

Prologue

THIS IS THE PLACE . . .

Alida Garcia stumbled through the dense winter woods, blood marking her long path, a bright red comet trail against the blazing white snow.

Her hands shook violently. She could barely make a fist out of her talonlike fingers, nearly numb, wet from the big clumps of snow that fell thick and fast all around her, melting almost as soon as they hit her skin. When the time came, could she even pull the trigger on Luiss old revolver?

A searing pain in her stomach brought her thoughts back to the mission, the divine mission.

Something was wrong. Well, fuck, it was all wrong, and had been from the first moment she started scratching at her belly and her elbow. But something was even more wrong, something inside. It wasnt supposed to be like this . . . somehow, she knew that.

She looked behind her, along the bloody path through the snow, eyes searching for pursuit. She saw nothing. Shed spent years in fear of the INS, but it was different now. They didnt want to deport her now they wanted her dead.

Her hands and legs oozed blood drawn by scratching branches. Her left foot bled thanks to the shoe shed lost some time ago; the snows thin, jagged crust made every step a cutting crunch. She didnt know why her nose bled, it just did, but all those things were trivial compared to the blood she vomited every few minutes.

She had to go on, had to go on, find the place . . . the place where it would all begin.

Alida saw two massive oak trees, reaching out to each other like centuries-old lovers, a freeze-frame of perpetually denied longing. She thought of her husband, Luis, again, and thought of the baby. Then she pushed those thoughts away. She could think about that no more than she could think of the nasty thing on her belly.

Shed done what she had to do.

Three bullets for Luis.

One for the baby.

One for the man with the car.

That left one bullet.

She stumbled, then tripped. She reached out to try and stop her fall, but her bloody hands punched through the knee-deep snow. Her frigid hand hit an unseen rock, bringing more flaring, cold-numb pain, and she dropped headfirst through the white crust. She came up, wet snow and ice sticking to her exhausted face. Then she threw up again blood gushing from her mouth to splash bright red against the white snow.

Blood, and a few wet chunks of something black.

Inside, it hurt. It hurt so bad.

She started to get up, then stopped and stared at the twin oak trees.

They dominated a natural clearing, bare branches a sprawling, skeletal canopy at least fifty meters across. A few stubborn, dead leaves clung to the branches, fluttering slightly in the winter wind. She hadnt known what shed been looking for, just that she had to walk into the woods, deep into the woods, where people didnt go.

This was it, this was the place.

Such a long journey to wind up here. Shed taken the mans car back in Jackson. The man had said he wasnt la migra, wasnt the immigration police, but those people had chased her all her life and she knew better. He had stared at the gun, said he wasnt la migra, said he was just looking for a liquor store. Alida knew he was lying. She had seen it in his eyes. She had left him there, taken his car and driven through the night, then abandoned the car in Saginaw. There she hopped a freight train and just started watching for big woods. As long as she kept moving mostly north, it didnt matter.

Moving north, really, was the story of her life. The farther north you went, the fewer questions people asked. Childhood in Monclova, Mexico. Teenage years in Piedras Negras, then at nineteen she snuck across the border and started moving through Texas and beyond. Seven years of working, hiding, lying, always moving north. Shed met Luis in Chickasha, Oklahoma, then together they worked their way through America: St. Louis, Chicago, joining her mother in Grand Rapids, Michigan. A brief change, heading east when Luis found regular construction work in Jackson.

Then the itching started. And not long after, the urge to move north again. No, not just an urge, as it had been before.

The itching made it a mission.

But finally, after twenty-seven years of life, she could stop moving. She stared at the oak trees, the way they reached out to each other. Like lovers. Like husband and wife. She couldnt stop thinking of him anymore, couldnt stop thinking of her Luis. But it was okay now, because she could join him.

She looked back one more time. The thick, falling snow was already covering the comet path, turning the red to a fuzzy pink, soon to be all white again. La migra was looking for her, they wanted to kill her . . . but unless they were only fifteen or twenty minutes behind, her trail would soon be gone forever.

Alida turned again to stare at the trees one more time, the image a glorious sculpture in her brain.

This is the place.

She pulled the old .38 revolver out of her pocket and pressed the barrel against her temple.

When she pulled the trigger, her cold fingers worked just fine.

1.

CAPTAIN JINKY

FM 92.5 morning call-in line, whats on your mind?

I killed them all.

Marsha Stubbins groaned. Another Im so funny asshole trying to take the weird route to get on the air.

Did you now? Thats nice, sir.

I have to get on with Captain Jinky. The world has to know. Marsha nodded. It was 6:15 A.M., just about time for the loonies and the jerks to roll out of bed, hear Captain Jinky & the Morning Zoolanders goofing off on the air, and feel they had to be part of the show. This happened every morning. Every . . . single . . . morning.

Captain Jinky has to know what, sir?

Has to know about the Triangles. The voice was soft. The words came between big breaths, like someone trying to talk just after an intense workout.

Right, the triangles. Sounds more like a personal problem, sir.

Dont patronize me, you stupid cunt!

Hey, you dont get to scream at me like that just because Im a phone screener, okay?

Its the Triangles! We have to do something. Put me on with Jinky or Ill come down there and stick a fucking knife in your eye!

Uh-huh, Marsha said. A knife in my eye. Right.

I just killed my whole family, dont you get it? I have their blood all over me! I had to! Because they told me to!

This isnt funny, you idiot, and by the way, youre the third mass murderer thats called here this morning. If you call back, Im calling the cops.

The man hung up. She sensed he was getting ready to say something, to scream at her again, right until she said the word cops. Then he hung up and hung up fast.

Marsha rubbed her face. Shed wanted this internship, and who didnt? Captain Jinky had one of Ohios highest-rated morning shows. But man, this phone-screening gig, with the crazy calls day after day . . . so many retards out there who thought they were funny.

She rolled her shoulders and looked at the phone. All the lines were lit up. Seemed everyone in the city wanted to get on the air. Marsha sighed and punched line two.

In Cleveland, Ohio, there is a room on the seventeenth floor of the AT&T Huron Road Building, formerly known as the Ohio Bell Building. This room does not exist.

