.

The tail that had anchored itself in Fatty Pattys body dangled limply from the center of the Triangle, a weak limp-dick appearance, dripping blood and pale slime. It hung down to the floor, where the last inch or two lay unmoving on the carpet. The newly hatched creature stood there on unsure legs, its clicking noises loud and distinctive.

Fatty Patty let out a small scream as the three Triangles on her stom

ach broke loose almost simultaneously. They sprang out like vicious jack-in-the-boxes, streaming trails of blood and pus as they came down in different parts of the room.

One flew through the air and landed on the couch to Perrys left, as if it had just stopped by to watch the Lions game on a frosty fall Sunday afternoon. He got a much better look at this one. Its pus- and bloodcovered skin was no longer blue but a pockmarked, translucent black. He could see strange, alien organs inside, something fluttering spastically that must have served as a heart, and some other colored bits of flesh, the purpose of which he wouldnt dare venture a guess. The end of the tail had landed on his leg it moved a little, leaving a slime trail on Perrys jeans. The tails end was ragged and torn, slowly leaking purple blood. That must be why they thrust so hard to escape her; they had to separate from the tail, most of which was left behind in Fatty Patty, an umbilical cord and safety cable they no longer needed now that they were free of her incubatory body.

The Triangle struggled to lift itself up, but one tentacle-leg slipped between the couch cushions. Perry gazed down at it with the strobe light of emotions still flashing at MTV-video speed. He felt a primitive urge to smash it, while simultaneously he felt compelled to gently lift the newborn from the couch, hold it adoringly, and set it on the floor to walk for the first time, beaming down at it with the proud smile of a new parent.

Turn her o v e r , turn her over.

The command yanked Perry from his maddening emotional conflict. What did you say?

Turn her o v e r .

The y a r e hatching.

They wanted him to roll her over so the Triangles on each ass cheek could hatch properly. He looked at Pattys shuddering body, now covered with blood, pus, vomit and purple slime.

She had ceased all movement. Her eyes were glazed and fixed open, her eyebrows raised, and her face frozen in a sneer of terror. She looked almost dead. Caterpillar dead. All hosts probably died it made much more sense than having the ex-host in a position to kill weak hatchlings. What had finally done her in? Some toxin? Screaming mental overload? That thought crystallized Perrys emotions into two camps, polarized his hatred of the Triangles and the overflow euphoria at the hatching. He pushed back the happiness, the joy those emotions werent his, and he didnt want them in his head anymore.

Turn her OVER.

Turn her OVER NOW.

The mindscreen slammed his attention back to the dead Fatty Patty, and suddenly he knew how they had killed her. He recognized the look on her face and the whimpering noises she made, realized why shed just lain there as the things ripped free from her body, why she didnt put up a fight. It was because an all-out mindscreen had paralyzed her.

Theyd screamed so loud, it killed her.

Perry jumped off the couch and knelt next to her body, His knees slipped a little in the thin film of puke/blood/pus/purple that coated the carpet. He moved quickly; he didnt want another mindscreen, one that might be bad enough to make his brains drip out his ears like a McDonalds Gray-Matter Shake.

Turn her over, the y are hatching.

The y are hatching!

Perry put his hands on her shoulder and pushed, only to find that instead of rolling over she just slid across the muck. She was dead weight, pardon the pun.

Repetitive clicking noises filled the room. Some came fast, some slow; all had different pitches and volumes. He could feel his Triangles growing impatient; another mindscreen was rapidly approaching, the crack of the masters whip on the slave who cant perform. The power had changed hands once again.

He put his bad knee on her left shoulder and reached across her dead body. He grabbed high up on her right arm. He pulled back on the arm, slowly turning her. She flumped onto her stomach, her tits squishing out like half-inflated inner tubes.

Free from the weight, the Triangles on her ass wasted no time. They thrust only a few times before ripping free in a great gout of blood, an orgasmic finish to their necrophilic sex/birth. One flew out at an angle, hitting the kitchen table before falling to the floor. The other sailed upward in a steep arc, flying toward the lampshade. Like a LeBron James

jumper swishing through the hoop, the Triangle slid through the lampshades open top. It hit the illuminated bulb, first with a sudden sizzle, then a loud crack as the tiny body exploded. Black goo splattered against the inside of the

lampshade, a wet silhouette as it slowly dripped toward the floor.

