

## CHAPTER 1

*Northern Virginia, 1998*

The sheriff looked out over the crowded backyard. People were frantically searching everywhere: sheriff's deputies, crime scene technicians, even file clerks and secretaries from the Warren County Sheriff's Department whose hearts had been touched by the news. Everyone wanted to help: friends, neighbors, church members, even total strangers from as far away as Front Royal who had heard about the missing three-year-old boy and had driven over to lend a hand with the search.

But there was no sign of the boy anywhere.

It was late now, well after midnight, and the sheriff was privately beginning to lose hope. He kept up a bold front for the sake of the frantic mother, but he had worked kidnappings and child abductions before, and he knew that the first twenty-four hours were critical. Unfortunately, this was the second day of the search, and the boy's odds of survival were diminishing fast.

"Is there anything new you can tell me? Anything at all?"

The sheriff turned to the woman; her face was contorted by fear and exhaustion, and her panic-stricken eyes stared up at him from sunken gray pools. "I told you I'd tell you the minute we know anything."

"That was an hour ago."

"That was ten minutes ago. We'll find your boy, Mrs. Coleman—it just takes time."

"It seems to be taking longer than it should."

"Not at all," the sheriff lied. "Look at all these people pitching in—if your boy's anywhere around here, they'll find him."

"What if he's not around here? Has Mark told you anything else?"

"I'm afraid your husband has decided not to cooperate."

"Maybe I should try talking to him again."

"I don't think that will help, and it'll only make you feel worse. Right now you need to keep your hopes up and let us do our work. I'll keep you posted—I promise."

"Then I'll help search."

“You’ll only slow us down, Mrs. Coleman—people keep stopping to take care of you instead of searching. If you want something to do, go back and pitch in at the refreshment table.”

“That’s a good idea,” she mumbled. “Everyone’s working so hard—they’ll be hungry . . .” Her voice trailed off as she turned away.

Just then a sheriff’s deputy approached and nodded a greeting.

“Where have you been, Elgin?” the sheriff asked. “You’ve been gone for hours.”

“I went to find her, just like you told me. She lives way up on top of the mountain above Endor, y’know—thought I’d like to never find her.”

“Well, did you?”

“Eventually. It’s like a prison up there—she’s got the whole place surrounded by chain-link fence and she keeps the gate chained shut. She don’t have no phone—I had to just sit there and lay on the horn until she finally came to the gate. Any news here?”

“Nothing. We’ve looked everywhere we can think of.”

“The crawl space?”

“Checked it twice. Checked the attic too, but he wasn’t there, thank the Lord—the boy wouldn’t have lasted an hour up there in this heat. I had the city engineers bring maps of all the storm drains and culverts—nothing. We searched the woods over there—been over it twice, but we’re looking again. A bunch of the neighbors walked that cornfield hand in hand, but they didn’t find him there. Did you fetch her down?”

“She wouldn’t come with me—insisted on drivin’ herself. Creepiest thing I ever saw, Gus; I’m layin’ on the horn and three big dogs come walkin’ up to the gate. Biggest mutts I ever saw—they just stood there and looked me over—I swear I thought they were black bears at first. Then the woman comes walkin’ up nice and slow, wearin’ a long white robe with her black hair hangin’ all around. And there’s another dog walkin’ beside her—a mangy old gray mongrel—and the thing’s only got three legs. Three legs! What about the husband—has he said anything more?”

“Nothing. He took the boy, no doubt about it—but he’s not about to tell us where he put him.”

“Just to spite his ex-wife?”

“He’s got a knife in her heart and he’s just gonna twist it—a woman he used to be married to. We’ve tried all we can—threatened him with everything from hell to high water, but he’s not talking. The fool’s willing to let his own boy die just to cause the woman pain. You know, people can be mean as snakes sometimes. You say she wouldn’t come with you—but she is coming, right?”

“She’s already here. Get this, Gus: She walks right up to the gate and looks at me with one eye—then she snaps her fingers like this and all four dogs sit down at the same time. Never said a word to ’em—it’s like the dogs could read her mind. I don’t mind tellin’ you, it made my skin crawl.”

The sheriff shook his head. “She’s as weird as her old man was.”

“I don’t mind ‘weird’—hey, *I’m* weird—but this is somethin’ else. Know what she said to me? ‘Who dares to invade my privacy?’ I’m tellin’ you, Gus, it’s true what people say about her: The woman is a witch.”

“I don’t care if she’s the Ghost of Christmas Past, as long as she can help us find that boy. Where is she now?”

“Right over there—you can’t miss her.”

The sheriff looked; standing on a small berm at the far edge of the property was a woman in her mid-twenties dressed in a flowing white gown. Her hair was long and straight and she kept her head down so that the hair hung in front of her face. Beside her was a dog: mottled gray, lean and angular—and it had only three legs. Standing atop the berm, the two of them were almost silhouetted against the new moon—and the sheriff had to admit, the image was definitely eerie.

He walked over to her. She did not look up as he approached.

“Are you Alena Savard?” he asked.

The woman cocked her head to one side and slowly raised it until her hair parted slightly, exposing a pale sliver of flesh and one emerald eye that glared up at the sheriff. “I am.”

“Can you help us, Ms. Savard?”

“What is it you require?”

“We’ve got a missing boy here, about three years old. It’s a domestic dispute. There was an ugly divorce and a custody battle and the husband lost. First he threatened

to take the boy away, then he threatened to harm him—it looks like he might have done both.”

“Why didn’t you stop him?”

“Because you can’t arrest a man for a crime he hasn’t committed yet. I don’t like it either, but that’s the law. The wife got a restraining order, but it didn’t much matter—a man who’s willing to let his own boy die won’t be stopped by a piece of paper.”

“You people,” she said. “My dogs are more human than you.”

“Right now I’m inclined to agree with you. We’ve got the husband in custody, but he refuses to talk to us; the boy’s been missing for almost two days now, and we’re hoping we can find him before—”

“I find the dead.”

“Well, we’re hoping he’s still alive.”

“I find the dead—only the dead.”

“Keep your voice down, will you? The mother is right over there, and she’s about out of her mind already.”

“Why did you send for me?”

“I’ve heard about your father—I thought maybe you could help.”

“If the boy is alive I’ll be of no use to you. You think the boy is dead, or you wouldn’t have sent for me.”

“I think he *might* be dead—it’s an option we have to consider. We need to know if we should keep looking, and you might be able to tell us. Will you help?”

Alena paused. “I will help—under the following conditions: No one is to speak to me or come near; the moment I finish I will leave—I will answer no further questions; and if anyone attempts to approach my dog in any way I will leave immediately. Do you agree to these conditions?”

“Agreed. What do you need me to do?”

“Nothing. Just leave me alone.”

“One thing,” the sheriff said. “That woman over there is the boy’s mother. Try to stay clear of her; it’s best if she doesn’t know you’re here.”

He walked back to the house and turned to watch.

The woman seemed to do nothing at first—then she slowly raised both arms and looked up into the night sky. She lowered her head again and swung it slowly from side to side, as if she were mopping a table with her long black hair. She shook both arms loosely, like a pitcher limbering up, then began to walk around in small circles.

Everyone in the yard began to stop and stare.