At least, whats in the room does not exist. On maps, building records, and to most people who work on the seventeenth floor, Room 1712-B is just a file-storage room.

A file-storage room that is always locked. People are busy, no one asks, no one cares its like millions of other locked rooms in office buildings all over the United States.

But, of course, its not a file-storage room.

Room 1712-B doesnt exist, because its a Black Room. And Black Rooms dont exist the government tells us so.

To get inside this Black Room, you have to run a gamut of security screens. First, talk to the seventeenth-floor guard. His desk happens to be just fifteen feet from 1712-B. Hes got security clearance from the NSA, by the way, and is perfectly willing to cap your ass. Second, slide your key card through the slot next to the door. The card has a built-in code that changes every ten seconds, matching an algorithm based on the time of day this one makes sure only the right people can enter at the right times. Third, type your personal code into the keypad. Fourth, press your thumbprint onto a small gray plate just above the door handle so a fancy little device can check your thumbprint and your pulse.

Truth be told, the fingerprint scanner isnt worth a crap and it can be easily fooled, but the pulse check is handy just in case youre just a tad overly excited because someone has a gun to your head, a gun that was probably used to kill the aforementioned security guard. If you successfully navigate these challenges, 1712-B opens to reveal the Black Room and the things inside that also do not exist. Among those goodies is a NarusInsight STA 7800, a supercomputer designed to perform mass surveillance on a mind-boggling scale. The NarusInsight is fed by fiber-optic lines from beam splitters, which are installed in fiber-optic trunks carrying telephone calls and Internet data into and out of Ohio. This technojargon means that those lines carry all digital communication in Ohio, including just about every phone call made in and out of the Midwest. Oh, youre not from the Midwest? Dont worry, there are fifteen Black Rooms spread around America. Plenty for everyone.

This machine monitors key phrases, like nuclear bomb, cocaine shipment, or the ever-popular kill the president. The system automatically records every call, tens of thousands at a time, using voice-recognition software to turn each conversation into a text file. The system then scans the text file for those potentially naughty terms. If none are found, the system dumps the audio. If they are found, however, the audio file -and the voice-to-text transcript- is instantly sent to the person tasked with monitoring communication containing those terms.

So yeah, every call is monitored. Every. Single. Call. For terrorism words, drug words, corruption words, all the stuff youd expect. But due to some rather violent cases that had popped up in recent weeks, a secret presidential order added a new word to the national-security watch list.

And in this case secret wasnt some document that people discussed in hushed tones with Beltway reporters. This time, secret meant that nothing was written down, no record of any kind, anywhere.

What was that new word?

Triangles.

The system listened for the word triangles in association with words like murder, killing, and burn. Two of those words happened to be used in a certain call to a certain guest line for Captain Jinky & the Morning Zoolanders radio show.

The system translated that call to text, and in analyzing that text found the words triangles and killed in close proximity. Stick a fucking knife in your eye didnt hurt, either. The system marked the call, encrypted it, and shipped it off to its preassigned analyst location.

That location happened to be yet another secret room, this one located at the CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia. When a room at the CIA headquarters is secret, a secret from people who spend their lives creating and breaking secrets, thats some pretty serious black-ops shit.

The preassigned analyst listened to the call three times. She knew after the first listening this was the real deal, but she listened twice more anyway, just to be sure. Then she placed a call of her own, to Murray Longworth, deputy director of the CIA.

She didnt know, exactly, what it meant to have murder and triangles in close proximity, but she knew how to spot a bogus call, and this one seemed authentic.

The calls origin? The home of one Martin Brewbaker, of Toledo, Ohio.

It wasnt the kind of music youd expect to hear at that volume. Heavy metal, sure, or some angry kid pissing off the neighborhood with raw punk rock. Or that rap stuff, which Dew Phillips just didnt get. But not Sinatra.

You didnt crank Sinatra so loud it rattled the windows. Ive got you . . . under my skin.

Dew Phillips and Malcolm Johnson sat in an unmarked black Buick, watching the house that produced the obscenely loud music. The houses windows literally shook, the glass vibrating in time with the slow bass beat and shuddering each time Sinatras resonant voice hit a long, clean note.

Im not a psychologist, Malcolm said, but Im going to throw out an educated guess that theres one crazy Caucasian in that house. Dew nodded, then pulled out his Colt .45 and checked the magazine.

It was full, of course, it was always full, but he checked it anyway forty years of habit died hard. Malcolm did the same with his Beretta.

Even though Malcolm was just under half Dews age, that habit had been instilled in both men courtesy of same behavioral factory: service in the U.S. Army, reinforced by CIA training. Malcolm was a good kid, a sharp kid, and he knew how to listen, unlike most of the brat agents these days.

Crazy, sure, but at least hes alive. Dew slid the .45 into his shoulder holster.

Hopefully hes alive, you mean, Malcolm said. He made that call about four hours ago. He could be gone already.

Im crossing my fingers, Dew said. If I have to look at one more moldy corpse, Im going to puke.

Malcolm laughed. You, puke? Thatll be the day. Say, you going to bang that CDC chick? Montana?

Montoya.

Right, Montoya, Mal said. The way this case is going, were going to see a lot of her. Shes pretty hot for an older chick.

Im fifteen years older than her, at least, so if shes old, that means Im ancient.

You are ancient.

Thanks for pointing that out, Dew said. Besides, Montoya is one of those educated women far too smart for a grunt like me. Afraid shes not my type.

I dont know who is your type. You dont get out that much, man. I hope Im not your type.

Youre not.

Because if I am, you know, thats going to make my wife nervous. Not that theres anything wrong with that, of course.

Knock it off, Mal, Dew said. We can wallow in your rapier wit later. Lets get on point. Its party time.

Dews earpiece hung around his neck. He fitted it into his ear and tested the signal.

Control, this is Phillips, do you copy?

Copy, Phillips, came the tinny voice through the earpiece. All teams in position.

Control, this is Johnson, do you copy? Malcolm said.