Thanks for saving me the trouble, Perry thought.

A wave of anger and depression crashed over him, overflow emotions again, fighting for mental space with his own feelings of villainous satisfaction at the newborn Triangles untimely death.

What happened?
Where did he go?
Why doesnt he answer?

His Triangles still couldnt see, he remembered, because he remained fully dressed. They only sensed that the newborn was gone. He felt their random anger coursing through his body he had to choose his words carefully.

He slid up his sweatshirt sleeve and held it up to the lamp. He hatched right onto a lightbulb. It was an accident. In his voice he heard that servile tone, the tone of Fatty Patty trying to placate him, the tone of his mother trying to avoid a beating. It fried him on the spot.

His answer appeared to satisfy the Triangles. They said no more. The steady clicking slowed considerably. The baby Triangles were crouched down on their tentacles, resting their pyramid bodies against the carpet. Their eyes closed, they stopped moving they appeared to be asleep. Only an occasional click escaped their still bodies.

The strange aroma of burned Triangle flesh filled the room, slightly overpowering the odors of Perrys own rotting shoulder, the vomit and the smells of birthing that floated in the still apartment air. He felt his own Triangles fall asleep their constant mental buzzing slowly fading away into near nothingness, like a barely audible car radio tuned to AM static.

He was alone, left to gaze upon the facedown, dead Fatty Patty. He knew he didnt have much time. In addition to the three Triangles in his own body, he had five hatchlings to deal with, creatures that he knew nothing about. How long would they sleep? What would they do when they awoke?

Apart from the questions that raged through his mind, he knew one thing for certain he wasnt going to end up like the weakling lying on

the living-room floor, giant fist-size holes left in her corpse. If he had to die, it wouldnt be like a victim, waiting nicely for the Three Stooges to rip out of his rotting body.

If he was going out, it would be on his feet, fighting every step of the way like a Dawsey. His shoulder throbbed, his back itched and his mind spun feverishly, thinking of a way to kill them all.

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FLASHBACK

On Dews twenty-second birthday, hed been getting piss-faced drunk at a small bar in Saigon with his three closest friends, all members of his platoon. The bar had white walls, Christmas lights across the ceiling and plenty of working girls. Hell of a party that turned out to be. Dew had stumbled to the bathroom to take a piss, and in midstream heard a bone-thumping explosion followed by a scream or two. He wasnt quite sobered up by the blast, but what he saw when he came out of the bathroom obliterated his buzz completely.

The white walls were streaked with chunks of bone, bits of hair and bright-red trails slowly dripping down the wall like living Rorschach blots. The blood and bits belonged to his buddies and the seven-year-old suicide girl whod entered the bar wearing the latest fashion in homemade explosive backpacks.

That incident, that hated memory, was the first thing to enter his mind when he walked into Perry Dawseys apartment. So much blood on the walls, on the floor, on the furniture. The kitchen floor looked like a pattern of brown and red rather than the original white. There was even blood on the kitchen table, some of which had slowly spilled over the edge and dried in a thin, brittle-brown stalactite. The apartment crawled with Ann Arbor cops, state troopers and men from the Washtenaw County coroners office.

Its really something, huh?

Dew looked at Matt Mitchell, the local coroner whod escorted him to the crime scene. Mitchell had a crooked smile and a glass eye that never seemed to look the right way. His face held a small smirk, almost an expectant look, as if he were waiting to see if the gore would make Dew blow chow.

Dew nodded toward the body. You got an ID on the couch-potato Jesus over there?

Couch-potato Jesus? Mitchell looked at the body, smiled, then looked back to Dew. Hey, thats pretty frickin funny.

Thanks, Dew said. Ive got a million of em.

Mitchell flipped through a small notepad. The victim is William Miller, a coworker of Dawseys and apparently a friend they went to college together.

Isnt this an awful lot of blood to come from one victim?

Mitchell gave Dew another quizzical look, but this time it held a bit of surprised respect. Thats pretty observant, Agent Phillips. Not many people would have noticed that. You seen stuff this intense before?