She knelt down in front of her dog and took a brightly colored bandanna from around her neck; she showed it to the dog as if she were asking for its approval—then she slipped the bandanna around the dog’s neck and straightened it.

The entire yard fell silent.

She stood up again and snapped her fingers; the dog immediately circled her once and sat down at her side. She snapped her fingers a second time and made a tossing motion with her right hand; the dog jumped to its feet and began to zigzag across the yard with its nose quivering just above the ground.

The mother approached the sheriff from behind and tugged on his sleeve. “Who is that woman?” she asked.

“Never you mind,” the sheriff said. “She’s here to help us find your boy.”

“How can she help?”

“We can use all the help we can get right now, Mrs. Coleman.”

“But—what is she doing? It looks so strange.”

“I don’t know, exactly.”

“You already tried a search-and-rescue dog—it couldn’t find him.”

“This is a different kind of dog. We’re hoping it’ll have better luck.”

The dog quickly worked its way across the berm and around the backyard with the woman following close behind; she made no eye contact with anyone as they worked, and the other volunteers all nervously stepped back and gave them a wide berth wherever they turned.

When they reached the edge of the woods the dog suddenly stopped; it swung its head back and forth over an area no larger than a frying pan—and then it lay down. The woman knelt down in front of the dog and looked into its eyes; she made a shrugging motion and looked again. The dog just lay still and stared up at her.

The woman stood up and looked across the yard at the sheriff. She pointed to the ground near the trunk of an old beech tree.

The mother grabbed the sheriff's arm. "Why is she doing that? Why is she pointing at the ground?"

The sheriff didn't answer.

"What does that mean? Tell me!"

"Keep her here," the sheriff said to Elgin, then started toward the woman and the dog.

He called out to Alena as he approached. "Are you sure?"

She nodded.

The sheriff tested the spot with the toe of his shoe; the soil was loose. He turned to one of his deputies and called back, "Bring me a shovel."

The mother let out a shriek and twisted out of Elgin's hands.

Alena knelt down in front of her dog again and flashed it a beaming grin, then rolled onto her back as the two of them began to wrestle together in the grass.

The mother ran to the beech tree and threw herself in front of it. "It's not him!" she shouted. "He isn't dead!"

"We'll know in a minute," the sheriff said, readying the spade above the ground—but the woman grabbed the handle with both hands and stopped him.

"Don't!" she screamed. "If you find him here, they'll stop looking for him!"

"Mrs. Coleman—please."

The mother released the shovel and turned on Alena. "Who are you?" she demanded.

Alena scrambled awkwardly to her feet.

"Who told you to come here anyway? I didn't ask you to! I don't want you here!"

Alena lowered her head until her black hair covered her eyes.

"I know who you are—you're the witch, come to take my boy! He was alive until you came here! He was—"

Her voice failed mid-sentence, and she collapsed to the ground sobbing. Alena turned without a word and hurried away.

## CHAPTER 2

*Northern Virginia, June 2008*

Donovan approached the fluttering yellow crime scene tape and held up his FBI credentials to the officer, a sheriff's deputy from the Warren County Sheriff's Department. The deputy took the leather folder from his hand and began to read it carefully.

"We don't get many of you FBI fellas out here in Warren County," the deputy said.

"No kidding." Donovan took his credentials from the deputy's hand and the man flashed a disappointed look, as though Donovan had taken away a book before he had finished reading.

"My name's Elgin Tate," he said, and then added almost as an afterthought, "*Deputy* Elgin Tate." He grinned and extended his hand and Donovan took it.

"Special Agent Nathan Donovan."

The deputy let out a low, "Hoooo-ee!"

Donovan pointed to the tape. "Mind if I come in and take a look around?"

"Why ask me?"

"Weren't you guys the first ones on the scene?"

"Yes, sir. We got the call from the medical examiner's office yesterday afternoon."

"Then this is your crime scene, Deputy—you've got jurisdiction here, and I can't enter the crime scene until you give me permission."

The deputy took on a look of renewed importance. "Come right on in, Mr. Donovan."

Donovan swung one leg over the tape just as the deputy hoisted it high overhead and held it there. Donovan turned and looked at him. "I already flossed this morning."

"Sorry." The deputy released the tape and took a step back.

"Thank you."

"Gonna be a hot one," the deputy observed.

"It's getting there."

"Too hot for June. Too hot for this time of morning."

“Right on both counts.”

“They tell me you boys are gonna be in charge here.”

“That depends on what we find. Where are these graves?”

“Right over there.”

Donovan looked across the field but saw nothing. Until a month ago this area of rural Virginia had been thick virgin woodland—but now the entire area had been scraped clean for two hundred yards on all sides, leaving nothing but featureless brown loam littered with gray-green rock as far as the eye could see. Masses of bulldozed trees lay in twisted piles, awaiting an endless caravan of trucks that would haul them off to paper mills farther to the south; red flags fluttered atop pillars of soil that stood like castle parapets, marking the level of the original surface before excavation had begun.

“Want me to show you?” the deputy offered.

“Just point. If you don’t mind, I like to get my own first impressions.”

Fifty yards ahead Donovan came to a ridge where four rectangular holes lay side by side in the earth, each just a few yards from the next. There were no headstones, but a crude wooden cross made of two-by-fours had been hammered into the ground to mark the head of each grave. The land around the crosses had not yet been disturbed by the excavators and bulldozers, but at the foot of each grave the ground suddenly dropped off, forming a short vertical cliff that exposed the end of each grave as if a four-toothed giant had taken a bite from the hillside.

Donovan could see at a glance what had happened: Some hapless construction worker had sunk the teeth of his backhoe into the rocky Virginia hillside, unaware that he was about to discover the location of a long-forgotten graveyard. It was a fairly common occurrence these days, especially in areas like rural Virginia where people had been living and dying for four hundred years. Survivors moved westward, towns expanded in unpredictable directions, and old graveyards like this one were gradually covered over and forgotten, awaiting the day—sometimes centuries later—when some unfortunate builder would stick a shovel in the ground and find a skull staring back at him. It was just bad luck, that’s all, hard on the nerves and even harder on the checkbook—because every time it happened the builder was required by law to stop construction until every single grave was identified and carefully moved to a new location. God help you if the

graveyard turned out to be sizable, and God help you even more if somebody famous turned out to be buried there—because then the historic preservation people got involved, and that’s when things really got expensive.

*But that’s the law*, Donovan thought, and it didn’t matter to the law whether your intended building project was just a new backyard septic tank or a project the size of this one—a thousand-acre super-regional mall and entertainment complex that would eventually include hotels, a water park, office condominiums, and a million and a half square feet of prime retail space predicted to attract “destination shoppers” from everywhere east of the Mississippi.

It doesn’t matter who you are either—whether you’re just a lowly Virginia homeowner with backed-up toilets or the guy who’s bankrolling this place—a man who, just five months from now, would probably become the next president of the United States. The law doesn’t care; no matter who you are or what you’re building, you’re going to stop everything until those graves are relocated, no matter how long it takes and no matter what it costs—and you’re going to pick up the check.

But that’s not why Donovan was there; the FBI wasn’t in the grave relocation business. There was something different about this graveyard. The construction workers here had found something else—something much more serious.

