

THE GEMINI VIRUS

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PROLOGUE

A New Illness in Three Parts

Monday, September 24
Ramsey, New Jersey

DAY 1

Bob Easton prided himself on his health; always had. It made him feel just a little bit superior to everyone else, especially the smokers, the drinkers, the dopers, and the guys who ate eggs and bacon for breakfast, pork roll for lunch, and spare ribs for dinner. They were all fools. The human body was a temple, and you didn't desecrate the temple.

He watched his diet to the point where he drove his wife, Bernice, out of her mind. He inspected everything before he put it in his mouth, brooded over "Nutrition Facts" charts, and could quote *Men's Health* articles from memory. He also exercised—a brisk jog every morning at precisely five thirty, followed by a short calisthenics regimen in the makeshift gym in their basement. His friends either made fun of him or were openly jealous. Nevertheless, he vowed to keep it up until he was no longer able, which he prayed wouldn't occur until he was in the Centenarians Club. That was his goal—three digits. And his physician, Dr. Petralia, thought he had a decent chance of making it. "You never get sick," Petralia said during the last checkup. (Easton

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had two per year, religiously.) “And it’s not easy to die if you don’t get sick, right?” Sitting on the cold exam table in his blue paper smock, Easton smiled and nodded. *That’s right—no sickness, no death. And I don’t get sick . . . ever.*

Except he was sick now. He was very sick.

The biggest mystery was how it happened in the first place. He had personal policies designed to protect against illness. One was to avoid others who weren’t feeling well. If he heard someone coughing at the plant, he’d send them home. (As a floor manager with seniority, he could do this.) If someone blew their nose more than once in a restaurant, he’d leave. He also avoided schools and day care centers; they were bacterial playgrounds. This led to several fights with his oldest daughter, Kelly. She lived nearby and couldn’t always pick up her two sons, who were in first and third grade respectively. Yet she knew not to contact her father even in an emergency. He wouldn’t go near a public restroom. If he had no choice, he’d stand a foot back from the urinal and wouldn’t flush. (If he had to take a crap, he’d wait until he got home, no matter how dangerous it was to his intestines.) He also used a paper towel on the doorknob when he went out. Nothing, in his opinion, was more vile than a public-restroom doorknob. He had a recurring nightmare about being forced to lick one.

So how did this happen?

The fever came first, stirring him from a deep sleep. He stumbled out of bed, dizzy and disoriented, and collided with the bathroom door because he didn’t realize it was closed. This awoke Bernice, who asked if everything was all right. He grumbled something unintelligible, and she drifted away again. When he flicked on the light switch, the glare exploded with such in-

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tensity that the pain in his head ballooned until it felt like his skull was cracking open.

He dug through the medicine cabinet because he believed there was a thermometer in there somewhere. He couldn't locate it and thought about asking Bernice for help. Then he decided to forgo the inevitable sarcasm that would surely follow. He continued searching through the standing army of outdated prescription bottles, over-the-counter medications, travel-size containers, skin creams, and body lotions, and finally found it inside a repurposed Tupperware container that was also home to an old comb (with loose strands of hair still in it, he noticed), a pair of scissors, and several dental tools of questionable origin. He retrieved some cotton balls and a bottle of isopropyl alcohol and then sanitized the thermometer beyond reason.

After setting the tip under the wet flesh of his tongue, he pressed the back of his hand against his forehead. He knew this was no way to gauge a fever, but he did it anyway. The heat was something close to nuclear. *I'm on fire!* He felt around in different places. *I'm cooking inside my skin. . . .* He inspected himself in the mirror and saw a face that was deeply flushed, the cheeks bright red. It was like looking at someone else.

The thermometer beeped and Easton looked. Then he wished he hadn't.

102.5°F.

He took it a second time, and it went up to 102.7 degrees F. Some crazy voice in the back of his mind said, *When you get to a hundred and three, sell!*

I'll call Petralia at nine and get in there first thing. Meanwhile . . .

He sorted through the over-the-counter meds, found nothing for fevers that hadn't expired, and settled on a washcloth soaked in cool water. Then he eased back into bed, where Bernice was

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snoring away like a sailor. His heart pounded in the stillness, and he began feeling the aches for the first time—neck, elbows, fingers, and knees. *Like an old man on a park bench*, he thought, *throwing bread crumbs to the birds*. He slept fitfully for two hours, was barely able to move when he awoke, and stayed there in his flannel pajamas feeling grossed out by the heat and sweat of his own body. *My sick body*, he thought with a mixture of depression and irritation.

Bernice initially responded, as he expected, with dumbfounded astonishment. She stood at the foot of the bed studying him, apparently in search of some sign of deception. Then, utilizing the gifted insight that he always found infuriating, she said, “You don’t look so good.”

“I appreciate the penetrating diagnosis.”

“Should I call your doctor?”

