

= PART I =

Museum of Unnatural Mystery.

Chapter 3

New York, Present Day

The red-haired kid was clambering onto the platform, calling his younger brother a chicken, reaching toward the elephant's foot. Juan eyed him silently, easing himself forward just as the kid's hand touched the exhibit.

"Yo!" Juan yelled, breaking into a trot. "Hey, no touching the elephants." The boy looked scared and snatched back his hand; he was still at an age where a uniform impressed him. Older ones—fifteen, sixteen—would give Juan the finger sometimes. They knew he was only a museum guard. Lousy fucking job. One of these days he was going to finish that equivalency shit and take the police exam.

He watched suspiciously as red-hair and little brother walked around the cases in the darkened hall, looking at the stuffed lions. At the case full of chimps, the boy started hooting and scratching under his arms, showing off for junior's benefit. Where the hell were the parents?

Now Billy, the redhead, tugged his little brother into a chamber filled with African artifacts. A row of masks with flat wooden teeth leered at them from a showcase. "Wow!" exclaimed Billy's kid brother.

"That's *dumb*," said Billy. "We're going to see the dinosaurs."

"Where's Mommy?" said the kid, screwing his head around.

"Aw, she got lost," said Billy. "Come on."

They began to move through a vast, echoing hall filled with totem poles. At the far end, a woman holding a red flag was leading the final tour group of the day, her voice shrill. To Billy's younger brother, the hall smelled faintly spooky, like smoke and old tree roots. When the group disappeared around a corner, the hall fell silent.

The last time they had been there, Billy remembered, they had seen the biggest brontosaurus in the world, and a tyrannosaurus and a trachydont. At least, that's what he thought it was called, a trachydont. The teeth on the tyrannosaurus must have been ten feet long. That was just about the greatest thing Billy had ever seen. But he didn't remember seeing these totem poles. Maybe the dinosaurs were

through the next door. But that led only to the boring Hall of Pacific Peoples, full of jades and ivories and silks and bronze statues.

“Now look what you did,” said Billy.

“What?”

“You made me get lost, that’s what,” said Billy.

“Mommy’s gonna be *real* mad,” the kid said.

Billy snorted. They weren’t supposed to meet his parents until closing time, on the big front steps. He’d find his way out, no problem.

They wound through several more dusty rooms, down a narrow flight of stairs, and into a long dim hall. Thousands of little stuffed birds lined the walls from floor to ceiling, white cotton poking out of sightless eyes. The hall was empty and smelled of mothballs.

“I know where we are,” said Billy, hopefully, peering into the dimness.

The kid started to snuffle.

“Shut up,” said Billy. The snuffling stopped.

The hall took a sharp dogleg, ending in a darkened cul-de-sac full of dust and empty display cases. There were no visible exits except back through the hall of dead birds. The footfalls of the children echoed hollowly, far from the other Sunday tourists. Against the far side of the chamber stood a rolling barricade of canvas and wood, pretending unsuccessfully to be a wall. Letting go of his brother’s hand, Billy walked up and peered behind the barricade.

“I been here before,” he said confidently. “They’ve closed this place off, but it was open last time. I bet we’re right below the dinosaurs. Lemme just see if there’s a way up.”

“You’re not supposed to go back there,” the kid brother warned.

“Listen, stupid, I’m going. And you’d better wait.” Billy ducked behind the barricade, and a few moments later the kid heard the squeal of metal as a door was pulled open.

“Hey!” came Billy’s voice. “There’s a spiral staircase here. It only goes down, but it’s cool. I’m gonna try it out.”

“Don’t! Billy!” the kid cried, but the only answer was retreating footsteps.

The kid started to bawl, his thin voice rising in the gloom of the hall. After a few minutes he fell to hiccupping, sniffed loudly, and sat down on the floor. He started pulling on a little flap of rubber that was coming off the toe of his sneaker, working it loose.

Suddenly, he looked up. The hall was silent and airless. The lights in the cases threw black shadows on the floor. A forced-air duct thumped and began to rumble somewhere. Billy was gone for real now. The kid started to cry again, louder this time.

Maybe it would be okay if he followed Billy. Maybe it wasn’t such a scary thing after all. Maybe Billy had gone ahead and found his parents, and they were waiting for him, there on the other side. But he had to hurry. The Museum was probably closed by now.

He stood up and slipped behind the partition. The hall continued on, the cases filled with the dust and mold of long-neglected exhibits. An ancient metal door on one side of the hall was slightly ajar.

The kid walked up to it and peered in. Behind the door was the top landing of a narrow spiral staircase that circled downward out of sight. It was even dustier here, and there was a strange smell in the air that made his nose wrinkle. He didn't want to stand on those steps, at all. But Billy was down there.

"Billy!" he called. "Billy, come up! *Please!*"

In the cavernous gloom, his echoes were the only answer. The child sniffled, then gripped the railing and began walking slowly down into darkness.

Chapter 4

Monday

As Margo Green rounded the corner of West Seventy-second Street, the early morning sun struck her square in the face. She looked down a minute, blinking; then, tossing her brown hair back, she crossed the street. The New York Museum of Natural History loomed before her like an ancient fortress, its vast Beaux Arts facade climbing ponderously above a row of copper beeches.

Margo turned down the cobbled driveway that led to the staff entrance. She walked past a loading dock and headed for the granite tunnel leading to the interior courtyards of the Museum. Then she slowed, wary. Flickering stripes of red light were painting the mouth of the tunnel in front of her. At the far end, she could see ambulances, police cars, and an Emergency Services vehicle, all parked at random.

Margo entered the tunnel and walked toward a glass pillbox. Normally, old Curly the guard would be dozing in his chair at this time of the morning, propped up against the pillbox corner, a blackened calabash pipe resting on his ample front. But today he was awake and standing. He slid the door open. "Morning, Doctor," he said. He called everyone 'doctor,' from graduate students to the Museum Director, whether they owned that title or not.

"What's up?" Margo asked.

"Don't know," Curly said. "They just got here two minutes ago. But I guess I'd better see your ID this time."

Margo rummaged in her carryall, wondering if she even had her ID. It had been months since someone had asked to see it. "I'm not sure I've got it with me," she said, annoyed that she hadn't cleaned her bag of last winter's detritus. Her carryall had recently won 'messiest bag in the Museum' status from her friends in the Anthro Department.

The pillbox telephone rang, and Curly reached for it. Margo found her ID and held it up to the window, but Curly ignored her, his eyes wide as he listened to the receiver.

He put it down without saying a word, his whole body rigidly at attention.

"Well?" Margo asked. "What's happened?"

Curly removed his pipe. "You don't want to know," he said.

The phone rang again and Curly grabbed it.

Margo had never seen the guard move so quickly. She shrugged, dropped the ID back in her bag, and walked on. The next chapter of her dissertation was coming due, and she couldn't afford to lose a single day. The week before had been a write-off—the service for her father, the formalities, the phone calls. Now, she couldn't lose any more time.

Crossing the courtyard, she entered the Museum through the staff door, turned right, and hurried down a long basement corridor toward the Anthropology Department. The various staff offices were dark, as they always were until nine-thirty or ten o'clock.

The corridor took an abrupt right angle, and she stopped. A band of yellow plastic tape was stretched across the corridor. Margo could make out the printing: NYPD CRIME SCENE—DO NOT CROSS. Jimmy, a guard usually assigned to the Peruvian Gold Hall, was standing in front of the tape with Gregory Kawakita, a young Assistant Curator in the Evolutionary Biology Department.

"What's going on here?" Margo asked.

"Typical Museum efficiency," Kawakita said with a wry smile. "We've been locked out."

"Nobody's told me nothing, except to keep everyone out," the guard said nervously.

"Look," Kawakita said, "I'm giving a presentation to the NSF next week, and this day's going to be a long one. Now, if you'll let me—"

Jimmy looked uncomfortable. "I'm just doing my job, okay?"

"Come on," Margo said to Kawakita. "Let's get some coffee up in the lounge. Maybe someone there will know what's going on."

"First I want to hunt down a men's room, if I can find one that isn't sealed off," Kawakita responded irritably. "I'll meet you there."

The door to the staff lounge, which was never closed, was closed today. Margo put her hand on the knob, wondering if she should wait for Kawakita. Then she opened the door. It would be a cold day in hell when she needed *him* as backup.

Inside, two policemen were talking, their backs turned to her. One sniggered. "What was that, number six?" he said.

"Lost count," the other replied. "But he can't have any more breakfast to bring up." As the officers moved apart, Margo got a look at the lounge behind them.

The large room was deserted. In the kitchen area at the far end, someone was leaning over the sink. He spat, wiped his mouth, and turned around. Margo recognized Charlie Prine, the new conservation expert in the Anthro Department, hired on a temporary grant six months before to restore objects for the new exhibition. His face was ashen and expressionless.

Moving to Prine's side, the officers propelled him gently forward.

Margo stood aside to let the group pass. Prine walked stiffly, like a robot. Instinctively, Margo's eyes traveled downward.

Prine's shoes were soaked in blood.

Watching her vacantly, Prine registered the change of expression. His eyes followed hers; then he stopped so suddenly that the cop behind plowed into his back.

Prine's eyes grew large and white. The policemen grabbed his arms and he resisted, neighing in panic. Quickly, they moved him out of the room.

Margo leaned against the wall, willing her heart to slow down as Kawakita came in, followed by several others. "Half this Museum must be sealed off," he said, shaking his head and pouring himself a cup of coffee. "Nobody can get into their offices."

As if on cue, the Museum's ancient PA system wheezed into operation. "*Attention please. All nonsupport personnel currently on the premises please report to the staff lounge.*"

As they sat down, more staffers entered in twos and threes. Lab technicians, for the most part, and assistant curators without tenure; too early for the really important people. Margo watched them detachedly. Kawakita was talking but she couldn't hear him.

Within ten minutes, the room was packed. Everyone was talking at once: expressing outrage that their offices were off-limits, complaining about how no one was telling them anything, discussing each new rumor in shocked tones. Clearly, in a museum where nothing exciting ever seemed to happen, they were having the time of their lives.

Kawakita gulped his coffee, made a face. "Will you look at that sediment?" He turned toward her. "Been struck dumb, Margo? You haven't said a word since we sat down."

Haltingly, she told him about Prine. Kawakita's handsome features narrowed. "My God," he finally said. "What do you suppose happened?"

As his baritone voice boomed, Margo realized that the conversation in the lounge had died away. A heavysset, balding man in a brown suit was standing in the doorway, a police radio shoved into one pocket of his ill-fitting jacket, an unlit cigar protruding from his mouth. Now he strode through, followed by two uniformed policemen.

He centered himself at the front of the room, hiked up his pants, removed his cigar, picked a piece of tobacco off his tongue, and cleared his throat. "May I have your attention, please," he said. "A situation has arisen that's going to require you to bear with us for a while."

Suddenly, a voice rang out accusingly from the back of the room. "Ex-cuse me, Mister?..."

Margo craned her neck over the crowd. "Freed," Kawakita whispered. Margo had heard of Frank Freed, a testy Ichthyology curator.

The man in brown turned to look at Freed. "Lieutenant D'Agosta," he rapped out. "New York City Police Department."

It was a reply that would have shut most people up. Freed, an emaciated man with long gray hair, was undaunted. "Perhaps," he said sarcastically, "we may be informed of what exactly is going on around here? I think we have a right..."

"I'd like to brief you on what happened," D'Agosta resumed. "But at this point, all we can say is that a body has been found on the premises, under circumstances we are currently investigating. If—"

At the explosion of talk, D'Agosta wearily held up his hand.

"I can only tell you that a homicide squad is on the scene and that an investigation is in progress," he continued. "Effective immediately, the Museum is

closed. For the time being, no one may enter, and no one may leave. We expect this to be a very temporary condition.”

