1

Podlesny, Russia

The old man looked at the driver of the car. "Is he angry with me, Pasha?"

The young man gave an indifferent shrug. "It's just business, Nikolai. He hired you; you worked for him; you no longer wish to work for him; you quit. You will take another job and my grandfather will hire another scientist. Life goes on."

"Your grandfather is a very powerful man."

"*Dedushka* is a businessman, nothing more."

"Then he forgives me?"

Pasha Semenov looked over at his passenger. Nikolai Petrov's eyes looked sunken and haunted, like those of a dog that had been kicked too many times. The old man hunched down in his seat as if a great weight was pressing down on him. Wrapped around his left wrist was a black wool Orthodox prayer rope, tied into fifty knots with a wooden bead dividing the knots into groups of ten. The old man constantly fingered the knots, mouthing silent words until his fingers arrived at a wooden bead—then he said aloud, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Pasha smirked. "You don't look like much of a sinner to me. Maybe I should get one of those things."

"You don't know what I've done," Petrov mumbled. "You don't know what I almost did."

"What did you do, old man? Go on, impress me with your sins."

Ends of Earth 2nd pass.indd 1 6/17/09 4:31:44 PM

"We did things that no man should do, Pasha, things that could lead to the end of the earth—the end of everything. Your grandfather does not understand this. He does not believe as I do."

"What my grandfather believes is that the great Dr. Nikolai Petrov has lost his mind."

"Do you know why the Soviet Union crumbled, Pasha? It was God's judgment on us for the things we almost did—for the things we were preparing to do."

"Listen to yourself—you talk like one of those cave hermits from Kiev. Do you know your problem, Nikolai? You're living in the past. This is the new Russia—the world is different now."

"The world does not change, Pasha. The human heart does not change."

Pasha pulled the car off the road and stopped.

Nikolai Petrov looked out his window. In a clearing to his right he saw an enormous concrete grain silo encircled by a winding metal staircase whose steps protruded like the petals of a flower, ascending to an open doorway at the very top of the silo. There was a matching doorway on the opposite side that opened into empty space. At the bottom of the silo was a third doorway where a corn elevator offloaded the grain into a line of waiting trucks.

"This is not the train station," Petrov said.

"How observant of you," Pasha said, opening his door and stepping out. "Dedushka asked me to bring you. He wants to wish you good-bye."

"It isn't necessary," the old man protested, but Pasha was already out of the car.

Pasha put his fingers to his lips and made a piercing whistle.

One of the farmhands looked up.

"Dedushka," Pasha shouted.

The farmhand pointed to the top of the silo.

Pasha turned back to the car and found Petrov still huddled inside.

Ends of Earth 2nd pass.indd 2 6/17/09 4:31:44 PM

He waved impatiently to the old man until he reluctantly opened his door and climbed out.

"He's up in the silo," Pasha shouted over the din of the corn elevator. "Come."

They walked to the base of the metal staircase and Pasha gestured for Petrov to go ahead of him. The old man began to timidly climb the stairs while Pasha kept one hand pressed against the middle of his back to keep him moving forward. When they had rounded the silo once, Pasha whistled down to the corn elevator operator and made a slashing gesture at his throat. The machinist nodded and pulled a rusted lever and the engine sputtered to a stop. The air was suddenly silent.

"Dedushka didn't have time to come to the station," Pasha told Petrov, continuing to urge him forward. "Prices are up and the corn has to get to market right away. You know how it is on a farm—always something to do."

At the top of the staircase Pasha pushed past Petrov and looked into the open doorway. The interior of the silo was a circular room filled with an endless sea of golden corn that dipped toward the center like a draining sink. A white-haired old man was standing knee-deep near one of the walls, scooping up shovelfuls of corn and tossing them into the center. There were no lights in the silo; it was illuminated only by the daylight pouring through the doorways on opposite sides.

"Dedushka," Pasha called out. "You have a visitor."