“I’ll do it. Please get me the phone.”

It was going on seven thirty at this point; too early for Petralia to be in the office. Still, Easton got the answering service to make the first available appointment. His heart sank when he was told by the operator that “Doctor P” was away on vacation in Greece and wouldn’t be back for another two weeks. She asked if he would like to make an appointment with Dr. Fisher instead. Easton considered it briefly, then declined. Ol’ Doctor P had been his man for the last twelve years and knew his body better than anyone. He wasn’t about to start fresh with some kid whose diploma still had wet ink on it.

Bernice, in the baby blue nightgown that Easton thought of as part of the *Golden Girls* Collection, shuffled to the doorway and stopped. Her eyes were nearly bulging with timid astonishment; she could not remember the last time her husband had been unwell.

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“What time is your appointment?”

“He’s not there today.”

“He’s not there?”

“He’s on vacation.”

“Oh . . .”

Easton sat hunched over on the bed’s edge, hands bunched together as if in prayer. Around the edges of his closely shorn silver hair, tiny beads of sweat had formed.

“I’ve, uh . . . I’ve got to go to ShopRite and get something.”

“Isn’t there anything in the cabinet?”

“No, I didn’t see anything for fevers that was still good.”

We haven’t had anything for fevers since the kids were here, Bernice thought. That seemed like an eternity.

“Do you want me to drive you?”

He could sense the concern in her voice, and it softened him. He gave her a sideways glance and smiled. “No, but thanks. I’ll be okay.” He finished with a quick wink, which he knew she always loved. She smiled back.

In truth he felt worse than before, and if anyone else were offering the lift, he would’ve taken it without hesitation. But no one, in his opinion, was a lousier driver than his wife; he’d just as soon go on roller skates. No, this was something he had to do himself.

When he took the first step out of bed, the room spun. He leaned against the dresser for support. Perfume bottles clattered against one another; two brushes tumbled to the carpet. When Bernice stepped in to help, he held his hands up and assured her he was fine. A small voice told him he was, in fact, quite a long way from fine. Nevertheless, he struggled into jeans and a sweatshirt.

He couldn’t remember the last time he’d bought over-the-counter medication, and he was overwhelmed by the array of

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choices. Sudafed, Robitussin, Mucinex, Vicks . . . antihistamine cough and cold suppressant, non-drowsy nasal decongestant, multi-symptom expectorant . . . coated caplets, liqui-gels . . . day and night, extended release . . . original flavor, orange, cherry . . .

“You gotta be kidding me,” he muttered before coughing into the crook of his arm. It was wet now, phlegmy. He settled on something with the words FEVER REDUCER and COLD AND FLU. That sounded reasonably close.

“Oooh, you look awful, Bob,” the woman at the register said as she inspected him over her half-moon glasses. Her name was Doris Whittenhauer, and she was the Gal Who Knew Everyone.

“Thanks, Doris. I feel awful, too.”

“Are you sure this is the right stuff for what you have?” She waved the box in the air.

“Do you *know* what I have?”

“No.”

“Okay, then.”

He coughed again, so violently this time that several heads turned.

Whittenhauer leaned back with a grimace. “Seriously, I think you should call your—”

“I already did. He’s on vacation.”

“So go to whoever’s covering for him.”

“I just might,” he replied, and now he meant it. Yes, Fisher was just a kid, but Easton could swear his condition had diminished even in the brief span since he first walked in. *Something’s not right.* . . .

The woman standing behind him was Katie Milligan, a plain and wholly unattractive thirty-four-year-old who’d held the same clerical position in the town’s public works department since her first summer following high school. She opened her

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tiny purse and took out a tissue as soon as she realized Easton was the same man who'd been hacking his lungs out when they were in the medicine aisle together. She covered her nose and mouth and took a step back when Easton sneezed mightily and caught only part of it in his hands. His eyes were red and watery, his skin pale. She agreed with the cashier that he needed to see someone, but she didn't inject this into the conversation. As a general rule, she did not enter conversations unnecessarily. She lived alone with a tankful of tropical fish and a hundred old books, and that was just fine with her.

She watched in horror as Easton, finished with his transaction, wiped his nose on the sleeve of his lumberjack's coat. It left a shimmering string of snot in its wake, which he seemed not to notice.

As he passed through the automatic doors, he looked down at his change. This was a lifelong habit. *Count your change, always*. The medicine rang up at \$6.53 (which he thought was a rip-off), and he'd paid with a ten. So he should have \$3.47 left.

He was fingering through the coins when the punch came. Not a real one, for there was nobody within twenty feet of him. But it felt real enough—like the boxer's fist in the center of his gut. The money tumbled from his hand, the bills fluttering down and the coins bouncing everywhere. He wrenched out a terrible sound and staggered to the nearest car to steady himself. His mind swirled; his breathing became heavy.