He paused. “If a homicide has occurred, there is a possibility, a *possibility*, that the killer is still inside the Museum. We would merely ask you to remain here an hour or two while a sweep is conducted. A police officer will be around to take your names and titles.”

In the stunned silence that followed, he left the room, closing the door behind him. One of the remaining policemen dragged a chair over to the door and sat down heavily in it. Slowly, the conversations began to resume. “We’re being locked in here?” Freed cried out. “This is outrageous.”

“Jesus,” Margo breathed. “You don’t suppose Prine is a murderer?”

“Scary thought, isn’t it?” Kawakita said. He stood up and went to the coffee machine, beating the last drops out of the urn with a savage, blow. “But not as scary as the thought of being unprepared for my presentation.”

Margo knew Kawakita, young fast-track scientist that he was, would never be unprepared for anything.

“Image is everything today,” Kawakita went on. “Pure science alone doesn’t get the grants anymore.”

Margo nodded again. She heard him, and she heard the swirl of voices around them, but none of it seemed important. Except for the blood on Prine’s shoes.

Chapter 5

“Listen up,” the policeman said an hour later. “You’re free to go now. Just be sure to stay out of the areas behind the yellow tape.”

Margo raised her head from her arms with a start as a hand landed on her shoulder. Tall, lanky Bill Smithback clutched two spiral notebooks in the other hand, and his brown hair looked, as usual, as if he’d just gotten out of bed. A chewed pencil was tucked behind one ear, his collar was unbuttoned and his grimy tie knot pulled down. The perfect caricature of a hard-driving journalist, and Margo suspected he cultivated the look. Smithback had been commissioned to write a book about the Museum, focusing on the Superstition exhibition that would open next week.

“Unnatural doings at the Natural History Museum,” Smithback muttered darkly in her ear as he folded himself into a chair beside her. He slapped his notebooks on the table, and a flood of handwritten papers, unlabeled computer diskettes, and photocopied articles covered with yellow highlighting spilled across the Formica surface.

“Hello, Kawakita!” Smithback said jovially, slapping him on the shoulder. “Seen any tigers lately?”

“Only the paper variety,” Kawakita replied dryly.

Smithback turned to Margo. “I suppose you must know all the gory details by now. Pretty nasty, huh?”

“They didn’t tell us anything,” Margo said. “All we’ve heard is some talk about a killing. I guess Prine must have done it.”

Smithback laughed. “Charlie Prine? That guy couldn’t kill a six-pack, let alone a biped. No, Prine just found the body. Or should I say, them.”

“Them? What are you talking about?”

Smithback sighed. “You really don’t know anything, do you? I was hoping you’d heard something, sitting in here for hours.” He sprang up and went over to the coffee urn. He tipped and rattled and cursed it and came back empty handed. “They found the Director’s wife, stuffed in a glass case in the Primate Hall,” he said after settling himself in the chair again. “Been there twenty years before anyone noticed.”

Margo groaned. “Let’s hear the real story, Smithback,” she said.

“All right, all right,” he sighed. “Around seven-thirty this morning, the bodies of two young boys were found dead in the Old Building basement.”

Margo pressed a hand to her mouth.

“How did you learn all this?” Kawakita demanded.

“While you two were cooling your heels in here, the rest of the world was stuck outside on Seventy-second Street,” Smithback went on. “They’d shut the gates on us. The press was out there, too. Quite a few, in fact. The upshot is, Wright’s going to give a press conference in the Great Rotunda at ten to quell the rumors. All that zoo talk. We’ve got ten minutes.”

“Zoo talk?” Margo pressed.

“It’s a zoo around *here*. Oh, God. What a mess.” Smithback was savoring not telling what he knew. “Seems the murders were pretty savage. And you know the press: They’ve always assumed you’ve got all sorts of animals locked up in here.”

“I think you’re actually enjoying this,” Kawakita smiled.

“A story like this would add a whole new dimension to my book,” Smithback went on. “The shocking true account of the grisly Museum killings, by William Smithback, Junior. Wild, voracious beasts roaming deserted corridors. It could be a best-seller.”

“This isn’t funny,” Margo snapped. She was thinking that Prine’s laboratory wasn’t far from her own office in the Old Building basement.

“I know, I know,” Smithback said good-humoredly. “It is terrible. The poor kids. But I’m still not sure I believe it. It’s probably some gimmick of Cuthbert’s to boost publicity for the exhibition.” He sighed, then started guiltily. “Hey, Margo—I was really sorry to hear about your father. I meant to tell you earlier.”

“Thanks.” Margo’s smile held little warmth.

“Listen, you two,” Kawakita said, rising, “I really have to—”

“I heard you were thinking of leaving,” Smithback continued to Margo. “Dropping your dissertation to work at your father’s company, or something.” He looked at her curiously. “Is that true? I thought your research was finally getting somewhere.”

“Well,” Margo said, “yes and no. Dissertation’s dragging a bit these days. I’ve got my weekly eleven o’clock with Frock today. He’ll probably forget, as usual, and schedule something else, especially with this tragedy. But I hope I do get in to see him. I found an interesting monograph on the Kiribitu classification of medicinal plants.”

She realized that Smithback's eyes had already started to wander, and reminded herself once again that most people had no interest in plant genetics and ethnopharmacology. "Well, I've got to get ready." Margo stood up.

"Hold on a minute!" Smithback said, scrambling to gather up his papers. "Don't you want to see the press conference?"

As they left the staff lounge, Freed was still complaining to anyone who would listen. Kawakita, already trotting down the hall ahead of them, waved over his shoulder as he rounded a bend and disappeared from sight.

They arrived in the Great Rotunda to find the press conference already in progress. Reporters surrounded Winston Wright, Director of the Museum, poking microphones and cameras in his direction, voices echoing crazily in the cavernous space. Ippolito, the Museum's Security Director, stood at the Director's side. Clustered around the periphery were other Museum employees and a few curious school groups.

Wright stood angrily in the quartz lights, fielding shouted questions. His usually impeccable Savile Row suit was rumpled, and his thin hair was drooping over one ear. His pale skin was gray, and his eyes looked bloodshot.

"No," Wright was saying, "apparently they thought their children had already left the Museum. We had no prior warning... No, we do not keep live animals in the Museum. Well, of course, we have some mice and snakes for research purposes, but no lions or tigers or anything of that sort... No, I haven't seen the bodies... I don't know what kind of mutilation there was, if any... I don't have the expertise to address that subject, you'll have to wait for the autopsies... I want to emphasize that there's been no official statement made by the police... Until you stop shouting I won't answer any more questions... No, I said we do not have wild animals in the Museum... Yes, that includes bears... No, I'm not going to give any names... How could I possibly answer that question? ... This press conference is over... I said this press conference is over... Yes, of course we are cooperating in every way with the police... No, I don't see any reason why this should delay the opening of the new exhibition. Let me emphasize that the opening of *Superstition* is right on schedule... We have *stuffed* lions, yes, but if you're trying to imply... They were shot in Africa seventy-five years ago, for Heaven's sake! The zoo? We have no affiliation with the zoo... I'm simply not going to respond to any more outrageous suggestions along those lines... Will the gentleman from the Post please stop shouting? ... The police are interviewing the scientist who found the bodies, but I have no information on that... No, I don't have anything more to add, except that we're doing everything we can... Yes it was tragic, of course it was..."

The press began to fan out, heading past Wright into the Museum proper.

Wright turned angrily toward the security director. "Where the hell were the police?" Margo heard him snap. As he turned, he said over his shoulder, "if you see Mrs. Rickman, tell her to come to my office immediately." And he stalked out of the Great Rotunda.

Chapter 6

Margo moved deeper into the Museum, away from the public areas, until she reached the corridor called 'Broadway.' Stretching the entire length of the Museum—six city blocks—it was said to be the longest single hallway in New York City. Old oaken cabinets lined the walls, punctuated every thirty feet by frostedglass doors. Most of these doors had curators' names in gold leaf edged in black.

Margo, as a graduate student, had only a metal desk and a bookshelf in one of the basement labs. *At least I have an office*, she thought, turning off from the corridor and starting down a narrow flight of iron stairs. One of her graduate-student acquaintances had only a tiny battered school desk, wedged between two massive freezers in the Mammalogy Department. The woman had to wear heavy sweaters to work, even at the height of August.

A security guard at the bottom of the stairwell waved her on, and she moved down a dim tunnel, flanked on both sides by mounted horse skeletons in ancient glass cases. No police tape was in sight.

In her office, Margo dropped her carryall beside her desk and sat down. Most of the lab was actually storage for South Seas artifacts: Maori shields, war canoes, and cane arrows stuffed into green metal cabinets that stretched from floor to ceiling. A hundred-gallon fish tank, a simulated swamp belonging to the Animal Behavior Department, perched on an iron frame underneath a battery of lights. It was so overpopulated with algae and weeds that Margo had only rarely been able to catch sight of a fish peering out through the murk.

Next to her desk was a long worktable with a row of dusty masks. The conservator, a sour young woman, worked in angry silence, spending what seemed barely three hours each day at her task. Margo figured it took her about two weeks to conserve each mask, judging by the slow turnover. The particular mask collection she was assigned to contained five thousand such masks, but it didn't seem to concern anyone that, at the rate she was going, the project would take close to two centuries to complete.

Margo logged onto her computer terminal. A message in green letters appeared, swimming into focus out of the depths of the CRT:

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HELLO MARGO GREEN@BIOTECH@STF
WELCOME BACK TO MUSENET
DISTRIBUTED NETWORKING SYSTEM,
RELEASE 15-5
COPYRIGHT © 1989-1995 NYMNH
AND CEREBRAL SYSTEMS INC.
CONNECTING AT 10:24:06 03-27-95
PRINT SERVICE ROUTED TO LJ56
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YOU HAVE NO MESSAGE(S) WAITING
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She went into word-processing mode and called up her notes, preparing to review them before her meeting with Frock. Her adviser often seemed preoccupied during these weekly meetings, and Margo was constantly scrambling to give him something new. The problem was, there usually wasn't anything new—just more articles read, dissected, and stuffed into the computer; more lab work; and maybe ... *maybe* ... another three or four pages of her dissertation. She understood how somebody could end up a permanent rider on the government-grant gravy train, or what the scientists derisively referred to as an ABD—All But Dissertation.

When Frock had first agreed to act as her adviser two years before, she half suspected some mistake had been made. Frock—intellect behind the Callisto Effect, occupier of the Cadwalader Chair in Statistical Paleontology at Columbia University, Chairman of the Evolutionary Biology Department at the Museum—had chosen her as a research student, an honor awarded to only a handful each year.

Frock started his career as a physical anthropologist. Confined to a wheelchair by childhood polio, he had nonetheless done pioneering fieldwork that was still the basis of many textbooks. After several severe bouts with malaria made further field research impossible, Frock diverted his ferocious energy to evolutionary theory. In the mid 1980s, he had started a firestorm of controversy with a radical new proposal. Combining chaos theory and Darwinian evolution, Frock's hypothesis disputed the commonly held belief that life evolved gradually. Instead, he postulated that evolution was sometimes much less gradual; he held that short-lived aberrations—"monster species"—were sometimes an offshoot of evolution. Frock argued that evolution wasn't always caused by random selection, that the environment itself could cause sudden, grotesque changes in a species.

Although Frock's theory was backed by a brilliant series of articles and papers, much of the scientific world remained dubious. If bizarre forms of life exist, they asked, where are they hiding? Frock replied that his theory predicted rapid demise of genera as well as rapid development.