He approached the first grave and carefully placed one foot beside the opening, easing his 220-pound frame forward to make sure the edge would support his weight without crumbling. He leaned over the opening and peered down.

There, at the bottom, was the body of Nick Polchak.

Donovan cocked his head to the left to view the body right side up. Nick was dressed the way he always was, the only way Donovan had ever seen him—in baggy cargo shorts that always exaggerated the leanness of his long legs. He wore a collared short-sleeved shirt that looked as if he had selected it blindfolded from a rack at Goodwill—which he might very well have done. The shirt draped away from his body like a cape, and underneath it was a gray Penn State T-shirt; the top of the logo was just visible above his large hands, which were folded across his chest with the fingers interlocked, causing his knuckles to blanch like knots in a rope. His feet were shoved

sockless into a pair of well-worn Nikes, and his legs were incongruously crossed at the ankles as if he were lounging on a beach chair instead of lying at the bottom of a grave.

Donovan looked at his face. There they were, as always—Nick’s enormous spectacles. Without those glasses Nick was legally blind, but with them he possessed extraordinary close-up vision, almost as if he had two microscopes straddling his nose—a valuable asset for a man who had spent his life studying the microscopic features of blowflies and maggots. After all these years the glasses had become a permanent fixture of his face; Donovan had sometimes wondered if he would even recognize Nick without them.

But Nick’s face looked different this time; this time his eyes were closed—something Donovan had never seen before. His huge brown eyes no longer floated like two chestnuts, distorted and magnified by the thick lenses. His eyes were closed now, and the lenses looked like a pair of empty TV screens.

Donovan shook his head. “I knew I’d find you like this some day. It was only a matter of time.”

He bent down and picked up a pebble from the ground. He held it out over the open grave, aimed carefully, and released it. It bounced off the center of Nick’s forehead.

Two soft brown orbs suddenly blinked open. “Hey, watch it—you could kill a guy that way.”

“What are you doing down there?”

“I was taking a nap—until somebody tried to bury me.”

“You were taking a nap in a grave?”

“It’s the coolest place I could find. It was empty—nobody was using it.”

“I’m not paying you to take naps,” Donovan said.

Nick’s eyes widened. “You’re *paying* me this time? Maybe I am dead.”

“It was just an expression.”

“I figured.”

Nick climbed to his feet and began to dust himself off. The grave was shallow, no more than three feet deep, and the lip of the opening was even with Nick’s waist. He extended his hand up to Donovan, who braced himself and hoisted Nick out of the hole

with a single powerful tug. The two men stood face-to-face now; Nick was slightly taller than Donovan, but the FBI agent outweighed him by at least thirty pounds.

Donovan looked at Nick's face and smiled.

Nick shook his head. "You do that every time, you know."

"Do what?"

"Grin like a gargoyle the first time you look at my glasses."

"It's either that or scream and run."

"Look who's talking. I have to look at you *through* these glasses."

Donovan glanced down at Nick's legs. "Man, don't you *ever* get any sun?"

"I'm a college professor," Nick said, "not a field agent with the Federal Bureau of I-travel-to-exotic-hot-spots-and-save-the-world."

"Is that my job? I wish somebody had told me."

"How's Macy doing?"

"She's good, Nick. She's pregnant—did I tell you?"

Nick paused. "Is that a good thing?"

"It's the best."

"Then I'm happy for you both. Tell Macy that for me—and tell her I'm still available if she ever decides to stop polluting the gene pool through inferior mate selection."

"Yeah, I'll be sure and tell her that. When did you get up here?"

"About an hour ago. I drove up from NC State this morning."

"Just in time for your afternoon nap."

"An FBI agent told me he'd be here to meet me. Like most government officials, he lied."

"Then you got my message."

"You were lucky. We're in summer sessions right now—I don't have any classes."

"Would it have mattered?"

"No—but I like to play hard to get."

"Any trouble finding the place?"

"It's hard to miss."

“Have you had a look around yet?”

Nick motioned for Donovan to follow him; he led him around to the bottom of the ridge where the foot of each grave lay exposed like a row of open ovens. “It’s pretty obvious what happened,” he said.

“Tell me.”

“The builders were excavating this hillside—you can tell from the surveyor’s markers that this entire area is scheduled to be removed. They brought in a thirty-ton Komatsu excavator with a backhoe attached to the front.”

“How do you know that?”

Nick pointed over his shoulder, and Donovan turned and looked: Twenty yards behind them sat a thirty-ton Komatsu excavator with a backhoe attached to the front.

“Are you sure you’re an FBI agent?” Nick asked.

“Keep going.”

“The bucket of the backhoe looks about three feet wide. I figure the operator made about six passes through the hillside before he finally noticed something; by that time he had exposed the ends of these four graves. He probably figured there might be more, so he stopped.” Nick pointed to the openings and traced an imaginary line from left to right. “You can see that the caskets are buried at varying depths—that’s typical of an older graveyard. I’d say the average depth is about four or five feet.” He stepped up to the grave on the left and pried a crumbling splinter of wood from the edge of the hole. “The casket is almost completely decayed. It’s definitely old; a forensic anthropologist might be able to give us a date—possibly even an identification if they’re lucky enough to find any artifacts among the remains.”

He pointed to a thin layer of stones stacked across the top of the casket. “You find this sometimes in older graves,” Nick said. “The stones were put there to keep predators from digging their way in. It also keeps the ground from settling once the casket rots away.” Above the layer of rock was an inch or two of compacted soil, and above that was the open space where Nick had been lying.

“You can see that they started to excavate each of the graves. The workers probably figured, ‘Hey, they’ll have to be moved anyway—might as well get started.’”

They got pretty far on the first one there—but the second grave was different. They stopped digging when they found this.”

Nick pointed to a foot-thick layer of soil that remained above the second casket. Long thin strips of grayish-white bone peeked out from beneath the dark soil.

“That’s the humerus up there. You can see the ball of the shoulder joint and a little bit of the clavicle underneath. The crest of the pelvis is just visible there, and down here—” He pointed to the soil at the end of the grave; the jagged stumps of four small bones projected from the earth like tree roots where the backhoe had cleanly severed them. “This is a tibia and fibula,” Nick said. “Here’s the other pair right beside them. You can see that the legs were pressed close together; my guess is that the body was buried on its side, most likely in a fetal position.”

“Why?”

“When you fold a body up it requires a smaller hole. It’s a real time-saver when you have to dig the hole yourself.”

Donovan looked at him. “You worry me sometimes.”

“Two bodies in the same grave,” Nick said, “the owner downstairs and a renter in the apartment above. It’s pretty clever if you think about it. What better place to hide a body than a graveyard?”

“Then you think the renter was murdered.”

“So do you—you wouldn’t have called me if you didn’t. This is a rural area, Donovan, there are plenty of places to bury a body—nobody has to double up. In older cities when the graveyards got overcrowded they used to bury people on top of each other, but always in a casket and always in ceremonial fashion—laid out on their backs nice and comfy so they could all ‘rest in peace.’ Nobody buried people like this—tucked up in a ball without even a wooden box to call home. This guy was murdered all right—a forensic anthropologist can probably verify that by looking for bullet fragments or cut marks on the bone. The question is, ‘Who is this guy? And who killed him—and why?’ What you need is a postmortem interval—you need to establish time of death so you can begin to assemble a list of suspects. I suppose that’s why you sent for a bug man—that’s why you need me. What I can’t figure out is why you’re here.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why is the FBI involved in this? Why do you guys care?”

