

There were no plants and few decorations. On the wall above the entertainment center, however, were Perrys numerous football accolades. A shelf held trophies for high-school MVP awards and his treasured Gator Bowl MVP trophy from his freshman year. Plaques dotted the walls: Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year, Detroit Free Press Mr. Football award from his senior year in high school, a dozen others.

Two items hung side by side, obviously commanding a place of honor among the awards. The first was something hed been stunned to see, even when he knew it was coming, something that had marked a turning point in his life: his acceptance letter from the University of Michigan. The other item he both loved and hated: his snarling, sweat-streaked, helmet-clad face on the cover of Sports Illustrated. In the picture he was tackling Ohio States Jervis McClatchy, who was completely wrapped up in Perrys bulging, dirt- and grass-covered arms. The cover read, So good its SCARY: Perry Dawsey and the Wolverine D lead Michigan to the Rose Bowl.

He loved the cover for obvious reasons what athlete doesnt dream of making the cover of SI? He hated it because, like many football players, he was superstitious. The cover of SI was suspected by many to carry a curse. If youre an unbeatable team and you make the cover, youre going to lose the next game. Or, if youre the best linebacker in a decade and you make the cover, your career will soon be over. Part of him couldnt shake the stupid feeling that if he hadnt made that cover, hed still be playing football.

The place was small and admittedly a bit ghetto, but it was a veritable luxury condo compared to his childhood home. He treasured his privacy. It was a little lonely at times, but he could also do anything he wanted anytime he wanted. No one to track his schedule, no one to care if he brought home some girl he met at the bar, no one to bitch if he left his dirty socks on the kitchen table. No one to scream at him for reasons unknown. Sure, it wasnt the mansion he should have had, it wasnt the abode of an NFL star, but it was his.

At least hed found a job in Ann Arbor, home of his alma mater. Hed fallen in love with the town during college. Hailing from a small town like Cheboygan, he distrusted cities, felt uncomfortable in some sprawling metropolis like Chicago or New York. At the same time, however, he was the proverbial farm boy whod seen the bright lights of the bigger world, and he couldnt go back to small-town life, which seemed devoid of culture and fun by comparison. Ann Arbor was a college town of 110,000 that retained a cozy, small-town warmth, giving him the best of both worlds.

He tossed his keys and cell phone onto the kitchen table, threw his briefcase and heavy coat on the beat-up old couch, pulled the Walgreens bag from his pocket and headed for the bathroom. The rashes felt like seven searing electrodes grafted to his skin and connected to a tenthousand-watt current.

Hed deal with the rashes, but first thing first that zit-thing above his eyebrow had to go. He set the bag down, opened the medicine cabinet and pulled out tweezers. He gave them a habitual flick, hearing them hum like a tuning fork, then leaned into the mirror. The weird zitthing was still there, of course, and it still hurt. Hed seen Bill pop a zit once: the process took like twenty minutes. Bill was methodical and a bit of a pussy, so that was fine. Perry had a higher tolerance for pain and a lower tolerance for patience. He took one deep breath, fixed the tweezers on the small, gnarled red bump and yanked. The chunk tore free the pain came hot and sweet. Blood trickled down his face. He took another deep breath as he grabbed a wad of toilet paper and pressed it to the new wound. He held up the tweezers with his free hand. Just a small dot of flesh. But in the middle there, was that a hair? It wasnt black at all, it was blue, a deep, dark, iridescent blue.

Friggin weird. He ran the tweezers under hot water, washing away the odd zit. He grabbed the Band-Aids from the cabinet: only six left. He ripped the paper off one and put it over the small, bloody spot where the zit-thing had just been. That had been the easy part any pansy could deal with pain. But itching, that was a different story.

Perry dropped his pants and plopped down on the toilet. He pulled the Cortaid from the white bag. Squirting a healthy portion into his hand, he plastered the goo on the yellowish welt atop his left thigh.

He immediately regretted it.

The direct contact made the welt rage with intense itching pain, a blowtorch burning white-hot, as if his skin had melted away in glowing, molten drips. He scooted on the seat and nearly cried out. Controlling himself after only a second or two, he took a long, slow breath and forced himself to relax.

Almost as soon as the pain started, it died down, then seemed to subside completely. Smiling at the small victory, Perry gently worked the salve into the welt and the surrounding skin.

He almost laughed with relief. Using far more caution, he worked the Cortaid into the other welts. When he finished, all seven of them fell quiet.

The Magnificent Seven, Perry mumbled. You arent so magnificent now, are you?

With all seven itches battled into submission, he felt giddy, he felt like howling with joy. But more than anything else, he felt tired. The

maddening itches created constant stress; with that stress suddenly gone, he felt like a schooner with the wind dying out of its sails.

Perry stripped out of all but his underwear, left his clothes in the bathroom and walked to the small bedroom. His queen-size bed left little space for a single dresser and a nightstand. Less than eighteen inches separated the sides of the mattress from the wall.

He practically fell into the comfortable old bed. He pulled the loose blankets around himself, shivering as the cool cotton raised goose bumps on his skin. The blankets quickly warmed, and at 5:30 P.M. he was sound asleep, a small smile still tickling his face.

16.

VEINS

Margaret walked, trying to stretch her muscles, but there wasn't much room in the claustrophobic BSL-4 tent. She wandered over to Amos, who was transfixed by a slide set under a high-powered microscope.

What have you got on that thorn?

Still doing a few tests. I've found another structure that you should take a look at. And make it quick, it's decomposing as we speak. He stood, letting her peer into the microscope. The highly magnified image looked to be a deflated capillary, a normal vein. But it wasn't all normal. Part of it looked damaged; from that area ran a grayish-black tubule. The tubule ended with a decomposing area showing the ubiquitous rot so common in all the victims. Amos was right, she could see the tissue dissolving right before her eyes. She focused her attention away from the rapid-rot spot and back onto the tubule.