Yuri Semchenko turned. The man was built like a tree stump with arctic-white hair combed straight back toward his shoulders. He was dressed in denim overalls and a white cotton shirt, the sleeves rolled halfway up his thick, mottled forearms. His face was tanned and leathery, a field of deep folds and furrows with jowls that concealed most of his neck. His forehead was narrow and his hairline low; there was no hint of thinning or receding. His eyes were a dull,

Ends of Earth 2nd pass.indd 3 6/17/09 4:31:44 PM

hollow gray set in sunken sockets like two slabs of slate peering up from the soil.

Semchenko looked at his visitors without expression. "Grab shovels," he said to them. "Make yourselves useful."

Pasha picked up two shovels and handed one to his companion. He waded into the corn a few steps, then turned back and motioned for Petrov to follow.

The old man did.

"Like this." Semchenko demonstrated, holding his shovel overhand and scraping the corn away from the concrete walls. "Moisture collects," he said. "The corn forms a crust—we must break it free."

Pasha began to do the same.

Petrov stood near the center of the silo and stared at Semchenko's back. "Don't do it, Yuri," he said. "Please—I beg you."

Semchenko looked at him over his shoulder. "Don't do what?"

"You know what. You have no right."

The white-haired man let out a snort.

"Science makes possible things that should never be done," Petrov said.

"Who is to say what should not be done?"

"God. He is to say."

Another snort. "Then let God tell me himself and not some cowardly old man."

"I cannot have a part in this. I will not."

"Yes, Nikolai, you've made that very clear." He tossed a shovelful of corn in front of Petrov and nodded toward the center of the room. "Throw it there—in the middle."

Petrov slowly scooped up the corn and threw it a few feet. "I have to go, Yuri. Please, I have a train to catch."

"Pasha must help me first," Semchenko said. "The sooner he finishes, the sooner he can take you to the station." He tossed another shovelful at Petrov's knees.

Ends of Earth 2nd pass.indd 4 6/17/09 4:31:44 PM

So did Pasha.

Petrov began to eagerly dig into the growing pile of corn and pitch it toward the center of the silo, working as hard and as fast as his aging back would allow.

Semchenko watched the old man work for a few moments, then nodded to Pasha. The two men set down their shovels and waded through the corn to the opposite doorways. Pasha climbed out onto the stairway on his side. Semchenko sat down on the ledge of his doorway, leaned out, and signaled to the corn elevator operator below him.

The engine started up again.

Petrov began to sink.

He looked up in horror and saw Yuri Semchenko calmly watching him from one of the doorways. He twisted around and saw Pasha doing the same behind him. He tried to take a step, but when he lifted one leg the other leg only sank deeper. With a rustling sound the corn poured toward the center of the silo like sand emptying from an hourglass.

Within seconds the corn was up to Petrov's waist.

"Don't do this!" he cried out. "Yuri, please!"

"Sorry, old friend, but a conscience is a dangerous thing. I cannot be certain where yours might lead you."

"I won't tell anyone! I swear!"

"Yes, I know."

The corn was up to his chest now. He threw himself forward and tried to swim, but there was nothing to push against and the corn flowed up and around him and licked at him with its yellow tongue.

"Stop struggling, Nikolai. You'll only sink faster."

But the old man began to struggle frantically, thrashing and clawing and beating at the corn. Nothing helped; the corn continued to swallow him like a snake with a helpless mouse. His shoulders disappeared like two rocks beneath a rising tide. His hands clawed at the

Ends of Earth 2nd pass.indd 5 6/17/09 4:31:44 PM

air above him, then fell limp and slowly sank back into the yellow sea. The corn rose up to his neck, then his chin, and he threw back his head and gasped for air as his lungs began to compress.

His eyes looked at Semchenko one last time. "Yuri," he whispered. "Please—don't—"

The corn poured over his face and into his mouth and he was gone.

Semchenko stared at the sea of grain for a minute or two, then signaled to the machinist to stop the engine again.