Dew heard the same tinny voice acknowledge Malcolms call.

Malcolm reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small leather business-card holder. Inside were two pictures, one of his wife, Shamika, and one of his six-year-old son, Jerome.

Dew waited. Malcolm usually did that before they talked to any suspect. Malcolm liked to remember why he did this job, and why he had to always stay sharp and cautious. Dew had a picture of his daughter, Sharon, in his wallet, but he wasnt about to pull it out and look at it. He knew what she looked like. Besides, he didnt want to think about her before he went on a mission. He wanted to insulate her against the kinds of things he had to do, the kinds of things his country needed him to do.

Malcolm snapped the card holder shut and tucked it away. Howd we get this choice gig again, Dew?

Because good ol Murray loves me. Youre just along for the ride.

Both men stepped out of the Buick and walked toward Martin Brewbakers small, one-story ranch house. An even two inches of snow covered the lawn and the sidewalk. Brewbakers place was near the corner of Curtis and Miller, just off the tracks in Toledo, Ohio. It wasnt rural by any stretch, but it wasnt packed in, either. The four lanes of busy Western Avenue kicked up plenty of noise not enough to drown out Screamin Frank Sinatra, but close.

In case things got crazy, they had three vans, each filled with four special-ops guys in biowarfare suits. One van at the end of Curtis where it ran into Western Avenue, one at Curtis and Mozart, and one at Dix and Miller. That cut off any escape by car, and Brewbaker didnt have any motorcycles registered on his insurance or DMV record. If he ran north, across the freezing Swan Creek, the boys in van number four parked on Whittier Street would grab him. Martin Brewbaker wasnt going anywhere.

Did Dew and Malcolm get biowarfare suits? Hell no. This had to be kept quiet, discreet, or the whole fucking neighborhood would freak out, and then the news trucks would come a-courtin. Two goons in yellow Racal suits knocking on the door of Mr. Good Citizen had a tendency to shoot discretion right in the ass. Not that Dew would

have worn the friggin thing anyway with the shit hed been through, he knew that when it was time to check out, you were checking out. And if things went according to plan, theyd isolate Brewbaker, bring in gray van number one real discreet-like, toss his ass in and haul him off to Toledo Hospital where they had a quarantine setup ready and waiting.

Approaching the front door, Dew said. He spoke to no one in particular, but the microphone on his earpiece picked up everything and transmitted it to Control.

Copy that, Phillips.

This was their chance, finally, to catch a live one.

And maybe figure out just what the fuck was going on. Remember the orders, Mal, Dew said. If it goes bad, no shots to the head.

No head shots, right.

Dew hoped it wouldnt come down to pulling the trigger, but somehow he had a feeling it would. After weeks of chasing after infected victims, arriving to find only murdered bodies, moldering corpses, and /or charred remains, they had a live one.

Martin Brewbaker, Caucasian, age thirty-two, married to Annie Brewbaker, Caucasian, twenty-eight. One child, Betsy Brewbaker, age six.

Dew had heard Martins call to Captain Jinky. But even with that crazy recording, they werent sure yet. This guy might be normal, no problems, just liked to blast his Sinatra on eleven.

I tried so . . . not to give in, I said to myself, This affair never will go so well.

Dew, do you smell gasoline?

Dew wasnt even halfway through the first sniff when he knew that Malcolm was right. Gasoline. From inside the house. Shit.

Dew looked at his partner. Gas or no gas, it was time to go in. He wanted to whisper to Mal, but with Sinatra so fucking loud he had to shout to be heard.

Okay, Mal, lets go in fast. This asshole probably wants to light the place on fire like some of the others. We have to take him down before he does that, got it?

Malcolm nodded. Dew stepped away from the door. He could still kick a door in if he had to, but Mal was younger and stronger, and young guys got off on that shit. Let the lad have his fun.

Malcolm reared back and gave one solid kick the door slammed open, the deadbolt spinning off inside somewhere, trailing a few splinters of wood. Mal went in first, Dew right behind.

Inside the house, Sinatra roared at a new level, so loud it made Dew wince.

In spite of a warning voice that comes in the night, And repeats, repeats in my ear, A small living room that led into a small dining room, then a kitchen.

In that kitchen, a corpse. A woman. Pool of blood. Wide-eyed. Throat slit. A brow-wrinkled expression of surprise, not terror . . . surprise, or confusion, like shed passed on while looking at a Wheel of Fortune puzzle that really had her stumped.

Mal showed no sign of emotion, and that made Dew proud. Nothing they could do for the woman now anyway.

Dont you know, little fool, you never can win, Use your mentality, wake up to reality.

A hallway that led deeper into the house.

Dews feet squishing on the brown shag carpet. Squishing because of the thick trail of gasoline that made the carpet an even darker brown.

Mal and Dew moved in.

First door on the right. Mal opened it.

A childs bedroom, and another corpse. This one a little girl. Six years old, Dew knew, because hed read the file. No look of surprise on that face. No expression at all, really. Just glassy-eyed blankness. Slightly open mouth. Blood all over her tiny face. All over her little Cleveland Browns T-shirt.

This time Mal stopped. The girl was the same age as his Jerome. Dew knew, right then and there, that Mal would probably kill Brewbaker when they found him. Dew wouldnt stop him, either.

But this wasnt the time for sightseeing. He tapped Mal on the shoulder. Mal shut the girls door behind him. Two more doors: one on the right, one at the end of the hall. The music still blared, offensive, overpowering.

But each time that I do, just the thought of you

Makes me stop, before I begin, Mal opened the door to the right. Master bedroom, no one there. One door left. Dew took a deep breath, nose filling with gasoline fumes. Mal opened the door.

And there was Martin Brewbaker.

Mals theory back in the car turned out to be prophetic there was one crazy Caucasian in that house.

Wide-eyed and smiling, Martin Brewbaker sat on the bathroom floor, legs straight out in front of him. He wore a gas-soaked Cleveland Browns hoodie, jeans, and was barefoot. Hed cinched belts around both legs, just above the knee. In one hand, he held an orange lighter. In the other hand, a nicked-up red hatchet. Behind him sat a red and silver gas can, lying on its side, its contents making a glistening wet puddle against the black and white linoleum floor. Cause Ive got you . . . under my skin.

