

Perry stood, buttoned his pants and put his sweatshirt back on. He took a deep breath and tried to clear his mind. Its just a test of will, Perry thought. A test of discipline, thats all. Youve got to have discipline. He left the bathroom and headed back to his desk, ready to work hard and earn his pay.

PAYIN THE COST TO BE THE BOSS

Murray Longworth looked over the list of personnel who had enough security clearance to join Project Tangram. It was a short list. Malcolm Johnson was down for the count. That made Dew a solo operative, which is what Murray had wanted in the first place. But Dew had insisted on bringing in Johnson. Murray shook his head that decision would fuck with Dew, probably for the rest of his life.

Casualties, unfortunately, were the cost of doing business. You sent flowers to the funeral, you moved on. Murray understood that. Dew, he never did. Dew Phillips made shit personal. That was why Murray was the number-two man in the CIA and Dew Phillips was still a shitstomping grunt. A grunt in a nice suit, sure, but a grunt nonetheless. That was also why five presidents had called on Murray to get things done. Secret things. Unsavory things. Things that would never make the history books, but had to get done anyway. And this time the President of the United States of America had asked Murray to find out what the hell was turning normal Americans into crazed murderers. Murray, from the CIA, mind you, and not the FBI, who should have handled a domestic issue. It was, in fact, illegal for the CIA to run this op on U.S. soil, but the president wanted Murray to handle it if it was terrorism, it might require some creative tactics. Tactics that just might be just a smidgen outside the law.

Five victims to date in a plague that would throw the country into an unparalleled panic, and he had precious little information. So far hed done a masterful job of keeping the lid on things he had more than a hundred people at his immediate disposal, yet fewer than ten knew what was actually going on. Not even the Joint Chiefs had the whole story.

When Margaret Montoya had contacted the CIA with that first strange report, the call eventually landed with Murray. She wasnt just some crank caller or some science-type doom-and-gloomer preaching about yet another pending global-warming catastrophe. She was from the CDC, and she suspected she might have stumbled onto a terrorist bioweapon. Her credentials and her urgency convinced enough people

to push her through the phone maze, each level passing the call upward, until it reached Murray.

Margaret said she hadnt gone through the proper channels in the CDC because she feared leaks. Murray knew that was only partially true the rest of the story was that Margaret wanted to be the one tracking this bizarre killer. If she went through normal channels, she feared some supervisor would take the case away from her and grab all the recognition while Margaret was pushed to the wayside of anonymity.

Hed met with her, and it took only one look at her case files and those pictures of Charlotte Wilson and Gary Leeland to convince him that she was right; there was a new threat in town.

The best part of it all was her relative obscurity. She wasnt some world authority on disease or some Nobel Prizewinner or anyone of note. She was a very competent epidemiologist who worked out of the Cincinnati CDC office; she wasnt even high-ranking enough to be at the main CDC center in Atlanta. Murray knew he could monopolize her time draft her, if you will and only a handful of people would notice her absence.

Hed put people to work searching for references to triangles or anything else that might reveal additional cases. That search turned up Blaine Tanarive, who a week earlier had contacted Toledo TV station WNWO, claiming a triangle conspiracy. WNWO notes described Mr. Tanarive as paranoid and irrational.

Two days later, neighbors discovered the bodies of Tanarive and his family in their house. Tanarive was reported as being in a highly advanced state of decomposition. His wife and two daughters were also found dead, although their level of decomposition was not as advanced. Forensics showed that each of the women had been stabbed at least twenty times with a pair of scissors. WNWO then did a follow-up story on Mr. Tanarives phone call and the message of the triangle conspiracy.

A murder/suicide. Tanarive had no record of violence. Neither he nor his family had any history of mental illness. All the physical evidence pointed to Tanarive. Investigators wrote off the case as a sudden, tragic, inexplicable onset of mental illness. The case had been closed until Murrays search for information related to triangles.

Margarets information, combined with the Tanarive case file, was all Murray needed to see. Hed taken the info to the director of the CIA, then called an emergency meeting with the president. Not a meeting with the presidents chief of staff, not with the secretary of defense, but a quiet little sit-down with the head honcho himself. Murray brought Montoya along for good measure.

Her report proved quite convincing. The pictures really captured the presidents attention: pictures of Gary Leelands blue triangle growths; pictures of similar, rotting growths on Charlotte Wilsons corpse; pictures of Blaine Tanarives oozing, pitted, skeletal body, covered with that eerie green fuzz.

The president gave Murray carte blanche, anything he wanted. Murray had the power to draft whomever he needed, but he didnt want a big team, not yet. He had to keep things quiet, controllable. When the news of this hit the streets the panic would be legendary. More than likely the country would basically shut down; people wouldnt leave their homes for fear of catching the disease, and those who did leave would flood the hospitals with everything from diaper rashes to flea bites. And Murray knew that sooner or later the news would get out. He had to gather as much information as he could before the panic hit, because when it did, things were going to get very complicated.

Five cases to date two more discovered after the presidential meeting. First, Judy Washington, age sixty-two, found one day after Gary Leeland had died, but obviously infected earlier. Dew and his partner found her pitted skeleton in a field outside the retirement community where both she and Leeland lived. Her infection had already run its course. And now the disaster that was Martin Brewbaker. Five cases in sixteen days, and he knew there were more the CIA had yet to uncover.

He suspected things were only going to get worse.

10.

HALF AN AUTOPSY IS BETTER THAN NONE

She hated herself for feeling this way, but she was thrilled at the chance to examine a fresh body. She was a doctor first, a healer; that had been her training, if not her true calling, and she held the sanctity of life in the highest regard. She knew she should feel upset over the new death, but excitement had washed over her the second that Murray ordered her to Toledo.