When the second punch arrived, he fell to the ground in a heap. With his hands pressed against his stomach and his dignity stripped away, he rolled around on the blacktop groaning. Several people came rushing over, asking if he was okay. He wanted to say *Do I look okay?* but couldn't summon the breath. The third and fourth shots weren't so bad, but they furthered the

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humiliation by causing him to urinate in his pants. A small crowd had gathered now, and several were on their cell phones calling for an ambulance.

A message flashed through Bob Easton's brain: *This isn't a cold. This is something else.*

DAY 3

If the management at Bally's Hotel and Casino had a way of checking, they likely would've been puzzled by the fact that each of its 345 guest rooms had its thermostat set between 70 and 78 degrees F—except for the one on the seventeenth floor that was occupied by Ms. Doris Whittenhauer, supermarket checkout clerk from Ramsey, New Jersey. By 4:30 A.M., with the air conditioner blowing at maximum for the third straight hour, the temperature had fallen to 62 degrees F. The heavy gold curtains had been pulled shut, eclipsing a magnificent view of the Atlantic Ocean. Thus, the only illumination came from two night-lights Doris brought along—one in the bedroom and one in the bathroom. She always took night-lights with her when she went on her regular trips to Atlantic City.

She sat motionless and naked in the tub, which was filled to the edge with water chilled by the ice cubes she'd requested from room service. Two champagne buckets stood dripping in their tripods outside the doorway. The woman who answered the phone when Doris called the second time said, "Didn't we just send one?" Doris didn't reply; she just hung up. When the knock came at the door, she said to leave it out there, she'd get it in a minute. Then her trembling hands reached out and grabbed it—hands that barely looked human anymore.

It began Tuesday morning, about twenty-four hours after

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the encounter with Easton. At the age of fifty-two, Doris knew her body well enough—the sudden drop in strength meant an illness was coming on. (She always imagined a pressure gauge with its needle moving slowly to the left.) But the trip to AC was already set in stone. She'd received a postcard from Jennifer, her personal casino hostess, more than a month ago. It said a comp room was ready whenever she wanted it. She started going down there with her ex, Alan, back in '96 when they were still trying to keep the marriage afloat. As it turned out, he had not one but two girlfriends tucked away in the area—the first at Caesars and the second at the Taj. The final straw for Doris was when the Taj bimbo showed up at Bally's one evening and demanded to know who she was. Alan managed to talk his way out of it, and Doris let him. It was over anyway.

In spite of the soap opera, she made some friends at Bally's and, truth be known, liked coming down from time to time. It was a quick and inexpensive way to escape the routine and recharge the batteries. Alan did the right thing after the divorce and disappeared, moving to Texas to live with a brother. She never heard from him again, which was great. As the years passed, Doris went from a Gold Club member to Platinum, and then Diamond. That meant free rooms, food, and booze, as well as the end of having to wait on line for anything. The staff treated her like the Queen of Sheba, quite a respite from the grind at the supermarket.

She hadn't been down in almost three months. She wasn't a big fan of the shore between Memorial and Labor Day. The casinos were elbow to elbow with every obnoxious out-of-towner. The best time to go, she had learned, was in May or September—warm enough to stroll the boardwalk and breathe the sea air, but still far outside the nightmare of tourist season.

Jennifer booked her a deluxe suite this time—wide-screen plasma TV, a smaller one set into the bathroom mirror, art deco

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accents, everything granite and walnut. . . . Gaudy, but she liked it. She also had over four hundred dollars in comp money. Her plan was to spend two days courtesy of the house, playing the slots and maybe a little blackjack, getting a twenty four-ounce porterhouse at the Reserve (her favorite), and, hopefully, seeing the girls—Susie from Manahawkin, Alexandra from Margate, and Lynn from Smithville. She didn't have their phone numbers or email addresses, didn't even know their last names. But they were part of the fabric of her Atlantic City world, and she found comfort in their company.

She realized an illness was on the way as she was setting the last of her things into her suitcase. She immediately connected it with Easton and cursed him out loud. *Probably the damn flu*, she thought. *So much for the guy who never gets sick*. Well, flu or not, she was going down there. She'd been looking forward to it and badly needed the break—three twelve-hour shifts in the last week alone, plus her boss, the twenty-eight-year-old manager of the store who had been there for only half a year but had the unbeatable qualification of being the owner's son-in-law, had been an even bigger jerk lately than he usually was. The idea of sitting home with an ice pack on her head watching reruns of *M*A*S*H* was out of the question. Besides, she hated having plans ruined at the last minute. She'd have to be in the hospital on her way to emergency surgery before she let go of this trip.