Oh, maybe once or twice.

Were still typing all the spills. Theres more in the bathroom and even some in the bedroom. Ill tell you right now its not all from the victim. You hit that nail right on the head.

Mitchell walked into the kitchen, being careful not to disturb the cluster of evidence for technicians gathering samples from the floor and the table. I think theres another victim we havent seen yet, he said.

Another victim? You mean Dawsey had another victim and he took the body with him?

Mitchell gave the apartment a sweeping gesture. How else could you explain all this?

Ever think it might have come from Dawsey himself?

Mitchell laughed. Yeah, right, from the perp himself. Id like to see someone lose this much blood and keep on kicking. Find anything else?

Mitchell nodded and pointed to the kitchen counter. An evidence bag held a wrongly folded map. Maybe something, maybe nothing. That map was on the kitchen counter. There were some tacky, bloody fingerprints, not dry yet, so he was looking at it not very long ago. Hed circled Wahjamega.

That a town? Dew asked as he picked up the evidence bag holding the map. The bloody fingerprints were still wet enough to smear the plastic. The words This is the place were scrawled on the map in handwriting so bad it was barely legible.

Yeah, Mitchell said. About, oh, ninety minutes or so from here.

You notify Wahjamega police to be on the lookout?

They dont have any town is too small but we let the Tuscola County Sheriff s department know, yeah. Hell, every cop in the state is on the lookout anyway.

Dew nodded approvingly. Maybe something, maybe nothing, as

Mitchell had said. Dew leaned more toward the something side it didnt take a genius to figure out Dawsey hadnt circled Wahjamega on a whim. The map didnt show much in the way of civilization around the town. In fact, it looked like there might be a shitload of trees.

Trees.

Deep woods, even.

As soon as he got out of this apartment, hed have Murrays boys

focus the satellite coverage on Wahjamega instead of Ann Arbor.

The brown-polyester-wearing Bob Zimmer wove through the crowded apartment, dodging the photographer and another cop before stopping in front of Dew and Mitchell.

This just gets better and better, Phillips, Zimmer said. I just talked to the governor. Again. FBI says Dawsey and the Vietnamese kid were working together they found a bunch of emails. Homeland Security raised the alert level to fucking red, to severe. Dawsey has knowledge of a bomb.

Dew nodded. I told you someone else might be involved in those murders. We figure it was Dawsey.

To think theres a cell right here in our midst, Zimmer said. And why didnt someone bother to pick up a fucking phone and let us know theres terrorists in town? His eyes showed doubt, as if his bullshit meter was going off, but they also showed hed follow through. Bullshit or no bullshit, Bob Zimmer wasnt taking any chances with the safety of his men or his town.

Nguyen was what we call a sleeper, Bob, Dew said. Hes just another foreign college student. He stays quiet until hes needed, then boom. Only we dont think hes operating under directions, we think he just snapped. Somewhere along the line, he or his buddies recruited Dawsey.

Why the hell would a white-collar American fall in with terrorists? Mitchell asked.

We dont know yet, Dew said. Maybe he was bitter at the man because he worked some shit computer job and didnt pull in millions in the NFL. It doesnt fucking matter. Dawsey might know about a bomb we dont know where it is, we dont know what it is. We have to get to him and fast.

Zimmer stared at Dew. Ill tell you right now, I dont like this, he

said. Weve got nine people dead, at least one killer is on the loose, and theres a goddamn bomb out there somewhere. I cant help but think we could have prevented this if youd let us know you were watching this Vietnamese kid.

We had to see who would contact him, who would supply him, Dew said. It was a sting, Bob, but it went bust. The key thing to remember is we dont want anyone else getting killed. And if you want to save lives, just make sure your men know exactly what theyre dealing with. Now, if youll excuse me, I have to go make some calls.

Dew walked out of the blood-splattered apartment, leaving Bob Zimmer to grind his teeth in frustration.

DEAR OLD DAD

His shoulder pulsed with a deep, steady, low-frequency throb. His ass echoed the beat. This internal-rotting thing was getting serious.