What the hell is that thing?

I love your subtle use of scientific terminology, Margaret. That appears to be a siphon of some sort.

A siphon? You mean this was tapping into Brewbaker's bloodstream, like a mosquito?

No, not like a mosquito, not at all. A mosquito merely inserts its proboscis into the skin and draws out blood. What you're looking at is another level entirely. That siphon draws blood from the circulatory system, but it's permanently attached; there's no visible means for opening or closing the siphon. That means there are probably matching siphons that return blood to the circulatory system otherwise the growth would fill up with blood and burst.

So if it returns the blood to the circulatory system, it's not feeding directly on the blood?

No, not directly, but it's definitely capitalizing on the host's bodily functions. The growth obviously draws oxygen and possibly nutrients from the bloodstream. That must be how it grows. It may also feed directly on the host, but I doubt that; that would entail a digestive process

and a method for eliminating waste. Granted, the growths we've seen have been completely decomposed, so we can't confirm or deny the existence of a digestive tract, but from what we've got here I doubt there is one. Why would something evolve a complicated digestive system when there's no apparent need the blood would supply the growth with all sustenance.

So it's not just a mass of cancerous tissue, it's a full-blown parasite. Well, we don't know that it's really living in the usual sense, Amos said. If it's a growth, it's just that, a growth, whereas a parasite is a separate organism. Remember, the lab results didn't show any tissue other than Brewbaker's that and the huge amounts of cellulase. But it does appear to be using the host's bodily functions to stay alive, so at least for now I'd have to agree with you and define it as a parasite.

Margaret noticed a touch of astonishment in his voice. He was really beginning to admire the strange parasite. She stood.

Amos bent back to the microscope. This is a revolutionary development, Margaret, don't you see that? Think of the lowly tapeworm. It doesn't have a digestive system. It doesn't need one, because it lives in the host's intestine. The host digests food, so the tapeworm doesn't have to; it merely absorbs the nutrients surrounding it. Where do those nutrients go if the tapeworm doesn't get them? They go into the bloodstream. Blood carries those nutrients, along with oxygen, to the body's various tissues and then takes out waste materials and gases.

And by tapping into the bloodstream, the triangle parasites get food and oxygen. They don't need to eat or breathe. That's how it appears. Quite astonishing, isn't it?

You're the parasitologist, Margaret said. If this keeps up, you'll be in charge and I'll be the lackey.

Amos laughed. Margaret hated him at that moment over thirty-six hours into their marathon session, with little more than twenty-minute catnaps to pace them, and he still didn't seem tired.

Are you kidding me? Amos said. I'm a total chickenshit, and you know it. First sign of danger physical or emotional I run for the hills. My wife actually has my balls in a jar back at the house. She's taller than me, she puts the jar up on a shelf where I can't reach it.

Margaret laughed. Amos was famously open about who ran his household.

I'm fine where I'm at, Amos said. I rather like being the lackey if being in charge means having to deal with Dew Phillips and Murray Longworth. But if I do wind up calling the shots, just remember I like my coffee black.

They sat in silence for a moment, tired brains processing the strange information that seemed to provide no answers. This can't stay a secret forever, Amos said. Off the top of my head, I can name three experts who should be here right now. Murray's secrecy policy is asinine.

But he's got a point, you have to admit, Margaret said. We can't have this story out, not yet. We'll have anyone with a rash, bug bite or even dry skin flooding the hospitals. It's going to make it very difficult to find someone who's actually infected, especially as we have no idea what the early stages of this infection look like. If the story got out now, we'd have to look at millions of people. Hopefully we can at least come up with some kind of screening process or test for infection before this story breaks.

I understand the precarious nature of the situation, Amos said. I just think that Murray is taking this too far. Its one thing to keep a lid on something its quite another to be completely understaffed. What the hell happens if a hundred Martin Brewbakers suddenly pop up, and no one is prepared for it, let alone warned it could happen? You think a bomb is a terror weapon? Its nothing compared to hundreds of Americans going psycho on each other. What happens if we keep this a secret until its too late to do anything about it?

He walked back to his station, leaving Margaret to stare at the half body. The constant decomposition had partially relaxed Brewbakers talon hand where it had once stood straight up, it now hung at fortyfive degrees, halfway to the tabletop. His blackening, liquefying body didnt have much time left.

Margaret wondered about Amoss comment; if there was some rogue lab with the technology to genetically engineer a parasite that could alter human behavior, wasnt it already too late?

#### CAT SCRATCH FEVER

Perry awoke with a scream. His collarbone raged with pain, like hed dragged a razor blade across the thin skin atop the bone, peeling back flesh like a cheese grater rubbed across some Cheddar. The fingers of his right hand felt cold, wet and sticky. A sunrise beam of light pierced his half-drawn curtains, lighting up the window frost crystallized on the pane. His room filled with the hazy glow of a winter morning. In the dim light, Perry stared at his hands; they looked to be covered with chocolate syrup, thick and tacky-brown. He fumbled with the lamp on his nightstand. The bulbs glow lit up the room and his hands. It wasnt chocolate syrup.

It was blood.

Eyes widening in horror, Perry looked at his bed. Thin streaks of blood dotted the white sheets. Still blinking sleep-crust from his eyes, he ran to the bathroom and stared in the mirror.

Trickles of dried blood and finger-smears of the same streaked his left pectoral, clotting in his thin blond chest hair. Hed torn the skin during the night, digging into the flesh with his fingernails, which were caked with blood and bits of dried skin. Perry looked down at his body. Blood smudges, some wet, some tacky and some completely dry, covered his left thigh.