Donovan nodded to the remaining graves. “The third grave is just like the first one,” he said. “One grave, one body. But the fourth grave is just like this one—there’s a second body buried on top of the original casket. That strongly suggests the same person committed both murders.”

“So?”

“There’s a lot of land still to be excavated here—there’s no telling how many more graves they might find. They’ve already found two of these double graves; there could be more. You know how the FBI classifies these things: three or more murders with the same modus constitute a serial killer—that’s when we get involved.”

“Okay—but why are *you* here? If I remember correctly, aren’t you a counterterrorism agent?”

“That’s right.”

“Does the FBI suspect that this has something to do with terrorism?”

“No.”

Nick waited.

“It’s a little . . . complicated.”

“I’m listening.”

Donovan paused. “Remember the last time we worked together?”

“In New York, in TriBeCa, a couple of years ago. I remember clearly—you didn’t pay me that time either.”

“Well, that turned out to be a big case for me. It seems I stopped a guy who was planning to attack the city with bubonic plague.”

“I remember reading about that—on the cover of the *New York Times*, in fact. Not bad—that must have been a shot in the arm for your career.”

“To say the least. The Bureau takes a lot of heat these days; we get so many complaints and criticisms that when something actually goes right we want to make sure everybody knows about it.”

“So they want everybody to know about *you*.”

“I guess so. They pulled me off the field and brought me down to Washington. The camera seems to be following me right now, and I suppose they want to take

advantage of it. It's kind of a PR job, really. I go to a lot of parties; I do a lot of interviews."

"They pulled you off the field? Is that what you wanted?"

"They didn't ask."

"I'm asking."

"Some days I could slash my wrists," Donovan said, "but that's another story. To answer your question, I'm standing here with you because this is where they want me right now."

"Here? Why?"

Donovan nodded to the massive excavation site that surrounded them. "*The Patriot Center*—that's what they're planning to call this place. It'll be the largest mall in the eastern U.S., situated right off I-66, the main east-west corridor out of Washington DC, just an hour from the city. A thousand acres of Virginia countryside—and one man owns the whole shebang."

"Who?"

"John Henry Braden."

"*Senator Braden*?"

"In five months it'll be *President Braden*, according to the buzz in Washington. This is all his land, Nick—not just the Patriot Center, but as far as the eye can see—most of it belongs to him."

"That was a pretty good investment."

"Can you imagine what will happen to the value of his land once the Patriot Center is completed? And not just around here—all along the I-66 corridor. Braden owns land all along the way."

"How can one man afford to buy so much land?"

"He didn't buy it, he inherited it. It's been in his family for decades—centuries, from what I hear. Braden is one of those old Virginia blue bloods. The man has deep roots, and deep roots make deep pockets."

"I suppose his people all came over on the *Mayflower*."

"Are you kidding? Braden can trace his family tree all the way back to Jamestown—he looks down his nose at the stragglers who came over on the *Mayflower*."

“I still don’t get it,” Nick said. “What if Braden does have a lot of money on the line here? Why does the FBI care?”

“Politics. Braden sits on some very influential committees—the sort of committees that decide the annual budget for the Department of Justice, which determines the annual budget for the FBI. Get the idea? If Braden wants something from the FBI, all he has to do is ask.”

“And you think he asked for you?”

“That’s what I hear.”

“Why you? The FBI has all kinds of people who could handle this. If Braden wants you here, he probably wants the camera that’s following you.”

“I agree.”

“But why would Braden want this kind of publicity?”

“Because he’s running for president of the United States, and every presidential candidate needs to appear tough on crime. He’s got a horse farm in Middleburg about half an hour east of here. John Henry Braden can’t have a serial killer operating in his own backyard; whatever develops here, he wants the American public to see that he’s on top of it.”

“Sounds like a risky move to me. What if it turns out worse than he thought? This could backfire on him.”

“It could—but he’s betting it won’t, and in the meantime he looks like a man of courage and conviction. That’s important; Braden wants voters to know that he won’t put up with crime in his own state, and he won’t put up with it when he’s in the Oval Office.”

“You mean *if*.”

“Not from what I hear.”

“So your role here is largely symbolic?”

“Thanks for the kick in the groin. Yes, my role is largely symbolic. I symbolize the full attention and complete resources of the FBI—and John Henry Braden.”

“Impressive,” Nick said. “The Department of Entomology won’t even post my photo on their Web site.”

“There might be a reason for that.”

“Thanks. So—how do you want to proceed here?”

“I want us to work it from both sides. I want you here; like you said, I need a postmortem interval—an estimate of how long those two bodies have been dead. I mean, are we talking decades or centuries here? Is this an active serial killer we’re talking about, or just ancient history?”

“I’m not sure I can help you,” Nick said. “These bones look pretty old to me. You know how it works, Donovan—the older the body, the less an entomologist will find.”

“Don’t be so modest. I’ve seen you do magic.”

“It all depends on what we find. *Calliphorids* are generally the first insects to colonize a body—the blowflies—sometimes within minutes of death. Suppose a murderer kills a victim, then sets the body aside while he digs a hole; even if he only takes a few minutes, female blowflies have already found the body and laid their eggs on it. So when the killer buries the body, he buries the blowfly eggs along with it. The eggs hatch underground, the maggots mature and pupate, adult flies emerge—but a lot of them can’t make it back to the surface again. I might find their bodies left behind.”

“What would that tell us?”

“It depends on the specific species. Suppose I find *Cochliomyia macellaria*, the secondary screwworm fly. The secondary screwworm fly doesn’t like fresh bodies—it prefers to wait a day or two until things dry out a little. That would tell us the victim was left aboveground for a day or two before he was buried. And *Cochliomyia macellaria* is rarely found in buildings, so that would mean the victim was probably killed outdoors. *Macellaria* is a warm-weather fly—but suppose I find *Phormia regina*, the black blowfly—they prefer cold weather. In that case we might be able to narrow the time of death to a specific season. And if we’re really lucky, we might even find a species that doesn’t belong here—a species that isn’t native to this area—and that would tell us the body was transported here from somewhere else. Like I said: It depends on what we find.”

“Fair enough. See what you can find.”

“If you ask me, what you really need here is a forensic anthropologist. He can give you a better PMI than I can—he can test the nitrogen levels in the bone.”

“There could be other bodies buried here, Nick, and they might not be as old as these two. If we find one, I’ll have to send for you anyway. I’d rather have you in on this

from the beginning; you're good at puzzles, and this looks like a big one to me. You know how to work a crime scene and you get things done—in your own manic, self-destructive way.”

“Well, I'll see what I can do—but until we find a fresher body I could use that anthropologist.”

“You'll have one by tomorrow. You should have everything you need within twenty-four hours; if you don't, call me. Where do you want them to set up the tent?”

Nick looked over the area. “On top of the ridge, near the graves—but tell them not to put it too close. I don't want the shade late in the afternoon—I'll need the sunlight.”

“Anything else?”

“I'd like to know a few details, like—where am I staying?”