The silo fell silent and the corn was perfectly still.

He looked across the room at Pasha. "Clean this up," he said. "Tell the authorities it was an accident. And Pasha—I was never here."

Ends of Earth 2nd pass.indd 6 6/17/09 4:31:44 PM

2

North Carolina State University, Raleigh

Nick Polchak slumped in his chair in the back of the classroom and watched stone-faced as the student concluded her presentation.

"And that," she said brightly, "is the life cycle of a fruit fly."

She tucked her poster under her chin and turned from side to side, offering her fellow students one final look before grinning hopefully at her professor.

Everyone in the classroom turned and waited for Nick's evaluation.

Dr. Nick Polchak was one of the best-respected and most-feared professors at North Carolina State University. Nick loved his academic discipline—entomology, specifically the study of the arthropods that comprise half the living species on our planet, and he had no patience for anyone who didn't share his passion for insects or his love of technical detail. For Nick life was bugs, pure and simple, a perspective that had long ago earned him the moniker "the Bug Man."

Nick took off his glasses and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "C-minus," he said. "And that's only because I'm in a generous mood."

The student did a dramatic double take, an imaginative blend of indignation and personal affront. "A *C-minus*? C'mon, Dr. P.!"

"Don't call me that," Nick said. "It makes me sound like a urologist."

Ends of Earth 2nd pass.indd 7 6/17/09 4:31:44 PM

"I deserve better than a C-minus!" The student hoisted her poster high overhead, as though Nick might have somehow overlooked it. "Look at this thing! I practically spent the whole night on it!"

"Lovely," Nick said. "Let's take a closer look."

As Nick worked his way to the front of the classroom, the students began to grin like hungry hyenas. They knew what was coming; it was the main reason they'd signed up for the course. Nick's students took an almost perverse pleasure in watching him savage their classmates on the days when projects and papers were due. This was the first project of the fall semester, and everyone could taste blood.

The young woman lowered the poster to chin-level and allowed Nick to look it over.

"Ms. Smith," he began.

"My name is Karnofski."

"Whatever." Though Nick had at his fingertips the Latin names of hundreds of species of blowflies and flesh flies, he had only two names for students—Smith and Jones, depending on which name randomly rolled off his tongue when summoned. "First of all, your drawing is all wrong," he said. "*Drosophila* is yellow-brown in color and has transverse black rings across its abdomen."

"That's awfully picky," she grumbled.

"Yes, science is like that. Second, their wings don't look like a couple of badminton rackets, and if I remember correctly, only the fairy-princess fruit fly is decorated with glitter."

Snorts and snickers from the classroom.

Ms. Smith-Karnofski frowned. "I wanted to make it stand out."

"Well, don't. And what, may I ask, is *that*?" He pointed to the fly's head, where a curved line arced beneath the two huge eyes.

"That's a smile. I was trying to make it look—you know—friendly."

Nick turned to the class. "Okay, let's get something straight. This is a course in basic entomology. What Ms. Smith here should have brought us was a technically accurate rendering of a *Drosophila*

Ends of Earth 2nd pass.indd 8 6/17/09 4:31:44 PM

melanogaster. Instead, what we have here is essentially a Precious Moments fruit fly. I'm sorry to break it to you, Ms. Smith, but fruit flies are not cute or cuddly or friendly. They are tiny arthropods that are valuable for research chiefly due to their extremely short life cycle."

Nick took the poster and held it up to the class. "What else is wrong with this drawing?"

No one dared an answer.

Nick ran his finger around the contour of the drawing. "See this? She colored inside the lines. That's an indication of a serious personality flaw that Ms. Smith will want to address before she gets any older." He handed back the poster. "Sorry, Ms. Smith, the C-minus stands. Who's next?"

Another student stepped to the front—an eager-looking young man with a thick gauze bandage wrapped around his left forearm.

Nick looked him over. "We're all yours, Mr. Jones—impress us."