Margaret wasn't exactly happy at another death, of course not, but she had yet to see a body that wasn't ravaged by days of highly accelerated decomposition. Here she was, seemingly the sole defender against this bizarre affliction, and she had almost nothing to study, nothing to work with. To Margaret this wasn't just another body the fifth so far it was a chance to gain headway against a disease with the potential to make Ebola and AIDS look as insignificant as the common cold.

So much could change in such a short time. Sixteen days earlier she'd been an examiner for the Coordinating Center for Infectious Diseases Cincinnati office. The CCID was a division of the Centers for Disease Control, or CDC. She was good at her job, she knew, but things hadn't been stellar career-wise. She wanted to move up the ladder, to gain prestige, but at the end of the day she had to admit to herself she just didn't like conflict brought on by office politics she simply didn't have the balls.

Then she got the call to examine a body in Royal Oak, Michigan, a body suspected of containing an unknown infectious agent. When she saw the body, or what was left of it, she knew it was a chance to make a name for herself. Only seven days after examining that body, she had sat down at a meeting with CIA Deputy Director of Intelligence Murray Longworth, and believe it or not, children the president himself. She, Margaret Montoya, sitting down with the president to help decide policy.

And now, less than twenty-four hours after a second secretive meeting in the Oval Office, a CIA agent escorted her as if she were some head of state. She absently chewed on a Paper Mate pen, gazing out the passenger-side window as the black Lexus pulled in to the entrance of the Toledo Hospital.

Four remote television vans dotted the parking lot, all close to the front and emergency entrances.

Dammit, Margaret said. She felt her stomach do flip-flops. She didn't want to deal with the press.

The driver stopped the car, then turned to look at her. You want me to take you in the back way? He was a stunningly handsome African American youngster named Clarence Otto, assigned to her on a semipermanent basis. Murray Longworth had ordered Clarence to accompany her everywhere. Mostly to grease the wheels, as Murray put it. Clarence took care of all the little things so Margaret could concentrate on her work.

It struck her as funny that Clarence Otto was a full-blown, gun-toting CIA agent, and yet he really didn't know what this was all about, while she, a midlevel epidemiologist for the CDC, was knee-deep in what might be the greatest threat ever to face the United States of America.

His looks distracted her, so she usually spoke to him while gazing in another direction. Yes, please...avoid the press and get me to the staging area as soon as possible. Every second counts.

That was an understatement. In her twenty-year career, she'd examined more bodies for more diseases than she cared to remember. Once a body died the corpse conveniently waited for examination. Put it on ice and it will keep until you're ready to take a peek. But not with this crap oh no not at all. Of the three bodies they'd actually recovered, two were already so decomposed as to be of little or no use. The other, which was the first body discovered, had literally dissolved before her eyes.

That was the first hint that something truly disturbing was afoot. Paramedics in Royal Oak, Michigan, had brought in the corpse of Charlotte Wilson, age seventy. Wilson had just murdered her fifty-one-year-old son with a butcher knife. She then attacked two cops on sight with said knife, screaming how she wouldn't let a bunch of Matlocks take her alive. The police really had no choice, and killed her with a single shot. The paramedics reported strange growths on the woman's body, the likes of which they'd never observed or heard of. They had pronounced her dead on the scene, then called for the morgue to come pick up the body.

Ten hours later, during the autopsy, the strange growths prompted county health officials to call the CDC's Cincinnati office, which sent Margaret and a team. By the time she arrived six hours after that sixteen hours after the woman had been shot and killed the body was already in bad shape. In the course of the next twenty hours, the body disintegrated into a pile of pitted bones, thick mats of an unidentified gossamer green mold, and a puddle of black slime. Refrigerating didn't slow the decomposition. Neither did flat-out freezing. The factor that attacked the body was unknown and new, an efficient chemical reaction that seemed unstoppable. Margaret still didn't know how it worked.

Shortly after Wilson's disintegration, Margaret hit the computer databases scanning for the words triangular growth. She found the record of Gary Leeland, a fifty-seven-year-old man who went to the hospital complaining of triangular

growths. Less than half a day after being admitted, Leeland killed himself by setting his hospital bed on fire. The pictures of Wilson, combined with the initial pictures doctors had taken of Leeland, were the reasons that Margaret was here.

Otto skirted the news vans and the bored-looking camera crews. The unmarked Lexus drew casual glances and nothing more. It pulled up near a back door, but a rogue reporter and a cameraman were waiting there as well.

What has the press been told? Margaret asked.

SARS, Otto said. Its the same story as with Judy Washington. Dew Phillips and Malcolm Johnson had found Judy Washingtons decomposed body four days earlier in an abandoned lot near the Detroit retirement home where she lived. Her corpse had been the worst yet nothing more than a pockmarked skeleton and an oily black stain on the ground. There wasnt a single shred of flesh left.

Second case in eight days, Margaret said. The press will think its a full-blown SARS epidemic.

SARS, or severe acute respiratory syndrome, had been tagged by the media several times over as the next nightmare plague. While the disease was potentially fatal, and had racked up a significant body count in China, it wasnt a major threat to a country with an efficient medical system like the United States. SARS was, however, a contagious, airborne disease, which explained the Racal suits and the quarantine. The bottom line on SARS? Enough of a danger to make people pay attention, but it

really threatened only the elderly and Third World countries and in America, that was never enough to create a panic. She got out of the car. As a unit, the reporter and the cameraman pounced like a trapdoor spider, a spotlight flicking on and hitting her in the eyes as the microphone reached for her face. She flinched away, trying to figure out what to say, already almost ready to vomit. But as fast as they were, Clarence Otto was faster, covering the camera lens with one hand, grabbing the microphone with the other and using his body to shield Margaret long enough for her to reach the door. He moved with the fluid grace of a dancer and the speed of a striking snake.

Im sorry, Otto said with his charming smile. No questions at this time.