The more the experts called Frock misguided, even crazy, the more the popular press embraced his idea. The theory became known as the Callisto Effect, after the Greek myth in which a young woman is suddenly transformed into a wild creature. Although Frock deplored the widespread misconceptions of his work, he shrewdly used his celebrity to further his academic efforts. Like many brilliant curators, Frock was consumed by his research; sometimes, Margo suspected, everything else, including her work, bored him.

Across the room, the conservator got up and—without a word—left for lunch, a sure sign that it was approaching eleven o'clock. Margo scribbled a few sentences on a sheet of paper, cleared the screen, and scooped up her notebook.

Frock's office was in the southwest tower, at the end of an elegant, Edwardian fifth-floor corridor; an oasis far from the labs and computer workstations that characterized much of the behind-the-scene Museum. The heavy oak door of the inner office read simply, DR. FROCK.

Margo knocked.

She heard a great clearing of the throat and the low rumble of a wheelchair. The door opened slowly and the familiar ruddy-complexioned face appeared, bushy eyebrows knitted in surprise. Then his gaze brightened.

“Of course, it’s Monday. Come in.” He spoke in a low voice, touching her wrist with a plump hand and motioning her to an overstuffed chair. Frock was dressed, as usual, in a somber suit, white shirt, and loud paisley tie. His thick brush of white hair looked ruffled.

The walls of his office were lined with old, glassfronted bookcases, many of the shelves filled with relics and oddities from his early years in the field. Books were piled in enormous, tottering stacks against a wall. Two large bow windows looked out over the Hudson River. Upholstered Victorian chairs sat on the faded Persian carpet, and on Frock’s desk lay several copies of his latest book, *Fractal Evolution*.

Next to the books, Margo recognized a large chunk of gray sandstone. Embedded in its flat surface was a deep depression, oddly smudged and elongated along one end with three large indentations at the other. According to Frock, this was a fossil footprint of a creature unknown to science: the single piece of physical evidence to support his theory of aberrant evolution. Other scientists differed: Many didn’t believe it was a fossil at all, calling it “Frock’s folly.” Most of them had never seen it.

“Clear away that stuff and sit down,” Frock said, wheeling back to his favorite spot under one of the bow windows. “Sherry? No, of course, you never do. Silly of me to forget.”

On the indicated chair lay several back issues of *Nature* and the typescript of an unfinished article titled “Phyletic Transformation and the Tertiary ‘Fern Spike.’” Margo moved them to a nearby table and sat down, wondering if Dr. Frock would mention something about the deaths of the two little boys.

He looked at her for a moment, motionless. Then he blinked, and sighed. “Well, Miss Green,” he said. “Shall we begin?”

Disappointed, Margo flipped open her notebook. She skimmed her notes, then began explaining her analysis of Kiribitu plant classification and how it related to her next dissertation chapter. As she spoke, Frock’s head gradually dropped to his chest and his eyes closed. A stranger might think him asleep, but Margo knew Frock was listening with intense concentration.

When she finished, he roused himself slowly. “Classification of medicinal plants by use, rather than appearance,” he murmured at last. “Interesting. That article reminds me of an experience I had among the Ki tribe of Bechuanaland.” Margo waited patiently for the reminiscence that was sure to follow.

“The Ki, as you know”—Frock always assumed his listener was as familiar with a subject as he was—at one time used the bark of a certain bush as a headache remedy. Charrière studied them in 1869 and noted their use of this bush in his field journals. When I showed up three quarters of a century later, they had stopped using the remedy. They believed instead that headaches were caused by sorcery.” He shifted in his wheelchair.

“The accepted remedy was now for the kinfolk of the headache victim to identify the sorcerer and, naturally, go off and murder him. Of course, the kin of the dead sorcerer were then required to avenge this death, so they often went right back and killed the person with the headache. You can imagine what eventually happened.”

“What?” Margo asked, assuming Frock was about to explain how all of this fit into her dissertation.

“Why,” Frock said, spreading his hands, “it was a medical miracle. People stopped getting headaches.”

His generous shirtfront shook with laughter. Margo laughed too—for the first time that day, she realized.

“Well, so much for primitive medicine,” Frock said a little wistfully. “Back then, fieldwork was still fun.” He paused for a minute. “There will be a whole section on the Ki tribe in the new *Superstition* exhibition, you know,” he went on. “Of course, it will be terribly played up for mass consumption. They’ve brought in some young fellow fresh from Harvard to curate the show. Knows more about computers and massmarketing than pure science, I’m told.”

Frock shifted again in his wheelchair. “In any case, Miss Green, I think what you’ve described will make a fine addition to your work. I suggest you obtain some samples of the Kiribitu plants from the herbarium and proceed from there.”

Margo was gathering her papers when Frock suddenly spoke again. “Bad business this morning.”

Margo nodded.

Frock remained silent for a moment. “I fear for the Museum,” he said finally.

Surprised, Margo said, “They were brothers. It’s a tragedy for the family. But things will die down soon—they always do.”

“I think not,” Frock said. “I’ve heard something about the condition of the bodies. The force used was ... of a nonnormal nature.”

“Surely *you* don’t think it was a wild animal?” Margo asked. Perhaps Frock was as crazy as everyone said.

Frock smiled. “My dear, I make no assumptions. I will await further evidence. For the moment, I simply hope this unpleasantness will not influence your decision on whether to remain with the Museum. Oh, yes, I’ve heard about it, and I was very sorry to get the news of your father’s death. But you’ve displayed three gifts that are indispensable to a first-class researcher: a sense of what to look for, a sense of where to look for it, and the zeal to see your theories through.” He moved the wheelchair closer to her. “Academic zeal is just as important as zeal in the field, Miss Green. Always remember that. Your technical training, your lab work, has been excellent. It would be a shame if our profession were to lose someone of your talents.”

Margo felt a mix of gratitude and resentment. “Thank you, Dr. Frock,” she replied. “I appreciate the kind words—and your concern.”

The scientist waved his hand, and Margo said goodbye. But at the door, she heard Frock speak again.

“Miss Green?” he asked.

“Yes?”

“Please be watchful.”

Chapter 7

Outside she nearly collided with Smithback. He leaned toward her, winking roguishly. "How about lunch?"

"No," said Margo. "Too busy." Twice in one day—she wasn't sure she could stand such a full dose of Smithback.

"Come on," he urged. "I've got some more grisly details about the murders."

"It figures." She quickened her pace down the hall, irritated that her curiosity was aroused.

Smithback grabbed her arm. "I hear they're serving a delicious aged and oven-dried lasagna in the cafeteria." He steered her toward the elevator.

The lunchroom was filled with the usual crowd of curators, beefy guards talking loudly, and assorted technicians and preparators in white lab coats. One curator was passing specimens around to a table of fellow scientists, who were murmuring in admiration and interest. Margo took a closer look. The specimens were pickled parasitic worms, coiled in jars of cloudy formaldehyde.

They sat down and Margo tried to see through the crust of her lasagna.

"Just like I promised," Smithback said, picking up a piece in his hand and biting off a corner with a crunch. "Been on the steam table since nine o'clock this morning, at least."

He chewed noisily. "Well, the police finally made it official. There were two murders here last night. Brilliant to have figured it out! And you remember all those questions the reporters asked about wild animals? Well, there's also a chance they were mauled to death by a wild animal."

"Not while I'm eating," Margo said.

"That's right. Literally shredded, by the sound of it."

Margo looked up. "*Please.*"

"I kid you not," Smithback continued. "And the heat is on to get this thing *solved*, particularly with the big exhibition coming up. I hear the cops have even enlisted a special coroner. Someone who reads gaping claw wounds like Helen Keller reads braille."

"Damn it, Smithback," Margo said and dropped her fork. "I'm sick of this—your cavalier attitude and your gory particulars while I'm having lunch. Can't I eat first and hear about this stuff later?"

"As I was saying," Smithback continued, ignoring the outburst, "she's supposedly an expert on big cats. Dr. Matilda Ziewicz. Some name, huh. Sounds fat."

Despite her annoyance, Margo suppressed a smile. Smithback might be a jerk, but at least he was a funny jerk. She shoved her tray away. "Where'd you hear all this?" she asked.

Smithback grinned. "I have my sources." He shoveled another piece of lasagna into his mouth. "Actually, I ran into a friend who writes for the *News*. Somebody got the story from a contact in the NYPD. It's going to be all over the afternoon papers. Can you imagine Wright's face when he sees that? Oh, God."

Smithback cackled for a moment before filling his mouth again. He'd finished his own and was starting on Margo's. For a thin guy, he ate like a beast.

"But how could there be a wild animal loose in the Museum?" Margo asked. "That's absurd."

“Yeah? Well, get this: They’ve got someone in here with a bloodhound, trying to track the son of a bitch.”

“Now you’re joking.”

“Hey, not me. Ask any of the security guards. There’s a million square feet in this joint where a big cat or something could be roaming, including five miles of forced-air ducts big enough for a man to crawl around in. And under the Museum is a warren of abandoned tunnels. They’re taking it seriously.”

“Tunnels?”

“Yup. Didn’t you read my article in last month’s magazine? The first Museum was built on an artesian swamp that couldn’t be permanently drained. So they built all these tunnels to divert the water. Then, when the original Museum burned down in 1911, they built the present Museum on top of the old Museum’s basement. The subbasement is huge, multileveled ... much of it isn’t even electrified. I doubt if there’s anybody still alive who really knows their way around down there.”

Smithback munched the last piece of lasagna and pushed the tray aside. “And then, there’re the usual rumors about the Museum Beast.”

Anybody who worked in the Museum had heard that story. Maintenance men working late-night shifts saw it out of the corners of their eyes. Assistant curators wandering down dimly lit corridors on their way to specimen vaults saw it moving in the shadows. Nobody knew what it was, or where it had come from, but some claimed the beast had killed a man several years before.

Margo decided to change the subject. “Is Rickman still giving you trouble?” she asked.

At the mention of the name, Smithback grimaced. Margo knew that Lavinia Rickman, the Chief of Public Relations for the Museum, had hired Smithback to write his book. She had also worked out the Museum’s cut of the advance and royalties. Although Smithback wasn’t happy about the contractual details, the exhibition promised to be such a blockbuster that book sales, riding on the success of the exhibit, could easily climb into six figures. It hadn’t been a bad deal for Smithback at all, Margo thought, given the only modest success of his previous book on the Boston Aquarium.

“Rickman? Trouble?” Smithback snorted. “Oh, God. She’s the definition of trouble. Listen, I want to read you something.” He pulled a sheaf of papers out of a notebook.

“When Dr. Cuthbert pitched the idea for an exhibition on *Superstition* to the Museum Director, Wright was very impressed. It had all the makings of a blockbuster exhibition, something on the level of *The Treasures of King Tut* or *The Seven Levels of Troy*. That meant big money for the Museum, Wright knew, and an unparalleled opportunity to raise funds from corporate and government sponsorship. But some older curators were unconvinced; they thought the exhibit smacked of sensationalism.’”

Smithback stopped. “Look what Rickman did.” He pushed the paper over to her. A big line sliced across the paragraph and a marginal note in fat red marker read: OUT!

Margo giggled.

“What’s so funny?” Smithback demanded. “She’s butchering my manuscript. Look at this.” He jabbed his finger at another page.

Margo shook her head. “What Rickman wants is a snow job for the Museum. You two won’t ever see eye to eye.”

“She’s driving me crazy. She’s taking out everything that’s the slightest bit controversial. She wants me to spend all my time talking to that nerd who’s curating the exhibition. She knows that he’ll only say what his boss Cuthbert tells him to.” He leaned forward conspiratorially. “You’ve never seen such a company man in your life.” He looked up, and groaned. “Oh, God, here he comes now.”

A young, slightly overweight man with horn-rimmed glasses materialized at their table, holding a tray balanced on a shiny leather briefcase. “May I join you?” he asked shyly. “I’m afraid this is practically the only seat left in the house.”