The young man quickly unwound the bandage and held his hand out palm-up. In the fleshy, hairless center of his forearm was a shallow gash about three inches long. The flesh around the wound was red and swollen, and in the center of the gash was a line of wriggling white maggots.

The class let out a gasp and the front row emptied out.

"My project is on *maggot therapy*," the student announced. "Maggots have been used for hundreds of years to clean out wounds. They eat away the dead tissue and keep the wound from getting infected."

Nick took the young man by the wrist and adjusted his glasses to get a better look. "Well, nobody can accuse you of coloring inside the lines. I have to ask you, Mr. Jones, is this a self-inflicted wound? You didn't do this to yourself just for my project, did you?"

"Nah. I got it skateboarding."

"Good. I get in enough trouble around here." Nick turned to the

Ends of Earth 2nd pass.indd 9 6/17/09 4:31:44 PM

class; it looked as if someone had tipped the room and deposited everyone along the back wall. "Okay, gather around. Let's see what we can learn from Mr. Jones."

No one moved.

"Oh, c'mon," Nick said. "You've all seen grosser things than this. You live in the dorms, don't you?"

The class eased forward and surrounded their wounded classmate.

"All right," Nick said to the young man. "Go on with your report."

Mr. Jones looked at him. "Go on?"

Nick blinked. "Was that it?"

"Pretty much. It's more of a . . . demonstration."

"Where did you learn about maggot therapy, Mr. Jones?"

He grinned. "From the movie *Gladiator*. Remember? Maximus has his shoulder ripped open and it's full of maggots, and this guy tells him, 'Leave them—they clean out the wound.'"

"Uh-huh. Tell me, Mr. Jones, how much do you know about maggots?"

"Um."

"A maggot is the larval form of a fly," Nick said. "The gravid female looks for decaying matter to lay her eggs in. Some species prefer decaying flesh, like the ones on your arm—probably common green bottles. The eggs hatch into larvae and begin to feed. They have two little mouth hooks, one on either side, and they use them to scrape away the decaying tissue and stuff it into a kind of pre-stomach known as a 'crop.'"

Nick looked at the group; their faces were slowly contorting. "Give me a break," he said. "I've watched some of you eat—it isn't much different. The maggots will pass through three stages of development called 'instars.' When they reach the final stage—when they've stuffed themselves on Mr. Jones's decaying tissue—they'll drop away and look for a secluded spot to pupate. A few days later

Ends of Earth 2nd pass.indd 10 6/17/09 4:31:45 PM

they'll emerge as adult flies. Tell me, Mr. Jones, where did you get the maggots for this little demonstration?"

"Well—we've got a lot of flies around our house."

"And why do you suppose that is?"

The young man shrugged.

"It's because you're a male, Mr. Jones, and your decor probably includes a lot of decaying matter. So you just exposed your open wound to the air?"

"It took a long time," he said solemnly. "I had to sit there for hours and act like I was dead."

"Yes, I've seen you do that in class—you're very convincing. And where did the flies come from?"

"Where did they come from?"

"Before they landed on you. You don't think your arm was their first stop of the day, do you?"

He paused. "I never thought about it."

"Flies aren't picky eaters, Mr. Jones. Yours probably landed on a dog pile on the way into the house, then stopped off for dessert in that garbage can your roommates never empty. And every time the fly lands, it picks up bacteria on its feet and deposits them on the next place it visits. Take a close look at his wound, everybody—see the redness around the edges? Notice how swollen it is? That's what doctors call *infection*, and Mr. Jones has managed to get himself a pretty good one."

"Oops," the boy mumbled.

"But let's give Mr. Jones credit—he was half right. Maggot therapy has been used for hundreds of years, and maggots will eat away decaying tissue and clean out a wound—the procedure is known as *cutaneous myiasis*. But maggots used for this purpose are always laboratory-reared—otherwise they'll spread the very infection they're meant to prevent. Now I'm afraid we'll have to excuse Mr. Jones so he can visit our campus health center, where they'll give

Ends of Earth 2nd pass.indd 11 6/17/09 4:31:45 PM

him a massive dose of antibiotics and possibly a psychiatric evaluation."