“There's a little town called Endor in the foothills just a couple of miles from here. They've got a nice little place up there.”

“Describe it for me.”

“Nice. Little.”

“I passed a Hyatt on the way out.”

“So far away. So inconvenient.”

“This 'nice little place' has cockroaches, doesn't it?”

“I wanted you to feel at home.”

“Thanks. How do I find it?”

“Ask the sheriff's deputy. I think he's a local.”

“Yes, I deduced that.”

“Anything else?”

“I'd like to know something: While I'm collecting desiccated insects from corpses and camping out at the No-Tell Motel in Endor, what exactly will you be doing—attending extra parties?”

“No, I'll be checking with the FBI's National Crime Information Center to see if there are any old missing persons reports from this area that might help us identify those two bodies. I'll check the local law enforcement records too—though I expect that to take longer. Between the two of us, I'm hoping we can figure this thing out.”

“And what if there are more than two bodies?”

Donovan shrugged. “We’ll worry about that when the time comes.”

The two men started back toward the sheriff’s deputy.

“How long do you think they’ll keep you in Washington?” Nick asked.

“Just until the spotlight fades, I suppose. I hope it’s soon—we miss New York.”

“You should screw up all the time the way I do. They let me go wherever I want.”

“Thanks for the career tip.” He stopped and turned to Nick. “One more thing: Stay away from the camera, okay? Don’t talk to the press. No interviews. We’ll have a public liaison officer here, and everything will go through him. Got it?”

“Don’t you trust me?”

“If I didn’t trust you, you wouldn’t be here. There’s a lot riding on this, Nick. A lot of important people will be watching—the sort of people who care a lot about what other people think.”

“Including a certain U.S. senator?”

“Yeah—especially him.”

### CHAPTER 3

Nick knelt on two wooden planks he had placed on either side of the skeleton to keep his weight from compacting the soil further and possibly damaging artifacts that might be recovered below. *A fat lot of good it'll do now*, he thought. *The construction worker who discovered this skeleton probably stomped all over it in hobnailed boots*. But you couldn't really blame him—all the poor guy was expecting to find was the grave's rightful owner resting peacefully in a pine box; he sure wasn't expecting to find a second resident sleeping in the top bunk.

Still, the construction worker hadn't made Nick's job any easier. The hide beetles and rove beetles that are attracted to buried remains prefer to dig down through the freshly loosened soil directly above the body; by removing the earth above the skeleton, the worker had inadvertently removed most of the insect evidence that might help Nick determine a postmortem interval. Most of the pupal cases and insect body fragments would be gone; a few might still remain, but finding them wouldn't be easy.

He knew the job would be even tougher for the forensic anthropologist Donovan promised to send. Nick gently swept away the soil from the humerus with a soft bristle brush, gradually exposing more of the bone; sure enough, he found the bone shattered twice before it even connected with the radius and ulna, probably because the nose of a shovel had chopped it in half. He crawled forward on the boards and brushed the dirt away from the side of the skull; he found it crushed flat like an eggshell, forming a delicate mosaic in the shape of a human head. *Good luck determining cause of death with this guy*, Nick thought. The FA would pull his hair out attempting to recover any reliable forensic evidence from this mess.

Nick hoped he'd have better luck with the body in the fourth grave—maybe it would be in better shape. But even if it wasn't, it might not be his last opportunity. There was no telling how many graves they would find in this old graveyard—and how many double occupants might be among them. Somebody had come up with the clever idea of disposing of a body by burying it on top of an existing grave, and whoever it was had used the technique at least twice. Who knows? Maybe the killer had used it three times—or four, or five. With each additional victim there would be more evidence—and more of a chance to find out who the killer was.

“Excuse me, I’m going to need you to leave.”

Nick rocked back onto his heels and straightened; his eyes were now level with the surface of the ground. He cupped his hand over his eyes and looked up to see an imperious-looking woman glaring down at him from the side of the grave. She stood like a pyramid with her trousered legs spread wide and her fists planted firmly on her hips. The image triggered an old memory of the Jolly Green Giant standing astride a valley of Golden Niblets—but there was nothing jolly about this woman. She was dressed in green khaki from head to foot, with a hunter-orange vest draped over her work shirt. Both shoulders were emblazoned with official-looking insignia embroidered in gold and blue, though from his vantage point Nick couldn’t read either one of them. Her hands were protected by white surgical gloves, making her long fingers look like a pair of cow’s udders after a good milking. Her narrow waist was girded by some sort of combination fanny pack/accessory holder, and around her neck she wore a gleaming silver whistle dangling from a black lanyard. Her head and face were enveloped by a billow of dark mosquito netting that draped down from a baseball-style cap, completely obscuring her features and expression—except for a condescending scowl, which somehow still managed to show through.

Nick looked up at her. “I beg your pardon?”

“I said, ‘I’m going to need you to leave.’”

“Who are you?”

She twisted and pointed to the shoulder patch on one arm; Nick squinted but still couldn’t make out the words. With an impatient huff she twisted farther and bent down a little more.

“We could save a lot of time if you’d just tell me,” Nick said. “Unless you need me to read it to you.”

She straightened. “My name is Marjory Claire Anderson-Forsyth.”

Nick waited. “Is this multiple choice, or do I have to remember the whole thing?”

She didn’t smile. “I am principal owner and chief trainer of the Virginia chapter of Fidelis Search and Rescue Dogs—*that* is what it says on my insignia. I have been contracted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation to locate the graves in this cemetery.”

“I already found this one,” Nick said. “You’ll have to look someplace else.”

She didn't reply.

Nick got up from his knees and dusted them off; he was almost even with the woman's waist now and the view was not improving. Twenty yards to his right he spotted a large black-and-tan dog darting back and forth, nervously sniffing at the ground. The dog was wearing a hunter-orange vest exactly like the woman's.

"Is that a cadaver dog?" Nick asked.

"That is a *forensic detection* dog," she corrected, "and I'm afraid your scent is distracting."

"The label said I'd be irresistible. I'm getting my money back."

Still no response.

It was quickly becoming apparent that the woman lacked a sense of humor—a human personality defect that Nick found particularly annoying. He hoisted himself out of the hole and stood up beside the woman. She was even taller than she appeared to be from below, flat-chested and thin as a wire. She lifted the front of the mosquito netting and pulled it back over her head, exposing her face. *You may now kiss the bride* was the thought that flashed through Nick's mind—it was not a pleasant thought. Her face matched the rest of her: It was long and thin with high cheekbones that ran down into sinewy sunken hollows like wax dripping over a ledge. Her hair was pulled back from her face in a bundle of tight curls of black and gray, and her dark eyes seemed to be frozen in a permanent glare—and right now they were glaring at Nick.

"Who *are* you?" she asked in exactly the same tone of voice Nick used when he came across an unfamiliar species of dung beetle.

He wiped his hands on his cargo shorts and extended one. "Nick Polchak," he said. "I'm a forensic entomologist from NC State."

She raised her gloved hands in front of her like a surgeon. "I need you to leave the area immediately."

Nick paused. "I'm afraid that's a bit of a problem. See, the FBI hired me too, and my job is to collect insect evidence from the—"

"Mr. Polchak, do you understand how a forensic detection dog operates?"