She locked the door of her apartment just after eight thirty that morning, stuffy and light-headed. The drive would take about two and a half hours, the great bulk of which would be spent on the Garden State Parkway. She brought along two different meds from the bathroom cabinet, plus a box of tissues for the passenger seat of her faithful '06 Toyota Corolla. She listened to Elvis and Everly Brothers CDs on the first half of the journey, singing along in her soft, passable alto. When the fever, chills, and sweat-

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ing started, however, she got on the cell phone with her sister, Rita, in western Pennsylvania and cursed every breath that kept Bob Easton alive. She had no way of knowing he was already dead.

By the time she pulled into the valet area, the aches had set in. They weren't so bad in her knees or neck, but the one in her lower back was torturous. She received a jolt every time she moved, like a poke from an electric prod. When she finally got out of the car, she had to muster all her strength to keep from crying out. She was more than happy to let someone else carry her suitcase to her room this time—it was worth every penny of the two-buck tip.

She tried unsuccessfully to unpack, took two Sudafed tablets, then went down to the casino floor. She found one of her favorite video poker machines—Ultimate 4 of a Kind Bonus Poker—and sat down reverently before it. She lit a cigarette, inserted her comp card, and asked a waitress for a gin and tonic. A few of those, she figured, and the cold would disappear. She didn't see Susie or Alex or Lynn, but one of them would show up eventually. She made the maximum bet on her first spin, won double in return, and immediately felt better. She was in business.

The coughing and sneezing started about a half hour later. The cough wasn't unusual; most the people in the aisle had a nasty hack from years of smoking and boozing. But the sneezing made her stand out. By late afternoon they were coming every few minutes. One rose so quickly that she sprayed the machine glass with it. She still had some tissues from the car, but they didn't last long. The waitress brought a pile of napkins, then another. Everyone within earshot identified her as the sick lady who should've stayed home. She received two scoldings for being so inconsiderate, as if Atlantic City were a bastion of class and civility.

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Six o'clock was supposed to be dinnertime: her much-anticipated visit to the Reserve. But she didn't feel up to it now—all she wanted to do was take more Sudafed and lie down. The pain in her back had grown roots, forcing her to take baby steps to the elevator. Alexandra was sitting at a blackjack table, but Doris pretended not to see her.

She ordered room service—hamburger and fries—but ate very little. She forced down a few bites because she figured her body needed some kind of nutrition. Then she lay on the bed and closed her eyes. The curtains were open, the last shreds of daylight fading fast. The clock on the nightstand read 7:32, and she was soon asleep.

She was jarred awake three hours later by a rumbling in her stomach, followed by a hot rising in her throat. She rolled quickly and vomited over the edge. It came out in two gushes, and the wet slapping sound made her guts tighten. Residual particles felt like cigarette embers on her tongue. She tried spitting them out, then raked them off with her fingernails.

She fell back on the pillows and collected her thoughts. *I'm in Atlantic City, at Bally's . . . Room 1733. . . I've been looking forward to this trip for weeks.* She saw her cell phone on the small circular table by the window and wondered if she should call her sister. *Maybe . . .* She put a hand to her forehead—it was filmy with perspiration and burning hot.

The odor from the vomit began drifting up. She covered her nose and turned away. Her breathing was heavy now, heart pounding. *I need to take more Sudafed.*

As she got to her feet, the first cramp struck her lower abdomen like the head of a sledgehammer. She yelped and went down, her knees on the floor while her upper body slumped across the second bed. Another blow followed, more vicious than the first, and she spilled onto the floor. Tears began flowing as she pressed

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hard against her stomach to dampen the pain. She curled into a fetal position and rolled onto her back. A guttural scream came to the surface with such force and clarity that it surprised her. Then a series of stuttering moans as the pain finally began to fade.

She turned over and got onto all fours. Sweat collected in the center of her forehead and fell away in large drops, making *pat* sounds when they hit the carpet. She got to her feet and went to the bathroom, where the Sudafed box stood on the vanity. She ripped out another pill and sloppily filled a glass with water, knocking it back with an alcoholic's greediness.

Even in the dim glow of the night-light, the image in the mirror halted her. Her face was bright red and slightly swollen; it almost looked like someone else. The glass fell from her hand and clattered on the marble, miraculously remaining unbroken, as she covered her mouth and began sobbing.

She fled back to the bedroom and called her sister on the cell phone. The conversation was brief and hysterical. Doris, whose memory was mythic among her friends and family, reported every detail. Rita listened patiently, then told her to stay calm; she was getting dressed and driving out to get her. Meanwhile, Rita suggested, she should try to get some more sleep. Doris followed this advice after pulling the curtains shut, covering the vomit with a white towel, and turning on the air conditioner—the latter because she was suddenly feeling unusually warm. Then she stripped down to her bra and panties, crawled into the second bed, and cried until she slipped away.