“Sure,” said Smithback. “Have a seat. We were just talking about you, anyway. Margo, meet George Moriarty. He’s the guy who’s curating the *Superstition* exhibition.”

Smithback shook the papers at Moriarty. “Look what Rickman did to my manuscript. The only things she didn’t touch were *your* quotations.”

Moriarty scanned the pages and looked at Smithback with almost childlike gravity. “I’m not surprised,” he said. “Why air the Museum’s dirty linen, anyway?”

“Come on, George. This is what makes for an interesting story!”

Moriarty turned to Margo. “You’re the graduate student working on ethnopharmacology, aren’t you?” he asked.

“That’s right,” she said, flattered. “How did you know?”

“I’m interested in the subject.” He smiled and looked at her briefly. “The exhibition has several cases devoted to pharmacology and medicine. I wanted to talk to you about one of them, actually.”

“Sure. What did you have in mind?” She looked at Moriarty more closely. He was about as average a Museum character as she could imagine: average height, a little pudgy, hair an average brown. His rumpled tweed jacket sported the heather tones that were regulation Museum-issue. The only things unusual about him were his large wristwatch, shaped like a sundial, and his eyes: an unusually clear hazel, shining with intelligence from behind his horn-rims.

Smithback sat forward, shifted irritably in his chair, and stared at the two. “Well,” he said, “I’d like to stay on and witness this charming scene, but I’m interviewing someone in the Bug Room on Wednesday, and I need to finish my current chapter. George, don’t sign any movie contracts for that exhibition of yours without talking to me first.” He stood up with a snort and made for the door, threading a complex path between tables as he went.

Chapter 8

Jonathan Hamm peered down the basement corridor through a thick pair of glasses that badly needed cleaning. Leather leashes were wrapped around his blackgloved hands, and two hounds sat obediently at his feet. His assistant

tracker stood beside him. Next to the assistant was Lieutenant D'Agosta, holding soiled, heavily creased blueprints, his two deputies leaning against the wall behind him. Police-issue pump-action Remington 12-gauges hung off their shoulders.

D'Agosta rustled through the blueprints. "Can't the dogs smell which way to go?" he asked irritably. Hamm let out a long breath. "*Hounds*. They're hounds. And they're not on a scent. They haven't been on a good scent since we began. Or rather, they've been on too many scents."

D'Agosta grunted, withdrew a sodden cigar from his jacket pocket, and began to raise it toward his mouth. Hamm caught his eye.

"Oh yeah," said D'Agosta. He pushed the cigar back into his pocket.

Hamm sniffed the air. It was damp, which was good. But that was the only good thing about this little picnic. First, there was the usual stupidity of the police. *What kind of dogs are these?* they'd asked. *We wanted bloodhounds*. These were hounds, he'd explained, a blue-tick hound and a black-and-tan coonhound. Given the right conditions, these hounds could track a lost hiker after a three-foot blizzard. *But these*, thought Hamm, *aren't exactly the right conditions*.

As usual, the crime scene had been fouled up. Chemicals, spray paint, chalk, a thousand people tramping in and out. Besides, the area around the base of the staircase had been literally bathed in blood; even now, eighteen hours or so after the crime, the smell hung heavily in the air, agitating the hounds.

They first tried to follow the scent from the crime scene itself. When that failed, Hamm suggested they "cut for scent," making a perimeter loop around the crime scene, hoping to pick up the trail as it exited.

The hounds had never been trained to work indoors. Naturally, they were confused. But it wasn't his fault. The police wouldn't even tell him if they were looking for a human or an animal. Perhaps they didn't know themselves.

"Let's go this way," said D'Agosta.

Hamm passed the leashes to his assistant, who started walking ahead, the hounds nosing the ground.

Next, the hounds had bayed up a storage room full of mastodon bones, and the paradichlorobenzene preservative that poured out when they opened the door had caused a half-hour delay while the hounds recovered their sense of smell. And that was just the first of a series of storage rooms full of animal pelts, gorillas in formaldehyde, a freezer full of dead zoo specimens, a whole vault full of human skeletons.

They came to an archway with an open metal door leading onto a descending stone stairway. The walls were covered with a crust of lime, and the stairway was dark.

"That must be the dungeon," one of the policemen said, with a guffaw.

"This goes to the subbasement," D'Agosta said, consulting the blueprints. He motioned to one of the officers, who handed him a long flashlight.

The shallow stairs ended in a tunnel made of herring-bone brickwork, its arched ceiling barely the height of a man. The tracker moved forward with the dogs, D'Agosta and Hamm behind. The two policemen came last.

"There's water on the floor," said Hamm.

"So what?" D'Agosta said.

"If there's been any water flowing through here there won't be any scent."

"I was told to expect puddles of water down here," D'Agosta replied. "It only floods when it rains, and it hasn't rained."

"That's reassuring," said Hamm.

They reached a place where four tunnels came together, and D'Agosta halted to consult the blueprints. "Somehow I thought you'd need to look at that," Hamm said.

"Oh, yeah?" D'Agosta said. "Well, I've got a surprise for you. These blueprints don't cover the subbasement."

When one of the dogs whined and began furiously sniffing, Hamm came suddenly to attention. "This way. Quick."

The dogs whined again. "They've got something!" said Hamm. "It's a clear scent, it must be. Look at their hackles rise! Keep the light up here, I can't see a blessed thing."

The dogs were straining, pulling forward, noses up and sniffing the air ahead.

"You see, you see!" Hamm said. "It's an air scent. Feel the fresh air on your cheek? I should have brought the spaniels. They're unbeatable with an air scent!"

The policemen slid past the dogs, one beaming his flashlight, the other carrying his shotgun at the ready. Ahead the tunnel forked again, and the dogs lunged to the right, breaking into a trot.

"Hold it, Mr. Hamm, there might be a killer out there," D'Agosta said.

The dogs suddenly broke into a deafening baying. "Sit!" cried the assistant. "Heel! Castor! Pollux! *Heel*, damn you!" The dogs lunged forward, paying no attention. "Hamm, I need a hand here!"

"What's gotten into you?" cried Hamm, wading into the frantic dogs, trying to grab their collars. "Castor, *heel!*"

"Shut them up!" snapped D'Agosta.

"He's loose!" cried the assistant, as one of the dogs bolted into the darkness. They rushed after the retreating sound of the dog.

"You smell it?" Hamm said, stopping short. "Christ Jesus, you *smell* it?"

A pungent, goatish odor suddenly enveloped them. The other dog was frantic with excitement, leaping and twisting and suddenly breaking free.

"Pollux! *Pollux!*"

"Wait!" said D'Agosta. "Forget the fucking dogs for a second. Let's proceed with a little order here. You two, get in front again. Safeties off."

The two men pumped their shotguns.

In the echoing darkness ahead of them, the barking faltered, then stopped. There was a moment of silence. Then a terrible, unearthly shriek, like the screeching of tires, leapt from the inky tunnel. The two police officers looked at each other. The sound ended as suddenly as it began.

"Castor!" Hamm cried. "Oh, my God! He's been hurt!"

"Get back, Hamm, goddammit!" barked D'Agosta.

At that moment a shape suddenly hurtled at them from the darkness, and there were two stunning blasts from the shotguns, two flashes of light accompanied by deafening roars. The rumble echoed and died in the tunnel, and there was an intense silence.

"You fucking idiot, you just shot my hound," said Hamm quietly. Pollux lay five feet from them, blood pouring freely from his ruined head.

“He was coming right at me...” began one of the officers.

“Jesus Christ,” said D’Agosta, “Stow that shit. There’s still something out there.”

They found the other dog a hundred yards down the tunnel. He was torn nearly in half, guts strung out in crazy patterns.

“Jesus, will you look at that,” said D’Agosta. Hamm said nothing.

Just beyond the body the tunnel branched. D’Agosta continued to stare at the dog. “Without the dogs, there’s no way of knowing which way it went,” he said at last. “Let’s get the hell out of here and let forensics deal with this mess.”

Hamm said nothing.

Chapter 9

Moriarty, suddenly alone with Margo in the cafeteria, seemed even more uncomfortable. “So?” Margo prompted, after a brief silence.

“Actually, I really *did* want to talk to you about your work.” He paused.

“You did?” Margo was unused to anyone showing interest in her project.

“Well, indirectly. The primitive medicine cases for the exhibition are complete, except one. We’ve got this terrific collection of shamanistic plants and artifacts from the Cameroons we want to display in the last case, but they’re badly documented. If you’d be willing to take a look...?”

“I’d love to,” Margo said.

“Great! When?”

“Why not now? I’ve got some time.”

They left the staff cafeteria and moved down a long basement hall lined with rumbling steam pipes and padlocked doors. One of the doors bore the label DINOSAUR STOREROOM 4—UPPER JURASSIC. Most of the Museum’s dinosaur bone and other fossil collections were stored here in the basement, since—she had heard—the great weight of petrified bone would cause the upper floors to collapse.

“The collection’s in one of the sixth-floor vaults,” Moriarty said apologetically as they entered a service elevator. “I hope I can find it again. You know what a warren of storage rooms they’ve got up there.”

“Have you heard anything more about Charlie Prine?” Margo asked quietly.

“Not much. Apparently he’s not a suspect. But I don’t think we’ll see him back here for quite a while. Dr. Cuthbert told me before lunch that he was severely traumatized.” Moriarty shook his head. “What an awful thing.”

On the fifth floor, Margo followed Moriarty along a wide passageway and up a flight of metal stairs. The narrow, labyrinthine catwalks that made up this section of the sixth floor had been built directly underneath the Museum’s long pitched roofs. On either side were rows of low metal doors, behind which lay the hermetically sealed vaults of the perishable anthropology collections. In earlier times, a poisonous cyanic compound had periodically been pumped into the vaults to kill vermin and bacteria; now, artifact preservation was handled with subtler methods.

As the two threaded their way along the catwalks, they passed a number of objects stacked against the walls: a carved war canoe, several totems, a row of slitted log drums. Even with one million square feet of storage space, every square inch had been utilized, including stairwells, corridors, and the offices of junior curators. Of fifty million artifacts and specimens, only about 5 percent was on exhibition; the rest was available only to scientists and researchers.

The New York Museum of Natural History consisted not of a single building, but several large buildings, connected over the years to form one sprawling, rambling structure. As Margo and Moriarty passed from one of the buildings into another, the ceiling ascended, and the catwalk became a branching corridor. A dim light filtered down from a row of dirty skylights, illuminating shelves filled with plaster casts of aboriginal faces.

“God, this place is huge,” said Margo, feeling a sudden cold thrust of fear, glad that she was seven stories above the dark spaces where the little boys had met their deaths.

“Largest in the world,” Moriarty said, unlocking a door stenciled CEN. AFRICA, D-2.

He switched on a naked, 25-watt bulb. Peering in, Margo could see a tiny room stuffed with masks, shaman’s rattles, painted and beaded skins, and a group of long sticks topped by grimacing heads. Along one wall was a row of wooden cabinets. Moriarty nodded toward them.

“The plants are in there. This other stuff is the shaman paraphernalia. It’s a great collection, but Eastman, the guy who assembled the Cameroon stuff, wasn’t exactly the most careful anthropologist when it came to documentation.”

“This is incredible,” said Margo. “I had no idea—“

“Listen,” Moriarty interrupted, “when we began researching this exhibition, you wouldn’t *believe* the things we found. There are close to a hundred anthropology vaults in this section alone, and I swear some of them haven’t been opened in forty years.”

Moriarty was suddenly more confident and animated. Margo decided that if he dumped the tweed jacket, shed a few pounds, and swapped the horn-rims for contacts, he could almost be cute.

But Moriarty was still talking. “Just last week, we found one of only a couple of existing examples of Yukaghir pictograph writing—right next door! As soon as I get time, I’ll be writing a note for the *JAA*.”

