

In that moment, he was his fathers son once again.

You want to see?

Pain was coming, Perry knew. Truckloads of it. A clearance sale on agony. You got to learn not to talk to me that way. Tell you what, Ill show you how I cook your dinner. Perry hopped up onto the counter.

He sat with his ass on the countertop, legs dangling over the edge, right ass cheek almost touching the edge of the electric stove, back resting against the cupboards that held his mismatched plates. He watched the burner slowly change from black to a soft, glowing orange. An orphaned, dried-out grain of rice sat

let us see

on the burner. Perry watched closely. The grain was at first white, then slowly turned black.

It began to burn, sending a thin

let us see now

tendrill of smoke toward the ceiling. The little stream thickened as the metal continued to heat, smoke rising in a tiny column then dissipating into

let us see, were warning you

nothingness. It was so black against the hot metal. There was the briefest flicker of an orange flame, and then nothing. The smoke quickly petered out, leaving a small black husk on the glowing burner.

warning y ou warningyou see See SEE

You want to see? Perry rolled onto his left cheek and hooked his right thumb under his waistband. Theyd warned him. Nobody warns a Dawsey of anything. It was Perrys house, after all, and anyone under his roof was damn well going to live by his rules.

y es w e want to see

now Now NOW, and

were not going to tell you again

Perry slid over so his right cheek hovered directly above the burner. He instantly felt the rising, searing heat. He pulled his pants down, exposing the right cheek to the burner only inches away. Blistering heat cascaded over his naked skin.

Do you see now, fuckers? He felt the overflow excitement again, coursing through his body, intense and stronger than ever. what is it? is it dinner? ar e w e going to eat?

what is it?

You dont know what it is? Perry heard the malice in his own voice, the hatred and the anger that had once again taken over his body and thrown reason and common sense out some mental twentieth-story window to splatter on the concrete sidewalk below. He heard his fathers voice within his own.

Well, if you dont know what it is, maybe youd better take a closer look!

Perry slammed his right cheek down on the burner and immediately heard the answering sizzle. The scorching pain stabbed into his body, but it was his pain, and he welcomed it with the wide-eyed smile of a madman. His nervous system railed against the searing heat as his flesh bubbled and blistered and blackened.

NO NO NO NO NO

NO NO NO

The stench of his own burning flesh filled the room. The unbearable agony ripped through his every fiber. Later on hed congratulate himself on his incredible willpower he managed to keep his ass pressed firmly against the burner for almost four seconds, fighting against his bodys primal directive to get away from the pain

NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO

The mindscram hammered into his head and broke his superhuman concentration. Perry leaped off the stove and landed on his bad leg, which promptly gave way. He fell in a heap on the bloodstained linoleum floor.

NO NO NO NO NONO NO

He didnt have time to regret his actions; he didnt even have time to tell himself how stupid it was. He felt the scorching pain on his ass and the strong smell of cooked human flesh -and was there another smell in there?- and the jackhammer screaming that ripped into his mind and stirred his brains like a swizzle stick.

NO NO NO NO NO NO

NO NO NO

Despite the pain that had him whimpering like a little girl, despite tears streaming down his face to mix with the dried blood on the linoleum floor, despite feeling every injury flare back to agonizing life, he knew hed killed another one. He held that satisfaction tight to his soul as he passed out.

THE ARCHES

Margaret, Amos and Clarence Otto stared at the photomural. Clarence had had the painting blown up to three times the original size, so that Nguyens nightmarish vision took up an entire wall.

Theyd all caught a few hours of sleep from around 2:00 A.M. to 5:00 A.M., then it was back to work. After two hours of staring at the mural, staring and thinking, Margaret still felt groggy despite five cups of nasty hospital coffee. Amos, as usual, looked none the worse for wear. Neither did Otto. Margaret hated them both.

Amos stood right in front of the photomural, his nose just inches from the wall. How did Nguyen know these people? he asked.

Margaret stared and thought hard about the question. I dont think he knew these people at all, she finally said.

Amos looked at her and crossed his arms. What, youre saying that the kid was a psychic or something?

Margaret shook her head slowly, but kept her eyes fixed on the painting photo. No, I dont think so. Not psychic, but something like psychic. Something beyond the science we know.

Where she could identify and match, she had taped the life-size pictures of the infestation victims faces next to their life-size spot on the painting.

Blaine Tanarive.

Charlotte Wilson.

Gary Leeland.

Judy Washington.

Martin Brewbaker.

Kiet Nguyen.

There was an indefinable horror in seeing the real faces taped next to Nguyens ghastly, painted renditions. Horror, yes, but that horror paled in comparison to the math.

Those six faces, she knew.

There were eleven other faces that she did not.

So there were more. At least eleven more. And who knew how many

beyond that? The thing made of those bodies seemed to expand far beyond the frame. How many other faces would be on the rest of the . . . the . . . what was it? An arch? No, there were multiple arches.

The construct.

Why was she focusing on that? Why did she feel the need to name it? Was it significant?

Margaret slowly walked backward, taking in the painting. Her eyes traced the arch, trying to imagine where the other end of it would logically fall.

The construct would be huge. The two arches alone would be at least twenty-feet high.

Arches. Made out of human parts.

Clarence, Margaret said quietly, get me Dew on the phone. Now.

INTERNET

Perry woke all at once, sitting straight up with eyes wide open. His sleeping mind had been searching his thoughts, not unlike the way the Triangles searched his gray-matter database, looking for an answer to the problem at hand. While sleeping, his brain had found a keyword to clutch, a distant beacon of hope in a dark flatland of despair.

That word was Internet.