She woke again at exactly 4:22. It was the itching that did it this time, first on her arms and legs, then her cheeks. It worsened as her senses defrosted—became maddening, really. She scratched the back of her left calf with the big toenail of her right foot. Then along her right forearm with her left hand. And then the right hand went to her right cheek. It became a bizarre, almost

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comical symphony of choreographed movements. Soon it was everywhere—behind her neck, along her sides, and around her still-sore abdomen. While each scratch temporarily reduced the itch, it also increased the heat under her skin, like she was triggering little fires everywhere. When she realized how far the temperature had dropped in the room, she threw the covers off. She generally disliked the cold, but now she was grateful for it.

The odor filled her nostrils again, which was puzzling. *How could it still be that bad?* When she realized her fingers were wet and sticky, the answer to the mystery zoomed into her head like a missile—

Oh no . . .

She groped for the light and looked down. What she saw was so surreal it made her light-headed. They weren't just blisters rising from her body; they were tiny *balloons*. Many were deflated, broken by her fingernails, and leaking a wheat-colored pus with wispy streams of scarlet.

Oh my God.

She got to her feet, trembling uncontrollably, and went into the bathroom. She was about to turn on the overhead light, then decided against it. The night-light would be enough. *I don't want to see it that well.* As a fresh round of tears began rolling down her cheeks, she stepped in front of the mirror.

Then she screamed again. And again. And again . . .

The blister-balloons were everywhere—stomach, arms, thighs, neck, and particularly her face. Her eyes had become sheltered slits. The nostrils were two large dots. And the mouth was reduced to a tiny orifice barely able to open and close within the tight confines of the swollen, bubbled surface. Each time she stretched the skin to let out another howl, more swellings exploded, the viscous fluid jumping out in grisly squirts.

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Feeling her sanity slipping away, she filled the basin with cold water and soaked a washcloth. Then she pressed it against her cheeks. Her skin was boiling now and itching relentlessly. Since the washcloth did provide some relief, she turned and began filling the bathtub. She was concerned, however, that it wouldn't stay cold, so she went back into the bedroom and called room service. When the first champagne bucket arrived, she dumped out all the ice, stripped naked, and stepped in.

There was no way she could have prepared for the shock—like thousands of needles being fired into her body in a matter of seconds. Her teeth began chattering, and her lips made the slow transition from pink to purple. Numbness settled into every muscle and tendon. She was unable to slow her breathing but did manage to move her limbs in slow, waving motions. At least the itching and burning began to quiet down.

The ice jingled along the sides with an almost musical cheerfulness. After it melted, she got out and called for the second bucket. She took no notice of the slurring in her voice, nor did she find it strange that she called the woman who answered the phone “Colleen”—an old elementary school friend.

The frigid water didn't seem so bad this time, she thought. Cool and brisk. Maybe she could do this every once in a while at home. She'd tell the other girls at the supermarket about it, too. Maybe they'd like to join her; that'd be fun.

Three hours later the itching-burning returned with a vengeance. Shortly thereafter, the elderly man in the room next to hers was awakened by what he thought was the sound of shattering glass. A call was placed to the front desk, and a manager was sent up. He knocked on Whittenhauer's door, first politely, then less so. He used his magnetic master key—a plastic plate that resembled a credit card—and stepped cautiously inside. A veteran

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of Operation Desert Storm who had killed at least a dozen enemy soldiers, he knew something was up as soon as the smell hit him.

He found her ravaged body curled in the bathroom in a puddle of blood that was still spreading. The jagged piece of mirror she'd used to take her own life was jutting out the side of her neck.

Eleven more Bally's customers would discover they had become infected the next morning. The morning after that, thirty-six.

DAY 5

"She hasn't come out of there in about a week, I'd guess" the super told the two officers. "Something like that." He was a mousy little man with wild gray hair and sandpaper cheeks, well past his prime and thoroughly defeated by life. His corduroys were worn smooth at the knees, and there were flecks of dandruff along the shoulder straps of his vest. "That's what Mr. Fent said," he went on, motioning toward Fent's door down the hallway.

He'd been the super in Katie Milligan's building for over twenty years, and he found her to be a very strange woman—never smiling, never saying hello, scurrying in and out of her tiny corner apartment and quickly locking the door. In the six years since she arrived, he'd been inside just once: to replace a pressure valve on one of the radiators. Milligan kept the place neat to the subatomic level, which was nice enough. But she followed him around the whole time, watched his every move. No friendly chitchat, no offer for a glass of ice water—just those paranoid sapphire eyes pressing down upon him.

"When did Mr. Fent call you?" the older officer asked. The

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super already thought of him as *the Bully*. Big gut, thick mustache, broken blood vessels around his nose from years of drinking and God knew what else.

“This morning.”

Officer Jim Dugan, aka the Bully, looked at his watch. “It’s twelve twenty now. What took you so long to contact us?”

He stuttered for a moment; guys like Dugan always stifled him. “I tried calling *her* first, and when I didn’t get any answer, I called the landlord.”