Margo smiled. He was so excited, he could have been talking about discovering an unknown Shakespeare play. She was sure that only a dozen readers of the *Journal of American Anthropology* would be interested. But Moriarty’s enthusiasm was refreshing.

“Anyway,” Moriarty said, pushing his glasses up his nose, “I just need someone to help me make sense of this Cameroon stuff for the display case write-up.”

“What do you want me to do?” Margo asked, temporarily forgetting the next chapter of her dissertation. His enthusiasm was infectious.

“That’s easy,” said Moriarty. “I’ve got the rough script for the case right here.”

He extracted a document from his briefcase. “See,” he said, running a finger down the covering sheet, “this sets out what, ideally, we want the case to say. We

call it the story line. All you have to do is flesh this out, plugging in a few of the artifacts and some of the plants.”

Margo scanned the document. It was starting to sound a little more time-consuming than she'd anticipated. “How long do you think this will take, by the way?”

“Oh, ten to fifteen hours, max. I've got the accession listings and some descriptive notes right here. But we've got to hurry. The opening is just a few days away.”

Back came the memory of her next chapter. “Now wait a minute,” she said. “This is a big job, and I've got a dissertation to write.”

The dismay on Moriarty's face was almost comical. It hadn't even occurred to him that she might have other things to do. “You mean you can't help?”

“Maybe I can squeeze it in,” she murmured.

His face brightened. “Great! Listen, while we're on the sixth floor, let me show you some of the other stuff up here.”

He led her to another vault and inserted a key. The door rasped open to a dazzling display of painted buffalo skulls, rattles, feather bundles, and even a row of what she recognized as raven skeletons tied up with rawhide.

“Jesus,” Margo breathed.

“There's a whole religion in here,” Moriarty said. “Wait till you see what we're putting on display. This is just the stuff left behind. We've got one of the best Sun Dance shirts anywhere. And look at this!” He pulled open a drawer. “Original wax cylinder recordings of the Sun Dance cycle songs, every one. Recorded in 1901. We've put them on tape, and we're going to play them in the Sioux room. What do you think? *Great* exhibition, huh?”

“It's certainly caused a fuss in the Museum,” Margo replied cautiously.

“Actually, there isn't as much controversy as people seem to make out,” Moriarty said. “There's no reason why science and entertainment can't meet as friends.”

Margo couldn't resist. “I'll bet your boss Cuthbert put you up to that line.”

“He's always felt that exhibitions should be more accessible to the general public. People may attend this because they expect ghosts and goblins and a spooky show—and they'll get them. But they'll go away with more than you might expect. Besides, the show's going to generate a lot of cash for the Museum. What's wrong with that?”

“Nothing,” Margo smiled. She'd leave the baiting to Smithback.

But Moriarty wasn't finished. “I know the word *superstition* has a bad connotation in some people's minds,” he said. “It smacks of exploitation. And it's true that some of the effects we're putting together for the show are ... well ... a bit sensational. But an exhibit called *Aboriginal Religion* just wouldn't sell, would it?” He looked at her with mute appeal.

“I don't think anyone objects to the title,” Margo said. “I guess there are a few people who don't feel your ends are truly scientific.”

He shook his head. “Just the crusty old curators and the crackpots. Like Frock, for example. They chose the *Superstition* exhibition over his proposal for one on evolution. So of course he doesn't have a good word to say about it.”

Margo's smile faded. “Dr. Frock is a pretty brilliant anthropologist,” she said.

“Frock? Dr. Cuthbert says he’s gone off the deep end. ‘The man’s bloody daft,’ he says.” Moriarty imitated Cuthbert’s Scottish accent. The sound echoed unpleasantly down the dim corridors.

“I don’t think Cuthbert is half the genius you feel he is,” Margo said.

“Now please, Margo. He’s top rate.”

“Not compared to Dr. Frock, he isn’t. What about the Callisto Effect?” Margo asked. “That’s some of the most cutting-edge work being done today.”

“Does he have a single speck of proof to back up his speculations? Have you seen evidence of any unknown, monstrous species roaming the earth?” Moriarty shook his head again, sending his glasses plunging dangerously down his nose. “Theoretical hype. I mean, theory has its place, but it has to be backed up with fieldwork. And that sidekick of his, Greg Kawakita, just encourages Frock with that extrapolation program he’s developing. I suppose Kawakita’s got his own reasons. But it’s pretty sad, really, to see a great mind take such a bad detour. I mean, just look at Frock’s new book. *Fractal Evolution*? Even the title sounds more like a kid’s computer game than science.”

Margo listened with rising indignation. Perhaps Smithback had been right about Moriarty, after all. “Well,” she said, “considering my affiliations to Dr. Frock, I don’t suppose you’d want me messing with your exhibit. I might add too much hype to the script.” She turned and walked briskly out the door and down the corridor.

Moriarty looked shocked. Too late, he remembered that Frock was her major advisor. He danced after her.

“Oh, no, no, I didn’t mean—“ he stammered. “Please, I was just ... You know that Frock and Cuthbert don’t get along. I guess I’ve picked up some of that.”

He looked so horrified that Margo felt her anger fade.

“I didn’t know they *had* that much of a problem with each other,” she said, allowing Moriarty to stop her.

“Oh, yes. From way back. You know that ever since Frock came forward with this Callisto Effect, his star has been falling in the Museum. Now he’s a department head in name only, and Cuthbert pulls the strings. Of course, I’ve just heard one side of the story. I’m very sorry, really. You *will* do the case for me, right?”

“On the condition,” Margo countered, “that you get me out of this maze. I’ve got to get back to work.”

“Oh, sure. Sorry,” Moriarty said. The gaffe had brought back all of his shyness, and as they began retracing their way to the fifth floor, he was silent.

“So tell me more about your exhibition.” Margo tried to put him at ease. “I’ve heard a little about some fabulously rare artifacts that will be on display.”

“I guess you must mean the Kothoga tribe material,” Moriarty said. “Only one expedition has ever found any traces of them. The figurine of their mythical beast Mbwun is—well, it’s one of the centerpieces of the show.” He hesitated. “Or I should say, it *will* be one of the centerpieces. It’s not on display yet.”

“Really?” Margo asked. “Isn’t that waiting till the last minute?”

“The situation is kind of unusual,” Moriarty replied. “But listen, Margo, this isn’t for public consumption.” They had returned to the catwalks, and Moriarty led her down the long corridors, speaking low. “There’s been a lot of high-level interest in

the Kothoga artifacts recently. People like Rickman, Dr. Cuthbert ... even Wright, apparently. There's been controversy over whether the material should be included in the exhibition. Surely you've heard the stories of a curse on the figurine, that sort of nonsense?"

"Not much," Margo said.

"The expedition that found the Kothoga material met with tragedy," Moriarty continued, "and nobody's been near the stuff since. It's still in the original crates. Just last week, all the crates were taken from the basement area where they'd sat all these years and moved to the Secure Area. Nobody's had access to them since, and I haven't been able to prepare the final displays."

"But why were they moved?" Margo pressed.

They entered the elevator. Moriarty waited until the door had closed before answering. "Apparently, the crates had been recently tampered with."

"What? You mean somebody had broken in?"

Moriarty stared at Margo, his owlish face wearing its look of perpetual surprise. "I didn't say that," he replied.

He turned the key, and the elevator lurched downward.

Chapter 10

D'Agosta wished with all his heart that the double-chili-cheeseburger in his stomach would disappear. Not that it was bothering him—yet—but it was an unwelcome presence.

The place smelled like they all did. In fact it stank. All the disinfectants in the world couldn't cover up the smell of death. And the vomit-green walls in the Medical Examiner's Office didn't help things any. Nor did the large gurney, currently empty, sitting like an uninvited guest under the bright lights of the autopsy suite.

His thoughts were interrupted as a large woman entered, two men following close behind. D'Agosta noticed stylish glasses, blonde hair escaping from under a surgeon's cap. The woman strode over and held out her hand, her red lipstick creased in a professional smile.

"Dr. Ziewicz," she said, with a crushing grip. "You must be D'Agosta. This is my assistant, Dr. Fred Gross." Ziewicz indicated a short, skinny man. "And this is our photographer, Delbert Smith." Delbert nodded, clutching a 4x5 Deardorff to his chest.

"So, Dr. Ziewicz, you come here often?" D'Agosta asked, suddenly eager to say something, anything, to stall the inevitable.

"NYME's my home away from home," Ziewicz replied with the same smile. "My field is—how shall I put it—special forensics. For just about everybody. We do our thing and ship them back out. Then I read about what it all means in the papers." She looked at him speculatively. "You've, ah, seen this kind of thing before, right?"

“Oh yeah,” said D’Agosta. “All the time.” The burger in his gut felt like a lead ingot. Why didn’t he think ahead, remember what his afternoon schedule was before chowing down like a damned hog?

“That’s good.” Ziewicz consulted her clipboard. “Let’s see, parental consent? Good. Looks like everything’s in order. Fred, start with 5-B.”

She began slipping on latex gloves, three pairs, a mask, goggles, and a plastic apron. D’Agosta did likewise.

Gross wheeled the gurney over to the morgue bank and slid out 5-B. The indistinct shape under the plastic looked strangely short to D’Agosta, with an odd bulge at one end. Gross slid the cadaver and its tray onto the gurney, wheeled the cart under the lights, checked the toe tag, and locked down the wheels. He placed a stainless-steel bucket under the gurney’s outlet pipe.

Ziewicz was fiddling with the microphone hanging above the body.

“Testing, one two three ... Fred, this mike is totally dead.”

Fred bent over the reel-to-reel. “I can’t understand it, everything’s turned on.”

D’Agosta cleared his throat. “It’s unplugged,” he said.

There was a short silence.

“Well,” said Ziewicz, “I’m glad there’s someone here who’s not a scientist. If you have any questions or comments, Mr. D’Agosta, please state your name and speak clearly toward the microphone. Okay? Everything goes on the tape. I’m just going to describe the state of the body first, and then we’ll start cutting.”

“Got it,” D’Agosta replied tonelessly. *Cutting*. It was one thing when a dead body was just lying there at the scene. But when they started cutting into it, peeling the layers away—he’d never gotten used to that.

“Are we up and running? Good. This is Dr. Matilda Ziewicz and Dr. Frederick Gross, and the date is Monday, March 27, at two-fifteen in the afternoon. We are joined by Detective Sergeant—?”

“Lieutenant Vincent.”

“Lieutenant Vincent D’Agosta, of the NYPD. We have here—“

Fred read off the tag. “William Howard Bridgeman, number 33-A45.”

“I am now removing the covering.” The thick plastic crackled.

There was a short silence. D’Agosta had a sudden flash of the gutted dog he’d seen that morning. *The trick is not to think too much. Don’t think about your own Vinnie, eighth birthday just next week.*

Dr. Ziewicz took a deep breath. “We have here a Caucasian male, a boy, age about, ah, ten to twelve years, height, well, I can’t give a height for this one because it’s decapitated. Maybe four feet ten inches, maybe five feet? Weight, about ninety pounds. This is very approximate. The state of the body is such that I can see no other identifying marks. Eye color and facial features indeterminate due to massive head trauma.”

“No anterior wounds or marks on the feet, legs, or genitals. Fred, please sponge off the abdominal area ... thank you. There are an undetermined number of large lacerations proceeding from the left anterior pectoral region at a hundred and ninety degree angle downward through the costals, sternum, and terminating at the right anterior abdominal region. This is a massive wound, perhaps two feet long and a foot wide. It appears that the pectoralis minor and pectoralis major are separated from the external thoracic cavity, the external and internal intercostals

are separated, and the body is eviscerated to a great degree. The sternal process has been split and the rib cage exposed. Massive hemorrhaging in the aortal—it's hard to see before cleaning and exploration.