He had no idea how close his own Triangles were to hatching. The areas where he still had them middle of his back just below the shoulder blades, left forearm, his left testicle had stopped itching or hurting. A brief glimmer of hope flashed in his head that they might be dead, that they had just passed on in their sleep like some beloved grandpa. But that was bullshit.

Hed rather have the itching back than what he felt right now. The spots felt numb. Completely numb. Something in his mind flashed localized anesthetic. He wondered if they were doing so much damage that the pain would have incapacitated him, shut him down, so they had to block the pain, letting him continue normally, letting him pursue those all-important duties of eating, of avoiding the Soldiers.

He shuddered, remembering the black tentacles snaking underneath Fatty Pattys skin minutes before the hatching. She hadnt looked as if she were in pain or any discomfort at all. Perhaps shed felt this same numbness. Perhaps shed been numb for days. The real problem was he had no concept of the timetable.

When his slumbering Triangles awoke, how long before they started screaming in his head? How long before their final death-song?

He didnt have the luxury of waiting. He had to assume that when they awoke, hed lose his last chance to purge them from his body. On top of that, the Columbos were outside, and it would only be a matter of time before they figured out where he was. Dawn was about to break. Theyd see him when he made a run for it. They probably had bugs in every apartment anyway, listening, doing their Big Brother gig. Spy satellites could be searching for him right now, X-ray vision peering through the walls and ceiling, seeking him out.

I dont know if you can hear me, Daddy, but I know youre right, Perry said. Time to shit or get off the pot. Time to

show them whos the strong one time to show them all.

CHEAP BUZZ

Her bathroom layout was identical to his, but there the similarity ended. Hers was decorated in seashell colors, everything matching perfectly, from the pale yellow towels to the porcelain clamshell soap dish. Every surface sparkled. It wasn't until Perry swallowed six Tylenol from a bottle he found in the immaculate medicine cabinet that it clicked. The pills slid down his throat, and it all fell into place.

At times the Triangles had acted weird, showing emotions instead of talking in their monotone robotic voice. Not just when they were mindscrambling incoherently, but when they were talking to him in a singsong voice, a lilting mental speech that sounded almost silly compared to their normal businesslike vocal patterns.

They acted like that right after he took Tylenol. And silly wasn't the right word for it the right word was stoned. Stoned out of their collective little gourds. Something in the Tylenol got them higher than a kite. He'd accidentally discovered a weapon to wield in the final battle.

Perry smiled.

Put on a good buzz, boys, he said, then swallowed back six more Tylenol. You're going to need it where you're going. The Tylenol-buzz was the final piece in his puzzle to outsmart them all: the Triangles, the hatchlings, the Columbos . . . everybody. Perry would show them who was King Crap. No bout-a-doubt-it.

He had a plan, kiddies, a big-brained plan that would expose the stupidity of his conspiring enemies.

Be a hot time in the old town tonight. Don't fuck with a Dawsey.

He quietly hopped back into the living room. The hatchlings were still asleep, their slumbering clicks punctuating the silence of the apartment.

Perry hummed a tune, the words rolling through his mind.

Burn, burn, yes ya gonna burn.

TOP

Dew's vision felt fuzzy. He pulled off his leather gloves and rubbed his eyes. The cold clung to his clammy fingers. His breath streaming out in billowing cones, Dew put the gloves back on and refocused his attention on the apartment complex's snow-covered roads.

The cops hadn't found a damn thing during the night the giant-size All-American psychopath was still running around like a rolling land mine waiting to bump into something and explode. Not a word from Wahjamega, either. Murray had dispatched several agents to the town. There were extra state police patrolling the area, the local police force was alerted to the danger, and NSA signal-intelligence agents scanned almost every line of communication in and out of the town. That, and the fact that Perry's face was plastered on every TV screen in the Great Lakes area, made it unlikely he'd slipped into Wahjamega unnoticed. The public was alert and looking; at least in the Great Lakes region, the hunt for Perry Dawsey had already taken on the mythical proportions of the O.J. Simpson chase. Another murdering football player on the lam.