Margaret let the door slip shut behind her, cutting off the reporters vehement protests. Clarence Otto could handle the media. He could probably handle a lot of things, some of which she didnt want to know about, and some of which she thought about each night she spent alone in a hotel bed. She suspected she could easily seduce him; even at fortytwo, she knew her long, glossy-black hair and dark eyes were part of a look that attracted many men. She thought herself an attractive Hispanic woman men who wanted her told her she was exotic. Which was funny to her, because she was born in Cleveland. Sure, she had some extra baggage around the hips -and who the hell didnt at forty-two?-, and the wrinkles were becoming a bit more prominent, but she knew damn well she could have just about any man she wanted. And she wanted Clarence.

She quickly shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts. When she got stressed, she got horny, as if her body knew the one surefire way to relieve mental tension. She was going to examine a corpse, for Gods sake, and she needed to keep her hormones in check. Margaret breathed deeply, trying to control her stress level, which seemed to soar higher with each case.

Almost as soon as she entered the hospital, another CIA agent, this one a middle-aged man shed never seen before, fell in at her side and escorted her through the empty halls. She figured this guy, like Clarence, knew little of the whole story. Murray wanted it that way the fewer people who knew, the fewer places from which information could leak.

She entered the morgue, which housed the recently erected portable decontamination chambers. Amos Braun, her only help in this hunt for answers to a biological nightmare, was waiting for her.

Good morning, Margaret.

She always thought his voice made him sound like a frog. Or maybe a toad. A drunk toad, slow and growly and maybe with only half his lips working correctly. The beyond-skinny Amos was somewhat effeminate and always the snappy dresser, though about ten years out of style. Most people initially assumed he was gay. His wife and two children, however, provided some evidence to the contrary. He always looked to be an hour or two behind on his sleep, even though his energy never faded.

Amos had been with her in Royal Oak when theyd examined Charlotte Wilson, and every step of the way since. He was one of the best in the business, granted, but he was all she had. Shed asked Murray for more staff, told him she needed more staff, but hed refused he wanted to control the flow of information, limit the number of those in the know.

Im surprised you beat me here, Amos.

Some of us arent off gallivanting around with the president, my dear. Becoming quite the celebrity, arent you?

Oh shut up and lets get ready. We dont have a lot of time if this body is like the others.

They stepped into two small dressing areas concealed by plastic dividers. Inside each area hung an orange Racal suit, designed to protect the wearer against all types of hostile agents. The suits always reminded her of hell, of burned human skin hanging like some satanic trophy.

First she removed her clothes and donned surgical scrubs. She slid into the Racal suit, which was made of flexible Tyvek synthetic fabric, impermeable to air, chemicals or virus particles. The ankles, wrists and neck had intricate metallic rings. With the suit on, she stepped into special boots that had a metallic ring matching the ones on the suit legs. She snapped the rings together with a satisfying springy click, signifying an airtight seal. She then wrapped the seam with brown sticky tape, further sealing off her feet against possible contamination. She did the same with the thick Tyvek gloves, taping herself off at the wrist. Tape was overkill, particularly with the state-of-the-art Racal suit,

but after seeing what this mysterious condition did to victims, she wanted all the precautions she could get. Margaret loosely wrapped several layers of

tape around her arm; if she accidentally cut the suit, she could plug the leak as fast as possible. They didn't understand how the infection spread. Other than shared symptoms, there seemed to be no connection between the five known victims. It might be spread by contact via some unidentified human carrier; via airborne transmission -although that seemed very unlikely based on the fact that no one exposed to the victims contracted the infection-; via common vehicle transmission, which applied to contaminated items such as food, water or any medication; or via vectorborne transmission, the name given to transmission from mosquitoes, flies, rats or any other vermin. Her current theory was far more disturbing: that it was being intentionally spread to specific targets. Any way she sliced it, however, until she knew the transmission mode for certain, she wasn't taking any chances.

When Margaret came out from behind the curtain, Amos was already waiting for her. In the bulky suit with no helmet, he looked particularly odd the suits helmet ring made his thin neck look positively anorexic. She had to argue with Murray Longworth to keep Amos. Murray actually thought she could figure out a completely unknown biological phenomenon all by herself. She needed a full team of experts, but Murray wouldn't hear of it. She needed Amos's expertise in biochemistry and parasitology. She knew the former discipline was vital for analyzing the victims bizarre behavioral changes, and she had a nagging feeling the latter would be increasingly significant. He was a smart-ass, but he was also brilliant, insightful and seemed to require little or no sleep. She was desperately grateful to have him.

Amos helped her with the bulky helmet, locking the ring to create the seal around her neck. The faceplate instantly fogged up. He wrapped her neck seal with the sticky tape, then started the air filter/compressor attached to the suits waist. She felt a hiss of fresh air; the Racal suit billowed up slightly. The positive pressure meant that in case of a leak, air would flow out of the suit, not in, theoretically keeping any transmission vectors away from her body. She helped Amos with his helmet.

Can you hear me? she asked. Her voice sounded oddly confined inside her helmet, but a built-in microphone transmitted the sound to a small speaker mounted on the helmets chin. External microphones picked up ambient sound and transmitted it to tiny built-in speakers, giving the suits wearer relatively normal hearing.

Sounds fine, Amos said. His froggish voice came through somewhat tinny and artificial, but she understood his words clearly.

The hospital didn't have an airtight room. Murray had provided a portable one, a top-secret Biohazard Safety Level 4 lab. Margaret hadn't even known such a thing existed until Murray acquired it from the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute for Infectious Diseases, or USAMRIID. USAMRIID probably should have been the ones studying Brewbaker and the others, but since Margaret already knew, she got to run with the ball. Biohazard safety levels ran from one through four, with BSL-4 being as bad as it got.

The portable BSL-4 lab was small, designed to fit inside existing structures. Its flexible walls were set up within those of the morgue, almost as if kids had set up a large white, plastic tent in their parents basement. She knew exactly what she'd see in the small space, as she'd left very specific instructions for Murray. She'd find a stainless-steel morgue table with a full drainage system to capture Brewbaker's liquefying body, a computer for sending and receiving information on a completely closed network, and a prep table with all the equipment she'd need, including a stack of BSL-4 sample containers that could be completely immersed in decontaminant solvent in the airlock, then shipped off to other BSL4 labs for analysis.