With a sudden start of horror, he saw bomb-run droplets of blood on his underwear. Pulling the waistband out, he looked down. A sigh of relief no blood on his testicles.

Hed torn into himself during the night, ripping away at the itches with an abandon that didnt exist during waking hours. How had he not woken up? Sleeping like the dead was an understatement. And despite more than thirteen hours of sleep, he still felt tired. Tired and hungry.

Perry stared at himself in the mirror. Pale skin, nearly white, smeared with streaks of his own blood dried to a reddish black, as if he were the canvas for a childs finger painting, or perhaps some ancient shaman bedecked for a tribal ritual. The rashes had grown in the night. Each was now the size of a silverdollar pancake, and had taken on a coppery color. Perry craned his neck, trying to use the mirror to see the blemishes on his back and ass. They looked okay, which was to say he hadnt scratched them raw during the night. In truth, they looked anything but okay.

Not knowing what else to do, Perry took a quick shower to wash off the dried blood. The situation was fucked up, obviously, but there was little he could do about it now. Besides, he had to be at work in a few hours. Maybe after work hed actually break down and make a doctors appointment.

Perry scrubbed up, then applied the rest of the Cortaid, being very careful with the raw wounds on his leg and collarbone. He applied BandAids to both areas, then dressed and made himself a whopping breakfast. His stomach groaned with a ravenous hunger, more intense than his normal morning cravings. He made five scrambled eggs, eight pieces of toast, and washed everything down with two big glasses of milk.

Overall, the rashes felt fine, although they looked worse than ever. If they didnt itch anymore, they couldnt be that big of a deal. Perry felt certain the rashes would subside by days end, or at least be on their way out. Confident his body could handle the problem, he gathered up his battered briefcase and headed to work.

#### NERVES

Margaret looked at the readout with disbelief.

Amos, she called through the biosuits tinny microphone. Come here and take a look at this. Amos glided over, as unaffected by fatigue as ever, and stood next to her.

What have you got?

I finished the analysis on samples taken from all over the body and found massive quantities of neurotransmitters, particularly in the brain.

Amos leaned forward to read the screen. Excessively high levels of dopamine, norepinephrine, serotonin . . . my God, his system was out of control. What do you think did this to him?

Thats not my specialty, Ill have to check into it. But from what I do know, excessive levels of neurotransmitters can cause paranoid disorders and even some psychopathic behaviors. And Im not sure there has ever been a case documented with levels this high.

The growth is controlling the victims with natural drugs. I wish we could get our hands on a live victim so we could see the insides of those damn growths. This is twice now weve had victims to examine, but both times the growths have been completely rotted out. Its almost as if the person who created these things intentionally added the rotting aspect, so it would be harder to examine the little buggers.

Margaret rolled the concept around in her brain, but it didn't take hold. She was already suspicious of the growths' incredible complexity; another theory began to take shape.

Amos pointed to the screen. The growth either produces or causes to be produced excess neurotransmitters, which create reproducible results. Brilliant. Absolutely brilliant.

There are other variances as well, Margaret said. There was seventy-five times the normal level of enkephalins in the tissue surrounding the growth. Enkephalin is a natural painkiller.

Amos thought for a moment. That makes sense. It's hard to tell with all the rot, but it looks like the growth causes a lot of damage to the surrounding tissue. Whoever engineered the growth doesn't want the host to feel that damage. The level of complexity is astronomical.

Amos, you don't have to root for the little buggers, Margaret said, a dressing-down tone in her voice. Were here to stop these things, remember?

He smiled. It's hard not to be astounded. Come here and take a look at what I've got under the ultraviolet microscope.

Margaret shuffled to the device, where Amos had been working for the last thirty minutes. Her Rascal suit zip-zipped with each step as if she wore children's footed pajamas.

She peered into the microscope. The sample looked like a normal nerve cell. Amos had done a perfect job of isolating and preparing the tissue: fingerlike dendrites, stained and glowing electric-blue under the ultraviolet light, reached out and over the thicker axons. It was the same connection that provides signal communication for every animal on the planet.

It's an isolated cluster of nerve cells, she said. Where is this from?

I found it near the eighth cranial nerve. The rot is working its way through there, but I was able to find a few relatively clean areas.

Inside the awkward biosuit, Margaret frowned. The eighth cranial nerve, or the vestibulocochlear nerve, was where signals from the ear entered the brain.

It's heavily damaged, shows signs of decomposition, but still obviously nerve tissue, Margaret said.

Amos remained quiet. Margaret looked up from the microscope.

Amos leaned forward. You're sure?

Margaret wasn't in the mood for games, but she took another look anyway. She could see nothing unusual.

Amos, if you've got a point to make, please make it.

The cells don't belong to Martin Brewbaker.

Margaret stared blankly, not understanding the statement. Not Brewbakers? Why are you looking at other samples? If they're not Brewbakers' nerve cells, then whose . . . Her voice trailed off as the significance hit home.

Amos, are you telling me these belong to the growth?

I performed protein sequencing on the black thorn and the vein siphon. The results turned up some unknown proteins, definitely not human. So I took some samples from around the body and ran the same sequence. I found high concentrations in the brain—that's how I discovered the cluster on the cranial nerve. I found the protein in other places, but no more nerves, only remnants of that peculiar rot. There were high concentrations in the cerebral cortex, thalamus, amygdala, caudate nucleus, hypothalamus and septum.

Margaret felt overwhelmed. Much of the brain's higher functions remained a mystery, even in this day of rapidly ascending scientific knowledge. The sections of Brewbaker's brain infected with the rot composed part of the limbic system, which was thought to control memory storage and emotional response, among other functions.

What the hell was the growth doing in Brewbaker's brain? It already had him controlled with the neurotransmitter overdose, didn't it?