How stupid hed been to call on the phone, rummaging through the Yellow Pages trying to find Triangle this or Triangle that. How could the Soldiers make themselves known in the Ann Arbor Yellow Pages? America was a big fucking place. And who was to say that this Triangle infection epidemic was limited to the United States? It was probably global. And if you wanted to communicate with people all over the world, you needed a global medium. Not television, not radio, not phones, not newspapers if you wanted to keep something quiet but let people know you were out there, there was only one answer, the only true global medium: the Internet.

He moved to rub the sleep from his eyes and suddenly had to bite back a scream as he rolled onto his scorched ass. He couldnt see the window in the living room, but the brightness of the apartment told him he hadnt been asleep long. If he ever got out of this alive, hed buy himself a brand-new bed. Something he couldnt afford. Something so comfortable hed never want to get out of it again. Something that was better than sleeping on linoleum floors.

The Four Horsemen were still out; he could feel them sleeping. Except . . . they werent the Four Horsemen anymore, were they? Perry managed a malicious smile even though every inch of his body seemed to voice complaint. They werent four anymore, he was sure of it. They were three. What would he call them? As if there could have ever been any doubt.

The Three Stooges were all that remained. That made the score Perry Dawsey 4, Fucking Triangles 3. Perry wouldnt quit until he got the shutout.

He fumbled his way to his feet -correction, foot- and hobbled to his Macintosh. Less than sixty seconds after he awoke, the Mac chimed its startup tone and began the boot process. Startup programs came to life, including his email and instant-message clients.

Why hadnt he thought of it before? He was on the Internet every damned day, for crying out loud. Thats where the answer lay, thats what it was all about. He started up Firefox and went right to Google. He didnt think it mattered what search engine he used; the government would make sure that the Triangles home page was easily found by those who knew what to look for.

His email client finished loading and immediately chirped at him. Sixty-four emails. He chanced a quick peek at the in-box.

FROM: SUBJECT:

Bill Miller Where the hell are you? Bill Miller Dude, get back to me! Its not about the Cincinnati bowtie. Branston Gumong Hey dude top brands available

Peter Hurt

Pussy GalOR-e Bill Miller

Mister T. Minga for u

All top medications at top price Hot wet teen snatch, just 4 U! If I was that kid, I would breast-feed until I was 17 or 18 You are huge cock for your woman?

Ithaca Tang Shen Director of the Contracts Award and Review Department

A friend Nigeria fortune waiting to be made

Bill Miller Dine at just one American pink taco stand!

Bill Miller A pond would be good for you -these are good movie lines, dammit, Stop ignoring me-

Jesus, Billy, get a life.

It went on and on. A quick count showed sixteen messages from Bill. Sure, Perry hadnt been to work, but wasnt that a little...stalkerish? Why was Bill trying so hard?

Hes trying to contact you because hes your friend, dumb-ass . But what if there was more to this? What if Bill was...was supposed to be keeping an eye on him?

Youre getting crazy paranoid, Perry old boy, knock that shit off and focus.

He had to concentrate on the web search. Thats where the answer lay it had to.

He typed in Triangles.

He would have never thought there would be so much stuff. The entries were numerous: tons of Wikipedia shit, math up the ass, sites focusing on the Triangle Area in North Carolina, and of course several on the Bermuda Triangle. Perry breezed through them, giving them little more than a cursory once-over.

He typed in triangles and infected.

Finally he found it. Fifteen pages into the search. To a normal person, it wouldnt have looked like anything out of the ordinary. But to Perry, the letters on the screen glowed with hope.

Triangles - You are not alone

We are here to help you. This page has all the information on dealing with your condition and making you better.

www.tomorrowresearch.com - 5k - Cached - Similar pages

Not alone.

Not alone!

His hands shook with excitement; he finally knew really knew

that someone could help him. People knew about the parasites slinking their tails through his body.

He clicked on the entry. Perry stared with wide eyes, his pulse hammering both in his head and his wounded shoulder, his breath pinched tight in his chest.

Big letters at the top of the page read You are not alone. The layout was stark and simple, not enough graphics to interest the casual browser should he stumble onto it. To Perry, however, the page was a godsend. Right under You are not alone was a Triangle it was the image embedded in his own skin, a stylistic rendering of the horror that sent tendrils throughout his body, and yet it was something hed seen all his life. It was the pyramid from the back of a one-dollar bill, its eye glowing green at the top. This pyramid, however, showed three glowing eyes at the top, not just one.

Perry choked back tears only someone whod seen the blue critters under the skin would realize, could realize, the meaning of that threeyed pyramid.

Underneath the Triangle was a short message. The words called to his desperate soul as if they were the writings of God.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

If you have found this page, then you know what were all about. Were here to help you. We know whats happening to you, and we can save you, but you have to act quickly. Your condition gets worse by the second. Click here to fill out the form with your address, and we will send doctors to you immediately. Be patient, be calm, were here to help you. Do not panic, as it will only make things worse. Do not tell anyone else about your condition, not even your doctors there are people out there that want to harm you. Stay where you are, fill out the form, and wait. Everything will be fine. Do not tell anyone about the Triangles. If you think you cant wait, dial 206-222-2898.

Perry almost wanted to get up and dance around the room. Hed found the way out. Hed hit the eject button before the damaged fighter crashed into a mountain. Hed gotten the call from the governor just before theyd thrown the switch. Hed rushed out of the burning building beautiful costar over his shoulder just before the gas mains caught and the credits rolled over a mushroom cloud of fire and death.

All he had to do was wait. He wrote down the number; hed call as soon as he finished with the computer.

The form asked for his name, then his street address. He flew through it, backing up only to fill in a few typos made as his hasty fingers danced frantically across the keyboard.

It asked for his phone number; he typed it in.

He stopped for a brief second at the next question, wanting to finish and click send, but the oddity of the query gave him pause.

Who have you told about your condition? List their full names and addresses, please.

Now why the fuck would they want to know that? Who cared? It didnt matter he hadnt told anyone. He typed in none.