Margaret and Amos entered the airtight room through the flexible airlock. Inside, Dew Phillips was waiting and he wasn't wearing a biosuit. He stood next to the charred body laid out on the steel table. It was horribly burned, especially around what was left of the legs.

Margaret felt anger wash over her; this man could be contaminating her lab, impeding any work she might accomplish now that she had an actual body and not a disintegrating pile of rotting black flesh. Agent Phillips, what are you doing in here without a biosuit?

He just stared at her. He pulled a Tootsie Roll from his pocket, unwrapped it slowly, popped the candy into his mouth, and then dropped the wrapper on the floor. Nice to see you, too, Doc.

Dew's deep green eyes resembled the color of dark emeralds. His skin was pale, his face stubbled and haggard, his suit wrinkled beyond all repair. His mottled scalp shone under the harsh lab lights. Age hadn't affected his body, not much; it looked rock solid under the wrecked suit.

Answer my question, Margaret demanded, her voice mechanized by the suits small speaker. She hadn't liked him from the start, hadn't liked his cold demeanor, and this incident wasn't helping change her opinion at all.

Dew chewed for a moment, cold eyes staring into Margaret's. I got up close and personal with this guy. If he's contagious, I've got it, so what's the point in putting on a human condom?

She walked up to the table and examined the body. The fire had briefly touched the head, burning away all hair and leaving a scalp dotted with small blisters. A twisted expression of wide-eyed rage etched the corpse's face. Margaret suppressed a shiver, first at the very picture of lunacy on the table before her, then at Dew Phillips, who had looked straight into this horrid expression and pulled the trigger three times.

The arms and legs were the worst, burned to blackened cinders in places. Where the skin remained, it was the leathery greenish black of third-degree burns. The left hand was nothing more than a skeletal talon covered with chunks of cindered flesh. The right hand was in better shape, almost free of burns, an oddly white area at the end of a shriveled, carbonized arm. Both legs were gone below the knee.

The corpses genitals were badly burned. Second-degree burns covered the abdomen and lower torso. Three large bullet wounds marked the chest, two within inches of the heart and one directly over it. Smears of blood were now bone dry, flaking away, leaving whiter spots on the scorched skin.

What happened to his legs?

He cut them off, Dew said. With a hatchet.

What do you mean, he cut them off? He cut off his own legs? Right before he set himself on fire. With gasoline. My partner tried to put him out, and got a hatchet in the belly for his troubles. Jesus, Amos said. He chopped off his own legs and burned himself? Thats right, Dew said. But those nice bullet holes in his chest, those are mine.

Margaret stared at the corpse, then back up at Dew. So . . . does he have any?

Dew reached down and turned the corpse over. For some reason it surprised her to see he wore surgical gloves. He flipped the body over with minimal effort Martin Brewbaker hadnt been a big man, and much of his weight had been consumed by fire.

The wounds were much worse on Brewbakers back, fist-size holes ripped open by the .45-caliber bullets, but that wasnt what caught Margarets attention. She unconsciously held her breath there, just left of the spine and just below the scapula, sat a triangular growth. It was the first growth shed seen live, and not as a picture, since her examination of Charlotte Wilson. One of the bullet wounds had ripped free a small chunk of the growth. Flames had caused even more damage, but at least it was something to work with.

Amos leaned forward. Are there any more?

I thought I saw some on his forearms, but Im not sure, Dew said.

Not sure? Margaret stood. How can you not be sure? I mean, either you saw them or you didnt. She noticed Amos wince behind his faceplate, but it was too late.

Dew stared at her, anger visibly whirling behind his dead eyes. Sorry, Doc, I was busy looking at the fucking hatchet the bastard was burying in my partners stomach. His voice was slow, cold and threatening. I know Ive only been doing this shit for thirty years, but next time Ill pay better attention.

She suddenly felt very small one look at the body and shed forgotten all about Dews partner laid up in critical condition. Jesus, Margaret, she thought, were you born an insufferable bitch or did you have to work at it?

Dew . . . Im sorry about . . . about . . . The name of Dews partner escaped her.

Malcolm Johnson, Dew said. Agent, husband, father.

Margaret nodded. Right, of course, Agent Johnson. Well...Im sorry.

Save it for the medical journals, Doc. I realize Im supposed to answer your questions, but you know, all of a sudden I dont feel so swell. Something about the smell in here is making me sick.

Dew turned and headed for the door.

But Dew, I need to hear how it went down! I need all the information I can get.

Read my report, Dew said over his shoulder.

Please, wait

He slipped out through the airlock and was gone.

Amos went to the prep table. Among other instruments, the prep team had left them with a digital camera. Amos picked it up and started circling the body, taking picture after picture.

Margaret, why do you let him walk all over you like that?

She turned on Amos, her face flushing with anger. I sure didnt see you standing up to him.

Thats because Im a pussy, Amos said. He snapped another picture. Im also not in charge of this shebang you are.

Shut up, Amos. In truth, she was happy to see Dew leave. The man had an aura about him, a sense that he was not only a death dealer, but one waiting impatiently for his own demise as well. Dew Phillips gave her the willies.

She turned back to the body and gently, ever so gently, poked the triangular growth. It felt squishy underneath the burned skin. A tiny jet of black ooze bubbled up from one of the triangles points.

Margaret sighed. Lets get rocking. Excise samples of the growth, and lets send them out for analysis right away the body has already started rotting, and we dont have a lot of time.

She picked up Dews Tootsie Roll wrapper, dropped it in a medical waste bin, cracked her knuckles through the large gloves, then got to work.

11.

RUMBLIN, STUMBLIN, BUMBLIN

That was a bullshit call! Perrys booming voice joined the fused protests of the other bar patrons. Theres no way thats interference!