Amos continued. What you're looking at here is the only sample I've found that wasn't completely decomposed. I've never seen proteins like this, so I assume they're synthetic, man-made. If they're natural, they're nothing I've encountered. I've searched all the academic and biotech databases and found nothing similar. That means if the proteins are synthetic, someone is keeping their research well guarded, which doesn't surprise me considering the vastly advanced technology we're dealing with.

She was awed. It was unthinkable that the organism's creator had engineered a new parasite that could grow from a very small embryo, possibly even a single cell, and latch on to a human host. It was even more unthinkable that this creature produced neurotransmitters like some kind of factory, dumping them into the bloodstream. But it was numbingly yes, numbing to comprehend the genius that had bioengineered artificial nerves so accurately that they could interact with human nerves.

I follow the vein siphon, that makes sense, she said. But the siphon is just a physical attachment to draw nutrients. What good does it do the parasite to grow mimic nerves?

You've got me. But one must draw the logical conclusion that the growths tapped in to the nervous system, just as they tapped in to the circulatory system.

But why? She spoke more to herself than to Amos. The neurotransmitter overdose produces somewhat predictable, reproducible results. If the goal is to make people crazy, then why would they go through the trouble of tapping in to the nervous system? And what's the purpose for doing so?

Amos shrugged. He rolled his shoulders and twisted at the waist, trying to loosen up. He walked around the table, doing mini laps, trying to shake off the fatigue.

Margaret shuffled to her station, her mind spinning with possibilities and a new level of fearful respect for the mystery organism.

It had seemed so obvious unbelievable and awe-inspiring, but still obvious that this was an organism bioengineered to make people violent and unpredictable. Now, however, she wasn't so sure. There was something else to the mystery, something that a theory of high-tech terrorists didn't explain.

Hey, Margaret, bring me the camera. She looked back. Amos stood next to Brewbaker's hip. All parts of him were being consumed by the black rot, but some spots weren't quite as advanced. The hip was one such spot. She grabbed the camera from the prep table and handed it to Amos.

He pointed to the hip, to the little lesion they'd seen earlier.

Margaret, look at this. He knelt down and took a picture.

I see it. You already showed me.

Yes, but do you see anything different?

Margaret sighed. Amos, no more drama, please. If you've got something to say, say it.

He said nothing. Instead he stood, fiddled with the camera, then stood shoulder to shoulder with her so they could both see the camera's small screen. The screen showed a close-up of the lesion, a tiny blue fiber sticking out of it.

So? Margaret said. We've got shit to do before his body is goo, Amos.

That's the picture we took when we first saw it, he said, then hit the advance button on the camera. The picture changed. And that is the picture I took just now.

Margaret stared. The two pictures looked exactly the same, except for one thing the second picture showed not one fiber, but three, a small red one, a small blue one, and the original blue one, which was three times as long as it had been before.

Even though Martin Brewbaker was dead, the fibers were still growing.

19.

## HUMP DAY

By noon the damnable things started itching again, and Perry had to wonder if he should see a doctor. But it was just a little rash, for crying out loud. What kind of a wuss goes to see a doctor for a little rash? If you don't have self-discipline, what do you have?

He'd always been a very healthy person. He hadn't vomited from a non-alcohol-related incident since the sixth grade. While others succumbed to the flu, Perry would suffer only a runny nose and a slightly queasy stomach. While others called in sick at the drop of a hat, Perry hadn't missed a day of work in three years. He'd inherited his resilience, as he had his size, from his father.

Perry had been twenty-five when Captain Cancer finally claimed Jacob Dawsey, the toughest sonofabitch this side of Brian Urlacher. Prior to that last trip to the hospital, from which Jacob Dawsey never returned, he had missed only one day of work in his entire life. That day came when Perry broke his father's jaw.

Perry had returned home from late-season football practice to find his father beating his mother. Snow had been falling on and off for a week, enough to cover the sparse grass with patchy white, but not enough to accumulate on the dirt road that led up to the house the road glistened with cold wetness.

His father had thrown his mother off the front porch, into a slushy puddle, and was in the process of whipping her with his belt. The scene was nothing new, and to this day Perry had no idea why he snapped, why for the first time in his life he fought against his father's incessant rage.

Gonna show you whos in charge, woman, Jacob Dawsey said as he brought the belt down with a crack. Give you women an inch and you take a mile! Who the hell do you think you are? Even though his father had spent all his life in northern Michigan, he had the faintest trace of a drawl. It colored his words, making hell sound like hail.

At the time Perry was a high-school sophomore, six-foot-two, 200 pounds and growing like a weed. He was no match for his father's six-foot-five, 265 pounds of solid muscle. But Perry rushed him anyway, hit his father with a flying tackle that carried them both into the tattered front porch. Rotten lattice shattered around them.

Perry got up first, screaming, snarling, and hit his father with a heavy left hook. That blow broke his father's jaw, but Perry only found that out later. Jacob Dawsey tossed his son away like so much rubbish. Perry jumped up to press the attack. His father grabbed a shovel and proceeded to give Perry the worst beating he'd ever suffered.

Perry fought like he'd never fought before, because he was sure he was going to die that day. He landed two more shots on his father's jaw, but Jacob Dawsey barely flinched as he brought the flat of the shovel down again and again.

The next day the pain was too much for even the mighty Jacob Dawsey. He went to the hospital, where the doctors wired his mouth shut. When his father returned home, he called his son to the kitchen table. Black-and-blue, cut in a dozen places, Perry could hardly walk after the shovel-beating, but he sat at the table as his father scrawled out childish writing on a piece of paper. Jacob Dawsey was only semiliterate, but Perry could make out the message.

Cant talk, broke jaw, said the scribbled writing. You fought like a man. Proud of you. It's a shit world, you got to learn to survive. Someday you understand, thank me.