Describe your current condition. Be as detailed as possible on what THEY look like.

He didnt have time for this shit. He needed help now. He clicked send, completing the form. It didnt matter they had enough information and he couldnt put it off anymore. Theyd be here soon. All he had to do was wait. Wait for the cavalry.

His computer beeped. An instant-message window appeared. From StickyFingazWhitey.

Bill Millers handle.

StickyFingazWhitey: Good god, man! Youre finally online!!!!

R U OK?

Perry stared at the screen. He was suddenly petrified, afraid to move. First the emails, then the call, and now this.

StickyFingazWhitey: I know youre there, fat boy. Talk to a brotha.

Bill was one of them. One of them. Hed IMed as soon as Perry had sent in the form. That wasnt coincidence.

Of course it is. Youve been offline for days. He IMed you almost as soon as you came back on, thats all.

It couldnt be Bill; hed known Bill for years. But if someone wanted to experiment on Perry, to watch Perry, who better to do that than his best friend? All they had to do was turn Bill. That was the term, turn, what they do to make double agents.

StickyFingazWhitey: Stop jerkin der Gherkin and answer me. Seriously. Getting pissed. Dont make me smack you around, bitch.

IMs werent enough for Bill. Perrys VOIP connection started to ring Bill was trying to initiate an Internet phone call over the computer. The computers digital ringing sounded far too loud in the quiet apartment.

what is that sound what

Perry jumped with surprise; the Triangles had been so utterly quiet hed forgotten about them. He sucked in three shallow breaths, clenched and unclenched his fists. Did they know hed just contacted the Soldiers? If they did . . . they would mindscram him any second now. Were they searching his brain?

ne w noises.

what ar e the ne w noises

w e a r e hearing

Perry grabbed the Mac with both hands and threw it against the wall as hard as he could. Plastic and glass smashed, with a bright flash of electricity. The pieces fell to the floor, leaving a scored burn mark on the wall, a fuzzy black snake marking the computers sudden death.

what s going ON

tell US

Nothing! Nothing is going on. I dont hear anything. He had to play it cool, relaxed, chillsville. He couldnt let on that the Triangles hours were numbered. He had to keep them in the dark. It was only a matter of time before this game was over, and if Perry wanted to win, he had to play it cool. Just like Fonzie, honeybunny . . . play it cool.

ne w noises, what ar e the ne w noises we ar e hearing Noises? I didnt hear anything. Im sure its nothing to worry about. no one is her e no columbos
anyone

Nope, just relax, man, just chill. Perry felt the Triangles oddly black emotions flowing through him. He tried to nail down the vibe; anxiety, perhaps. His own emotions excitement, hope, fear, rage stirred them up like a bunch of hyperactive kids dropped in the midst of the Hersheys chocolate factory.

is so mething wrongwho is there who

Perry took a very deep breath and let it out slowly, telling himself over and over again to relax. He repeated the process ten times, feeling calm spread over his body. Discipline, as Dear Old Dad would say. Without discipline youre no better than some two-bit cooze, crying over this and crying over that.

Perry knew he had to calm down, to chill out the Three Stooges. Its okay, fellas. Perrys voice exuded control. Theres no one here. Just relax. Were all going to go to sleep now, just chill.

Perry closed his eyes. Relaxation swept over him like a warm wind. This was not the time for weakness if hed ever had a moment of selfcontrol in his life, now was the time to exercise it. You gotta have discipline, boy. Without discipline, people are going to walk all over you, and nobody but nobody walks all over a Dawsey.

He laid his head on the back of the couch. This was a game, thats all, just like football, although this time the stakes were a bit higher than a Big Ten title. It was a game, and he was winning. A smile touched his face, only for a second, as sleep came and he drifted away.

MARGARET TALKS TO DEW

Agent Otto handed Margaret his cell phone. The weight surprised her the cell phone was larger than any shed seen in years.

Hello, Dew, she said.

I assume youre calling because you have information for me, Doc, he said. Im trying to run an op here. Even through the cell phone, she could hear his annoyance. She didnt have time for his attitude.

We need satellite coverage, Margaret said. Can you get that?

Why do we need it?

You know what, Phillips? Answer the fucking question, okay? Can you or can you not get satellite coverage?

There was a pause. You might want to talk to me with a little more respect there, Doc.

Screw your respect. Answer the damn question or I hang up and go right to Murray. Can you, or can you not, get dedicated satellite coverage for the Ann Arbor area?

This isnt the movies, Doc, Dew said. We cant just dial in an address and see a full-color picture of Mister and Misses Jones doing it doggy-style. It will take some time, but we can get the coverage. Now, if youre done with the potty mouth, you want to tell me why?

Margaret held the phone with her right hand. With her left she rubbed her knuckles against her hair, so hard it hurt. None of this made any sense, none of this was science, but she knew what had to be done she couldnt explain why, yet it had to be done anyway.

The paintings of Nguyen, she said. They had all the known victims, then eleven other people.

So?

So there are victims we havent found yet.

You know were working on that, Dew said. We have scans of the faces, all-points out on them, over the whole state and into Ohio and Indiana. Were trying to track them down. Why is a satellite going to help with that?

Margaret winced as her knuckles dug too deep. She forced herself to put her hand at her side.

Theyre building something, Margaret said. I think the victims are supposed to build something, something big.

What? What are they supposed to build?

Something in the woods, maybe. I think there are trees involved. Deep woods, even.

So then what shall I tell the satellite to look for?

Margaret sighed. I dont know. Something with arches. Maybe twenty feet high.

And how long is this thing?

Dew, I just dont know.