The murder was about seven hours old if Dawsey had fled, he could already be in Indiana, Chicago, Fort Wayne or on the Ohio Turnpike heading for the East Coast, but Dew knew that Dawsey hadn't gotten far. Let the public think what they want, let them get the man's description and keep a sharp eye out. Dawsey might surprise them all, you never knew, and if Dawsey was heading somewhere, it was better that Joe Public knew enough to steer clear.

Dawsey's Ford remained safely under the carports snow-covered metal awning. No cars had been reported stolen in Ann Arbor for two days no motorcycles, mopeds or even a freaking ten-speed, for that matter.

So Dawsey probably hadn't driven anywhere, and on top of that it looked as if something was wrong with his right leg. Brian Vanderpine, the Ann Arbor cop who'd discovered the murder scene, was the first to notice Dawsey's bloody footprints in the apartment hallway. Despite the fact that blood was splattered all over the hall, Vanderpine only found prints made by a left foot. They hadn't found any marks that

might have been left by a crutch, so Vanderpine ventured the hypothesis that Dawsey was hopping.

So now you had a man a huge man without a car or any means of transportation, committing what amounted to a spontaneous murder, leaving in a hurry, probably without the time to plan anything or the forethought to call a cab -they'd checked, and no taxi had picked up a fare anywhere near the area that day-, and he was hopping all the way. That was the key people would remember if they saw someone hopping, and no one had reported any such person despite the ubiquitous news coverage.

All of these elements led Dew to one conclusion: Dawsey probably hadn't left the apartment complex at all. Most everybody figured he was long gone, but they based their decisions on fabricated info saying Dawsey had terrorist connections that could help him fade into the woodwork.

The army of cops had checked inside every apartment in Building B, so he wasn't there, but how far could he have gone? There were seventeen buildings in the complex, with twelve apartments in each building, four apartments each on three floors. An army of cops had knocked on every door in the entire complex, asking if anyone had seen or heard anything strange. No one had. But not all the apartments were occupied. Some people were at work, some were just gone. There hadn't been time for a background check on every apartment owner to find out if each one was supposed to be home or not. No signs of forced entry Dawsey hadn't broken in anywhere.

But that didn't mean Dawsey wasn't in one of those apartments. Maybe with a hostage. Maybe forcing someone to say that everything was fine.

Dew stuck with his instincts. If Dawsey had blood on his feet, he might also have it elsewhere on his person. The

obvious bloody footprints had led out to Dawseys car, but each print held less and less blood, and at the car the last of it appeared to have worn off his boot. A man wounded, hopping, moving fast . . . he might fall, and if he did, that hypothetical additional blood might leave a mark in the snow.

So Dew had walked a circle around Building B. Hed found nothing, so hed walked around again, staring at the ground the whole time. He

walked back to Dawseys car; disturbed snow in front of the hood indicated that someone, probably Dawsey, had stood there not too long before.

All the footprints in front of the car were from a left foot. You had to look very closely to see that detail, but once he saw it, he couldnt unsee it. Dawsey, crippled leg and all, had stood right there. Hell, hed probably watched Vanderpine enter his apartment building.

Dew squatted in front of the car. His cold knees throbbed at the effort.

The CIAs lead agent has arthritis, he mused. Theres something you dont see in the movies.

Crouched in front of the beat-up, rust-speckled Ford, Dew looked at the door to Building B. He felt an unexpected surge of adrenaline Dawsey had been in this same spot. Dawsey had watched the two cops enter the building, watched the door shut behind them, and then he . . . he did what?

Dew looked around his position, trying to see the terrain through the eyes of an infected man. On his left was Washtenaw Avenue, the main road that shuttled traffic between upscale Ann Arbor and low-rent Ypsilanti. It was full of ever-present thirty-five-mile-per-hour traffic. If hed gone that way, someone would have noticed the hopping man.

Dawsey wouldnt have wanted that. Too much noise, too many people. Dew looked to his right, down the apartment complexes road. There were more apartments. A shitload more apartments. Almost no traffic, curtains and shades all drawn against the winter cold, nobody looking, nobody walking. Thats what Dawsey wanted. It was quiet, it looked full of hiding places bushes, shrubs. The cop army had searched all of those hiding places and found nothing, not even a footprint or snow knocked off a bush branch.