“That would be Mr. Arnold?”

“Yes.”

“Where’s he?”

“In Florida.”

“Why?”

“He lives down there all year, he and Mrs. Arnold. They never come up, ever.”

Dugan nodded to his partner, the young man the super had classified as *the Kid*, and said, “You should be writing this down.”

In truth, Dugan, as senior officer present, should be doing it. But Bill Teague had learned not to argue with the full-tilt bastard they’d assigned to be his lord and master during his rookie year. He took out his notepad and miniature-golf pencil and began scribbling.

“And what did Mr. Arnold say to do?” Dugan asked, continuing the interrogation.

“Call you.”

“Is it unusual for Ms. Milligan to stay in her apartment for long periods?” Dugan knew who she was since, technically, they were both town employees. He’d seen her around, thought she was a whackjob.

“Not really.”

“Then why the call from her neighbor?”

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The super looked to Teague first, then back to Dugan. “The smell,” he said, lowering his voice.

“The smell?”

“Mr. Fent said it was coming through the baseboard vents. I went in and checked, and he was right—it was terrible. Like rotting food.”

Dugan turned to the door. It would’ve been customary—not to mention polite—to start with a gentle, ordinary knock. But he’d apparently missed this lesson in law-enforcement etiquette and went straight to hammering with his fist.

“Ms. Milligan? This is the Ramsey police. Could you please come out here for a moment?”

No answer.

“Ms. Milligan?”

More banging. Then he rang the bell.

Still no answer.

“You’ve got the key, right?”

“I do, but—”

“No ‘but,’ just open the door.”

The little man paused only briefly—Mr. Arnold had told him not to let the police in without calling him first—but it was enough to cause Dugan’s thermometer to rise. The redness first appeared high on his chest, then spread rapidly up his neck and kept going until his face took on the color of a boiled ham. Teague had seen the progression many times and braced himself.

“Open this damn thing or I’ll cite you for obstruction.”

The jangling key chain was out in a flash. “Okay.”

As the door drifted back, Dugan’s first thought was that the weather stripping around it was superb because the difference in air quality inside and outside the apartment was unbelievable. *It reeks in there.*

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And Dugan had a feeling he knew why. “Stay back,” he told his new friend.

“But Mr. Arnold said I should—”

“Absolutely not. You stay out here. Bill, let’s go.”

He ordered Teague to close the door behind them—the super stood in the hallway with a helpless look as he disappeared from view. Dugan was sure he’d call the landlord on his cell phone within seconds, the little worm.

They were in a short hallway and surrounded by darkness even though it was early afternoon.

“Look for a switch,” Dugan said. Teague found one by the door and flicked it. Then he gasped.

Dugan didn’t doubt for a minute that the numerous smears on the cream-colored walls and the hardwood flooring were blood—mostly. Between his early days in Paterson and what he hoped would be his final years here in Ramsey, he’d been to enough homicide scenes to identify a bloodstain a mile away.

But there was something else—a crusty, golden yellow substance that was reminiscent to earwax. It was mixed with the blood as if blended in some kind of macabre cocktail. *Shaken, not stirred*, he thought crazily.

“What’s this yellowy stuff?” Teague asked, leaning down to get a closer look.

“I have no idea,” Dugan replied. “But don’t touch it. We’ll have Frawley’s guys come and collect samples.”

Teague did as he was told. On a mildly rebellious impulse, however, he moved in close enough to sniff a particularly crusty area. In that instant, he realized the mystery substance was the source of the ungodly smell (and that there must be plenty more of it around). In that same instant—although there was no way he could’ve known it—he had issued his own death warrant.

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They went from the hallway to a small dining room. Dim rectangles of light glowed around a pair of blackout shades. Teague drew them up, revealing more of the blood-crust smears. They looked as though they'd been randomly applied with a paintbrush.

Then another peculiarity—in the china cabinet, everything from the Audubon plates Milligan had painstakingly collected over the last twenty years to the priceless Hummel figurines her beloved grandmother left to her had been shattered. Equally strange was that the glass on the cabinet doors was intact. It was as if each item had been removed and smashed, and then the pieces put back inside. There wasn't even any debris on the walnut table or the Persian rug.

"What the hell . . . they were replaced in their original spots?!" Teague said, almost whispering.

Dugan only nodded in response, then started into the adjoining living room. After the first step, however, he stopped—the carpeting under his foot made a wet, squishy sound.

"Oh man," he said, reaching for his flashlight.

It wasn't blood, it was water—water and what appeared to be thousands of little white flecks. Getting to his knees, Dugan saw that the flecks were actually tiny stones. They were about the same size as the copper BBs he used to shoot squirrels and birds outside his bedroom window as a kid.

"Jim, c'mere. . ."