"Fred, clean the edge of the thoracic cavity. The viscera that are clearly exposed and fully protuberant are the stomach, small and large intestines. The retroperitoneal organs appear to be in situ.

"Sponge the neck off, Fred. The neck area shows signs of trauma, some bruising, perhaps indicative of extravasation, possible spinal dislocation.

"Now for the head ... dear God."

In the silence, Fred cleared his throat.

"The head is decapitated between the axial process and the atlas. The entire occipital portion of the calvarium and half the parietal process have been crushed, or rather seemingly punched through and removed, by means unknown, leaving a hole perhaps ten inches in diameter. The skull is empty. The entire brain appears to have fallen out or been extracted through this hole ... The brain, or what is left of it, is in a pan here to the right of the head, but there is no indication of its original position vis-à-vis the body."

"It was found in pieces near the body," said D'Agosta.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. But where's the rest of it?"

"That's all there was."

"No. Something's missing. You got full scene-of-crime series for this?"

"Of course," said D'Agosta, trying not to show his annoyance.

"The brain is severely traumatized. Fred, bring me a number 2 scalpel and transverse speculum. The brain appears to have been severed at the medulla oblongata. The pons Varolii is intact, but separate. The cerebellum shows surface lacerations but is otherwise intact. There is little evidence of bleeding, indicating postmortem trauma. There's the body of fornix, attached. The cerebrum has been completely severed from the mesencephalon and the mesencephalon has been bisected and—look, Fred, there's no thalamoid region. And no pituitary. That's what's missing."

"What's that?" asked D'Agosta. He willed himself to look more closely. The brain, sitting in a stainless-steel pan, looked a hell of a lot more liquid than solid. He turned away. Baseball. Think about baseball. A pitch, the sound of a bat...

"The thalamus and the hypothalamus. The body's regulator."

"The body's regulator," repeated D'Agosta.

"The hypothalamus regulates body temperature, blood pressure, heartbeat, and the metabolism of fats and carbohydrates. Also the sleep-wake cycle. We think it holds the centers of pleasure and pain. It's a very complicated organ, Lieutenant." She looked fixedly at him, anticipating a question. D'Agosta mumbled dutifully, "How does it do all that?"

"Hormones. It secretes hundreds of regulatory hormones into the brain and bloodstream."

"Yeah," D'Agosta replied. He stepped back. The baseball soaring deep into center field, the center fielder dropping back, glove raised...

"Fred come over here and look at this," Ziewicz said sharply.

Fred bent over the pan. "It looks like... Well, I don't know..."

"Come on, Fred," Ziewicz coaxed.

“Well, it looks almost like—“ Fred paused. “Like a bite was taken out.”

“Exactly. Photographer!” Delbert rushed forward. “Get this. Looks just like when one of my kids takes a bite out of a cake.”

D’Agosta leaned forward, but he could see nothing special in the gray, bloody mess.

“It’s semicircular, like a human’s, but it appears larger, more ragged than you’d expect. We’ll take sections. Let’s test for the presence of salivase enzymes, Fred, just in case. Take this to the lab, tell them to flashfreeze it and microsection here, here, and here. Five sections each. Stain at least one with eosinophil. Stain one with salivase activating enzyme. Anything else you or they can think of.”

As Fred left, Ziewicz continued. “I am now bisecting the cerebrum. The posterior lobe is bruised, consistent with removal from the cranium. Photograph. The surface shows three parallel lacerations or incisions, approximately four millimeters apart, about half an inch deep. I am parting the first incision. Photograph. Lieutenant, see how these lacerations start wide and then converge? What do you think?”

“I don’t know,” D’Agosta said, peering a little closer. *It’s just a dead brain*, he thought.

“Long fingernails, maybe? Sharpened fingernails? I mean, do we have a homicidal psychopath on our hands?”

Fred returned from the lab, and they continued working on the brain for what seemed an eternity to D’Agosta. Finally, Ziewicz told Fred to put it in the refrigerator.

“I will now examine the hands,” she spoke into the microphone. She removed a plastic bag from the right hand and carefully resealed it. Then she lifted the hand, rotated it, examined the fingernails. “There is foreign matter under the thumb, index, and ring fingers. Fred, three well slides.”

“He’s just a kid,” D’Agosta said. “You’d expect his fingernails to be dirty.”

“Perhaps, Lieutenant,” Ziewicz replied. She scraped the material into small depressions in the slides, one finger at a time. “Fred, the stereozoom? I want to look at this.”

Ziewicz placed the slide on the stage, peered down, and adjusted the instrument.

“Normal fingernail dirt under the thumb, from the looks of it. Same with the others. Fred, full analysis, just in case.”

There was nothing of interest on the left hand.

“I will now,” Ziewicz continued, “examine the longitudinal trauma to the anterior portion of the body. Del, photographs, here, here, and here, and whatever else you think will show the wound best. Close-ups of the areas of penetration. It looks like the killer has done our Y-incision for us, wouldn’t you say, Lieutenant?”

“Yeah,” D’Agosta said, swallowing hard.

There were a series of rapid flashes.

“Forceps,” Ziewicz continued. “Three ragged lacerations begin just above the left nipple in the greater pectoral, penetrating and eventually separating the muscle. I am opening and probing the first laceration at the point of entry. Clamp there, Fred.

“I am now probing the wound. There is unidentified foreign matter here. Fred, a glassine? It looks like clothing material, perhaps from the victim’s shirt. Photograph.”

The flash popped, and then she held up a small piece of what looked like bloody lint, dropping it into the glassine envelope. She continued probing in silence for a few moments.

“There is another piece of foreign material deep in the muscle, about four centimeters directly below the right nipple. It is lodged on a rib. It appears to be hard. Photograph. Stick a flag in there, Fred.”

She extracted it and held it up, a bloody lump poised at the end of the long forceps.

D’Agosta ventured forward. “What is it? Rinse it off, maybe, and see?”

She glanced at him with a slight smile. “Fred, bring me a beaker of sterile water.”

As she dipped the object in and stirred, the water turned brownish red.

“Keep the water, we’ll see if there’s anything else in it,” she said, holding her find to the light.

“Jesus H. Christ,” said D’Agosta. “It’s a claw. A fucking claw.”

Ziewicz turned to her assistant. “That will be a charming snippet of monologue for our tape, won’t it, Fred?”

Chapter 11

Margo dumped her books and papers on the sofa and glanced at the clock perched atop the television: ten-fifteen. She shook her head. What an unbelievable, horrible day. Staying all those extra hours had only netted three new paragraphs on her dissertation. And she still had to work on the display-case copy for Moriarty. She sighed, sorry she’d ever agreed to the project.

Reflected neon light from a liquor store across the avenue struggled through the lone window of Margo’s living room, throwing the room into electric-blue chiaroscuro. She turned on the small overhead light and leaned against the door, scanning the disorder slowly. Normally, she was neat to excess. But now after just one week of neglect, textbooks, letters of sympathy, legal documents, shoes, and sweaters were scattered across the furniture. Empty cartons from the Chinese restaurant downstairs lay neglected in the sink. Her old Royal typewriter and a fan of research papers were spread out on the hardwood floor.

The shabby neighborhood—not-yet-gentrified upper Amsterdam Avenue—had given her father another reason why she should return home to Boston. “This is no place for a girl like you to live, Midge,” he had said, using her childhood nickname. “And that Museum is no place to work. Cooped up day after day with all those dead, stuffed creatures, things in jars. What kind of a life is that? Come back and work for me. We’d get you a house in Beverly, maybe Marblehead. You’ll be happier there, Midge, I know you will.”

When she noticed her answering machine was blinking, Margo pressed the message button.

“It’s Jan,” the first message began. “I got back into town today, and I just heard. Listen, I’m really, really sorry to hear about your father’s death. I’ll call back later, okay? I want to talk to you. Bye.”

She waited. Another voice came on. “Margo, this is your mother.” And then a click.

She squeezed her eyes tightly for a moment, then took a deep breath. She wouldn’t call Jan, not just yet. And she wouldn’t return her mother’s call, either; not until tomorrow, at least. She knew what her mother would say: *You have to come home to your father’s business. It’s what he would have wanted. You owe it to both of us.*

Turning away, she settled herself cross-legged in front of the typewriter, and stared at the curators’ notes, catalogue data, and accession listings Moriarty had given her. It was due the day after tomorrow, he’d said, and the next chapter of her dissertation was due the following Monday.

She glanced at the papers for another minute or two, collecting her thoughts. Then she began to type. A few moments later, she stopped and stared into the dusk. She remembered how her father used to make omelettes—the only thing he knew how to cook—on Sunday mornings. “Hey, Midge,” he would always say. “Not bad for an old ex-bachelor, huh?”

Several of the lights outside had been shut off as the shops closed. Margo looked out at the graffiti, the boarded-up windows. Maybe her father was right: Poverty wasn’t much fun.

Poverty. She shook her head, remembering the last time she’d heard that word, remembering the expression on her mother’s face as she’d pronounced it. The two of them had been sitting in the cool, dark office of her father’s executor, listening to all the complex reasons why her father’s debt-to-equity ratio and lack of estate planning was forcing liquidation—unless some family member were to step in to keep his business afloat.

She wondered about the parents of the two little boys. *They must have had high hopes for their children, too,* she thought. Now, they’ll never know disappointment. Or happiness. Then her thoughts moved to Prine. And the blood on his shoes.

She got up and turned on more lights. Time to start dinner. Tomorrow, she’d lock herself in her office, get that chapter finished. Work on the Cameroon write-up for Moriarty. And put off making a decision—for one more day, at least. By next week’s meeting with Frock, she promised herself, she’d have made up her mind.

The telephone rang. Automatically, she picked it up.

“Hello,” she said. She listened for a moment. “Oh. Hello, Mother.”

Chapter 12

Night came early to the Museum of Natural History. As five o’clock neared, the early spring sun was already setting. Inside, the crowds began to thin.

Tourists, schoolchildren, and harried parents streamed down the marble staircases toward the exits. Soon the echoes and shouts and clatter of footsteps in the vaulted halls died away. One by one, the exhibit cases went dark, and as the night wore on, the remaining lights threw crazed shadows across the marble floors.

A lone guard wandered along a hall, making his rounds, swinging a long key chain and humming. It was the beginning of his shift, and he was dressed in the standard Museum-issue blue-and-black guard uniform. Long ago the novelty of the Museum had worn off.

The whole joint gives me the creeps, he thought. Look at that son of a bitch in there. Goddamn native shit. Who the hell would pay to look at this stuff? Half of it's got curses on it, anyway.

The mask leered at him out of a dark case. He hurried on to the next station, where he turned a key in a box. The box recorded the time: 10:23 P.M. As he moved into the next hall, he had the unsettling impression—as he had so often—that his echoing footfalls were being carefully duplicated by some unseen presence.

He came to the next station and turned the key. The box clicked, and registered 10:34 P.M.

It only took four minutes to get to the next station. That gave him six minutes for a toke.

He ducked into a stairwell, closing and locking the door behind him, and peered down toward the darkened basement, where another door opened to an interior courtyard. His hand went for the light switch at the top of the stairs, but then withdrew. No sense calling attention to himself. He gripped the metal handrail tightly as he crept downward. In the basement, he made his way along the wall until he felt a long horizontal handle. He pushed, and frigid night air streamed in. He wedged open the door and lit up a joint, inhaling the bitter smoke with pleasure as he leaned out into the courtyard. A thin light from the deserted cloister beyond gave a pale illumination to his movements. The faint hum of passing traffic, muffled by so many intervening walls, passages, and parapets, seemed to come from another planet. He felt, with relief, the warm rush of the cannabis—another long night made bearable. Smoke finished, he flicked the roach into the dark, ran his fingers through his crew cut, stretched.