Mr. Jones looked chagrined. "I guess it was kind of stupid, huh."

"No, it was just ignorant, and fortunately ignorance is curable. Next time check your facts first—and don't do your research at Blockbuster Video. *Gladiator* got it wrong."

"What about my grade?"

"I'm giving you a B-plus," Nick said, "because you didn't use glitter and because a guy like you is probably going to need a few breaks in life." Nick looked at his watch. "Okay, that's it for today. We'll pick up with your projects next time—and please, no more death-defying 'demonstrations.'"

As the students began to scatter Nick noticed that a much older man had been standing among them—Noah Ellison, chairman of the Department of Entomology.

"Nicholas," the old man groaned, "please tell me that wound was not self-inflicted."

"Of course not," Nick said. "I cut him open myself. Cadavers are expensive."

Noah's expression didn't change.

"I'm kidding, Noah. That was his entomology project—*maggot therapy*."

"I take it the larvae were not sterile."

"It's a new technique. Apparently it's very successful with gladiators."

"You have to admire the boy's spirit," Noah said. "It will take him a long way."

"It's taking him to the health center right now. What can I do for you, Noah?"

"I have good news and I have bad news," Noah said. "Knowing you as I do, I'm going to tell you the bad news first—otherwise you'll get overly excited by the good news and refuse to sit still for the bad."

Ends of Earth 2nd pass.indd 12 6/17/09 4:31:45 PM

"I'm not a child, Noah."

"Of course you are, Nicholas. Intellectually you're quite extraordinary, but let's face it—when it comes to impulse control you're essentially an adolescent."

"Thanks, Dad. So what's the news?"

"The bad news is: The entomology department is hosting a reception for incoming graduate students and we're encouraging our faculty to attend—*all* of our faculty."

Nick let out a moan. "Why me? You know I despise things like that."

"This is their first introduction to our department, Nicholas. We're making an effort to give our department a human face."

"Our department should have an insect face," Nick said. "If they wanted a smiley face, they should have enrolled in the humanities."

"Nicholas—for some of them it's their first introduction to our nation. We have several foreign graduate students every year, you know. Who is there to greet them when they arrive? Who helps their wives and children settle in? Who tells them, 'Welcome to America'?"

"Doesn't the government take care of that? What are we paying taxes for?"

"Now you're just being silly. What does this really require of you?"

"In terms of physical energy or emotional trauma?"

"Nicholas."

"Okay, Noah, I give up. I'll be there."

"In body *and* in spirit."

"That I can't promise."

"Nicholas."

"Oh, all right—I'll do my best. Now what's the good news?"

"Our office just received a phone call from the Sampson County sheriff's department. It seems a man has been murdered there, and they're requesting the assistance of a forensic entomologist. They

Ends of Earth 2nd pass.indd 13 6/17/09 4:31:45 PM

specifically asked for you—not that there are many options. Sampson County is about—"

"I know where it is, Noah. How long ago did they call?"

"About an hour."

"Do you have an address?"

Noah held out a slip of paper.

Nick snatched it from his hand and hurried for the door. "Why didn't you tell me this in the first place?"

Noah watched as the door slammed behind him. "That's why," he said.

Ends of Earth 2nd pass.indd 14 6/17/09 4:31:45 PM

3

The body sprawled facedown in the dirt between the long rows of bushy green shrubs. The victim's arms lay at his sides with the palms facing up, indicating that the man had made no attempt to break his fall.

"Dead before he hit the ground," the Sampson County detective said.

"At least unconscious," Nick replied. "Have you got a name?"

"Massino," he said. "Call me Danny."

"I meant the victim."

"Oh. His name is Severenson—Michael Severenson. This is his farm. How long you figure he's been out here?"