Teague also fired up his flashlight, and the beam found a fish tank in the darkness, lying on its side. The spilled-out contents included a heavier shoal of tiny stones, plus a bubble filter, a can of flake food, and a ceramic model of Cinderella's Disney castle. The latter had obviously served as a home to Milligan's finned friends.

But where are they? Teague wondered. *Why aren't there any dead fish on the floor?*

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His curiosity was satiated a moment later when Dugan found the light switch. They were standing at one end of a long room that looked as though it'd been attacked by a gang of drunken apes. Every piece of the sofa set had been overturned, the three framed paintings (all real, by the look of them) were slashed with large X's, and the small-but-functional fireplace was stuffed to the top with antique books; the kind that most people like to smell rather than read. But it was the fish—and what happened to them—that made Teague's stomach roll. He was an animal lover at heart.

There was a large corkboard attached to the wall by the kitchen doorway, and they had been pinned to it with plastic toothpicks. They were arranged in neat rows, four columns of five for a total of twenty. Each one had a yellow Post-it Note underneath, with identifications in Milligan's enraged scribble—

Cardinal Tetra

Paracheirodon axelrodi

Tiger Barb

Puntius tetrazona

Common Angelfish

Pterophyllum scalare

Dugan moved in close and inspected the collection. “What the hell is this all about?”

Teague hung back and diverted his eyes to other parts of the room. There were more smears everywhere, plus the oddly unsettling sight of a pizza—whole, not even one slice missing—facedown on the carpet in front of the coffee table. It looked as though it had been stamped down, as if Milligan (or whoever) tried drive it through the floor. The empty box was still on the

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table, and Teague recognized the name on the lid—Kinchley’s, right here in town. Best pizza he ever had, although he wasn’t sure if he’d be able to take another bite without thinking of Katie Milligan.

“The smell is getting worse,” Teague said. What he meant was *We’re getting closer to . . . whatever*. Two other sentiments in his voice included *I think I’m about to see my first dead body* and *I’m not sure if I’m ready for this*.

“I know,” Dugan replied without the slightest note of empathy. “Something’s not quite—Oh *God!*”

He had ventured into the kitchen, and now, only seconds after he fired the overhead light, he stumbled backwards and almost fell through the open doorway.

“Oh my God! OH MY GOD!”

Teague never heard him scared before. Now the fear in his voice was as clear as the peal of a church bell.

He rushed over to help steady him. Then, over Dugan’s shoulder, he saw it. . . .

“Is that—?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh Lord . . .”

Through the clear glass of the blender, which was sitting on the counter and still plugged in, was the unmistakable form of a human foot. It had been hacked off just above the ankle, and the two jagged bones of the narrow tibia and wider fibula were preventing the lid from sitting flush. A huge puddle of dried blood—with very little of the yellow mystery sauce this time—was spread out on the floor, and a serrated bread knife lay nearby. Bloody tracks—one a normal footprint, the other a dark dribble-trail occasionally broken by roughly circular punctuation—led away from site, past the two of them, then curled left in a hairpin turn down a second hallway they had yet to explore.

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They moved in no particular hurry toward the blender. The dismembered foot was unquestionably that of a woman, and neither had any doubt it was once the property of Katie Milligan. It was beginning to turn black from the bloodless rot, making it look as though it'd been hanging in a smokehouse. The most remarkable feature, however, was the blistering—it was so widespread that there were no clear areas. Most of the bubbles had been broken open, as evidenced by the deep scratch-lines. But a few remained. It made Teague think of a wicked case of sumac poisoning he'd had as a child. Ten times worse than ivy, with an itch that drove him insane for three solid weeks. *This looks like it was ten times worse than* that, he thought. At the base of the blender jar, about an inch of the golden mystery sauce had accumulated and congealed.

Dugan, mesmerized by all of it, reached up and pulled his tie loose. Sweat was pouring down his face and neck, and his breathing was becoming audible.

“What now?” Teague said softly.

Dugan's first attempt at a reply was squelched by whatever had built up in his throat. He cleared it, then said in a feeble croak, “Let's check the rest of the place.”

“Sure,” Teague said. It came out just slightly sarcastic. *Gee, can we?* Under normal circumstances, he would've suffered the Wrath of Dugan for that indiscretion. But his boss didn't even seem to notice.

They followed the blood trail to the second hallway. There were two doors—one at the far end, the other immediately to the right. The latter was half open. After taking a deep breath, Dugan pushed it all the way back and hit the light switch. Milligan's bathroom was, literally, a bloody mess. Towels lay piled on the floor, stained in scarlet and amber. The bowl hadn't been flushed in a while and badly needed to be. Both men couldn't help but

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give the contents a cursory glance. Neither was certain what he saw, nor did he wish to be. There was also a puzzling stack of ice-cube trays on the toilet tank.