Margaret, Dew said. He spoke slowly, as if explaining something to a child. Changing a satellites tracking is a big deal. We have to drop scheduled coverage from an area to redirect. Plus, we have to get squints assigned to look at the pictures, try and find what youre looking for and since you dont really know what it is youre looking for, and were covering a huge area, its a practically impossible job. Now, with all that in mind, is this just a hunch of yours, or do you have something real for me?

Margaret thought about it. She had nothing solid, nothing to go on other than the painting of an insane, murdering artist.

Its a hunch, she said. But I feel it, Dew.

Even through the rough connection, she heard Dews heavy sigh. Fine, fuck it. What have we got to lose? So this will take four or five hours. Im telling them to look for something unusual, with arches, twenty feet high, length unknown. Yeah?

Yeah, Margaret said. Yeah, thats right.

It will be done. And if you change your mind and want the satellite to look for unicorns or Santas sleigh, just let me know. With that, Dew hung up.
SPAM?

Murray Longworths desk intercom buzzed softly. He pressed the talk button.
What is it, Victor?
Sir, I thought you'd want to know that something came in over the web.
Murray felt his pulse quicken. When?
Less than an hour ago, sir.
Where is the client?
Ann Arbor, Michigan, sir.
Bring me the info immediately.
Victor entered the office with a sealed folder. The computer boys were under strict orders to print any web info that came through, then delete all traces of the data from the system. Murray didn't like using the Internet, but he agreed with Montoya that it was one way to possibly reach victims without raising the press's attention. Apparently the hunch had paid off.
Victor left the room, and Murray broke the seal.
Ann Arbor, Michigan. Perry Dawsey. Dew was already there, had already had a run-in with one of the infected freaks, as had Otto and Margaret. It was a slam-dunk home run. Margaret's work had put Dew close. Dawsey listed no contacts that was good. That made things easier. Apartment complex that wasn't good. No description of Dawsey's condition.
Dew was already there. So was Margaret, and she had an analysis facility ready and waiting. Finally, it was the break that Murray needed.
THE TRUTH The voice tickled his thoughts, teased his muddled mind.
Where are they?
It was the voice of the Triangles: mechanical, and yet still alive.
Are you there? Another is missing.
The voice of the Triangles, and yet it was different. Somehow almost . . . feminine. Not a woman's voice, but a woman's concern, a woman's depth of feeling.
Why don't they answer?
Where are they?
His eyes fluttered sleepily. The voice was something important, something he knew he needed to think about. The pain hung on his body like a weighted suit. Every inch seemed to throb and pulse in a muted symphony of complaint. They won't make it, they won't make it, he is too strong.
Perry blinked again, clawing his way to consciousness. Triangles, but not his. Were these the ones his own infectors had mentioned when they said that strange phrase: we do that without telephones talk to Triangles.
He felt the Three Stooges stirring. The female voice faded away. Perry wasn't ready to get up. He lay on the couch, weight on his left side, wondering if he should just spend the rest of his life there, on his good side, not bothering to get up and suffer any more pain or wonder what fabulous secret the Stooges might deal out next.
His ass still burned; it felt as if he were still sitting on the stove. A truly nasty smell filled the air. So this is what burning human flesh smells like? Wonderful. There was another smell, something more pungent, more . . . dead-smelling. But it wafted in and out and couldn't compete with the all-encompassing smell of Perry's Home-Cooked Rump Roast.
Why do you fight us?
And there they were. No mistaking that voice. Male, arrogant, bossy.
His own beloved Triangles.
Who was that other voice? Perry asked, ignoring their question.
There's someone else infected, isn't there? Who is it? Does he live in the apartments?
We won't tell you.
Why do you keep killing us? Where are the only ones who can save you now.
What the hell are you talking about? Save me? I know I'm as good as dead.
No, it's the others who want to kill you, not us. Not us, Perry. We would never hurt you. The Triangles weren't trying to kill him? Bullshit. They were going to burrow out his insides and wear him like a coat, or take over his mind and dance him around the street like a fucking human Muppet.
Someone is coming. Is it Columbo?
Perry heard nothing. Was their hearing better than his? How strong were they now?
You hear someone out in the hall? Is it the neighbor who was here before?
No. Footsteps are lighter, it's Columbo
kill Columbo.
It's not Columbo!
Perry painfully picked himself up off the couch, using the table to help him stand. Every movement brought fresh waves of pain. Why the hell do the police scare you so bad?

Because they are coming

to get us.

Men are looking for us, to kill us. Why don't you understand?

Take it easy. Don't get excited and start screaming in my head again, okay? Perry breathed slowly. He tried to project his calmness, hoping that if the Triangles could overflow emotion into him, he could do the same in reverse. Why do you think they're coming to get you now?

Don't you get it? If they kill you, they kill us.

It hit him like a bullet between the eyes.

Perry's analytical process stopped dead-still as the truth suddenly rocked home. The truth that had been there from the start, and all he had to do was ask.

The Soldiers weren't coming to save him.

They were coming to kill him.

To keep the Triangle larvae from hatching. It made perfect sense, although part of his mind still fought against it. If the Soldiers wanted to kill him, then there was truly no way out, no escape, no chance.

He talked in barely a whisper. Do you mean . . . do you mean that the Soldiers are coming to kill me?

Yes yes stupid!

Yes coming to kill YOU!

He was fucked. He was completely and utterly fucked. The Triangles

were killing him from the inside. Soldiers wanted to gun him down and stop the Triangles from becoming whatever it was they became. He had no idea who the Soldiers were, where they were, what they looked like. They could be anybody. Anybody. And hed sent an invitation through the Internet, painted a fucking bulls-eye on his own forehead. His fathers voice filtered into his head, a once-faint memory now strong and vital. Its you against the world, boy, you just remember that. The world is a harsh place, where only the strong survive. If you aint strong, people will use you up and throw you away. Youve gotta show the world whos boss, boy, show them with strength. Thats why Im so tough on youthat and because youre one stupid cornholing bastard and you piss me off every chance you get. Someday boy, youll thank me. Someday youll understand.