While hooting and hollering football fans packed the bar, there was a noticeable space around Perry and Bills table. The narrow-eyed scowl etched on Perrys face was the same one he had unconsciously worn on the football field. The other patrons cast frequent, discreet glances his way, keeping an eye on his huge, tense form as if he were some predator that might snap at any moment.

The ten-foot projection TV screens of Scorekeepers Bar & Grill blazed San Franciscos crimson jerseys and gold helmets along with Green Bays tradition-rich green and yellow. The slow-motion replay showed a perfect spiral descending toward a Packers receiver, then the 49ers defensive back reaching up and swatting the ball away.

Perry screamed at the TV. You see that? He turned to stare in disbelieving anger at Bill, who sat calmly sipping from a Budweiser bottle. You see that?

Seemed like a good call to me, Bill said. No bout-a-doubt-it. It was practically rape when you look at it.

Perry howled in protest, beer spilling from his mug as his hands moved in accordance with his speech. Oh, youre crazy! The defender has a right to go for the ball. Now the Packers have a first-and-ten on the friggin fifteen-yard line.

Try to keep some of that beer in the mug, will you? Bill said, taking another sip from his bottle.

Perry wiped up the spilled beer with a napkin. Sorry. I just get pissed when the refs decide whos supposed to win and dont just let them play.

It is a cruel and unjust existence, my friend, Bill said. We cannot escape the inequities of life, even in the sporting world.

Perry set his mug on the table, his eyes focused on the screen, his right hand casually scratching his left forearm. A corner blitz swept around the left offensive end, crushing the Green Bay quarterback for a sevenyard loss.

Perry shook his clenched fist at the screen. Take that, baby. Man, I love to see that. I hate quarterbacks. Friggin nancy-boys. Its good to see someone put a snot-bubbler on the QB.

Bill looked away and put up a hand as if to say, Enough. Perry smiled and drained the rest of his beer in one long pull, then scratched at his thigh.

Beer make you break out in hives or something? Bill said. What?

Your fleas again. Youre on your fifth beer, and with each one you scratch a little more.

Oh, Perry said. Its no big deal. Its just a bug bite.

Im starting to wonder if we should be sitting in the same booth I wouldnt want to catch lice.

Youre a regular comedian. Perry signaled to the waitress. You want another?

No thanks, Bill said. Im driving home after this. You better slow down, cowboy youre getting a little excitable.

Aw, Bill, Im fine.

Good, and were going to keep it that way. You know how you get if youve had too much to drink. Youre done for the night. Annoyance flared at the command, and Perrys eyes narrowed. Who the hell was Bill to tell him what to do?

Excuse me? Perry said. Without thinking, he leaned toward Bill, lip curling into a small sneer.

Bills face showed no change. You know when you scowl like that you look just like your father?

Perry flinched as if hed been slapped. He sat back, then hung his head. He felt his face flush all hot and red with embarrassment. He pushed the beer mug away.

Im sorry, Perry said. He looked up with pleading eyes. Bill, Im really sorry.

Bill smiled reassuringly. Dont sweat it, buddy. Youre under control. Its okay.

No, its not okay. I cant talk to people like that you especially. Bill leaned forward, his tone soft and supportive. Give yourself a break, Perry. You havent had an incident in years.

Perry stared off into space. I still worry. I might slip up, you know? Not be paying attention, smack the shit out of someone before I realize what Im doing. Something like that.

But you havent smacked anyone. Not for a long time, man. Just relax. Your sob story is bringing tears to my manly eyes. Bills smile showed his understanding.

Perry thanked the powers that be, and not for the first time, that he had a friend in Bill Miller. Without Bill, Perry knew hed probably be in jail somewhere.

Bill put his hand on Perrys arm. Perry, you gotta give yourself some credit. Youre nothing like your father. Youve left all that behind. You just have to be careful, thats all your temper is fucked up, man, just stay on point. Now can we stop with all this sissy-boy simpering and watch some football? The time-out is over. What do you think the Pack will do here?

Perry looked up at the screen. He let go of the small incident, let go of memories of his fathers endless violence. It was always easy to lose himself in football.

Ill bet they go off-tackle on this one. Theyll try to catch the Niners sleeping, but they havent been able to block the inside linebacker all day. Hes creeping up right on the snap he better watch his ass or theyll go play-action and throw behind him when he comes barreling in.

Bills reassuring touch had started Perrys arm itching again. He dug at it absently as he watched the Packers running back go off-tackle for two yards before the inside linebacker drilled him.

Bill took a swig of beer and stared at Perrys arm. You know, I understand that your protruding brow is indicative of a certain caveman mentality, but maybe you should set aside your negative feelings toward the medical profession and see a doctor.

Doctors are a rip-off. Its all a big racket.

Yes, and Ill bet you saw Elvis last night and theres some great alien hookers at the trailer park down the road. Youve got a college degree, for Gods sake, and you still think doctors are medicine men who bleed you with razors and use leeches to suck away the bad spirits.

I dont like doctors, Perry said. I dont like them, and I dont trust them.

On the screen, the Packers QB took the snap and faked a handoff. The inside linebacker took a step forward, and as soon as he did, Perry saw the opening in the middle. The QB saw it too he stood tall in the pocket, the picture of poise, and rifled the ball into the end zone just a few yards behind the linebacker. The receiver hauled it in with a diving catch, giving the Packers a 2220 lead with only fourteen seconds left in the game.

Fuck, Perry said. I fucking hate quarterbacks. He felt that gnawing jealousy inside, the one that always came when he watched someone blow a play he himself would have easily made. It was so hard to watch the weekly NFL battles, knowing damn well thats where he belonged, knowing damn well he wouldnt have just been competitive, but dominant. He silently cursed the injury that had ended his career.

First the Lions, now the Niners, and you still havent figured out the problem in Pullman, Bill said. Looks like this just isnt your week.