The tub was filled within an inch of the rim, and drifting placidly on the surface of the blood-clouded water was what appeared to be sizable sections of scratched-off (or peeled-off) skin. They drifted with the silent grace of lily pads, which somehow made them all the more grotesque.

Dugan lingered, and Teague realized it wasn't because he was in any kind of trance this time—he just didn't want to go into the last room. The feeling was mutual, quite frankly, but they couldn't leave until they did. And there was no greater truth in the universe than the fact that Bill Teague wanted to get the hell out of this apartment.

“One more to go,” Teague said, “and then we're done.”

“Yeah,” Dugan replied. “Okay.”

As they went down the hallway together, side by side like groom and bride, they realized two things. First, the room at the other end was, without a doubt, the primary source of the smell in the apartment. It seemed to be seeping right through the door and growing exponentially. And second, there were *machines* of some kind running inside—they could hear several different mechanized hums and rhythms, as if Milligan were secretly managing a small production facility.

They paused when they got there, both wishing they were anywhere else on Earth while their hearts boomed like war drums. Dugan took something from his back pocket—a small, cylindrical container that looked like lip balm. Largely unknown to the general public, it was indispensable to medical examiners worldwide—a quick stroke under each nostril made you all but impervious to the wretched stench of decaying flesh.

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He applied it quickly, then handed it to Teague. “You’ll want this.”

“Thanks.” Teague’s fingers were shaking. When he was finished, he replaced the cap and handed it back.

“Good?”

“I hope so.”

“Okay.” Dugan licked his lips. “Here goes.”

He surprised Teague by grabbing the knob and pushing the door back in one quick motion. Teague realized he was working from the Band-Aid theory—yank it off fast and maybe it won’t hurt as much.

Even in the blackness, they could see her, or at least what was left. She had hanged herself from the ceiling fan while it was running—and, gruesomely, still was. The overworked motor groaned unevenly as the paddles turned at a lazy, diminished speed. The darkness obscured all fine details, but the spare light from the hallway revealed the silhouette of Milligan’s body, clad in a long nightgown, each time it cycled by.

“Holy hell . . .,” Dugan said hoarsely.

“Turn it off,” Teague told him, the slightest touch of hysteria in his voice. “Turn it off!”

“What?”

“The fan! Turn off the *fan!*”

“Oh . . .”

He reached in and felt for the switch. There was a round fader knob just inside the doorway, but he pulled back with a girlish squeal when he realized it was encrusted with some kind of dried substance.

He swore copiously as he wiped his fingers on his shirt. Then he reached into his front pocket and retrieved a handkerchief. Covering his hand as if preparing to do a magic trick, he tried again.

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He meant only to turn the knob until it clicked and shut the fan off. In his heavily distracted state, however, he inadvertently depressed it, powering the fan's three-globed lights. Now every detail was in plain view.

A part of them didn't want to look—but of course they did. Teague was paralyzed while the circuitry in his brain sparked and sputtered in an attempt to comprehend the sight before him. Dugan's reaction wasn't quite so succinct—his face went from the flustered ham-pink to a deathly pale. His eyes widened like those of a surprised child. Then he opened his mouth to speak, but instead he fell to his knees and vomited explosively. He tried to stem the flow with his hand, but the force was such that it merely squirted between his fingers.

Milligan's skin—visible only on her face, arms, and the tip of the remaining foot that peeked out below the hemline of her gown—had swollen to such a degree that she looked like an over-inflated toy. The arms were almost comical in their Popeye-esque exaggeration, the foot like a child's "monster foot" bedtime slipper. And her bloated face seemed as though one poke with a needle would blow it to pieces.

The balloonlike blistering was ubiquitous, many of the larger examples lying as flat and flaccid as downed parachutes. Others dangled from her body like little price tags. The calico coloring ranged from black to purple to lavender. Neither Dugan nor Teague had any way of knowing the lavender was the result of Milligan's blood vessels literally melting under her skin, a late-stage symptom of the disease that was already taking up residence through their own systems.

As the initial shock wore away, they began noting other details. First, the room was *freezing*—at some point Milligan put an air conditioner in each of the two windows and cranked them up. Then there was the puzzling "crimson ring"—a spat-

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tery line of dark red coloring that ran, unbroken, in a roughly circular pattern around the room. Teague figured it out first and nearly lost his own lunch as a result—bodily fluids of one kind or another flying off Milligan’s rotating corpse for God only knew how long. But the most horrific feature, by far, was Milligan’s neck—wrapped in a woolen scarf and tied in a knot that had grown increasingly tighter, it now shared roughly the same circumference as an ordinary garden hose. This, the two men realized, was the reason Milligan’s head hung down at such a sharp angle. A few more hours and it would’ve detached and zoomed off somewhere.

Dugan got to his feet, wiping his mouth with the back of his sleeve. He took one more look at everything, then could look no more. He reached in and closed the door, then said, “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

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