Youre too late, pigs, Brewbaker said. They told me youd come. But you know what? Im not going, Im not taking them. They can fucking walk there themselves.

He raised the hatchet and whipped it down hard. The thick blade slid through skin and denim just below his knee,

crunched through his bone, and chonked into the linoleum floor, severing his leg. Blood sprayed all across the floor, mixing with the pool of gas. His severed leg and foot sort of flopped on its side. Brewbaker screamed, an agonizing scream that drowned out Sinatras jamming orchestra. His voice screamed, but his eyes didnt they kept staring at Dew. That happened in one second. In the next second, the hatchet came up again and went down again, severing the other leg, also just below the knee. Brewbaker tipped backward, the now-missing weight throwing off his equilibrium just a bit. As he rolled back, his stubby legs sprayed blood into the air, onto the bathroom counter, onto the ceiling. Dew and Malcolm both instinctively raised an arm to block the blood from hitting them in the face.

Brewbaker flicked the lighter and touched it to the floor. The gas flamed up instantly, igniting the puddle, shooting down the wet path down into the hallway and beyond. Brewbakers gas-soaked hoodie snapped into full flame.

In a blur of athletic motion, Mal holstered his weapon, whipped off his coat and rushed forward.

Dew started to shout a warning, but it was already too late.

Mal threw his coat on Brewbaker, trying to smother the flames. The hatchet shot forward again burying itself deep in Mals stomach. Even over the Sinatra, Dew heard a muffled chlung and knew, instantly, that the hatchet blade had chipped the inside of Mals spine.

Dew took two steps into the flaming bathroom.

Brewbaker looked up, eyes even wider, smile even wider. He started to say something, but didnt get the chance.

Dew Phillips fired three .45 rounds from a distance of two feet. The bullets punched into Brewbakers chest, sliding him backward on the blood- and gas-slick floor. His back slammed into the toilet, but he was already dead.

Converge, converge! All units move in, man down, man down!

Dew holstered his weapon, knelt, and threw Mal over his shoulder. He stood with strength he didnt know he still possessed. Brewbaker burned, but the flames hadnt spread to his right arm. Dew grabbed Brewbakers right hand, then stumbled down the flaming hall, carrying one man and dragging another.

THE RAW AND THE COOKED

Dew staggered out of the burning house. Winter air cooled his red face, while inferno heat singed his back through his suit.

Hold on, Mal, he said to the bleeding man on his right shoulder. Hold on, ace, helps on the way.

Dew slipped on the unshoveled sidewalk and almost pitched into the snow-covered lawn, but he recovered his balance and made it to the curb. He crossed the street, stumbling like a drunk, then slid Brewbakers body into a shallow snowbank, where it hissed briefly like a match dropped into a stale drink. Dew knelt on one knee and eased Malcolm onto the ground.

Mals once-white shirt was a sheet of red around his stomach. The hatchet had gone in deep, deep enough to cut through intestines. Dew had seen wounds like that before, and he didnt have much hope.

Hang on, Mal, Dew whispered. You just remember Shamika and Jerome, and you hang on. You cant leave your family alone. He held Malcolms hand, which felt hot and wet and was covered with puffy burn blisters. The screech of tires split the air as several nondescript gray Chevy work vans slid to a stop. The van doors opened; a dozen men dressed in bulky chemical-weapons gear leaped onto the slush-wet pavement. They brandished compact FN-P90 submachine guns and moved with practiced precision, rushing to set up a perimeter around Dew and Malcolm, around the burning house. Some of the men rushed to Malcolms side.

See, buddy? Dew said. His mouth was inches from Malcolms ear. See? The cavalry is here, youll be at the hospital before you know it. You just hang on, brother.

Malcolm let out a groan. His voice sounded whispery, like windblown paper scraping against dirty concrete.

That . . . asshole . . . dead? Malcolms lips, or what was left of them, barely moved when he spoke.

Fuckin-A right he is, Dew said. Three in the ticker, point-blank.

Malcolm coughed once, sending a wad of thick, dark blood shooting

out onto the snow. The men in chemical-warfare suits hurried him to one of the waiting vans.

Dew watched as the soldiers loaded Brewbakers smoldering corpse into another van. The remaining soldiers moved Dew to the last van, half helping him, half pushing him. He got in, heard the door shut, then heard a small hiss as the sealed van became negatively pressurized. Any surprise leaks would let air in, not out, in case Dew was contaminated with the unknown spore. He wondered if theyd have him in the airlock again, watching him for days on end, waiting to see if he showed the few known symptoms or even better, kiddies developed new ones. He didnt care, as long as they could help Malcolm. If Malcolm died, Dew didnt think he could forgive himself.

Less than twenty seconds after the vans had screeched to a halt, they tore down the street, leaving the burning house behind.

ONE SMALL STEP . . .

After a journey of unknown distance, unknown time, the next batch of seeds dropped from the atmosphere like microscopic snow, scattering wildly at the tiniest breath of wind. Wave after wave washed through the air. The most recent waves had been close to success, the closest yet, but still hadnt caused the critical mass needed to accomplish the task. Changes were made, new seeds released. It was only a matter of time until things were right.

Most of the seeds survived the feathery fall, but the real test was yet to come. Billions died at the touch of water or the kiss of cold temperatures. Others survived the landing, but found conditions unsuitable for growth. A scant few landed in the right place, but wind, or the brush of a hand, or perhaps even fate, swept them away.

A minuscule percentage, however, found conditions perfect for germination.

Smaller than specks of dust, the seeds tentatively held their place. Rigid microfilaments ending in Velcro-like hooks helped each seed stay fast to the surface. With the fortuitous landing began a race against time. The seeds faced a nigh-impossible task of attaining self-sufficiency, a battle for survival that started with a minuscule arachnid.

A simple mite.