But it was the dead of winter why hide in a snow-covered bush when you could hide in a nice warm apartment? Thats what Dawsey had seen. He had just committed a brutal murder, then watched two cops enter his building. Dew reminded himself of the raging paranoia exhibited by all the victims. Dawsey had watched the cops go in, known they were coming for him, known theyd find the body. Hed wanted to find a hiding place and find one fast.

Dew came out from the hiding spot, grunting as he stood, his knees complaining against the unkind treatment. He walked toward Building G. Despite the fact that his pulse raced like a high-octane engine, he moved with deliberate slowness, examining the ground with a renewed focus.

BURN, BURN, YES YA GONNA BURN

The one on his back was going to be the toughest. Perry had explored Fatty Pattys cabinets and found a cigarette lighter, two bottles of wine, three bottles of Bacardi 151, and half a fifth of Jack Daniels. Hed already knocked back a whole bottle of wine; a buzz rolled thickly through his head. It wasnt a Wild Turkey buzz, but hed chugged the entire bottle, so the real kick was probably still brewing in his gut.

Three left: his back, his left forearm, and his balls.

For what he was about to try, he wanted to be very, very drunk. There was no clever way to remove the Triangles, and the risk seemed

greater than ever. The Triangle on his forearm might be close to the artery. The one on his back was right over his backbone its barbed tail could be wrapped around his vertebrae. Pulling that one out might injure or even sever his spinal cord. The one on his nuts, the one hed managed to not think about for days . . . well, hed just have to get a lot drunker first.

He wasnt certain he could pull any of them out, but he could kill them where they grew. Theyd rot, sure, but if his plan worked, he would dial 911 and head straight for an emergency room. Let the doctors figure it out. The Soldiers wanted to whack him and stop the Triangles from hatching; maybe if there were no more Triangles, the Soldiers wouldnt kill him. Maybe maybe maybe. They might kill him anyway, but they might keep him alive so they could interrogate him. Even if they took him prisoner so they could probe his mind with their secret machines and TVs that could read thoughts, hed still be alive.

And, most important of all, he would have killed those motherfucking Triangles. Then, even if the Soldiers brought him down, no one could ever doubt that he died like a Dawsey.

He wasnt going out as a human incubator. He wouldnt let them win. A painful fever seemed to grip his muscles. His joints ached with the dull kick of a bass drum. The rot. The rot from his shoulder, his ass, spreading to other parts. He could fight the Triangles, maybe, but how could he fight black bile rot flowing through his blood?

The gig was up. Time to shit or get off the pot.

The sleeping hatchlings filled the apartment with clicks and pops. A Garth Brooks song filtered faintly through the floor from the apartment below. In his own mind, all was quiet, not a peep from his own Triangles.

Perry stuffed the lighter into his front pocket, grabbed the liquor bottles and his butchers block that held his knives and his Chicken Scissors. He hopped clumsily for the bathroom.

Burn, burn, yes ya gonna burn.

THE FED

Dew knelt, staring at the spot in the snow. He thought hed imagined it at first, the frenzied creation of a tired mind and tired eyes. As he stooped down to look closer, he knew it was real.

A tiny, dark pink streak on the pavements thin snow. It was small, only about a half inch long and less than an eighth of an inch wide. Wisps of fine powder almost covered the mark.

Dawsey had fallen, right here. Dew looked back to Dawseys car; if you drew a straight line from the rusty Ford through the blood spot, that line pointed directly to the door of Building G.

Dew stood and moved toward the door, pulse racing, adrenaline pumping. He kept his eyes fixed on the ground, looking for another blood spot, just to be sure.

His sleepiness vanished, possibly from the thrill of the hunt, or more likely from a well-honed instinct for self-preservation.

It was party time.

The first real action since Martin Brewbaker, the infected psycho whod killed his partner. Brewbaker hadnt been a big man, nor had he been an athlete, but hed proved something Dew had known since hed been eighteen being a killer isnt about being strong or fast or well trained, its about being the first to pull the trigger, its about attacking before the other guy is ready, its about the willingness to go for the throat right off the bat. The growths had made Martin Brewbaker that kind of man. Dawsey had those same growths, but Dawsey was a big man, he was an athlete, and he was violent and vicious even before he was ever infected.