Yeah, Perry said as he scratched his forearm. His voice sounded resigned. You can say that again.

12.

CLUES

Margaret arched her back and took a deep breath, trying to calm her nerves, the Racal suit encumbering her every movement. Her hands shook, only slightly, but it was enough to disturb her control of the laparoscope.

The laparoscope, a surgical tool used for operations in the abdominal cavity, consisted of a sensitive fiber-optic camera and an attachment for various probes, scalpels, drills and other devices. The camera, complete with its own light, was barely larger than a piece of thread. The rig included a big monitor on a video tower. Surgeons utilized the equipment to perform delicate operations without cutting into the patient via traditional means.

Few people used such equipment for autopsies, but Margaret wanted to examine the area surrounding the growth while disturbing it as little as possible. Her strategy seemed to have paid off.

Just as in her examination of Charlotte Wilsons corpse, the growths had already rotted into a liquefied black pulp. There was nothing in the growth itself she could examine. The surrounding tissues were decomposing at a frighteningly fast pace, but this time she was ready. Using the laparoscope, shed probed the area in and around the growth. Deep inside, almost to the bone and in the midst of rotting black flesh, shed found a piece of matter that clearly didnt belong to the victim.

She cracked her knuckles one at a time. The bones popped silently, muffled by the Racal suit. She drew another breath, then took the cameras control with her left hand. The monitor showed the growths blackened, decaying interior. She knew the rot would soon spread to other parts of the body, dissolving it into a useless pile of putrefaction in a few scant hours. Every second counted.

Her hands grew steady; they had to be for such delicate work. The piece of material, barely a quarter inch across, looked to be part of the growth. It was black, the same color as the decomposed gore around it, but reflected the light almost like plastic. That reflective quality was the only reason shed spotted it.

Her left hand maneuvered the camera, pushing it closer to the black piece. Her right hand controlled a trocar, a hollow tube through which specialized surgical instruments could access a patients body cavities without cutting him or her open. Her trocar carried a tiny pair of pincers. Like a kid with a hundred-thousand-dollar video game, she moved the pincers closer to the black plastic fleck. Her finger rested on a trigger that, when pressed, would close the pincers.

Margaret tweaked the camera controls. The image, slightly distorted from high magnification, focused in on the mysterious shiny fleck. The pincers looked like metallic monster claws about to pluck a lone swimmer from a sea of black.

She gently squeezed the trigger. The pincers gripped firmly on the strange material, squishing out thick bubbles of rancid goo as they closed.

Nice job, Amos said. First try. Give the lady a cee-gar.

She smiled and pulled back on the pincers. The material resisted the pull. She looked closely at the monitor, then gently moved the pincers from side to side, wiggling the clamped object. The reason for the resistance became clear the object appeared to be embedded in a rib. She pulled back gently, slowly increasing the pressure. The object bent slightly, then popped free. They heard a wet squelch as the tiny pincers smeared with black slime pulled free from the wound.

Amos held a petri dish under the pincers. Margaret released the trigger, but the little fleck clung to the goop on the bottom pincer. He grabbed a scalpel, then gently used the point to push the object into the petri dish.

She took the dish and held it close to her faceplate. The fleck had a shape to it, and she could see why it had stayed so firmly planted in the bone. It looked just like a black rose thorn.

She felt a rush of satisfaction. They were still a hundred miles from figuring out the key to this horrific puzzle, but thanks to Charlotte Wilson she knew better what to look for and how much time she had to work with. The black fleck was something new, and it brought them one step closer to an answer.

Hey, Amos said, what do you make of this? He stood next to Brewbakers hip, one of the places least damaged from the flames. His finger rested beside a small lesion, sort of like a gnarled zit.

A gnarled zit with a tiny blue fiber sticking out of it.

So he had some acne, Margaret said. Do you think its significant? I think everything is significant. Should we excise it and send it out? She thought for a moment. Not yet. It doesnt look like theres any

decomposition on that spot, and I want to examine it for myself. Lets focus on the areas that are rotting, as we know we wont have much longer to work with those, then come back to it, okay?

Sounds good, Amos said. He grabbed the camera from the prep table. He leaned in close to the zit, snapped a picture, then put the camera back on the prep table. Right, well come back to it.

How much longer until we get the results from the tissue analysis of the growth?

Well have info tomorrow. Im sure theyre working through the night. DNA analysis, protein sequencing and anything else that might pop up.

She checked her watch 10:07 P.M. She and Amos would also be up all night and well into the next day. Had to be. They knew from hardearned experience that they had only a few days before Brewbakers body rotted away.

13.

TWO-FER TUESDAY

Good God, Perry, Bill said. Two days in a row. Ive seen flea-ridden dogs scratch like that, but never a human. Bill, half hung over the cubicle wall, looked down at a madly scratching Perry.

Of course, Im assuming youre human, Bill added. Scientists still debate that one.

Perry ignored the mild gibe, concentrating instead on his left forearm. Hed pushed the sleeve of his ratty Detroit Lions sweatshirt up past his elbow. His right hand looked a blur as he raked the hairy forearm with his fingernails.

I hear scabies is nasty this time of year, Bill said.

Damn thing itches like all get-out. Perry stopped for a moment to stare at the welt. Its texture resembled a small strawberry if strawberries were yellow and oozed tiny drops of clear fluid. The yellowish welt felt solid, as if a piece of cartilage had broken free from somewhere in his body and lodged in his arm. His arm, and six other places.

The digging nails left long, angry-red scratches. The scratches surrounded the welt like egg white around an over-cooked yolk.

Gee, that looks healthy, Bill said, then slipped back into his cube.

Its no big deal. Perry turned his attention to his screen, which displayed a computer network diagram. He absently reached up and brushed a lock of straight, heavy blond hair out of his eyes.