Halfway up the stairs, he heard the door slam shut below. He stopped, feeling a sudden chill. Had he left the door open? No. Shit, what if someone had seen him toke up? But they couldn't have smelt the smoke, and in the dark, it would've looked just like a cigarette.

There was a strange, rotten odor in the air that had nothing to do with weed. But no light flicked on, no footstep sounded on the metal steps. He started up toward the landing above.

Just as he reached it, he sensed a swift movement on the stairs behind him. He spun around, and a hard jerk on his chest shoved him backward against the wall. The last thing he saw were his shadowy entrails rolling and slipping down the stairs. After a moment, he stopped wondering where all that gore had suddenly come from.

Chapter 13

Tuesday

Bill Smithback sat in a heavy chair, watching the sharp, angular figure of Lavinia Rickman behind her birchwood veneer desk, reading his rumpled manuscript. Two bright red fingernails tapped on the glossy finish. Smithback knew that the fingernail ditty did not bode well. A very gray Tuesday morning sat outside the windows.

The room was not a typical Museum office. The untidy stacks of papers, journals, and books that seemed a fixture in other offices were missing. Instead, the shelves and desk were decorated with knickknacks from around the world: a storyteller doll from New Mexico, a brass Buddha from Tibet, several puppets from Indonesia. The walls were painted light institutional green, and the room smelled of pine air freshener.

Additional curios were arranged on both sides of her desk, as formal and symmetrical as shrubs in a French garden: an agate paperweight, a bone letter opener, a Japanese netsuke. And in the center of the motif hovered Rickman herself, bent primly over the manuscript. The swirled stiff orange hair, Smithback thought, didn't go well with the green walls.

The tapping speeded, then slowed as Rickman turned the pages. Finally she flicked over the last page, gathered the loose sheets together, and squared them in the precise center of the desk.

"Well," she said, looking up with a bright smile. "I have a few small suggestions."

"Oh," said Smithback.

"This section on Aztec human sacrifice, for example. It's much too controversial." She licked her finger daintily and found the page. "Here."

"Yes, but in the exhibition—"

"Mr. Smithback, the exhibition deals with the subject *tastefully*. This, on the other hand, is not tasteful. It's far too graphic." She zipped a Magic Marker across his work.

"But it's entirely accurate," Smithback said, wincing inwardly.

"I am concerned with *emphasis*, not accuracy. Something can be *entirely* accurate but have the wrong emphasis, and thus give the wrong impression. Allow me to remind you that we have a large Hispanic population here in New York."

"Yes, but how is this going to offend—"

"Moving on, this section on Gilborg simply must go." She zipped another line across another page.

"But why—?"

She leaned back in her chair. "Mr. Smithback, the Gilborg expedition was a grotesque failure. They were looking for an island that did not exist. One of them, as you are so zealous in pointing out, raped a native woman. We were careful to keep all mention of Gilborg *out* of the exhibition. Now, is it really necessary to document the Museum's failures?"

“But his collections were superb!” Smithback protested feebly.

“Mr. Smithback, I am not convinced that you understand the nature of this assignment.” There was a long silence. The tapping began again. “Do you really think that the Museum hired you, and is *paying* you, to document failure and controversy?”

“But failure and controversy are part of science, and who’s going to read a book that—”

“There are many corporations that give money to the Museum, corporations that might very well be disturbed by some of this,” Mrs. Rickman interrupted. “And there are volatile ethnic groups out there, ready to attack, that might take *strong* exception.”

“But we’re talking about things that happened a hundred years ago, while—”

“Mr. Smithback!” Mrs. Rickman had only raised her voice a little, but the effect was startling. A silence fell. “Mr. Smithback, I must tell you quite frankly...” She paused, then stood up briskly and walked around the desk until she was standing directly behind the writer.

“I must tell you,” Mrs. Rickman continued, “that it seems to be taking you longer than I thought to come around to our point of view. You are not writing a book for a commercial publisher. To put it bluntly, we’re looking for the kind of favorable treatment you gave the Boston Aquarium in your previous—ahem—assignment.” She moved in front of Smithback, perching stiffly on the edge of the desk. “There are certain things we expect, and indeed, that we have a *right* to expect. They are—” she ticked them off on bony fingers.

“One: No controversy.

“Two: Nothing that might offend ethnic groups.

“Three: Nothing that might harm the Museum’s reputation.

“Now, is that so unreasonable?” She lowered her voice and, leaning forward, squeezed Smithback’s hand with her dry one.

“I ... no.” Smithback struggled with an almost overwhelming urge to withdraw his hand.

“Well, then, that’s settled.” She moved behind the desk, and slid the manuscript over to him.

“Now, there’s one small matter we need to discuss.” She enunciated very precisely. “There were a few spots in the manuscript where you quoted some interesting comments by people ‘close to the exhibition,’ but neglected to identify the exact sources. Nothing important, you understand, but I’d like a list of those sources—for my files, nothing more.” She smiled expectantly.

Alarms rang in Smithback’s head. “Well,” he replied carefully, “I’d like to help you out, but the ethics of journalism won’t let me.” He shrugged his shoulders. “You know how it is.”

Mrs. Rickman’s smile faded quickly, and she opened her mouth to speak. Just then, to Smithback’s relief, the phone rang. He got up to leave, gathering his manuscript together. As he was closing the door, he heard a sharp intake of breath.

“Not *another!*”

The door hissed shut.

Chapter 14

D'Agosta just couldn't get used to the Hall of the Great Apes. All those big grinning chimps, stuffed, hanging out of the fake trees, with their hairy arms and hilarious realistic dicks and big human hands with real fingernails. He wondered why it had taken so long for scientists to figure out that man was descended from the apes. Should've been obvious the first time they clapped eyes on a chimp. And he'd heard somewhere that chimps were just like humans, violent, excitable, always beating hell out of each other, even murdering and eating each other. *Jesus*, he thought, *there must be some other way to get around the Museum without going through this hall.*

"This way," said the guard, "down this stairway. It's pretty awful, Lieutenant. I was coming in at—"

"I'll hear that later," said D'Agosta. After the kid, D'Agosta was ready for anything. "You say he's wearing a guard's uniform. You know him?"

"I don't know, sir. It's hard to tell."

The guard pointed down the dim stairs. The stairway opened onto some kind of courtyard. The body lay at the bottom, in shadow. Everything was streaked and splattered in black—the floor, the walls, the overhead light. D'Agosta knew what the black was.

"You," he said, turning to one of several policemen following him, "get some lights in here. I want the place dusted and swept for fibers pronto. Is the SOC unit on its way? The man's obviously dead, so keep the ambulance people out for a while. I don't want them messing things up."

D'Agosta looked down the stairs again. "Jesus H. Christ," he said, "whose footprints are those? Some jackass walked right through that pool of blood, it looks like. Or maybe our murderer decided to leave us a fat clue.

There was a silence.

"Are those yours?" He turned to the guard. "What's your name?"

"Norris. Eric Norris. As I was saying, I—"

"Yes or no?"

"Yes, but—"

"Shut up. Are those the shoes?"

"Yes. See, I was—"

"Take the shoes off. You're ruining the carpet." *Fucking doorshaker*, D'Agosta thought. "Take them to the forensics lab. Tell them to seal 'em in a crime bag, they'll know what to do. Wait for me there. No, don't wait for me there. I'll call you later. I'll have a few questions for you. No, take the fucking shoes off right here." He didn't want another Prine on his hands. What was it about this Museum, people liked to go around wading in blood? "You'll have to walk over there in your socks."

"Yes, sir."

One of the cops behind D'Agosta snickered.

D'Agosta looked at him. "You think it's funny? He tracked blood all over the place. It's not funny."

D'Agosta moved halfway down the stairwell. The head was lying in a far corner, face down. He couldn't see it all that well, but he knew that he'd find the top of the skull punched out, the brains floating around somewhere in all that gore. God, what a mess a body could be if it wanted to.

A step sounded on the stairway behind him. "SOC," said a short man, followed by a photographer and several other men in lab coats.

"Finally. I want lights there, there, and there, and wherever else the photographer wants 'em. I want a perimeter set up, I want it set up five minutes ago, I want every speck of lint and grain of sand picked up. I want TraceChem used on everything. I want—well, what else do I want? I want every test known to man, and I want that perimeter observed by everyone, got it? No fuck-ups this time."

D'Agosta turned. "Is the Crime Lab team on the premises? And the coroner's investigator? Or are they out for coffee and croissants?" He patted the breast pocket of his jacket, looking for a cigar. "Put cardboard boxes over those footprints. And you guys, when you're done, squeegee a trail around the body so we can walk without tracking blood everywhere."

"Excellent." D'Agosta heard a low, mellifluous voice behind him.

"Who the hell are you?" he said, turning to see a tall, slender man, wearing a crisp black suit, leaning against the top of the stairwell. Hair so blond it was almost white was brushed straight back above pale blue eyes. "The undertaker?"

"Pendergast," the man said, stepping down and holding out his hand. The photographer, cradling his equipment, pushed past him.

"Well, Pendergast, you better have a good reason to be here, otherwise—"

Pendergast smiled. "Special Agent Pendergast."

"Oh. FBI? Funny, why aren't I surprised? Well, how-do, Pendergast. Why the hell don't you guys phone ahead? Listen, I got a headless, de-brained stiff down there. Where're the rest of you, anyway?"

Pendergast withdrew his hand. "There's just me, I'm afraid."

"What? Don't kid me. You guys always travel around in packs."

The lights popped on, and the gore around them was bathed in brilliance. Everything that previously appeared black was suddenly illuminated, all the various shades of the body's secret workings made visible. Something D'Agosta suspected was Norris's breakfast was also visible, lying amidst a wash of body fluids. Involuntarily, D'Agosta's jaw started working. Then his eye caught a piece of skull with the dead guard's crew cut still on it, lying a good five feet from the body.

"Oh Jesus," said D'Agosta, stepping back, and then he lost it. Right in front of the FBI guy, in front of SOC, in front of the photographer, he blew his own breakfast. *I can't believe it, he thought. The first time in twenty-two years, and it's happening at the worst possible moment.*

The coroner's investigator appeared on the stairs, a young woman in a white coat and plastic apron. "Who's the officer in charge?" she asked, sliding on her gloves.

"I am," said D'Agosta, wiping his mouth. He looked at Pendergast. "For a few more minutes, anyway. Lieutenant D'Agosta."

"Dr. Collins," the investigator replied briskly. Followed by an assistant, she walked down to an area near the body that was being squeegeed free of blood. "Photographer," she said, "I'm turning the body over. Full series, please."

D'Agosta averted his gaze. "We got work to do, Pendergast," he said authoritatively. He pointed at the vomit. "Don't clean that up until the SOC has finished with these stairs. Got it?"

Everyone nodded.

"I wanna know ingress and egress as soon as possible. See if you can ID the body. If it's a guard, get Ippolito down here. Pendergast, let's go up to the command post, get coordinated, or liaised, or whatever the hell you call it, and then let's return when the team is done for a looksee."

"Capital" said Pendergast.

Capital? thought D'Agosta. The guy sounded deep South. He'd met types like this before, and they were hopeless in New York City.

Pendergast leaned forward and said quietly, "The blood splattered on the wall is rather interesting."

D'Agosta looked over. "You don't say."

"I'd be interested in the ballistics on that blood."

D'Agosta looked straight into Pendergast's pale eyes. "Good idea," he said finally. "Hey, photographer, get a close-up series of the blood on the wall. And you, you—"

"McHenry, sir."

"I want a ballistic analysis done on that blood. Looks like it was moving fast at a sharp angle. I want the source pinpointed, speed, force, a full report."

"Yes, sir."