What had been fucked up like, really fucked up beyond belief wasn't the beating itself. It was the look in his father's eyes. The look of sorrow, of love and the look of pride. The look that said, This hurt me more than it hurt you, and not because of the broken jaw. His dad saw the shovel-beating in the same light a sane father might see a spanking something unsavory that had to be done as a parenting responsibility. Jacob Dawsey didn't think he'd done anything

wrong in fact, he thought hed done the right thing, the responsible thing, and although he hated hurting his only begotten son, hed do what had to be done to be a good father.

Yeah, thanks Dad , Perry thought. Thanks a bunch. You're the best. But as much as he hated the man, Perry couldn't deny that his father had made him who he was. Jacob Dawsey had set out to make his son tough, and he had succeeded. Perry's toughness helped him excel on the football field, which earned him a scholarship and a college degree. As

crazy as Jacob Dawsey was, he'd also instilled a die-hard work ethic that Perry very much considered a key part of his personality. He liked working hard. He liked being the one people relied on to get the job done.

And rash or no rash, Perry was at work and doing his job. But being at work and being effective were two different things. He just couldn't concentrate. He continuously pursued the same avenues, the same possible solutions over and over again in his mind. His brain felt fuzzy, as if it couldn't grip the task at hand.

Perry, can I speak to you for a moment?

He turned to see Sandy standing just inside his cube. She didn't look happy.

Sure, he said.

I just got a call from Samir at Pullman. Their network has been dropping out for three days now.

Im working on it. I thought I had it fixed yesterday. Im sorry its taking so long.

I know you're working on it, but Im not sure you're paying attention. According to Samir, you had him reboot the network routers yesterday. Twice. And even though it didn't work either time, you had him do it again this morning. Perry's brain searched for an answer, but found none.

They're losing money, Perry. Sandy sounded more than a little angry. I don't mind if my people can't solve a problem, but I don't want you bullshitting your way through something if you don't know how to solve it.

Perry felt his own anger rise. He was working as hard as he could, dammit! He was the best one in the department. Maybe there were problems that just couldn't be solved.

So can you tell me what's wrong with their system? Sandy asked. Perry noticed for the first time that her eyes grew very wide and her nostrils flared when she was angry. The look seemed childish, petulant, like some spoiled little girl who thinks people should jump at her orders.

I don't know, Perry said.

Her eyes widened further and her hands went to her hips. Perry felt another stab of anger at her haughty posture.

How the hell can you not know? Sandy said. You've been on this for three days. You haven't known for three days and you haven't asked for help?

I said Im working on it! Even to himself his voice sounded strange full of anger and impatience. Sandy's eyes flashed with trepidation as she looked down. Her gaze returned to his face, the petulant look gone, replaced by a questioning, slightly fearful expression. Perry looked down himself to see what she'd stared at. His hands were balled into fists, squeezed so tight the knuckles glowed white against his reddish skin. He realized his whole body was coiled with aggressive tension, the same posture he used to have before the snap of the ball or before a fight. The office suddenly seemed very quiet. He pictured how frightening the scene must be to her; his big angry body hovering predatorily over her smallish, weak frame. He must have looked like a rabid bear about to pounce on a wounded fawn.

He willed his hands to open. His face flushed with embarrassment and shame. He'd made Sandy afraid of him, made her afraid that he'd lash out and hit her -just like the last job, his conscience teased, just like the last boss-.

Im sorry, Perry said quietly. The fear left Sandy's eyes, replaced by concern, but despite the change, she backed another step out of the cube.

You seem to be under some stress lately, Sandy said quietly. Why don't you take the rest of the day off and relax.

Perry blanched at the thought of leaving work early. Im okay. Really, I can fix the problem in Pullman.

I don't care about that, Sandy said. Ill get someone else to fix it. Go home. Now. She turned and walked away.

Perry stared at the ground, feeling like a failure, feeling he'd betrayed her loyalty. He'd been moments away from hitting the one person who'd given him a chance, who'd let him straighten out his life. She'd done everything for him by giving him that chance. This was how he thanked her. In unison, the seven itches flared all over his body, adding to his frustration. Like a huge child, he packed his duct-tape-patched briefcase and sluffed into his coat.

His IM alert dinged:

StickyFingazWhitey: Hey man, you okay? Can I help?

Perry stared at the message for a second. He didn't deserve help, he didn't deserve sympathy. Without sitting down, he typed in a reply:

Bleedmaize\_n.blue: Don't worry about me. Im tiptop.

StickyFingazWhitey: Like hell you are. Just be cool, go home, Ill patch this up for you.

Bleedmaize\_n.blue: No, stay out of it.

StickyFingazWhitey: Fine, I promise I won't say a word to Sandy. Of course, I lie a lot. I also promise I won't fix Pullman for you.

StickyFingazWhitey: Go watch your Pope Porn, Ive got this. No bout-a-doubt-it.

Bill had his back. Somehow that made Perry feel even worse. Even if he insisted Bill leave it alone, his friend would just do the work anyway.

He walked out of the office, feeling the eyes of everyone on his back. Red-faced and frustrated, Perry walked to his car and headed home.



## SHORTHANDED

It was hard to believe it had only been seven days since Murray had sent for him. Seven days ago, when hed never heard of triangles, Margaret Montoya or Martin Brewbaker. Seven days ago, when his partner wasnt in a hospital bed, a bed that for all intents and purposes, Dew had put him in.

Seven days ago Murray had called for Dew. Theyd fought side by side back in the day, but after Nam they didnt exactly keep in touch. When Murray called, it meant only one thing he wanted something done. Something . . . unappealing. Something that required getting a little dirt under the fingernails, something that Murray with his tailored suits and his manicures wasnt willing to do. But theyd been through hell together, and even though Murray had advanced in the CIA ranks and done his damndest to rise above the shit-stomping lieutenant hed been in Nam, when Murray called, Dew always answered.