"I'm an entomologist," Nick said, "but I imagine it's similar to the way an insect operates. As the human body decomposes, it emits a series of chemical compounds as by-

products; so far, about four hundred of these substances have been identified. These chemicals work their way to the surface of the soil where insects can detect them. I suppose a cadaver dog works the same way: Because it possesses far more sensitive olfactory abilities than a human being, the dog is able to detect the same chemical indicators that insects do.”

“That is essentially correct.”

“Some of these graves might date back to colonial times. Can a dog find a body that old?”

“A border collie in the Czech Republic once detected a grave that was two *thousand* years old.”

“Impressive.”

“It’s a very delicate process—so I’m sure you can understand that there must be no distracting odors when the detection dog is attempting to do its work.”

“And I’m a distracting odor.”

“How clever of you.”

“Let me get this straight. ‘Bosco’ is over there trying to sniff out a grave—”

“His name is *not* ‘Bosco,’” she said through clenched teeth. “His pedigree name is Augusta’s King Edward of Stanroph. I address him simply as ‘King.’”

“He’s got a longer pedigree than you do,” Nick said. “You’d better get yourself a couple more names, or pretty soon he’ll be tossing biscuits to you.”

Nothing.

Nick was losing patience. “Look. Your dog is over there trying to sniff out a grave, but he’s apparently not having any luck—so you think I must be distracting him. Tell me something: Isn’t your dog able to distinguish between a living being and a decomposing body? Or is there something you’re trying to tell me? Because a friend would let me know.”

She took a slow, deep breath. “Mr. Polchak, I am trying to be patient with you, despite your adolescent attempts at humor. A forensic detection dog is a highly trained, highly sensitive animal, and you are posing a distraction to my dog. I’m sure you will agree that the first priority here is to identify the location of all remaining graves in this graveyard—a task which I will happily undertake just as soon as you—”

“Hey!” Nick shouted. He pointed at the dog, who was raising one leg and urinating on a small clump of grass.

The woman put her whistle to her lips and made two shrill blasts; the dog stopped and hung its head in apparent shame—but not before emptying its bladder.

“Tell your highly trained animal to stop peeing on my crime scene!” Nick said.

She waved off the comment like an annoying gnat. “That is an instinctive canine behavior. He probably detects the scent of a predator and he’s ‘overmarking’ the spot. It’s a normal territorial response.”

“You tell him this is *my* territory,” Nick said, “and tell him if he doesn’t stop, I’m going to ‘overmark’ *him*. I’m interested in predators too, lady. Some of them scavenge for human remains—they disarticulate bodies and carry off bones and other body parts. They sometimes leave markings behind—markings that might tell us what kind of predator it was and which season it would have been present here. That information might lead us to the time of year the victim died—unless your dog destroys the evidence first.”

“Mr. Polchak—,” she began, but Nick cut her off.

“Look, Marge, I’m going to cut you some slack here—not because you deserve it, but because I’m a really nice guy once you get past my distracting scent. I’m going to back off and give you and Bosco a little space, because even though I hate to admit it I happen to agree with you on one point: The priority here is to locate all the remaining graves. So why don’t you and ‘Mr. Sensitive’ there get started and I’ll just move off to the side?”

“Downwind,” she added.

Nick bit his lip. “Of course. We wouldn’t want Bosco to get distracted—he might wet his leg.”

Nick turned without further comment and headed back toward the spot where the deputy stood guard—downwind. He sat down and stretched out on an area of remaining grass and took out his cell phone. He dialed a number from memory.

“Donovan,” a voice said. “What’s up, Nick?”

“There are three bodies in one of the graves,” Nick said.

“Really? Which grave?”

“I haven’t decided yet. I have to kill her first.”

A pause. “Okay, what’s the problem?”

“Who hired the cadaver dog lady?”

“Beats me. I requested a dog team through the Bureau. She must be on somebody’s ‘approved vendor’ list. Why?”

“I need to know something: Whose crime scene is this?”

“Mine.”

“Okay, what about when you’re not here? Whose crime scene is it then?”

“Mine. Would you like to put your sister on the phone so I can tell her that the ball belongs to you?”

“Would you?”

“No. You kids will just have to work this out between the two of you—it’s a part of growing up. Now if you don’t mind, Dad has some work to do.”

Nick closed the phone.

Three hours later he was still sitting in the same spot. Elgin was sitting beside him now; he had meandered over and taken a seat beside Nick and the two men now were leaning back on their elbows and watching “Marge” and “Bosco” work. Marge carried a bundle of small wire flags in her left hand, each one topped by a rectangle of bright red plastic; Nick assumed that their purpose was to mark the location of each grave as it was identified—but after three hours no red flags were visible on the ground.

“Not makin’ much headway,” Elgin observed.

“Not a whole lot,” Nick replied. “Are you a betting man, Deputy?”

“At times. I play the lottery when the numbers get high enough.”

“How many graves would you bet there are in this graveyard?”

The deputy considered. “No way to tell.”

“If you had to bet.”

The deputy looked over the area. “Well—I see four in a row right there. I suppose that could be the end of it, but most likely not—I figure they’s at least another one or two on either side. But it don’t make sense they’d plant ’em all in one row like peas or pole beans, so I figure they’s another row or two behind ’em—maybe more.”

“That’s good figuring,” Nick said. “So what’s your guess?”

“If I had to bet? I’d say thirty—thereabouts.”

“And how many of those thirty has Bosco found so far?”

“Maybe he’s just warmin’ up.”

Nick looked at his watch. “What is he, a Crock-Pot?”

The dog wandered back and forth across the open area with its nose to the ground; from time to time Marge would call the dog back, reaching into a pouch at her waist and handing the dog some kind of tasty reward—for what, Nick had no idea. Then she would send the dog off again, sniffing and pawing in his brilliant orange vest. Throughout the whole process the woman would issue piercing commands with the silver whistle, causing the dog to constantly stop and shoot off in a different direction like a fur-covered bumper car.

“Any idea what she’s doin’?” the deputy asked.

“I’m picking up a little of it,” Nick said. “When she wants the dog to come, she blows the whistle; when she wants the dog to change directions, she blows the whistle; when she wants to give the dog a reward, she blows the whistle. I think I understand: After years of constant training, the dog has taught her to blow the whistle.”

The whistle shrieked again and Elgin winced. “Sure wish she’d stop blowin’ that thing.”

“Me too,” Nick said. “If I was the dog I’d go for her throat.”

They watched a while longer. The dog constantly stopped and sniffed, but never seemed to show any more interest in one spot than another.

“Nice-lookin’ animal,” Elgin offered.

“So am I,” Nick said. “I can’t find graves either.”

He took out his cell phone and dialed again. There was a click and then a pause at the other end.

“Now what?” Donovan sighed.

“The wonder of caller ID,” Nick said. “We’ve got a problem.”

“What problem?”

“The dog—it’s got a nose like a brick.”

Another pause. “You know what I’ve always admired about you, Nick?”

“Nothing that I know of.”

“You’re not a whiner. I was just saying to Macy the other day, ‘You know, Nick Polchak is weird and he wears big funny glasses, but he’s no whiner.’”

“Flatterer.”

“Whenever there’s a problem, you always find a way around it. That’s a great quality, Nick—I’d sure hate to see it stop now.”