Demodex folliculorum, to be precise. While microscopic, a Demodex is larger than the dead skin upon which it feasts. So much larger, in fact, that it can ingest a tiny flake in a single bite. The mites hide in hair follicles, mostly, but

sometimes at night they slide out and crawl around on the hosts skin. They are not some parasite found only in dirty Third World countries where hygiene is a luxury, but on every human body in the world.

Including the host.

The hosts mites lived their entire, brief, skin-gobbling lives without ever leaving his body. In their incessant feeding frenzy, some of the mites came across the seeds which looked suspiciously similar to flakes of human skin. The mites gobbled up the minute seeds; just another mouthful in an endless and bountiful banquet of dead flesh.

The mites digestive system hammered at the seeds outer coat. Protein-digesting enzymes, called proteases, ate away at the membrane, breaking it down, weakening it. The membrane ruptured in several places but did not dissolve completely. Still intact, the seed passed through the mites digestive tract.

And thats where it all began, really in a microscopic pile of bug shit. The temperature hovered around seventy degrees much of the time and often reached eighty degrees or more with suitable cover. The seed needed such temperatures. It also needed certain measures of salinity and humidity, which the hosts skin unwittingly provided. These conditions triggered receptor cells, turning the seeds on, so to speak, and preparing it for growth. But there were other conditions that had to be right before germination could occur.

Oxygen was the main ingredient in this recipe for growth. During its long fall, the airtight seed coat prevented any gases from reaching the contents contained within, contents that were it biological might have been called an embryo. The Demodex mites digestive system, however, ravaged the seeds protective outer shell, allowing oxygen to penetrate. Unthinking, automated receptor cells measured the conditions, reacting in an exquisitely intricate biochemical dance that read like a preflight checklist;

Oxygen? Check.

Correct salinity? Check.

Appropriate humidity? Check. Suitable temperature? Check.

Billions of microscopic seeds made the long journey. Millions survived the initial fall, and thousands lasted long enough to reach a suitable environment. Hundreds landed on this particular host. Only a few dozen reached bare skin, and some of those expired before ending up in bug feces. In all, only nine germinated.

A rapid-fire growth phase ensued. Cells split via mitosis, doubling their number every few minutes, drawing energy and building blocks from the food stored within the seeds. The seedlings survival depended on speed they had to sink roots and grow protection in a soon-to-be-hostile environment. The seeds did not need leaves, only a main root, which in plant embryos is called a radicle. These radicles were the seeds lifeline, the means by which they would tap into the new environment.

The radicles main task was penetrating the skin. The skins outermost layer composed of cells filled with tough, fibrous keratin formed the first obstacle. The microscopic roots grew downward, slowly but incessantly pushing through this barrier and into the softer tissues beneath. One seed couldnt break that outer layer. Its growth sputtered out, and it died.

That left eight.

Once past that obstacle, the roots quickly dug deeper, slipping beyond the epidermis, into the dermis, then through the fatty cells of the subcutaneous layer. Receptor cells measured changes in chemical content and density. Underneath the subcutaneous layer, just before the firmness of muscle, the roots began a phase change. Each of the eight roots became the center for a new organism.

The second stage ensued.

This rapid growth had depleted the seeds food stores. Now nothing more than used delivery vehicles, the little husks fell away. Under the skin, second-stage roots spread out. They werent like roots of a tree or any other plant, but more akin to little tentacles, branching out from the center, drawing oxygen, proteins, amino acids and sugars from the new environment. Like biological conveyor belts, the roots pulled these building blocks back to the new organism, fueling an explosion of cell growth. One of the seedlings ended up on the hosts face, just above the left eyebrow. This one couldnt draw quite enough material to fuel the secondstage growth process. It simply ran out of energy. A few of the seedlings parts kept growing, assembling, automatically drawing nutrients from the host and creating raw materials that would never be used but for all intents and purposes this seedling ceased to be.

That left seven.

The surviving seedlings started building things. The first construct was a microscopic, free-moving thing that, if you had an electron microscope handy, looked like a hair-covered ball with two saw-toothed jaws on one side. These jaws sliced into cell after cell, tearing open the membrane, finding the nucleus, and sucking it inside the ball. The balls read raw DNA, the blueprint of our bodies, identifying the code for biological processes, for building muscle and bone, for all creation and maintenance. Thats all the DNA was to the balls, really; just blueprints. Once read, the balls returned this information to the seedlings.

With that data the seven knew what needed to be built in order to grow. Not at a conscious level, but at a raw, data-in and data-out machinelike state. Sentience didnt matter the organisms read the blueprints, and knew what to do next.

The seedlings drew sugars from the bloodstream, then fused them, a fast and simple chemical weld that created a durable, flexible building material. As the building blocks accumulated, the organisms created their next autonomous, free-moving structures. Where the balls had gathered, these new microstructures built. Using the growing stores of the building material, the new structures started weaving the shell. Without fast shell growth, the new organism

might not live five more days.

It needed that long to reach stage three.

4.

A CASE OF THE MONDAYS

Perry Dawsey threw back the heavy bedspread and mismatched covering blankets, exposing himself to the sudden grip of winter-morning chill. He shivered. The part of his brain that always beckoned him to sleep, to set the alarm for another fifteen minutes, tugged at him. A mild hangover didnt help his resolve.

See? the voice seemed to say. Its cold as hell this morning. Crawl back under the covers where its nice and warm. You deserve a day off.

It was his morning ritual; the voice always called, and he always ignored it. He stood and shuffled the four steps from his bedroom to the tiny bathroom. The linoleum greeted his feet with unwelcome cold. He shut the door behind him, started up the shower, and let the bathroom fill with deliciously warm steam. As he stepped into the nearly scalding water, the nagging morning voice faded away, just as it always did. He hadnt missed a day of work or even been late in three years. He sure as hell wasnt going to start now.

Scrubbing himself roughly, he came fully awake. His left forearm flared up with a tiny itch; he absently scratched it with his thick fingernails. Perry shut off the shower, stepped out, grabbed a rumpled towel that hung over the shower-curtain rod and dried himself. The steam hung like a wafting cloud that bent and drifted with his every movement.