Dew felt a flash of dj vu, the sense that he was again entering Martin Brewbakers house, walking down the hall just before the crazy fuck lit the place on fire and buried a hatchet in Malcolms guts. The old Sinatra tune rang in his head.

Ive got you . . . under my skin.

BACARDI

Perry shut the bathroom door behind him and spread his goodies out on the sink counter.

Bottle of Jack Daniels: check.

Two bottles of Bacardi 151: check.

Butchers block with knives and Chicken Scissors: check.

Lighter: check.

Towels: check.

Fatigue clutched at his body. He started the tub and flipped the lever on the stopper, allowing the basin to fill up with cold water.

He stripped down, taking off everything but his socks and his underwear. He grabbed the longest towel he could find, twisted it into a rope, then poured some Bacardi on it. It soaked into the terry cloth, filling the small bathroom with the strong smell of rum. He flipped the long towel over his back, feeling the cold, wet, rum-soaked spot send chills up his spine. He positioned that cold spot right over the Triangle. One end of the towel went over his left shoulder, the other under his right arm. He tied the ends together, making the towel hang like a banditos bullet strap.

S, seor. El Scary Perry is a baaad man.

He soaked the end of a smaller hand towel with Bacardi, then laid it on the toilet. With the preparation finished, he took four long, uninterrupted swallows of Jack Daniels.

Perry sat on the tub, the cold porcelain sending another wave of chills through his body. He held the knife and the lighter with his left hand. In his right he held the rum-soaked towel.

It was time.

Burn, burn, yes ya gonna burn.

Perry flicked the lighter. He watched the tiny orange flame shift and turn.

Yes, ya gonna burn.

CLOSING IN

Dew stood just inside the front door to Building G. He shivered slightly, but not from the winters cold. Like every other building in the sprawling complex, Building G had twelve apartments, four each on three floors.

Perry Dawsey, the one-legged killer, was in one of those apartments. Dew pulled his notebook from a jacket pocket. He quietly flipped through the pages, eyes looking down at the book one second, flicking back to look up the stairs and down the hall the next. He half expected to see the hulking nutcase tearing down the hall or the stairs, hopping madly, ready to do an encore presentation of the Bill Miller Crucifixion. Dew reviewed the notes hed collected from the cops. Building G had been checked by a pair of state troopers. There had been no answer at apartments 104 and 202. Dew put the pad back into his coat pocket, hand brushing against the .45 just to make sure it was there. If his hunch was right, he had a chance to kill Dawsey and do it with no press, no interference from the local cops.

Going in alone was dangerous, probably stupid. But Dawsey probably had a hostage right now. If the rapid-response teams closed too quickly and Dawsey saw them, he might drag that hostage out into the open where the cops could intervene. That would complicate things.

Dew pulled out the big cellular and dialed. It rang only once they were waiting for his call.

Otto here.

Get the squads in position, Dew whispered. Im in Building G. Do not I repeat, do not approach until I say so. Ill stay on the line. If the connection is cut off, move in immediately, understand?

Yes sir. Margaret and Amos are with me. Theyre ready.

Dew pulled his .45. Adrenaline surged through his veins. His pulse raced so fast he wondered if a heart attack would take him down before Dawsey could.

CONJECTURES

Racal suits were not built with comfort in mind. Margaret Montoya sat in the back of gray van number two, along with Amos and Clarence Otto. Both men also wore the bulky suits. All they had to do was put on the helmets,

pressurize and they were ready to battle with whatever bacterium, virus or airborne poison Perry Dawsey might spew forth.

Only Margaret knew it wasn't a bacterium, and it wasn't a virus. It was something different altogether. Something . . . new. She still couldn't put her finger on it, and it was damn near driving her mad.

So this couldn't be natural, Margaret said. We'd have seen it somewhere.

Amos sighed and rubbed his eyes. Margaret, we've had this conversation already. Several times.

He sounded exasperated, and she couldn't blame him scientific curiosity or no, her mouth had run nonstop for hours. There was an answer here, if she could only get a handle on it, somehow talk it out.