“I’m telling you, the dog can’t smell. How am I supposed to analyze insect evidence from graves that we can’t find?”

“How long has this dog been searching?” Donovan asked.

“An eternity,” Nick said.

“Three hours—that’s when you called to annoy me last. Has it occurred to you that this dog is trying to pick up the scent from bones that could be two or three hundred years old?”

“What about the bodies buried on top?” Nick said. “They could be a lot more recent—possibly only a few years old.”

“And the dog has to pick up the scent through a couple of feet of compacted soil.”

“I’m not expecting him to replace the headstones and plant flowers,” Nick said, “but it’s been three hours and he hasn’t found a single grave.”

“Give the dog some time. You’ve got two graves to get started on; do your work and let the dog do his.”

“I can’t,” Nick said. “Apparently I’m a ‘distracting scent.’”

“The dog told you that?”

“No, the woman did.”

“So who are you distracting—the dog or the woman?”

“I’m not calling you anymore,” Nick grumbled.

“Good. That Nick—he’s no whiner.”

Nick closed the phone and tossed it over his shoulder.

Elgin looked at him. “What’d the boss have to say?”

“FBI agents don’t always think clearly,” Nick said. “Too much time at the shooting range.”

Another thirty minutes passed.

The sun was just beginning to dip behind the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains now; the woman, taking note of the shadows stretching toward her, attached a leash to her dog's collar and began to walk back toward the parking lot.

"Nice work today," Nick called out as she passed. "One suggestion: You might tell the dog to search for graves instead of all the places where there aren't any. That might save time—it's a big planet."

The woman sniffed. "It's the temperature."

"Excuse me?"

"The warmer the temperature, the more difficult it is for the forensic detection dog to pick up the scent."

"It gets cooler here in the fall," Nick said. "Why don't you come back then?"

"We will be back in the cool of the morning," she said.

Nick and Elgin watched her as she turned and led the dog away.

"An entire day wasted," Nick groaned.

"I take it you're not one for sittin' around."

"I'd rather be driving in the wrong direction than waiting at a stoplight."

"Felt that way myself at times."

"I can't just sit here and wait for Bosco to grow a nose. Somebody else around here must have a cadaver dog. What about the sheriff's department—don't you guys have any contacts in the area?"

"None that I know of—not much need. Y'know, if you really want to find those graves, you ought to ask the witch."

Nick turned and looked at him. "Who?"

"The witch—the Witch of Endor."

"There's a witch in Endor?"

"Not in Endor exactly—she lives in the mountains up above the town. Her people have lived up there as long as anyone can remember. She's the only one left now. She practically owns the whole mountaintop—got a big fence around the whole thing. I seen it myself."

"Does she ever come into town?"

“Oh, no, sir—witches don’t associate. They only come out at night, and generally by a full moon. She only associates with animals.”

“Animals?”

“Witches have power over animals, y’know. She can speak their language—make ’em do anything she wants.”

“Uh-huh. And what makes people think she’s a witch?”

“Well, she dresses the part—that’s for sure. She wanders the woods at night with a three-legged dog—people catch a glimpse of her sometimes under a full moon. She does weird things with her hands—she makes these signs, puts the hex on people that get on her bad side.”

“Your average witch stuff,” Nick said.

“Pretty much—except for one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“She can raise the dead.”

## CHAPTER 4

“Pizza for *Polchak*,” Nick said.

A moonfaced boy in a grease-stained apron nodded and headed for the kitchen.

Nick leaned back against the counter and looked around the restaurant. The Endor Tavern & Grille was the only eating establishment in the town of Endor—not exactly a surprise, since the entire downtown consisted of nothing more than a single intersection. On the southwest corner stood the Skyline Motel, where Nick had checked in just a few minutes ago. He fished his room key from his pocket and held it up: It was a football-shaped disk of green plastic attached by an S-hook to a shiny brass key. Nick shook his head; he hadn’t seen a room key like this in years. The only places that used them anymore were truck stops and gas stations, to keep forgetful patrons from driving off with the restroom key. He wondered how long it would be before the Skyline Motel made the leap to the twenty-first century. *Probably never*, he thought. The twenty-first century could drive right past on I-66 and the little town of Endor wouldn’t miss it one bit.

Across from the Skyline and up the hill was the Endor Regional Library. *An odd location for a regional collection*, Nick thought, but then again reading might be a very popular activity in a boring little town like this. Catty-corner to the Skyline was Endor Resurrection Lutheran Church—a mountain-style hamlet with a tall, sloping slate roof. The entire church was constructed of the local stone, making it look as if the building were just one huge outcropping jutting from the mountainside.

On Nick’s left there was a long bar with a mahogany railing and six padded barstools—evidently the Tavern portion of the Tavern & Grille. It was “Grille” with an “e,” he noticed—probably somebody’s idea of a way to add a little class to an establishment that otherwise had none. Across from the bar the room opened into a spacious eating area—the Grille. In the center of the room was a canoe-sized salad bar, currently vacant, with a well-buffed Plexiglas sneeze guard suspended like a tent above it. The room was dotted with round four-tops and eight-tops draped in red-and-white vinyl checkered tablecloths with draperies to match, and there was a single row of red vinyl booths along the far wall. The walls themselves were made of brick with dark wood trim, and little yellow lanterns gave the room a dingy hue. *Lovely décor*, Nick thought—sort of a Tudor/Swiss/Shakey’s Pizza motif. Part watering hole, part gathering place, part

do-it-yourself, part sit-and-serve—a little something for everybody, because everybody in Endor had no place else to go—and neither did Nick.

It seemed to be a quiet night in Endor. Only one table was occupied—a table in the far corner surrounded by a group of teenagers. Nick watched them for a few minutes.

“Pizza for Kojak,” a voice behind him announced.

Nick turned. “Polchak,” he corrected, and handed the boy a twenty-dollar bill.

“Do you know those kids over there?”

The boy looked over Nick’s shoulder. “Sure.”

“What high school?”

“Endor.”

*That figures.* “What’s their mascot?”

“Mountaineers.”

*That figures too.* “Thanks. Keep the change—your government sends its greetings.”

Nick took the pizza and walked over to the table. As he approached, conversations began to drop off and heads turned to look at him one by one. Without a word he leaned out over the table and set the pizza in the center, then pulled up a chair and sat down—then he opened the box, took out a slice, and began to eat.

The group stared at him in silence.

“Help yourself,” Nick said through a mouthful. “I ordered ‘the works,’ so just pick off anything you don’t like.”

No one moved.

“So how did the Mountaineers do this year?”

There was a long silence before one of the boys ventured to ask, “Football or basketball?”

Nick cocked his head and looked at him. “Now what do you think?”

One of the girls covered her mouth and giggled. “Yeah—we suck at basketball.”

They all laughed—Nick could sense the release of tension.

“Did you go to Endor?” one of them asked.

“I’m from out of town,” Nick said. “I’m staying across the street at the Skyline. I ordered this pizza, but when I got the thing I realized it was too big for me—so I thought maybe you guys could help me eat it. Hope you don’t mind me barging in like this.”

The girl closest to Nick squinted hard and said, “You’ve got really huge glasses.”

“And you’re a very observant young woman,” Nick replied.

“Why do you wear them?”