The bathroom was little more than a closet with plumbing. Just inside and to the right of the door sat the small Formica counter that held the sink, its once-white porcelain stained with rusty orange from a combination of hard water and an ever-dripping spout. The countertop had about enough room for a toothbrush, a can of shaving cream and a shrunken, cracked bar of soap. All the other necessities resided in the medicine cabinet behind the mirror mounted above the sink.

Just past the countertop was the toilet, the other side of which almost bumped up against the tub. The bathroom was so small that Perry could sit on the toilet and touch the far wall without leaning forward. Used towels of various unmatched colors hung from the towel rack, the shower curtain and both sides of the doorknob, creating a rainbow terry-cloth contrast to the lime-green walls and scratched tan linoleum floor.

A small digital scale, dented and pockmarked with rust, was the only decoration. With a sigh of resignation, he stood on it. The bottom LED of the ones digit never lit up. It made the last digit look like an A rather than an 8, but it didnt hide his weight: 268.

He stepped off the scale. Another itch this one on his left thigh hit quickly, like the bite of a mosquito. Perry twitched with the sudden discomfort and gave the area a solid scratch.

He finished toweling off his hair, then stopped suddenly, jerking his hand away. Something hurt above his left eyebrow that angry-dull pain of accidentally hitting a big zit.

With his towel he wiped steam from the mirror. A shadow of bristly red beard covered his face. Bright red beard and straight blond hair, the strange distinctive mark of Dawsey men for as far back as Perry knew. He wore his hair shoulder length, not for style, but rather because it helped hide the striking facial resemblance he shared with his father. The older he got, the more the face in the mirror looked like the one face he wanted most to forget.

Fucking desk job. Making me a fat boy.

He focused his attention on the eyebrow zit. It looked sort of like a zit but also looked . . . strange. Small, gnarled red bump. It felt odd, like a teeny bug was biting or stinging him.

What the hell is that?

He leaned forward, skin almost touching the mirror as his fingers prodded the painful spot. Firm, solid skin, with something really small sticking out of it. The something was . . . black, maybe? A tiny speck. He dug at it for a second with his fingernails, but the spot hurt. Probably an ingrown hair or something like that. Hed try to leave it alone, let it firm up and deal with it later.

Perry reached for the shaving cream. He always took a good look at himself before shaving and brushing his teeth, not out of vanity but rather to see just how much further along his body was toward Old Fogey-Ville.

Back in college his body had been hard, chiseled, six-foot-five, 240 pounds of muscle befitting his AllBig Ten linebacker status. In the seven years following the knee injury that ended his career, however, his body changed, gradually adding fat while depleting unused muscle. He wasnt overweight by anyone elses standards, and his body still drew plenty of looks from women, but Perry could see the difference.

He shaved, slapped some mousse in his hair and brushed his teeth to complete his repetitive morning preparation. Perry dashed out of the bathroom into the cold apartment. He dressed quickly in jeans, an old AC/DC concert T-shirt and a warm San Francisco 49ers sweatshirt. Finally protected against the cold, he headed to the kitchen nook -he could never think of it as a kitchen, hed been in houses with a kitchen, this six-by-eight-foot alcove stuffed with a stove, cabinets and a fridge was and would always qualify as nothing more than a nook-.

He reached for the cupboard containing the Pop-Tarts, then arched his back in sudden surprise as another itch, this one burning and almost painful, erupted on his spine just below the shoulder blades. Perry reached a hand up over his shoulder and under his shirts to dig at the spot.

He scratched the itch into submission, wondering if he had contracted a rash or possibly suffered from dry skin caused by the arid winter air. Perry pulled down the box of Pop-Tarts and pulled out one of the two-tart silver foil packets.

The stove's digital clock read 8:36. Cramming a cherry Pop-Tart into his mouth, Perry walked the two steps to his computer desk and started stuffing papers into his beat-up, duct-tapepatched briefcase. He'd meant to get some work done over the weekend, but the Chiefs and Raiders had played on Saturday, and then he'd spent all day Sunday watching the games and SportsCenter. He finished up Sunday night with a trip to the bar to watch the Lions get their asses kicked, as usual. He snapped the case shut, threw on his coat, grabbed his keys and headed out of the apartment.

Three flights of stairs later, he exited the building and entered the knife-slash cold sting of December in Michigan. It felt like a thousand tiny pinpricks on his face and hands. His breath billowed wispy-white.

Jamming the second Pop-Tart into his mouth, he walked toward his twelve-year-old, rust-shot Ford, praying to the Great Gods of Piece-ofShit Cars that the old girl would start.

He slid behind the wheel -he never bothered to lock the car, who the hell would want the thing?- and closed the door. The frost-covered windows filtered the morning sun in icy-white opaqueness.

Come on, sister, Perry mumbled, his breath curling up and around

his head. He gave a small grunt of victory as the old car coughed to life on the first try. Perry grabbed the ice scraper and stepped out of the car, only to have yet another itch stab at his right ass cheek like a sandpaper needle. He reflexively grabbed at it, which made him lose his balance and landed him butt-first on the parking lot. Digging his fingers through the jeans and roughly scratching the spot, Perry felt the seat of his pants dampen with melting snow. Yep, Perry said as he stood and brushed himself off. Its definitely a Monday.

ARCHITECTURE

The shells grew in size and durability. Still too small to see with the naked eye, it wouldnt be long before they could not be missed. The same tiny, cell-like devices that built the shells used the available material to start making what went under the shells a framework that would comprise a new organism, a larger organism.

A growing organism.

The seedlings built their third and final free-moving microstructure. Where there had been readers to gather the DNA blueprints, and builders to make the shell and the framework, now came the herders.

The herders washed out into the hosts body, seeking very specific kinds of cells stem cells. The DNA blueprints showed that these were what the seedlings needed. The herders found these stem cells, then cut them free and dragged them back to the growing framework. First the herders cemented the stem cells to the framework with simple chemical bonds, then the reader-balls moved in.