StickyFingazWhitey: Dude, seriously...nasty. Bleedmaize.n_blue: Its no big deal, mind yer own. StickyFingazWhitey: God forbid you just go buy some oh, dare I speak the word that should never be spoken MEDICINE?

Perry tried to ignore Bills sarcasm. As if the wonderful rashes werent enough of a distraction. Perry had been working on the Pullman problem, the same one he hadnt solved the day before, for more than an hour. At least he tried to work. The rashes made it difficult to concentrate on customer support.

Quit being such a macho stud-boy and go buy some Cortaid. Bill hung over the gray cubicle wall like a puppy trying to decipher a new and unusual sound. You dont have to go to Mr. Evil Witchdoctor, for Gods sake, just buy something to help that itch. A disinfectant wouldnt hurt either, by the looks of things. Ill never understand why you like to sit in pain rather than partake in the wonders of a modern society.

Your doctors couldnt do anything for my right knee, now could they? I was at the game, Perry, remember? I saw your knee when I visited you at the hospital. Jesus H. Christ couldnt have brought that knee back from the dead.

Maybe Im just a Cro-Magnon, thats all. Perry fought the urge to scratch again. The rash on his right ass cheek demanded attention. We still hitting the bar tonight?

I dont think so, contagion-boy. I prefer the company of at least semihealthy people. You know, those with rubella or smallpox? Perhaps a bit of the Black Death? Id rather associate with them than deal with scabies.

Its just a rash, asshole. Perry felt anger slowly swell up in his chest. He immediately fought it down. Bill Miller seemingly lived to irritate people, and once he got rolling he didnt quit. It would be scabies this and scabies that for the rest of the week and it was only Tuesday. But they were just words, and good-natured words at that. Perry calmed himself. Hed already let his temper slip once this week hed be damned if hed insult Bill like that again.

Perry moved his mouse and clicked, magnifying a section of the network schematic. Leave me alone, will ya? Sandy wants this thing fixed right away. The Pullman people are going apeshit.

Bill slid back into his cube. Perry stared at the screen, trying to solve a problem taking place more than a thousand miles away in the state of Washington. Analyzing computer glitches over the phone wasnt an easy job, especially with network difficulties where the problem could be a wire in the ceiling, a bad port, or a single defective component on any of 112 workstations. Many times in customer support, he faced problems that would have chewed up Agatha Christie, Columbo and Sherlock Holmes in one big swallow. This was one such problem.

The answer danced at the edges of his mind, but he couldn't focus. He leaned back into his chair, which set the itch on his spine afire with maddening intensity. It was like a thousand mosquito bites all rolled into one.

Perry's train of thought dissolved completely as he ground his back into the office chair, letting the rough cloth dig through his sweatshirt. He grimaced as the welts on his leg flared up with itching so sudden and so bad that he might as well have been stung by a wasp. He attacked the leg welts, clawing his nails through blue-jean denim. It was like trying to fight a Hydra each time he stopped one biting head, two more flared up to take its place.

From the next cube, he heard Bill's poor impression of a Shakespearean actor.

To scabies, or not to scabies, Bill said, his voice only slightly muffled by the divider. That is the infection.

Perry gritted his teeth and bit back an angry reply. The welts were driving him nuts, making him easily irritated by little things. Still, although Bill was his friend, sometimes the guy didn't know when to quit.

DIRTY FINGERNAILS

Margaret stared into the microscope's eyepiece, trying to focus on the magnified image. Her eyes were red from lack of sleep. She couldn't rub them, thanks to the plastic faceplate and the cumbersome biosuit. She blinked a few times to clear her vision. How long had she been working on Brewbaker? Twenty-four hours and counting, and no end in sight. She bent and stared into the microscope.

Hmm, what have we here? The samples meaning seemed rather obvious, but her fatigue and the horrid condition of the victim's skin made her unsure. Amos, come over here and look at this.

He put down his chemical samples and moved toward the microscope. Like Margaret, he hadn't slept in more than a day. Even with the lack of sleep and the awkward Racal suit, however, he moved with a smooth grace that made him look as if he floated rather than walked. He bent into the eyepiece without touching anything.

After a moment he asked, What am I looking for?

I was hoping you'd see it right away.

I see a lot of things, Margaret, Amos said. Perhaps you could be a little more specific. Where is this skin sample from?

The area just outside the growth. See anything that would indicate moderate skin trauma? Amos half rose to answer, but Margaret cut him off. And don't give me one of your smart-ass answers, please. I know damn well the whole body is ripped to shreds.

Amos bent back to the eyepiece. He stared for a few seconds, silence filling the sterile morgue. Yes, I see it. I see some scabbing and some damage down past the subcutaneous layer. It looks like a long groove like a claw wound, perhaps. Margaret nodded. I think I'll take another look at those skin samples we got from under the victim's fingernails.

Amos stood straight and looked at her. You don't think he did this to himself, do you? This tear is all the way to the muscle, and it looks like repetitive damage. Do you know how much that would hurt? I can take a guess. Margaret stretched her arms high, bent to the left, then to the right. She was sick of the lab and sick of the limited sleep. She wanted a real bed, not a cot, and a real bottle of wine to go with it. As long as she was dreaming, she might as well throw in Agent Clarence Otto in a pair of silk boxers.

She sighed. Agent Otto would have to wait for another day. Right now she had other things to worry about, like what could make a man use his fingernails like claws to tear into his own body?

The computer terminal let out a long beep: information had arrived. Amos shuffled over and sat down.

This is odd, he said. Most odd indeed.

Give me the Cliffs Notes version.

Results on the excised growth, for starters. They said their sample had almost completely liquefied by the time they got it. They did what they could, though. The tissue was cancerous.

What do they mean, it was cancerous? We saw it. It wasn't a mass of uncontrolled cells; it had structure.

I agree, but look at these results: cancerous tissue. That, plus massive amounts of cellulase and trace amounts of cellulose.