“To keep insects out of my eyes at high speeds.”

She blinked..

“So I can see,” Nick said.

The girl leaned closer and studied the soft brown orbs that floated behind the lenses. “How big *are* your eyes?” she asked.

“They’re the size of Frisbees,” Nick said. “The glasses make them look smaller.”

She still didn’t change expressions, but some of the others laughed.

Nick lifted his glasses and showed the girl his eyes, then gave her a wink.

“You’ve got pretty eyes,” she said.

“Thanks. I wish I could say the same for you, but I’m afraid you’re just a big blur right now.” He turned to the rest of the group and said, “What are you guys waiting for? It’s lousy pizza anyway—it won’t taste any better cold.”

They were on the pizza like jackals on a gazelle.

Nick listened to the group as they talked; his eyes darted behind his glasses like a pair of rebounding basketballs. These kids were like a collection of insects to Nick, each with its own rituals and pairing behavior. The girl on his right was holding hands with the boy next to her, but she kept looking at a taller boy across the table. The shorter boy beside her kept clinging to the girl’s hand, but it was too late—a more suitable potential mate had already caught her attention. The boy directly across from Nick kept his arms folded with his fists tucked behind his biceps to make them appear larger than they really were, exaggerating his size and status. One girl wore more makeup than all the others combined; she kept touching it up with a pocket mirror, seeking to distinguish herself from the drabber females in the colony.

But the focus of Nick’s attention was the boy seated to his left. He was the largest in the group, with a tousle of brown hair and a splatter of pimples across his fair skin. He

was athletic and obviously proud of it—he wore a wool letter jacket with leather sleeves, even though the temperature outside was well over eighty degrees. He spoke with more volume and more self-assurance than the others, and other members of the group quickly deferred to him. This boy was the dominant male in the colony; he was the one Nick was looking for.

Nick turned and looked at him. “How’s the fall look for you guys? Tough schedule?”

“We’re gonna kick butt this year,” the boy said. “We’ve got our whole front line and half the backfield returning.”

“Who’s your big rival?”

“Front Royal,” the boy growled, and the whole group sneered with contempt. “We’re gonna kill them this year.”

“Front Royal,” Nick said. “I’ve heard of them—I heard a guy mention them just this morning. He said Front Royal is gonna jerk your jocks up over your heads this year.”

They all stared at Nick while he took another bite of his pizza.

“Who told you that?” the boy demanded.

“Like I said—I’m from out of town.” Nick pointed to the ’09 on the boy’s jacket sleeve. “Senior year coming up—any college prospects?”

The boy shrugged. “I’ve had some calls.”

“Think you’re big enough?”

“You bet I’m big enough—strong enough too.”

“College football is a whole new ball game,” Nick said. “Size is important, but what really matters is toughness—courage—*guts*.”

“I’ve got plenty of that.” The boy glanced around the group for confirmation, and his friends dutifully nodded. “We’re gonna *destroy* Front Royal this season, and you can tell that guy I said so. Better yet, you tell him to come say that to my face, and I’ll straighten him out personally.”

Nick did his best to look impressed. He turned to the rest of the group. “So what’s it like living in a town the size of Endor?”

“Boring,” they groaned in unison.

“You must know everybody in a town this size.”

“Everybody.”

“What about the kid who sold me this pizza?”

“That’s Donny,” one of them said. “He’s a dork.”

“What about the old guy who runs the Skyline Motel—the one with the hair sticking out of his ears?”

“Mr. Denardo,” someone said. “He’s got artificial knees—both of ’em.”

Nick let a beat pass before he asked, “What about the witch?”

No one answered.

Nick looked around the group. “C’mon—somebody here must know the witch.”

There was a pause. “We know *about* her,” someone said quietly.

“You mean nobody’s actually met her? Nobody’s talked to her?”

They shook their heads in astonishment. “Nobody talks to the witch. She lives up on the mountain, and she never comes down.”

“Never? What does she do for food?”

“She eats dogs.”

“She eats *dogs*?”

“It’s true,” one of the girls said. “My friend Keisha saw her—at the animal shelter over in Cedarville. She was opening all the cages and feeling all the puppies—she was looking for the fattest ones to take back with her.”

“What does the witch look like?”

“They say she’s a hundred years old, but she looks no older than you do. Keisha says she has long black hair that comes down to her waist. She was wearing dark sunglasses—so she wouldn’t give anybody the evil eye unless she wanted to. Keisha just stared at her—but then all of a sudden the witch turned and looked right at her and then she made a quick sign—sort of like this,” she said, waving her hands in front of her in a mystic-looking gesture. “And you know what? One week later Keisha had to have her appendix out. She almost died—I swear, no kidding.”

“That was a close call,” Nick said. “You know, if your friend saw the witch at an animal shelter, then she must come down from the mountains from time to time.”

They all looked at one another and slowly nodded, as though the thought was occurring to them for the first time.

“What’s the best way to contact her?”

They looked at Nick in amazement. “You want to *meet* the witch? Why?”

“I’d like to talk to her,” Nick said. “Sort of a project I’m working on.”

No one responded.

“She must have a phone.”

One of the boys stared at Nick as if he had just said, “Pigs must have wings.”

“The witch don’t have a phone,” he said. “The witch only talks to animals, and animals don’t have phones.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed that—it’s probably because they don’t have pockets.” Nick slowly leaned forward on the table and looked at each of them one by one. “Come on—do you mean to tell me that not one of you has ever snuck up there and climbed that fence just to take a look around? Just so you could come back and tell your buddies you did it? Just to feel the hair stand up on the back of your neck—to feel like you’re *alive*?”

No one answered.

Nick turned to the football player and quickly glanced down at the name embroidered on his letter jacket: *Biff*. Nick almost winced—no wonder the kid was overcompensating.

Nick looked him directly in the eye. “Not even you, Biff?”

“Me? Why me?”

“Toughness—courage—*guts*.”

“This is different,” Biff said.

“Why, Biff—I believe you’re *afraid*.”

Biff glared back. “I’m not afraid of anything.”

“Then take me up there,” Nick said.

“What?”

“Take me up there. We’ll climb that fence and we’ll find that witch and we’ll talk to her. We’ll do something that nobody else in this whole town has the guts to do—and when we get back, you’ll be a legend.”

Biff sat frozen with his eyes as wide as saucers—and then he shook his head. “I’m not going looking for any witch,” he said. “That’s just plain crazy—that’s askin’ for trouble.”

Nick shrugged and slowly rose from his chair. “It was worth a try,” he said, “but if you won’t do it, you won’t do it. Thanks for the help with the pizza, everybody; nice to meet you, and good luck with your fall season. Oh, that reminds me—can somebody tell me how to get to Front Royal?”

“Why do you want to go to Front Royal?”

“I want to meet their football team,” Nick said, looking back at Biff again.

“Maybe somebody in Front Royal has got more guts than you do.”

Nick stared at Biff and waited—and so did everyone else.

The boy stood up with clenched fists. “Okay,” he said. “I’ll take you up there, but only to show you that I’m not afraid.”

“I’ll meet you outside in five minutes,” Nick said, and started for the door.

“What if we can’t find her?” Biff called after him.

Nick turned and smiled. “We’ll find her—there’s a full moon.”