For the first time in his life, Perry did understand. Hed spent a decade trying to escape his fathers legacy of violence and abuse and anger, but now he knew that was a mistake.

You were right, Daddy, Perry whispered. You was always right. Fuck them all. He was a Dawsey, goddamn it, and hed sure as hell start acting like one.

Columbo is here.

As the last of his sanity slipped away, Perry heard a knock at his door. His eyes narrowed to predatory slits.

His fathers voice: You gonna let em push you around like that, boy? No sir, Daddy, Perry whispered. I sure as hell aint.

56.

COMPANY

Bill Miller knocked on Perrys door again.

Enough was enough. Perry was home. Period. Hed logged on to his instant messenger not more than thirty minutes earlier, and signed off as soon as Bill sent him a message. Bill had immediately hopped into his car, and now he was here, outside Perrys door.

Perry could have signed on from anywhere in the world, of course, but his Ford was still under the carport awning, a foot of clean snow behind it it hadnt moved for at least a couple of days.

Bill knocked again. Nothing.

Was Perry sick? Had he lost his temper, done something really bad, something he couldnt face? The guy was so sensitive about his violent streak, even a loud argument might fill him so full of guilt he couldnt face the day. Sick, guilty, whatever, Bill had to get to the bottom of this his friend needed help, and that was that.

He gave it one more triple-knock.

Perry, buddy, its Bill.

No answer.

Perry, everyones worried sick. You dont have to answer, but if youre there let me know youre okay.

No answer. He fished in the pocket of his leather coat for a piece of paper to leave a note. The hair on the back of his neck suddenly stood on end, caused by the peculiarly strong feeling that he was being watched. He looked up at the peephole, hand frozen in his pocket.

He heard the doors chain lock slowly scrape aside, followed by the click of a deadbolt sliding back into its housing.

The door opened slowly. Perrys hulking form came into view. Bill heard himself breathe in sharply, a comical sound of surprise. Perry looked like a Bruce Willis stand-in from one of the Die Hard movies. His long-sleeved white T-shirt was spotted with blood, blood that looked black where it had dried in patches spreading down from the left shoulder. He stood on one leg, holding the door for balance; the other leg hung loosely beneath him, not touching the floor, like a hunting dog on

point. The hanging leg had another T-shirt wrapped around its calf. Bill had no idea of that ones original color it was now a deep, crusty burgundy, like clothes that had been dropped in the mud, taken off at the back door, and left to dry in the sun. Perry had a bruised bump on his head the size of a golf ball. An old scruff of bright red beard glowed electrically against his pale white skin.

No, not like Bruce Willis . . . like Arnold Schwarzenegger. Perrys muscles rippled with every movement, especially on his neck, which looked like steel cables wrapped tightly with veins, then with skin. Perry hadnt looked this defined, this big this threatening in years, not since theyd been sophomores in college. Bill realized, suddenly, that by hanging out with him every day, hed lost touch with the fact that Perry Dawsey was a giant of a man.

Despite the haggard appearance, Perrys eyes were his most attentiondemanding feature. Not because of the fact that the skin around them was black-and-blue, either from a shot to the face or some serious lack of sleep, but from the look in the eyes. The spaced-out psycho look, like when Jack Nicholson axed his way through the door in The Shining. Bill had always been the type to trust his instincts. At this moment his instincts yanked at him to leave, to get the fuck out of there right now, fight-or-flight response kicking in with a 100 percent majority vote for flight. But Perry was obviously in trouble something was very, very wrong.

Postal was the word that flashed through Bills brain. Perry has gone postal.

They both stood for a few seconds without speaking.

Bill broke the interlude. Perry, are you okay?

There was no fucking question. As soon as Perry opened the door and saw Bill standing there in his black leather jacket with his neatly trimmed hair and immaculate appearance, Perry knew for certain that he was one of the Soldiers. Bill had been watching him all along. He might even be the one who put the Triangle seeds on him who can tell with

these crazy government fucks? When had they recruited Bill? After college? During college? How far back did this conspiracy go? Maybe thats why Bill had volunteered as a roommate so long ago. That made sense. That was logical.

Bill had come to check on the experiment. Hed probably freaked when Perry stopped going to work. When Perry filled out the online form, they sent Bill to look in on him. Why else would he be here right now? Bill was a fucking narc, waiting to sell Perry out to the Soldiers. Well, the backstabbing, traitorous snitch wasnt going to be telling his government butt buddies anything.

Not now.

Not later.

Not ever.

Im fine, Perry said. Come on in.

He took a small hop back into the apartment, making room for Bill to enter. Strange odors filtered out the open door.

Bills instincts clamored louder, swelling in volume and intensity, beseeching him to turn tail and run, baby, run.

Well . . . uh, I have to be getting back to work, no bout-a-doubt-it, Bill said. I just came out to see if you were okay, buddy. You dont look so good are you sure you feel all right?

Did Perry have any idea how bad he looked? Was he on drugs, maybe strung out on heroin or something? Bill couldnt stop looking at his eyes, the way they burned with intensity and simmering emotions. Bill had seen that look many times during the past ten years it was the look that came over Perrys face just before he punched someone, the look just before the snap of the ball. That look was predatory, and it meant serious trouble.

But in those ten years, that look had never been fixed on Bill until now.

Time to go.

Bill looked scared . He obviously hadnt counted on Perry figuring out The Plan. Nobody thought Good Ol Perry was smart enough to figure out The Plan. Theyd underestimated him. Bill had underestimated him. And now that Bill knew the depth of his soon-to-be-fatal mistake, there was nothing he could do. Nothing except run.

But Scary Perry Dawsey was way ahead of the game.