The saw-toothed jaws sliced into the stem cell, but gently this time. Microfilaments bare nanometers across slid into the stem cell DNA. Slid in, and started making changes.

Because the readers werent there just to read...

They were also there to write.

The stem cells were not conscious. They had no idea they had just been enslaved. They did what they always do: grow new cells. The new cells they produced were only slightly different from those they had been originally designed to build. Those new cells spread out through the growing framework, adding muscle and other, more specialized tissues. What arrived as a microscopic seed had hijacked the hosts body and used the built-in biological processes to create something foreign, in a way far more insidious than even a virus.

And while the seedlings had no concept of time, their mission would be complete in just a few short days.

THE DAILY GRIND

Perry walked into American Computer Solutions -ACS to those in the industry- at seven minutes to nine. He jogged through the building, catching and throwing hellos as he headed for his cubicle. Sliding into his chair, he tossed his briefcase on the gray desktop and started his computer. It chimed, seemingly in happiness at escaping the purgatory of off, and started through its RAM checks and warm-up cycles. Perry glanced at the wall clock, which was placed high enough that all could see it from their cubicles. It read 8:55. Hed already be working away when the clock struck 9:00.

Thought I was going to get you today, said a womans voice behind his back. He didnt bother to turn around as he opened the briefcase and pulled out the unorganized wad of paper.

Close but no cigar, boss, Perry said, smiling a little at the daily joke. Maybe next time.

Samir Cansil from Pullman called, the woman said. Theyre having network trouble again. Call them first thing.

Yes maam, Perry said.

Sandy Rodriguez left Perry to his work. Most of ACSs customersupport staff arrived a few minutes late, but Perry was always on time. Sandy rarely addressed the staff s tardiness problem. Everyone knew she didnt really care if people were a little late, as long as they didnt abuse that privilege and got their work done. She didnt care, and yet Perry was always on time.

Shed given him a chance when he had no job, no references and an assault conviction on his record. No, not just an assault an assault conviction on his former boss. After that incident he was sure nobody would ever hire him for white-collar work again. But his college roomie Bill Miller had put in a good word at ACS, and Sandy had given Perry a shot.

When she hired him, he swore to himself that hed never let her down in any way. That included being early every day. As his father used to say, theres no substitute for hard work. He pushed the sudden and unwelcome thought of his father from his mind he didnt want to start the day in a bad mood.

A full twenty-five minutes later, Perry heard the distinctive sounds of Bill Miller sliding into the adjoining cubicle. Bill was late as usual, and, also as usual, he didnt give a damn.

Morning, sissy-girl, Bill said, his ever-present monotone drifting over the five-foot cubicle walls. Didums sleep well?

You know, Bill, Im a little bit past the I drank more than you stage. Id like to think youll grow up one of these days.

Yeah, youre probably right, Bill said. Although I did drink more than you, girly-man.

Perry started to reply, but a stabbing itch on his right collarbone stole his voice and replaced it with a slight gasp of surprise. He dug his fingers through the sweatshirt, scratching at the skin underneath. Maybe he was allergic to something. Maybe a spider had crawled into his bed last night and tried to bite its way out.

He scratched harder, intent on blasting the itch into compliance. The irritation on his forearm acted up again, and he switched his focus to that spot.

Fleas? Bills voice came from above, unhampered by the divider walls. Perry looked up. Bills upper body leaned over the fabric-panel wall that separated the cubicles, his head just inches from the ceiling. He attained this height by a frequent practice of standing on his desk. Bill, as always, looked immaculate despite the fact hed left the bar the same time as Perry which meant he couldnt have had more than four hours sleep. With his bright blue eyes, perfectly trimmed brown hair, and a cleanshaven baby face free of even the tiniest blemish, Bill looked like a model for teenage zit cream.

Just a little bug bite is all, Perry said.

Bill retreated back behind the divider wall.

Perry stopped scratching, although the skin still itched, and called up the Pullman file on his computer. As he did, he launched his instantmessenger program even though people were only a few cubes away, instant messaging often proved to be the preferred method of communication within the office. Especially for communication with Bill, in the next cube, who usually had plenty to say that he didnt want others in the office to overhear. The IMs let them share sophomoric humor that helped to pass the day.

He started off the daily ritual with a message to Bills instant-message handle, StickyFingazWhitey.

Bleedmaize_n.blue: Hey. R we doing Monday Night Football tonight?

StickyFingazWhitey: Does the Pope wear womens underwear?

Bleedmaize_n.blue: I thought the phrase was, does the Pope wear a funny hat ???

StickyFingazWhitey: He already wears a big dress, although my sources say he doesnt deserve to wear white, if ya know what I mean. A

Perry snorted back a laugh. He knew he looked like an idiot when he did that, big shoulders bouncing, head down, hand over his mouth to hide laughter.

Bleedmaize_n.blue: lol. Cut it out, I just got here, I dont want Sandy to think Im watching YouTube clips again.

StickyFingazWhitey: How about you watch Popes Gone Wild on your own time, mister, you sick, sick man.

Perry laughed, out loud this time. Hed known Bill for . . . God, was it almost ten years already? Perrys freshman year in college had been a tough one, a time when his violent tendencies ran roughshod and unchecked. Hed landed at the University of Michigan courtesy of a fullride football scholarship. At first theyd roomed him with other football players, but Perry always viewed them as competition even if they didnt play the same position. A fight inevitably ensued. After his third altercation, the coaches were ready to yank his scholarship.

That crap may float at other schools, like Ohio State, they told him, but not at the University of Michigan.

The last thing they wanted, however, was to lose him they hadnt recruited him and given him a full ride for nothing. The coaching staff wanted his ferocity on the field. When Bill heard of the situation, he volunteered to room with Perry. Bill was the nephew of one of the assistant coaches. He and Perry met during freshmen orientation, and the two had hit it off quite well. Perry remembered that the only times he smiled during those first few months were when he was around Bills irrepressible humor.

irrepressible humor.

pound English major volunteer to room with a six-foot-five, 240-pound linebacker who benched 480 and had already beaten the holy hell out of three roommates, all of whom were Division I football players? But to everyones surprise, it worked out perfectly. Bill seemed to have a talent for laughter, laughter that soothed the savage beast. Bill saved not only Perrys athletic career but his collegiate one as well. Perry had never forgotten that.