"Quick guess? Three days, possibly four. It's a little hard to tell because the body's been shaded by these plants. If he was lying in the direct sun this time of year, he'd be a lot further along."

The furrow was no more than thirty inches wide, allowing the two men barely enough room to kneel—Nick at the victim's feet and the detective at the head, with the overhanging branches brushing against their arms.

"What kind of a farm did you say this is?"

"Tomatoes, mostly—one of those organic places. You know—" He lifted his little finger and wiggled it.

Nick blinked at the detective. When he did, his huge brown orbs vanished behind his lenses and reappeared an instant later. "I'm not following you."

"You know, one of those froufrou places. *Back to nature*—no bug

Ends of Earth 2nd pass.indd 15 6/17/09 4:31:45 PM

spray, no chemicals, nothing but dear old Mother Earth. I'll bet this guy never thought he'd end up fertilizing his own plants—talk about organic."

"The human body makes excellent fertilizer," Nick said. "The soft tissues contain carbon and nitrogen, and the bones are a good source of calcium and phosphorus. It's like a slow-release fertilizer, really, since the body decomposes over a period of—" Nick noticed a sudden silence and looked up.

"I was kidding," Massino said.

"Oh."

Nick went back to the body again. There appeared to be two bullet holes near the center of the back, one on either side of the spine. "Have your forensic techs got everything they need here?"

"Yeah, they're done."

Nick worked two gloved fingers into the holes in the victim's khaki shirt and carefully ripped the fabric open, exposing the skin. The bullet holes were spaced just an inch or two apart, and the wounds were already heavily infested with maggots. He studied the placement of the bullet holes. "Pretty good marksmanship," he said.

"Yeah, that's a tight spread—and judging by the spacing of the guy's footprints, it looks like he might have been on the run."

"He was," Nick said. "See the slide pattern in the dirt? He was moving pretty fast when he was hit, probably at a dead sprint. He was obviously trying to get away from someone. Did you find any footprints from the perp?"

"None—and the dirt's pretty soft, so we figure the shooter must have fired from the grass at the end of the row."

Nick turned and looked; it was a good thirty yards to the end of the row. Beyond it he could see a farmhouse with white siding and a gray aluminum roof. "I'd look for a hunter if I were you. Whoever did this was no stranger to guns—he got off two shots before the victim even dropped."

Ends of Earth 2nd pass.indd 16 6/17/09 4:31:45 PM

"A hunter," Massino said. "Gee, thanks. That narrows it down to every man in Sampson County—and half the women too."

"I'd be nice to your wife if I were you. Any ideas about a motive?"

"We think it might have been drug-related."

"Why's that?"

"This is a farm community, Polchak—people know each other out here. Michael Severenson grew up on this farm; he inherited it from his folks. That's how most people end up with farms these days 'cause the land's getting too pricey to buy. Severenson had a drug problem and everybody around here knew it—so did we. He had a couple of priors for possession; nothing major. He went through rehab a couple of times, but it never took."

"Was he married?"

"Yeah—got a kid too."

"Was his wife the one who found him?"

"Yeah. Stumbled onto him this morning. That's gotta be tough."

Nick frowned. "The woman didn't miss her husband for three days?"

"They've been separated for about a year. Not legally—he just up and took off one day. They've got a little workers' cottage over behind the barn, a place where the migrants used to live; whenever he dropped by he stayed there. She didn't see much of the guy—sometimes for weeks at a time."

"Do you think he was dealing?"

"We don't know yet. We think maybe he was trying to break into the business. If he was, he might have stepped on somebody's toes."

"You have that kind of problem out here?"

"They have that kind of problem everywhere—Sampson County's no different. We won't be positive about the drug angle until we can go over the place with a narcotics dog team. We're looking for one in Charlotte, but we're not having much luck."

"You need a good dog team? I can recommend one."

Ends of Earth 2nd pass.indd 17 6/17/09 4:31:45 PM

"Yeah?"

"I know a woman up in northern Virginia. She trains the dogs herself. I've worked with her. Never saw anything like it—her dogs can practically talk."