Bill concentrated on speaking in a calm, neutral voice. Perry, youre freaking me out, and you look like youre about to get violent.

He slowly backed away from the door. Im going to leave now. Youre going to go into your apartment and calm down. You relax and Ill be back in a bit.

Wait! Perrys word was a plea, pregnant with need, although he kept his voice almost as low and calm as Bills placating tone. You gotta help me...I... Perry swayed a little bit, his one good leg sagging under him. I . . . just cant . . .

Perry collapsed, falling into the hall like a sack of rotten meat and bones.

Bill instinctively reached out to help his friend. Perry knew that he would. People just couldnt help such things. Especially the Government People, because the government is here to help you, right? But for Bill, it was too late.

Too late to react, too

late Bill realized the trick. He tried to jump back, even before he saw the knife, but he was too close. He tried to jump back, to get

away, but Perry wasnt going to let that happen. As soon as Perry hit the floor, the rush of adrenaline blocked out all feelings of pain from his abused body. He rolled over his left shoulder and swung wide with the six-inch steak knife clutched unforgivingly in his right hand. The blade struck Bills right inside thigh, sliding noiselessly through jeans, through skin, through quadriceps. It finally thudded to a stop at the femur, the tip embedding in the bone and snapping free. Perry watched Bills eyes go

wide with shock, fear and pain. Bill stared down at the knife, at the blade sunk deep into his thigh. The blood didnt come until Perry wrenched the blade back for a second strike. Blood squirted out in a deep red stream, splattering on the hallways off-white walls and landing on the burnt-orange acrylic carpet that had been ugly even when it was new. Perry rolled up to his knees, head tilted forward, eyes flashing, lips curled in a demonic grin of anger and predation. He thrust the blade upward with the power of a knockout uppercut.

Bill tried to jump clear, but his wounded leg wouldnt hold his weight. He fell weakly backward, the knives upward arc whizzing

through the air, its jagged tip just barely missing his face. He landed on his back, blood still gushing from his leg.

Perry lurched forward, snarling, spittle flying from his sneering lips. He was a monster, a growling, six-foot-five vision from hell. He brought the blade down in an overhand thrust. Bill reactively brought his hands up, palms out, to protect himself from the slashing knife. Perrys strength drove the ragged, broken knife point clear through Bills upturned right palm. Jagged metal tore through cartilage, tendons and scraped across metacarpals until the knives wooden handle slammed into the palm, leaving five inches of the bloody blade jutting forth from the back of Bills hand.

Bills eyes reactively closed as hot blood splattered on his face. He never saw Perrys left hand ball up into a gnarled fist. The fist blasted into Bills nose with a muffled crunch. A second blow hammered home, spraying fine droplets of blood onto his face and hair.

Bills traitorous body fell limp.

Perry hopped off him immediately, grabbed his wrist and hopdragged him into the apartment. Bill weighed maybe a buck-fifty; dragging him was effortless, even with a bum leg. Perry shut and locked the door.

H e s not dead kill him

killhimkillhim

Were not going to kill him until I get some answers, Perry said, his breath ragged from excitement and exertion. Blood, steady and red, pulsed from the cut in Bills thigh, giving his jeans a rapidly spreading dark purple patch.

killhimkillhimkillhim

Shut up! Im not going to kill him. Were doing this my way. Bill had to have some answers, and Perry was going to hear every last one of them.

The pure, narcotic effect of sheer hatred surprised him. Bill was the enemy. Perry wanted to kill the enemy. Bill was one of the Soldiers, sent to experiment, then observe, then exterminate. Yes indeedee doodee, exterminate, but thats not going to happen, Billy Boy.

Bill let out a moan. He rolled slightly on the floor. He coughed and spit out a large clot of blood. Snarling, Perry jerked him to his feet and

pushed him backward across the living room. Bill fell heavily into the couch.

Perrys voice was a low rumble, a menacing drawl that hadnt escaped his lips in years. You want to get up when I hit you, boy? You gotta learn to stay down unless youre ready for some more punishment.

He grabbed Bills wounded right hand, which spurted blood in all directions thanks to the knife still embedded in the palm. Perry wrapped his hand around the knife handle and drove it into the wall just above the couch. The jagged tip punched into the plaster, pinning Bills hand.

You like that, snitch? You like that, spy? Then lets get you a second helping.

Perry hopped into the kitchen and grabbed another knife from the butchers block. He didnt even glance at the Chicken Scissors. Moving almost as fast as if he had two legs, he then hopped into the bedroom and grabbed a wrinkled, dirty sock from the floor.

Bills head lolled from side to side as he struggled for consciousness, blood pouring from his leg, his hand, his nose. Please, he murmured, his voice barely a whisper of escaping pain. Please . . . stop.

Perry grabbed Bills good hand. You talkin to me, boy? You speak when youre spoken to. You got to learn better than that! Perry shoved the sock into Bills mouth, forcing the dirty fabric in so far that Bill gagged.

With a primitive grunt of aggression, Perry slammed Bills good hand against the wall, palm out. He reared back with the fresh knife, then drove the blade through Bills exposed palm.

Bill roared in pain, clarity of mind returning in full at a rather unfortunate moment. The dirty sock muffled his cries of agony.

Bill tried to pull free, which made the blades cut deeper still into his ravaged hands. His body simply didnt have the strength. He slumped back into the couch, a portrait of defeat his bleeding hands stretching out on either side of his limply hanging head.

Neighbors, Perry said in a hiss, his eyes darting first to the window and then to the door. Nosy goddamned neighbors might be in on it.

He hopped to the door and stared out the peephole. Even through the distorted view he could see blood on the hallways walls and carpeting. Someone would notice it he didnt have much time. Time enough, however, to get some answers from the informant nailed to the wall.

Kill him kill him.

Kill him!