We dont know it hasnt been seen before, Amos said. Just because it hasnt been recorded, that doesnt mean its not known somewhere in the world.

Maybe that holds true with a regular disease, something that makes people sick. One sickness is much like the next. But this is different. These are triangles under peoples skin there would have been something. A myth, a legend, something.

You obviously dont think its natural, Otto said. So you agree with Murray? That its a weapon?

I dont know about a weapon, but its not natural. Someone made this.

And leaped decades ahead of any known level of biotech, Amos said patiently. This isnt cobbling together a virus. This is creating a brandnew species, genetic engineering at a level that people havent even theorized yet. The meshing of new organic systems to human systems is perfect, seamless. That would take years of experimentation.

But what if its not designed to build those systems, the nerves and the veins?

Of course its designed to do it, Amos said. It built them, right?

Margaret felt a spike of excitement, a brief flicker of insight. There was something here, something she couldnt put her finger on.

Yes, it built the nerves and vein siphons, but we dont know if it was designed to build those specifically.

Otto shook his head. I just dont follow.

Blueprints, Margaret said. What if the initial seed, or spore, or whatever, is designed to read blueprints, like the instructions built into our DNA?

Amos stared at her with a mixture of two expressions one said, I hadnt thought of that, and the other said, youre taking the fuck-nut bus to Looneyville.

Go on, Amos said.

What if this thing reads an organism? Figures out how to tap into it, grow with it?

Then it doesnt need people, Otto said. Why wouldnt we have seen this in animals?

We dont know it hasnt infected animals, Margaret said. But maybe theres something else going on here, more than pure biology. Maybe it needs . . . intelligence.

Amos shook his head. Needs intelligence for what? This is all conjecture, and besides the fact that you are obviously one crazy bitch, who would make an organism like that?

The pieces started to fall into place for Margaret. Its not an organism, she said. I think its a kind of machine.

Amos closed his eyes, shook his head and rubbed the bridge of his nose all at the same time. When they commit you, Margaret, can I have your office?

Im serious, Amos. Think about it. What if you had to travel great distances, so great that no living organism could survive the trip?

So youre talking even longer than a plane trip to Hawaii with my mother-in-law.

Yes, much longer.

Otto leaned forward. Are you talking space travel?

Margaret shrugged. Maybe. Maybe you cant send a living creature across space for as long as it takes to get from Point A to Point B. But you can send a machine. An unliving machine that consumes no resources, and has no biological process that could wear out over time. Its just dead.

Right up until it turns on, Amos said. Or hatches or whatever.

The perfect infantry, Otto said. An army that doesnt need to be fed or trained. You just mass-produce them, ship them out and when they land they build themselves and gather intel from their local host.

Amos and Margaret stared at Otto.

Okay, Amos said. For the sake of a crazy science bitch and a gungho junior spy thats watched too many movies, lets say youve got this weapon. What good does that do you? You send these things across the universe, stopping on Vulcan for a couple of brews, of course. But why?

Two reasons, Otto said. The first is recon. Gather intel on the environment, the people, the opposition. Maybe thats why its not in animals, because . . . His voice trailed off. He couldnt finish the thought.

Because if it can read DNA, maybe it can read memories, Margaret finished. It needs the cultural context to know the threats, to know what can stop it.

Agent Clarence Otto beamed at her. He nodded slowly. That smile of his was almost enough to take her away from this insanity, and she found herself smiling back.

Why dont you two just fuck and get it over with already? Amos said. If we can lose the flirting for a moment, Im still not convinced. Your ideas dont really make sense. In Margarets fantasy land, these things are here because Alf cant make the trip himself. So why are their little machines gathering intel?

Intel is the first reason, Otto said. The second is to use that intel to create a beachhead. Establish control of a defensible area so you safely receive reinforcements.

The van fell quiet for a few moments. A sense of dread filled the air. Finally, Amos spoke, fear ringing clear through his sarcastic tone.

Otto, if you dont mind, I like you better when I think youre just a dumb-ass CIA agent, he said. How about you leave the science to us and have a nice cup of shut the fuck up?