Ten years hed known Bill, and in all that time hed never heard the man give a straight answer about anything that wasnt related to work.

Music drifted over from Bills cube. Ancient Sonny & Cher ditty, to which Bill cleverly sang I got scabies, babe instead of the original lyrics. The IM alert chimed again:

StickyFingazWhitey: You think Green Bay is going to give the Niners a good game tonight?

Perry didnt type in an answer, didnt really even see the question. His face scrunched into a mask of intense concentration that one might mistake for pain. He fought against the urge to scratch yet again, except this time it was far worse than before, and in a far worse place.

He kept his hands frozen on the keyboard, using all his athletic discipline not to scratch furiously at his left testicle.

7.

THE BIG SNAFU

Dew Phillips slumped into the plastic chair next to the pay phone. After this ordeal even a young man would have felt like a week-old dog turd, and at fifty-six, Dews youth was far behind him. His wrinkled suit stank of sweat and smoke. Thick smoke, black smoke, the kind that only comes from a house fire. The odor seemed alien in the clean, dirt-free confines of the hospital. Somewhere in his head, he knew he should feel grateful that he was in the waiting room at the Toledo Hospital and not in the airtight quarantine chamber at the CDC in Cincinnati, but he just couldnt

find the energy to count his blessings.

Greasy soot streaked the left side of his weathered, heavily lined face. His bald head also showed streaks, as if flames had danced precariously near his mottled scalp. The small patch of red hair, which ran from ear to ear around the back of his head, had escaped the smoke stain. He looked weak and exhausted, as if he might teeter off the chair at any second.

Dew always carried two cell phones. One was thin and normal. He used that for most communication. The other was bulky and metallic, painted in a flat black finish. It was loaded with the latest encrypting equipment, none of which Dew understood or gave a rats ass about. He pulled out the big cell phone and called Murrays number.

Good afternoon, said a cheery but businesslike woman. Get Murray.

The phone clicked once; he was on hold. The Rolling Stones played

Satisfaction through the tinny connection. Jesus, Dew thought, even super-secret, secure lines have fucking Muzak.

Murray Longworths authoritative voice came on the line, cutting off Mick in mid-breath.

Whats the situation, Dew?

Its a big SNAFU, sir, Dew said. The military-parlance acronym stood for Situation Normal, All Fucked Up. He leaned his forehead on the pastel blue wall. Looking down, he noticed for the first time that the soles of his shoes had melted, then cooled all misshapen and embedded with bits of gravel and broken glass. Johnsons hurt.

How bad?

The docs say its touch and go.

Shit.

Yes, Dew said quietly. It doesnt look good.

Murray waited, perhaps only long enough to give the illusion that

Malcolms life was more important than the mission, then continued. Did you catch him?

No, Dew said. There was a fire.

Remains?

Here at the hospital, waiting for your girl.

Condition?

Somewhere between medium and well-done. I think shes got something to work with, if thats what you mean.

Murray paused a moment. His silence seemed weighted and heavy.

You want to stay with him, or should I have some boys watch over him?

You couldnt drag me away with a team full of mules tied to my balls, sir.

I figured as much, Murray said. I assume the area was checked and sterilized?

As in three-alarm sterilized.

Good. Margaret is on the way. Give her whatever help she needs. Ill get there when I can. You can give me a full report then.

Yes sir. Dew hung up and flopped back into the chair. Malcolm Johnson, his partner of seven years, was in critical condition.

Third-degree burns covered much of Mals body. The hatchet wound in his gut wasnt helping things. Dew had ample experience with horribly wounded men; he wouldnt take two-to-one odds for Malcolms survival. Dew had seen some crazy shit in his day, more than most, first in

Nam and then with almost three decades of service to the Agency, but hed never seen anything like Martin Brewbaker. Those eyes, eyes that swam with madness, drowned in it. Martin Brewbaker, legless, covered in fire like some Hollywood stuntman, swinging that hatchet at Malcolm. Dew let his head fall into his hands. If only hed reacted faster, if only

hed been just one second faster and stopped Mal from trying to put out the fire on Brewbaker. Dew should have known what was coming: Blaine

Tanarive, Charlotte Wilson, Gary Leeland all those cases had ended

in violence, in murder. Why had he thought Brewbaker would be any

different? But who would have expected the crazy fuck to set his whole house on fire?

Dew had one more call to make Malcolms wife. He wondered if Malcolm would still be alive by the time Shamika flew in from D.C.

He doubted it. He doubted it very much.

WOULD YOU LOOK AT THAT?

At lunchtime Perry sat in the bathroom stall, pants around his ankles, 49ers sweatshirt in a pile on the tile floor. On top of his left forearm, atop his left thigh, and on his right shin were small red rashes about the size of a No. 2 pencil eraser. Three other spots itched just as maddeningly; his fingers told him that similar rashes perched on his right collarbone, on his spine just below his shoulder blades and on his right ass cheek. He also had one on his left testicle that one he tried not to think about.

Their itching came and went, sometimes fading in and out like a slowly turned volume knob, other times arriving with full-bore force like hitting the power button of a maxed-out stereo. Definitely spider bites, he figured. Maybe a centipede; hed heard they had nasty venom. What amazed him was how hed slept through such an attack. Whatever it was that had bitten him, it must have hit just before he awoke. That would explain why he saw no marks when he prepared for work the poison had just entered his system, and his body was slow to react.

They itched and were a touch disconcerting, but all in all it was no big deal. Just a few bug bites. Hed simply have to discipline himself not to scratch, and sooner or later theyd go away. If he left them alone, theyd probably disappear. Trouble was, he had an awful time of leaving skin blemishes alone, whether they be scabs, zits, blisters or anything else, but his bad habit of picking at such blemishes wouldnt help matters. Hed simply have to focus, have to play through the pain, as his highschool football coach used to say.