Perry stared at Bill. His friend, Bill Miller. His . . . friend. My God, what have I done? Whats happening to me?

H e is Columbo,

he is the Soldiers.

He cant be.

H e s her e, isn t he?

Why would he be her e

no w if he wasn t

Columbo? Killlllllllll

himmmmmmmm

They were right. The emails, the calls, that convenient instant message, showing up at his door. Bill knew what was going on. He knew everything. How callous, how heartless could this bastard be? He had feigned friendship while watching the Triangles grow and fester and swell and chew Perry up from the inside as if he were a fucking goddamned caterpillar. Bill had watched all along.

But he could only watch at work.

What about the rest of the time? What about all the time Perry spent at home, in the apartment, particularly in the last few days? How were they watching him then? Bugs? Hidden cameras? Watching his instantmessage and email traffic? Maybe behind a light, maybe inside the TV. Maybe inside the damned TV!

And if theyd watched him all that time, then they were watching him now.

They were watching him carve up Billy the Betrayer.

They wouldnt just let that happen. They were coming, coming to rescue Billy. Perry took Bills head in his hands and stared into glassy eyes. Theyll be too late, Billy Boy, Perry said quietly. You hear me? Theyll be too fucking late to bail your ass out of this one. Bill screamed, but the sock muffled the noise.

Youd best knock that shit off, boy, Perry said, still staring into Bills terrified eyes, eyes that revealed searing pain and pure, raw terror. Quit your cryin, boy, or Ill give you something to cry about.

Bill screamed louder, trying to pull back from the bullnecked horror before his eyes.

Perry snarled as he grabbed Bills broken nose and shook it viciously from side to side. Bills body shuddered with fresh agony. He thrashed like a man in the electric chair, muscles contorting so violently that one knife-pierced hand pulled free from the plaster.

The blade still jutted from the back of his hand. Perry grabbed both Bills blood-slick wrist and the knife handle, then slammed the blade back into the wall. This time he felt a distinct and sudden resistance as the blade dug deep into a wall stud.

Old Billy Boy wasnt going to pull that one free anytime soon, no siree, bub, not anytime soon.

Bill fought down the pain, his mind freaked beyond the point of clear thought. Somehow he found the inner power to stop screaming, stop struggling, despite this seemingly endless torture from a man whom only minutes before hed known as his dearest friend.

Perry leaned in, so close that Bill felt the heat from his breath. Perry held his fingers less than a half inch from Bills nose, thumb and forefinger ready to grab again at a moments notice, ready to inflict more of that brain-shearing agony. Like I said, boy, stop your crying or Ill kill you right fucking now.

Bill stared up through tears that refused to be blinked away. The friend-turned-psycho leaned over him, perched on one leg. Bills fresh blood had smeared all over Perrys shirt, wetting the brown-black stains.

The sock filled his mouth with a sickly dry-cotton feel. It tasted much as Bill imagined a dirty old sock should: moldy and suffocating. Warm blood continued to pour from his nose, down his face and onto his chest. Blood from his punctured hands rolled down his arms to collect in wet pools at his armpits, soaking outward in an expanding tacky-hot pit stain.

How had this happened? Hed come to check on his best friend and now he was crucified to the wall, staring up at the bloody, giant, wildeyed, snarling, psychotic nightmare that was Perry Dawsey in name only.

Okay, Perry said in a whisper. Now Im going to take the sock out of your mouth. And when I do, Im going to ask you some questions. Whether you live or die is up to you the second you scream, Im going to pull that knife out of your hand and shove it through your eye and stir your brain like Skippy peanut butter. Its going to hurt. Its going to hurt a lot. And I dont give a fuck, but I think you already know that. Do you know I dont give a fuck, Billy Boy? Bill nodded in agreement. Perrys voice had grown calm, cold and relaxed, but his eyes hadnt changed. Bills chest felt packed with coppery terror. Fear filled his mind, leaving no room for thoughts of escape. Perry was in charge. Bill would do whatever he said. Whatever it took to stay alive.

Oh Jesus, dont let me die here. Please dont let this happen, oh dear God, please!

Good, Perry said. Thats good, Bill. Im sure youve been trained well and warned about the consequences of this mission, so I wont feel a bit of remorse. If your voice rises above conversational levels, youre not going to be having a whole lot of fun. Do you understand what will happen if your voice rises above conversational levels, Bill?

Bill nodded again.

Perry dropped to the couch, resting a knee on either side of Bills thighs. Bill saw him grimace a bit, but then that fleeting expression vanished, the psychotic stare back in place. Suddenly Perry looked away, his eyes losing focus. He seemed to be staring at the wall, or perhaps some point beyond the wall. His head cocked to the right ever so slightly. He looks like a dog listening to one of those ultrasonic whistles.

Look, Im telling you hell talk, Perry said. We dont need to kill him!

Oh Christ oh Jesus oh my Lord hes completely insane and Im going to die here, Im going to die just like that.

Perry spoke angrily to his unseen companion. Fuck off! This is my show now. You just shut up and let me think.

Bill felt his spirit sag down, weighted with doom. There was no hope.

Apparently the voice stopped. Perrys stare returned, a piercing fixation that drilled into Bills eyes, which were wide, white and wet. Bill felt weakness slip over him, slowly pulling him into unconsciousness.

This time he didnt fight it.

DEW ON THE MOVE

Dew pinched the uncomfortable, thick cellular between his shoulder and ear, steered with one hand, and with the other punched an address into the Buicks dashboard GPS computer.

How long since the client sent the form, Murray?

About twenty minutes.

Have we contacted him yet?