"Think she's available?"

"I can give her a call."

"I'd appreciate that."

Nick opened a large plastic toolbox and removed a long slender forceps and a series of small bottles half-filled with a clear liquid. "Hold these," he said, handing the bottles to Massino. "Take the caps off and set them down. Be careful not to spill them."

Next he took out a sleeve of small Styrofoam cups, a stack of coffee filters, and a ziplock bag filled with dark red meat cut into medium-sized cubes. He separated the cups and lined them up in front of them; he opened the plastic bag and dropped a cube of meat into each one.

"What is that?" Massino asked.

"Beef liver."

"What are the cups for?"

"They're known as 'maggot motels,'" Nick said. "Here—take a couple." He handed two of them to Massino, then leaned out over the body and began to examine the wounds, sorting through the wriggling mass of maggots with the forceps.

Massino grimaced. "What are you doing?"

"Searching for the largest specimens."

"Why?"

"They'll be the oldest. They were the first ones here."

Nick carefully plucked a particularly plump specimen from the roiling mass. He held it up to his glasses and examined it, then reached across and dropped it into one of the Styrofoam cups. When each cup contained three or four of the hardiest specimens, Nick took the cups back from the detective, stretched a coffee filter across the top of each

Ends of Earth 2nd pass.indd 18 6/17/09 4:31:45 PM

of them, and secured it in place with a rubber band. Then he repeated the process, collecting specimens from each of the wounds until all the motels were occupied.

"Now the bottles," he said, depositing two or three specimens into each of them and labeling them with the location of the wound where they were found.

"What are these for?"

"To identify species. The liquid is a preservative."

Massino swatted at a fly buzzing around his face.

"Don't do that," Nick said.

"Why not?"

"Those are specimens too. I need to net a few."

"Don't they ever bother you?"

"Does physical evidence bother you?"

Massino watched as Nick carefully returned each item to the toolbox. "What happens now?" he asked.

"Certain insects are attracted to decomposing bodies," Nick said. "Blowflies and flesh flies, for example—those things buzzing around your head. The females are looking for places to lay their eggs. They look for soft tissues that their babies won't have trouble chewing—open wounds and decomposing flesh are just the thing. The eggs hatch into maggots; the maggots grow and develop; they pass through distinct developmental stages that are easy to recognize; finally they pupate and emerge as adult flies. Are you following me?"

"So far."

"We've studied the life cycles of several different species, and we know exactly how long it takes for the insects to develop from egg to mature adult—*exactly*. So here we are; we've got a dead guy and he's got maggots. But how long has the dead guy been dead? When was he killed? To find out, I collect the oldest maggots from the body and take them back to my lab. I rear them—I allow them to continue to

Ends of Earth 2nd pass.indd 19 6/17/09 4:31:45 PM

grow in exactly the same conditions I find here. I time them—I count the precise number of hours until those maggots crawl out of their puparia as adult flies. After that, it's just mathematics. I identify the species, I look up the total time it takes for them to develop, I subtract the time it took for me to rear them, and I count backward. *Bingo*—we know the postmortem interval, the precise amount of time between death and the discovery of the body."

"How precise?"

"This should be a textbook case," Nick said. "A body in the open air during warm weather—it doesn't get any easier than this for a guy like me. I should be able to calculate a postmortem interval that's accurate within a few hours. That should help you narrow your field of suspects."

"Yeah—that would help a lot."

"I'm a little confused," Nick said. "You don't seem to know anything about forensic entomology."

"Never had much use for it."

"Then why did you send for me?"

"I didn't—she did."

"Who?"

"The wife."

Nick paused. "The victim's wife requested a forensic entomologist?"

"She requested you—specifically."

"Me?" Nick stopped to think. "*Severenson* . . . I don't know anyone by that name."

"Well, she knows you. She seemed to know all about you—and this weird business of yours. She told us, 'After seventy-two hours of death, forensic entomology is the most accurate way to quantify the postmortem interval.'"