Margaret thought on that for a moment. Cellulose was the primary material in plant cells, the most abundant form of biomass on the planet. But the key word there was plants; animals didn't make cellulose.

The cellulose didn't last, either, Amos said. Within hours of reception of material, cellulose decomposed into cellulase. They did everything they could to stop it, including attempts to freeze the material, but it didn't freeze.

Just like the enzyme that's decomposing the flesh. It's like a . . . self-destruct mechanism.

Suicidal cancer? That's a bit of a reach, Margaret.

It was a reach. A big one. And yet maybe she needed to reach; reach for something that was beyond accepted science.

ONE MAN'S HOME . . .

Coming home to apartment B-203 always generated mixed feelings. The place wasn't much, one meaningless apartment in a massive cluster of identical buildings. Windywood was the kind of complex where even flawless directions would have people guessing; there were enough buildings to necessitate a little network of roads with smarmy names like Evergreen Drive, Shady Lane and Poplar Street. After one or two wrong turns, the plain-looking, three-story, twelve-unit complexes were all you could see.

His building was only two down from the complex entrance, right across the street from the Washtenaw Party Store. Made things quite convenient. Meijers grocery store was only a couple of miles away; he hit that for the big grocery runs. For everything else the party store did the trick. It was a low-rent part of town, and the party store wasn't exactly a high-class operation there was always some welfare reject on the pay phone just outside the door, working a deal or having a far-too-loud argument with a significant other.

Perry didn't have Jack squat to eat at home. The party store had a great little deli, so he stopped for a ham sandwich with Texas mustard, and grabbed a six-pack of Newcastle beer. Sure enough, some chick was screaming into the phone. She held the receiver in one hand, a well-bundled baby in the other. Perry tried to ignore her as he walked in and tried to ignore her again as he walked out, but the girl was loud. He didn't feel any sympathy for her if he could rise above his background and upbringing, anyone could. People who lived that way wanted to live that way.

He pulled into the apartment complex and into his carport, which was less than an eighth of a mile from the entrance. The girl bothered him if he'd made it to the NFL, he'd live in a big house somewhere, far from the rabble of Ypsilanti. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was a failure. He should have more than this. The apartment was nice in its way, and he hated to feel ungrateful for the things that he had, but there was no denying the place was low-rent.

Seven years ago no one thought he'd wind up in anything less than a mansion. Scary Perry Dawsey, then a sophomore at the University of Michigan, had been named All-Big Ten linebacker along with senior Cory Crypewicz of Ohio State. Crypewicz went in the first round to Chicago. He pulled down \$2.1 million a year, not counting the \$12 million signing bonus. It was a far cry from Perry's meager tech-support salary.

But Crypewicz hadn't been as good as Perry, and all the country knew it. Perry had been a monster, the kind of defensive player who could dominate a game with his sheer ferocity. The press had tagged him with several nicknames, Beast, Cro-Mag and Fang among them. Of course, ESPN's Chris Berman always seemed to have the last word on nicknames, and the first time he used the Scary tag, it stuck.

My, but how a cheap-ass cut block could change things. The knee injury had been awful, a complete blowout damaging the ACL, the medial collateral, every frigg'ing ligament in the area. It even caused bone damage, fracturing the fibula and chipping his patella. A year's worth of reconstructive surgeries and rehabilitation didn't bring him back to full speed. The fact was, he just couldn't cut it anymore. Where he'd once raged across the football field, inflicting his savage authority on anyone foolish enough to cross his path, now he could do little better than hobble along, chasing running backs he could never catch, taking hits from blockers he could never avoid.

Without the release provided by football's physical play, Perry's violent streak threatened to eat him up from the inside. Thank God for Bill, who'd helped him adjust. Bill had been there for the next two years, acting as Perry's conscience, making him aware of his ever-present temper.

Perry yanked up the Ford's parking brake and hopped out. He was Michigan born and bred, and he loved the cold months, but winter made the complex look desolate, barren and hopeless. Everything seemed palegray and lifeless, as if some fairy-tale force had sucked the color from the landscape.

He put his hand in his pocket. The crinkly white Walgreens bag was still there. The itching was just too intense. He'd stopped at a drugstore just a few blocks from his apartment complex and bought a tube of Cortaid. It was silly to feel like he'd given in, like he was weak just for buying a tube of anti-itch medicine, but he felt that way regardless.

He wondered what priceless piece of wisdom his father would have regarding the medicine. Probably something along the lines of, You can't tough it out from a rash? Jee-zus, boy, you piss me off. Somebody's going to have to teach you some discipline. He'd have followed up that comment with the belt, or a backhand, or his fist.

Dear ol' Dad. Humanitarian and all-around great guy. Perry shook the thoughts away. Dad was long dead, the victim of well-deserved cancer. Perry didn't need to concern himself with that man anymore.

Sliding over the parking-lot snow, that thin film no shovel could seem to finish off, he reached the apartment building's dented green front door and keyed in. He grabbed his mail, mostly junk mail and coupons, then trudged up the two flights to his apartment. Walking up the steps dragged his jeans against the welts on his leg, amplifying the itching it was as if someone had jammed a burning coal in his skin. He forced himself to ignore it, to show at least a modicum of discipline, as he unlocked the door to his apartment.

The layout was simple: facing out the door to the hall, the kitchen nook was to the left and the living room was to the right. Just past the kitchen nook was the dining area. The spot was tiny to begin with; cluttered by both the computer desk that held his Macintosh and a small round table with four chairs, the place had barely enough room to maneuver.

The living room was decent-size, comfortable and sparsely furnished with his big old couch, in front of which sat a hand-me-down coffee table. An end table with a lamp tucked up against the couch. A small recliner too small for Perry's body was the habitual territory for Bill on football Sundays. Directly across from the couch and to the right of the door was the entertainment center with a thirty-two-inch flat-screen and a Panasonic stereo system, the only expensive items Perry owned. No need for a landline phone: work provided his cell, and cable modem provided his Internet connection.