Theres no answer at the number he gave us, Murray said. Weve sent a return email, but no response there yet, either. Send Margaret and her rapid-response teams for me. I have to find this apartment complex. Tell the squads to get to Dawseys apartment complex, but do not enter. Tell them to wait for my call. Leave my three teams at Nguyens place to make sure the media doesnt get in until they finish scrubbing the place of any triangle references. Dew broke the connection and put the cellular away. He almost rearended an old woman driving a Civic. He leaned on the horn, trying to

get her out of the way. It was Sunday, college on semester break, but there were still college kids crossing the street, slow and calm like they owned the world, like they were immortal. Right about now Dew would be more than happy to put that immortality up against the front bumper of the Buick.

He swung into the wrong lane and passed the Civic. The GPS said he was fifteen minutes away, but with traffic it would probably take just over twenty to reach Dawseys.

BEST FRIENDS FOREVER -BFF-

Perry knew he didnt have much time either the Soldiers were on their way, or Bill the Betrayer would soon bleed to death. The wet puddle on the couch grew steadily, as if Bill were pissing blood. Perry knew that if he timed it right, he could get the information and the Soldiers could save his friend. Correction. His so-called friend.

Bills eyes glazed over again, and his head sagged forward. Oh no you dont, you little informant, Perry said. He slapped hard with his left hand. Bills head shot back so fast his temple bounced off the wall. The slap sounded red, warm and satisfying.

You dont know what suffering is, Billy Boy. But Im going to do my best to give you a little taste of what Ive gone through.

Bills scared-rabbit look returned to his blood-smeared face. How could the Soldiers use some weak-ass like this? It was probably a trick yes, a trick. Bill was trying to lure him into overconfidence.

That shit isnt going to trick me, Billy Boy, no bout-a-doubt-it. He was smarter than these fuckers. They didnt know what theyd started by fucking with a Dawsey, because a Dawsey doesnt take shit, no sir, no how.

Perry reached out and pulled the sock from Bills mouth. Bill breathed deeply, but other than that didnt make a sound.

Perry licked his lips. He tasted blood. He didnt know if it was his or Bills. Eager for the final answer, he leaned in close and asked his vital question.

Who the fuck do you work for, and what are the Triangles going to turn into?

Perrys face was only inches from Bills. The dark circles around Perrys eyes made it look as if he hadnt slept in days. The whites were so bloodshot that they took on a pinkish hue. Bright red stubble stuck out offensively. There were open sores on his lips; it looked like hed bitten through them not very long ago.

But that question triangle?

Perry, wha . . . what are you talking about? Bill knew it was the wrong thing to say, but he couldnt think of another answer. Perrys eyes swelled with anger, adding to the already psychotic stare.

Dont screw with me, Bill. His quiet voice carried the threat of death. You and your little Jedi mind tricks can just fuck off. Im not buying what youre selling, junior. Now, Ill ask you again, what are the Triangles becoming?

Bills breath came in short, ragged gasps. What was this madness? What did Perry want to hear?

Bill tried to fight back tears of frustration and panic. Pain ripped through his body in a nonstop cacophony of raw nerves and cutting metal edges. It was so hard to think!

He struggled for words, struggled to make sense of it all. I dont know what youre talking about, Perry. Its me! Its Bill, for Gods sake! Why do you want to do this to me?

A smile crept across Perrys face. He reached out for one of the knives that had Bills hands impaled on the wall. Bills body went rigid with white-hot tension.

Getting a little loud in here, dont you think, Billy Boy?

Im sorry, Bill said quickly, his hushed whisper filled with fear and pleading. Im sorry, it wont happen again.

Goddamn right it wont, Billy old sport. If it does happen again, youll be dead before you can apologize. Your warnings are gone. Youre in Double Jeopardy now, where the points can really add up, so Ill ask you just one more time: what are the Triangles becoming?

Bills mind spun wildly for an answer, anything that would keep him alive even a little bit longer. He had to come up with some bullshit and fast, but it was so hard to think, impossible to concentrate. Perry was going to kill him.

I...I dont know, they didnt tell me that.

Like hell they didnt, Perry said, never losing his predatory stare. Youve got one more chance, Billy, and then Im going to carve you up.

Bill scrambled for an answer, but he couldnt make his mind focus past the pain, past the psychotic situation, past death that stared him in the face. What had Perry called him? The informant? Informant for what? For whom? What raving paranoid vision did Perry see through those bloodshot eyes?

Perry, I swear, they didnt tell me! He watched the rage flare up in Perrys eyes. Bill kept talking, his voice a nasal, pleading, pitiful cry. Its not my fault they dont tell me anything! They just told me to keep an eye on you, let them know what you were doing.

That reply seemed to strike a chord. Perrys look changed, as if Bills words answered some important question, but he still looked far from placated.

Bill continued, clutching to one faint glimmer of hope. Its not my job to know what the hell they turn into.

Perry nodded as if he accepted the story. Okay, maybe you know and maybe you dont, he said. Just tell me who youre working for.

I think you know that already, Bill said quickly. He held his breath, waiting for a violent reaction. The salty tang of blood mingled in his mouth with the tangible taste of fear. The flicker of hope glowed a bit brighter as Perry nodded and smiled.

Dizziness swept over Bill. The room seemed to spin. He couldnt keep this up. Perry, youre out of control. Youre paranoid . . . youre hallucinating . . .

A shiver rippled through Bills body. The apartment suddenly felt so cold, so icy cold. Black spots formed in front of his eyes, and another dizzy spell threw the room into crazy, unpredictable motion.

The ratfucker was passing out again. Perry bitch-slapped him three times, three vicious lefts, each harder than the last. It felt so good to lash out like that. You cant let people faint on you, not when you need information. All this pussy-ass narc needed was a little Dawseystyle discipline. Youve got to have discipline.

Bill blinked a few times, but his eyes were once again clear and lucid. Perry had hit so hard that his hand stung from the slaps. The right side of Bills face started to swell almost immediately, growing red and plump like a Ball Park frank.