"She said that? She used the term 'postmortem interval'?"

"Yeah, just like that."

Ends of Earth 2nd pass.indd 20 6/17/09 4:31:45 PM

Nick paused. "I think I'm in love."

"She seemed to know what she was talking about, and she was insistent. We figured, 'Hey, it's her husband—why not humor the woman? What can it hurt?'"

"Your confidence is overwhelming," Nick said. "You might be surprised to know that—"

"Uh-oh," Massino interrupted.

Nick looked up. Massino was staring over Nick's shoulder at something behind him. He twisted around and saw a young girl standing in the center of the row about thirty feet away.

"Is that the kid?" Nick asked.

"Yeah."

"She can't see her father like this—cover him up." He raised his voice and called out to the little girl. "Hey, go back—go back to the house."

The little girl didn't move.

She was young, no more than three or four, with a very slight build that made her look even younger. She wore a broad, floppy sun hat that covered most of her face and dark sunglasses with thick frames that were too old and too big for her face. She had thick auburn hair pulled behind her in a ponytail that stood out like fire against her creamy skin. She was dressed in a sleeveless cotton sundress the color of the Carolina sky and, strangely, a pair of thick socks but no shoes.

Nick scrambled to his feet and hurried toward her. "Did you hear what I said? You shouldn't be here—go find your mother." He did his best to block her view of the grisly scene behind him, but she didn't seem to be trying to look. She wasn't looking at Nick either; she seemed to be staring just off to the side. The little girl stood with her arms bent at the elbows, rotating both hands in constant circles as though she were trying to limber up her wrists.

Nick knelt down in front of her. "Excuse me—I'm talking to you."

Ends of Earth 2nd pass.indd 21 6/17/09 4:31:45 PM

Still she refused to make eye contact, and her little hands kept circling.

"Hey! Little girl!" Nick reached out and gently touched her right arm with his fingers; the instant he did she let out a piercing shriek that made him jerk back. The little girl turned on her heels and ran back toward the house, making intermittent shrieks as she went.

Nick turned to the detective. "What was that all about? I barely touched her."

"Better go find the mom," Massino said. "We don't want her getting the wrong idea."

Nick let out a groan and reluctantly started down the row after her. *The wrong idea*, he thought. *What's the kid's problem, anyway? And what's with the mom? She lets her daughter go wandering around a crime scene? That's just what you want—to let your little girl find her dad's dead body. If the kid wasn't damaged before, she would be after that.*

Nick came to the end of the row and stepped out onto the grass. Halfway to the farmhouse he saw the mother kneeling in front of the little girl. *Terrific*, he thought. He could just imagine the story the girl was probably telling her mother—about the bad man with the scary eyes who squeezed her arm until blood shot out of her fingertips. Nick had never been good with children. It wasn't that he didn't like them; they just didn't seem to like him. Maybe it was the glasses—he should have remembered to take them off. The glasses never helped. He made the mistake of bending over a baby crib once and the kid went ballistic, as if Nick were the baby mobile from hell. It took the mom an hour to calm the kid down again—he was probably in therapy now. And moms are so defensive; they're like mother bears protecting their cubs. You can't reason with them—they're too busy ripping open your bowels with their claws. *How am I going to explain this?* he wondered.

"Lady, I barely touched your daughter."

"Then why is she screaming her head off?"

"How would I know? Maybe she's weird." Great—that'll go over big.

Ends of Earth 2nd pass.indd 22 6/17/09 4:31:45 PM

The woman stood up as Nick approached and he braced himself for a verbal barrage—but she said nothing.

Her face seemed strangely familiar . . .

She stepped in close to him and looked up into his enormous eyes. She rested her hands on his chest, stretched up on her tiptoes, and kissed him on the cheek.

"Hello, Nick. It's been a long time."

Ends of Earth 2nd pass.indd 23 6/17/09 4:31:45 PM