It was only seven days ago that Dew had stood in Murrays waiting room, eyeing the twenty-something, red-haired secretary, wondering if Murray was fucking her.

She looked up with her sparkling green eyes and a genuine smile. Can I help you, sir?

Irish accent, Dew thought. If hes not banging her, or at least trying, he must be impotent.

Im Agent Dew Phillips. Murray is expecting me.

Of course, Agent Phillips, go right in. The redhead added in a confidential tone, Youre a few minutes late, and Mister Longworth hates tardiness.

Does he? Aint that a bite in the ass. Ill have to get on some kind of schedule.

Dew walked into Murrays sprawling, spartan office. A bullet-ridden American flag decorated one wall. On the opposite wall hung a row of pictures showing Murray with each of the last five presidents. The pictures were like a stop-action movie of Murrays aging process, from hard-bodied young man to more-than-slightly-overweight, cold-eyed piece of gristle.

Dew noticed the absence of any pictures showing Murray in his army uniform, either dress or fatigues. Murray wanted to forget that time, forget who hed been back then, forget the things hed done. Dew couldnt forget and he didnt want to anymore. It was a part of his life, and hed moved on. Mostly, anyway.

He certainly remembered the flag on Murrays wall, remembered the firebase where he and Murray and six other men had been the only survivors of an entire company, remembered fighting for his life with all the savagery of a rabid animal. It had been like something from World War I at the end, just before the choppers arrived, fighting hand to hand in wet, sandbagged trenches, the 2:00 A.M. stars hidden by clouds that poured rain and turned the firebase into a slick sea of mud.

Murray Longworth sat behind a large oak desk devoid of decoration, unless you counted the computer. The desks empty top gleamed with layers of polish.

Heya, L.T., Dew said.

You know, Dew, Id appreciate it if you didnt use that nickname.

Weve had this talk before.

Sure thing, Dew said. I guess I forgot all about that.

Have a seat.

Nice place youve got here. Youve had this office something like four years now? Glad I finally get to see it.

Murray said nothing.

Its been, what, three years since we talked, L.T.? Seven years since

you needed something from me? Your career in trouble again, is that it? You need Good Ol Dew to come in and pull your ass out of the fire? Make you look good, is that it?

Its not like that this time.

Sure, L.T., sure. You know, Im not as young as I used to be. My old body may not be up to your dirty work.

Dew stood in front of the flag. A grimy-brown color stained the top left corner; just delta mud, Murray told anyone that asked. But it wasnt mud, and Dew knew that better than anyone. The flag had once been attached to a flagpole that Dew used to kill a VC, driving the brass point into the enemys gut like some primitive tribal spearman. The bottom right corner held a similar stain, where Dew had tried in vain to stop the blood pouring from Quint Wallmans throat

after an AK-47 round had all but decapitated the eighteen-year-old corporal.

They hadnt used the flag for motivation, because at the time none of them had been particularly patriotic. The flag just happened to be where they made their last stand, where they held off the attack until the choppers came and bailed them out. Murray was the last one to board, making sure the other men all wounded, including Dew were on before he worried about himself. He grabbed the flag, the bloodstained, burned and bullet-ridden flag, on the way out. No one knew why at the time, probably not even Murray. When they realized it was all over, that they had escaped death, left the corpses of both friends and enemies behind, the flag somehow took on more meaning.

Dew stared at the tattered fabric, the memories pouring back, and it was a second before he realized that Murray was softly calling his name.

Dew? Dew?

Dew turned and blinked, quickly returning to reality, to the present. Murray gestured to the chair in front of his desk. Dew thought about antagonizing Murray some more, then walked to the chair and sat down. Dew pulled a Tootsie Roll from his jacket pocket, unwrapped it, popped the brown candy into his mouth then dropped the wrapper on the floor. He chewed for a moment, staring at Murray, then asked, Did ya hear about Jimmy Tillamok?

Murray shook his head.  
Ate a bullet. Used an old .45 wasnt much left of his face.  
Murrays head sank, and a long sigh hissed from his body. My God, I hadnt heard.  
Imagine that, Dew said. Hes only been in rehab a half dozen times in the last four years. He crashed hard, Murray.  
He crashed hard and he needed his friends.  
Why didnt you call me?  
Would you have come?  
Murrays silence answered the question. He looked up from the floor to return Dews stone-eyed stare. So were the last ones, then.  
Yep, Dew said. Just the two of us. Golly gee, its a good thing we stayed so close all these years. Now weve got each other to rely on. Lets get to the fucking point, L.T. What do you want?  
Murray pulled out a manila folder and passed it to Dew. It was labeled PROJECT TANGRAM. Weve got what could be a major problem.  
Murray, if this is just some bullshit where I get shot at so your career can advance, Im not doing it.  
I told you its not like that this time, Dew. This is serious.  
Yeah? Batting cleanup again, Murray? Who gave you their dirty laundry this time?  
I cant tell you.  
Dew stared hard at Murray. L.T. didnt mind dropping names, that was for damn sure. It all clicked at once: Murray couldnt say who, and hed called the one man who would do whatever it took to get the job done.  
Holy shit, Dew said. This is from the big man, isnt it? This is some secret presidential action, am I right?  
Murray cleared his throat. Dew, I said I cant tell you.  
The classic nondenial denial. Murrays way of confirming Dews theory without actually saying the words.  
Dew opened the folder and started browsing the contents. There were only four files: three case reports and an overview. Dew read the overview twice before he looked up, his expression ashen and disbelieving. He looked back to the report and started quoting some of the more fantastical phrases.  
Biological behavior manipulation? Bioengineered organism? Infectious terrorist weapon? Murray, are you yankin my crank with this stuff?  
Murray shook his head.  
This is bullshit, Dew said. You think that some terrorist created a... lets see here . . . bioengineered organism to make people psychotic?  
Thats not exactly what it says, Dew. Weve got three cases so far where normal people have contracted some kind of growth, and shortly afterward they became psychotic. We dont know for certain that this is a terrorist activity, but I think you appreciate that we have to act like it is. We cant be caught sitting on our hands.  
Dew read. Charlotte Wilsons report had a picture attached, a Polaroid that showed a bluish triangular mark on her shoulder. The picture attached to Gary Leelands file showed a scowling old man. A hateful, suspicious expression marred his wrinkled, stubbly face. The lumpy, bluish triangle on his neck accentuated the unpleasant expression. So this thing turns people into killers?  
It made Charlotte Wilson, a seventy-year-old grandmother, kill her own son with a butcher knife. It made Blaine Tanarive kill his wife and two young daughters with a pair of scissors. It made Gary Leeland, a fifty-seven-year-old man, set his own hospital bed on fire, killing himself and three other patients.  
Could this be coincidence? Did we check the background of these people? Any mental conditions?  
Ive checked it out, Dew. I wouldnt have called you in if I hadnt. In all these cases, the victims had no history of violence, no medical conditions, no psychological problems. All their friends and neighbors said they were good people. The only thing they have in common, in fact, is the sudden onset of acute paranoid behavior and those triangular growths.  
What about foreign occurrences? Anyone else dealing with something similar?  
Murray again shook his head, a solemn look on his face. Nothing. And weve looked, Dew, weve looked hard. As far as we know, were the only country with cases like this.  
Dew nodded slowly, now understanding why Murray chose to see a conspiracy amid the carnage. But how could terrorists come up with something like this?  
I dont think terrorists invented it, Murray said. But terrorists didnt invent nuclear warheads, sarin gas or passenger jets. Someone created this, and thats all that matters.  
Dew reread the report. If it was a terrorist weapon, it was a doozy. It made car bombs and random plane hijackings look worthless by comparison: imagine a country where you never know if your friends or neighbors or coworkers are suddenly going to snap and try to kill everyone in sight. People wouldnt go to work, wouldnt leave their houses without a gun. You would suspect that everyone was a possible killer. Hell, if parents murdered their own children, no one was safe. Such a weapon would cripple America.  
Dew reached for another Tootsie Roll. Murray, this couldnt be one of our weapons, could it? Something that maybe accidentally-on-purpose got a bit out of control?  
Murray was shaking his head before Dew finished the sentence. No, no way. I checked everything, and I mean everything. This isnt ours, Dew, I give you my word.



Dew unwrapped the candy and again dropped the wrapper on Murrays immaculate carpeting. So hows it work? We dont know for sure. The logical theory is that the growths produce drugs, which are dumped right into the bloodstream. Kind of like a living hypodermic needle pumping out bad shit.

How many people know about this?

A few people know bits and pieces, but as far as those that know the whole enchilada, theres myself, the director, the president and the two CDC doctors listed in the reports,

Dew stared at the photos. They gave him an uneasy feeling, down deep, at an instinctual level.

I need you on this one, Top, Murray said. The name chafed Dew as badly as L.T. chafed Murray. Top short for Top Sergeant, the rank hed held when hed served under Murray back in Nam. For years that had been his only name, a name that commanded respect. Once upon a time, everyone he knew had called him Top now the only one left who even knew the name was Murray, the guy who wanted to pretend that Vietnam had never happened. Somehow Dew didnt find humor in the irony.

And I dont care how old you are, Top. As far as Im concerned youre still the best agent in the field. We need someone who will do whatever it takes to get the job done. And even if you only believe half of whats in that report, you know we have to find out whats going on and damn fast.

Dew studied Murrays face. Hed known that face for over thirty years. Even after all this time, he could tell when Murray was lying. Murray had asked for help before, and on each of those occasions Dew knew damn well it was to benefit Murrays career. But all those times Dew had done it anyway, because it was Murray, because it was L.T., because hed fought side by side with the man during the most nightmarish period of their lives. But now it was different L.T. wasnt doing this for personal gain. He was scared. Scared shitless.

Okay, Im in. Ive got to bring my partner in on this.

Absolutely not. Ill get you someone else, someone I know. Malcolm doesnt have your clearance.

Dew was taken aback for a moment, shocked that Murray knew his partners name. Whats clearance got to do with it, L.T.? You just want someone wholl pull the trigger whenever you need it pulled, and as much as it pains me to admit it, thats who I am. But Ive been with Malcolm for seven years, and Im not going after this crazy-ass hullabaloo without him. Trust me, hes reliable.

Murray Longworth was a man used to getting his way, used to having his orders followed, but Dew knew he was also a politician. Sometimes politicians had to give a little to get what they wanted that was the nature of the game that Dew could never grasp, the game that Murray played so well.

Fine, Murray said. I trust your judgment.

Dew shrugged his shoulders. So what do we do next? Murray turned his gaze to the window.

We wait, Top. We wait for the next victim.

Hed waited then, and he was waiting now. Seven days ago hed been waiting for something to happen, for a chance to see if this crazy Project Tangram crap was for real, a hoax or something whipped up to earn Murray another promotion. Now, however, he was waiting for his best friend to die.

A death that would have never occurred if Dew hadnt insisted insisted, God dammit on getting Mal involved.

Rested but still weary, fueled more by anger than sleep, Dew sat alone in his hotel room, the big cell phone pinched between his shoulder and ear.

Your partner still in critical? Murray asked.

Yeah, still touch and go. Hes fighting his ass off. On the table in front of Dew lay a yellow cloth, on top of which sat a disassembled military-issue Colt .45 automatic. The dull, smooth metal winked bluegray under the hotel rooms glaring lights.

The docs are working on him? Murray asked.

Day and night, Dew said. That CDC bitch came in to take a look at him, too. Cant she at least wait until the body is cold, Murray?

I sent her in, Dew, you know that. She needs all the information she can get. Were grasping at straws here.

So what information does she have?

Im flying in tomorrow. Ill get a firsthand report and then Ill fill you in. You just sit tight until then.

Whats the national picture? We have any new clients? Dew finished oiling and assembling the gun. He set it aside and pulled out two boxes, one full of empty magazines, the other full of .45-caliber cartridges.

Not that we know of, Murray said. Alls quiet on the western front, it seems. And if we do have any other clients, you dont need to worry about them. You need a break. Im working on bringing some more people in.

With mechanical, habitual speed, Dew loaded the first magazine. He set it aside and started on the second. Dew sighed, as if his next words would seal his friends fate. But duty came first . . .

Mal aint gonna make it, Murray. It may suck to say that but its the truth.

Ive got someone lined up for you. Im going to brief him shortly.

No more partners.

Fuck you, Dew, Murray said, his calm tone suddenly turning angry. Murray hid his emotions well, always had, but now his frustration rang through. Dont you start flaking out on me. I know I wanted you solo on this, but its getting too big. I want someone with you. You need some help.

I said no more partners, Murray.

You'll follow orders.

Send me a partner and I'll shoot him in the knee, Dew said. You know I'll do it.

Murray said nothing.

Dew continued, his voice halting only slightly, colored by a tiny sliver of emotion.

Malcolm was my partner, but he's as good as dead. The shit I saw was crazy, Murray. People infected with this crap aren't human anymore. I saw that for myself, so I know what were up against. I know that Margaret needs something to work with, and she needs it fast. I can get that on my own. If I have to get used to someone else I can't move like I need to. I fly solo from here on out, Murray.

Dew, you can't make this personal. This is no time for stupid thoughts to cloud your judgment.

Dew finished the second mag. He held it in his left hand, staring at it, staring at the glossy tip of the single exposed bullet.

This isn't revenge, Murray, Dew said. Don't be a dumb-ass. The asshole that got Malcolm is already dead, so what can I take revenge against? I'll just work better sans partner.

Murray fell silent for a moment. Dew didn't really care if Murray agreed or not he was working alone and that was that.

All right, Dew, Murray said quietly. Just remember we need a live victim more than we need another corpse.

Call me when you get into town. Dew hung up. He'd lied, of course. It was personal. If you thought about it enough, everything was personal in one way or another. Sooner or later he'd find out who was making these little triangular buggers. Malcolm was gone, and somebody was going to pay.

He popped a magazine into the .45, chambered a round, then walked to the bathroom. Holding the gun in his right hand, finger on the trigger, Dew carefully examined himself in the mirror. He wasn't going out like that, not like Brewbaker. His skin looked fine, but small red spots seemed to fade in and out, catching the corner of his vision and then disappearing when he stared. His imagination, fucking with his head. If he contracted the infection, would he be sane long enough to know the symptoms? He didn't need to hold on to his sanity for long just long enough to pull the trigger.

Dew walked to the bed. He set the loose magazine on the nightstand, slid the .45 under his pillow, lay down and immediately fell into a light sleep.

He dreamed of burning houses, rotten corpses and Frank Sinatra singing I've got you under my skin.

#### THE FIZZLE

It felt so good to be out of the Racal suit. She couldn't wait to take a shower, because she smelled riper than a rotten egg. She had to clean up Murray was on his way to the hospital for an official update. At the moment, however, the shower had to wait. She read the report on the analysis of the strange fiber growing out of Martin Brewbaker.

After a few hours, the fiber dissolved, Amos said. They still can't figure out why. It seemed rot-free when we cut it out, but something triggered the effect.

But this report came before that, right? This is from the fiber itself, not from the rot?

Amos nodded. He was also thrilled to finally be free of the suit. He looked as relieved as a teenage boy who's just lost his virginity.

That's right, they were able to analyze it before the effect kicked in. Pure cellulose.

The same material that made up that triangular growth.

Exactly. Well, almost. The growth's cellulose seemed to be a structure shell, skeleton, elements responsible for form. Most of the growth was the cancerous cells.

They were out of the suits because there was no more point in examining a body that was nothing but black, liquefying tissue and a strange green mold that covered half the table. They'd done all they could, as fast as they could. They hadn't really found any answers, just more questions. One such question bothered her to no end the cellulose.

So the blue fiber, same material as the triangle structure, both sources composed of cellulose, a material not produced by the human body, Margaret said. And we think this is some kind of parasite. You have any theories on the blue fiber?

I think it's a fizzle, Amos said.

A fizzle?

I think the blue fiber is part of a parasite that didn't quite make it to the larval stage.

We know the stages now?

Amos shrugged. For lack of a better term, let's call the triangle in the body the larval stage. Obviously, there's a prelarval stage. The triangle is mostly cellulose, the fiber is cellulose, you do the math.

It made sense in a way. Some cellular automata producing raw materials that were never quite used, or perhaps a mutation of the parasite that just produced cellulose and never moved to the larval phase, as Amos suggested.

And that word bothered her as well.

So if there's a larval stage, she said, I suppose it turns into something else in the adult phase.

Amos clucked his tongue at her. Don't ask stupid questions, Margaret. Of course it does. And no, I don't know what that is. Right now I don't care I want a shower before I have to face Murray Longworth.

Maybe Amos could turn off his curiosity, but Margaret could not. Perhaps more accurately, she couldn't turn off her

fear.

If this was a larval stage, just what the hell awaited them in the adult form?