"I want it on my desk in thirty minutes."

McHenry looked a little unhappy.

"Okay, Pendergast, any more ideas?"

"No, that was my only one."

"Let's go."

In the temporary command post, everything was in place. D'Agosta always saw to that. Not one piece of paper was loose, not one file was out, not one tape recorder sitting on a desk. It looked good, and now he was glad that it did. Everyone was busy, the phones were lit up, but things were under control.

Pendergast slipped his lean form into a chair. For a formal-looking guy, he moved like a cat. Briefly, D'Agosta gave him an overview of the investigation. "Okay, Pendergast," he concluded. "What's your jurisdiction here? Did we fuck up? Are we out?"

Pendergast smiled. "No, not at all. As far as I can tell, I would not have done anything differently myself. You see, Lieutenant, we've been in the case from the very beginning, only we didn't realize it."

"How so?"

"I'm from the New Orleans field office. We were working on a series of killings down there, some very odd killings. Not to get into specifics, but the victims had

the backs of their skulls removed, and the brains extracted. Same modus operandi.”

“No shit. When was this?”

“Several years ago.”

“Several *years* ago? That—”

“Yes. They went unsolved. First it was ATF, because they thought drugs might have been involved, then it was FBI when ATF couldn’t make any progress. But we couldn’t do anything with it, the trail was cold. And then yesterday, I read a wire service report about the double murder here in New York. The MO is too, ah, too peculiar not to make an immediate connection, don’t you think? So I flew up last night. I’m not even officially here. Although I will be tomorrow.”

D’Agosta relaxed. “So you’re from Louisiana. I thought you might be some new boy in the New York office.”

“They’ll be here,” said Pendergast. “When I make my report tonight, they’ll be in on it. But I will be in charge of the case.”

“You? No way, not in New York City.”

Pendergast smiled. “I will be in charge, Lieutenant. I’ve been pursuing this case for years and I am, frankly, interested in it.” The way Pendergast said *interested* sent a strange sensation down D’Agosta’s back. “But don’t worry, Lieutenant, I am ready and willing to work with you, side by side, in perhaps a different way than the New York office might. If you’ll meet me halfway, that is. This isn’t my turf and I’m going to need your help. How about it?”

He stood up and held out his hand. *Christ*, D’Agosta thought, *the boys in the New York office will take him apart in two and a half hours and ship the pieces back to New Orleans.*

“Deal,” said D’Agosta, grasping his hand. “I’ll introduce you around, starting with the security director, Ippolito. Provided you answer one question. You said the MO of the New Orleans killings was the same. What about the bite marks we found in the brain of the older boy? The claw fragment?”

“From what you told me about the autopsy, Lieutenant, the ME was only speculating about the bite marks,” Pendergast replied. “I’ll be interested to hear the salivase results. Is the claw being tested?”

Later, D’Agosta would remember that his question had been only half answered. Now, he simply replied, “It’s being done today.”

Pendergast leaned back in his chair and made a tent of his fingers, his eyes looking off into space. “I’ll have to pay a visit to Dr. Ziewicz when she examines today’s unpleasantness.”

“Say, Pendergast? You aren’t by any chance related to Andy Warhol, are you?”

“I don’t care much for modern art, Lieutenant.”

The crime scene was packed but orderly, everyone moving swiftly and speaking in undertones, as if in deference to the dead man. The morgue crew had arrived but was standing out of the way, patiently observing the proceedings. Pendergast stood with D’Agosta and Ippolito, the Museum’s Security Director.

“Indulge me if you will,” Pendergast was saying to the photographer. “I’d like a shot from here, like this.” Pendergast demonstrated briefly. “And I’d like a series from the top of the stairs, and a sequence coming down.

Take your time, get a nice play of line, shadow, and light going.”

The photographer looked carefully at Pendergast, then moved off.

Pendergast turned to Ippolito. “Here’s a question. Why was the guard—what did you say his name was, Mr. Ippolito, Jolley, Fred Jolley?—down here in the first place? This wasn’t part of his rounds. Correct?”

“That’s right,” Ippolito said. He was standing in a dry spot near the entrance to the courtyard, his face a poisonous green.

D’Agosta shrugged. “Who knows?”

“Indeed,” Pendergast said. He looked out into the courtyard beyond the stairwell, which was small and deep, brick walls rising on three sides. “And he locked the door behind himself, you say. We have to assume he went outside here, or was headed in that direction. Hmm. The Taurid meteor shower was peaking at about that time last night. Perhaps Jolley here is an aspiring astronomer. But I doubt it.” He stood still for a minute, looking around. Then he turned back toward them. “I believe I can tell you why.”

Christ, a real Sherlock Holmes, thought D’Agosta. “He came down the stairwell to indulge a habit of his. Marijuana. This courtyard is an isolated and well-ventilated spot. A perfect place to, ah, smoke some weed.”

“Marijuana? That’s just a guess.”

“I believe I see the roach,” said Pendergast, pointing into the courtyard. “Just where the door meets the jamb.”

“I can’t see a thing,” said D’Agosta. “Hey, Ed. Check out the base of the door. Right there. What is it?”

“A joint,” said Ed.

“What’s the matter with you guys, can’t find a fucking joint? I told you to pick up every grain of sand, for Chrissake.”

“We haven’t done that grid yet.”

“Right.” He looked at Pendergast. *Lucky bastard. Probably wasn’t the guard’s joint anyway.*

“Mr. Ippolito,” Pendergast drawled, “is it common for your staff to use illicit drugs while on duty?”

“Absolutely not, but I’m not convinced it was Fred Jolley that—”

Pendergast shut him up with a wave of the hand. “I assume you can account for all these footprints.”

“Those belong to the guard who found the body,” said D’Agosta.

Pendergast bent down. “These completely cover any local evidence that may remain,” he said, frowning. “Really, Mr. Ippolito,” he said, “you should have your men better trained in how to preserve a crime scene.”

Ippolito opened his mouth, then closed it again. D’Agosta suppressed a smirk.

Pendergast was walking carefully back underneath the stairwell, where a large metal door stood partially open. “Orient me, Mr. Ippolito. This door under the stairwell goes where?”

“A hallway.”

“Leading to—?”

“Well, there’s the Secure Area down to the right. But it’s not possible the killer went that way, because ...”

“Excuse me for contradicting you, Mr. Ippolito, but I’m sure the killer *did* go that way,” Pendergast replied. “Let me guess. Beyond the Secure Area is the Old Basement, am I right?”

“Right,” said Ippolito.

“Where the two children were found.”

“Bingo,” said D’Agosta.

“This Secure Area sounds interesting, Mr. Ippolito. Shall we take a stroll?”

Beyond the rusty metal door, a row of light bulbs stretched down a long basement corridor. The floor was covered in shabby linoleum, and the walls were hung with murals of Southwestern Pueblo Indians grinding corn, weaving, and stalking deer.

“Lovely,” said Pendergast. “A shame they’re down here. They look like early Fremont Ellis.”

“They used to hang in the Hall of the Southwest,” said Ippolito. “It closed in the twenties, I think.”

“Ah!” said Pendergast, scrutinizing one of the murals. “It is Ellis. My heavens, these are lovely. Look at the light on that adobe facade.”

“So,” said Ippolito. “How do you know?”

“Why,” said Pendergast, “anyone who knows Ellis would recognize these.”

“I mean, how do you know the killer came through here?”

“I suppose I was guessing,” said Pendergast, examining the next painting. “You see, when someone says ‘it’s impossible,’ I have this very bad habit, I can’t help myself, I immediately contradict that person in the most positive terms possible. A very bad habit, but one that I find hard to break. But of course, now we *do* know the killer came through here.”

“How?” Ippolito seemed confused.

“Look at this marvelous rendition of old Santa Fe. Have you ever been to Santa Fe?”

There was a momentary silence. “Er, no,” said Ippolito.

“There is a mountain range behind the town, called the Sierra de Sangre de Cristo. It means the ‘Blood of Christ Mountains’ in Spanish.”

“So?”

“Well the mountains do look quite red in the setting sun, but not, I dare say, *that* red. That’s real blood, and it’s fresh. A shame, really, it’s ruined the painting.”

“Holy shit,” said D’Agosta. “Look at that.”

A broad streak of blood was smeared waist-high across the painting.

“You know, murder is a messy thing. We should find traces of blood all along this corridor. Lieutenant, we’ll need the crime lab people in here. I think we have your egress, at any rate.” He paused. “Let’s finish our little tour, and then call them in. I’d like to go ahead and look for evidence, if you don’t mind.”

“Be my guest,” said D’Agosta.

“Careful where you walk, Mr. Ippolito, we’ll be asking them to check the floors as well as the walls.” They came to a locked door marked RESTRICTED. “This is the Secure Area,” said Ippolito.

“I see,” said Pendergast. “And what exactly is the point of this Secure Area, Mr. Ippolito? Is the rest of the Museum insecure?”

“Not at all,” the Security Director replied quickly. “The Secure Area is for storing especially rare and valuable objects. This is the best-protected museum in the country. We’ve recently installed a system of sliding metal doors throughout the Museum. They’re all linked to our computer system, and in the event of a burglary we can seal off the Museum in sections, just like the watertight compartments on a—”

“I get the picture, Mr. Ippolito, thank you very much,” Pendergast said. “Interesting. An old copper-sheathed door,” he said, examining it closely.

D’Agosta saw that the copper covering was riddled with shallow dents.

“Fresh dents, by the look of them,” Pendergast said. “Now, what do you make of this?” He pointed downward.

“Jesus H. Christ,” breathed D’Agosta, looking at the lower section of the door. The wooden door frame was scored and gouged into a welter of fresh splinters, as if something with claws had been scrabbling at it.

Pendergast stepped back. “I want the entire door analyzed, if you please, Lieutenant. And now to see what’s inside. Mr. Ippolito, if you would be so kind as to open the door without getting your hands all over it?”

“I’m not supposed to let anyone in there without clearance.”

D’Agosta looked at him in disbelief. “You mean you want us to get a damn warrant?”

“Oh, no, no, it’s just that—”

“He forgot the key,” said Pendergast. “We’ll wait.”

“I’ll be right back,” said Ippolito, and his hurried footsteps echoed down the corridor. When he was out of hearing D’Agosta turned to Pendergast. “I hate to say it, Pendergast, but I like the way you work. That was pretty slick, the painting, and the way you handled Ippolito. Good luck with the New York boys.”

Pendergast looked amused. “Thank you. The feeling is mutual. I’m glad I am working with you, Lieutenant, and not one of these hard-boiled fellows. Judging from what happened back there, you still have a heart. You’re still a normal human being.”

D’Agosta laughed. “Naw, it wasn’t that. It was the fucking scrambled eggs with ham and cheese and ketchup I had for breakfast. And that crew cut. I hate crew cuts.”

Chapter 15

The herbarium door was shut, as usual, despite the sign that read DO NOT CLOSE THIS DOOR. Margo knocked. *Come on, Smith, I know you’re in there.* She knocked again, louder, and heard a querulous voice: “All right, hold your horses! I’m coming!”

The door opened and Bailey Smith, the old Curatorial Assistant of the herbarium, sat back down at his desk with an enormous sigh of irritation and began shuffling through his mail.

Margo stepped forward resolutely. Bailey Smith seemed to consider his job a gross imposition. And when at last he got around to things, it was hard to shut him up. Normally Margo would have merely sent down a requisition slip and avoided the ordeal. But she needed to examine the Kiribitu plant specimens as soon as possible for her next dissertation chapter. Moriarty's write-up was still unfinished, and she'd been hearing rumors of another horrible killing that might shut the Museum down for the rest of the day.

Bailey Smith hummed, ignoring her. Though he was nearly eighty, Margo suspected he only feigned deafness to annoy people.

"Mr. Smith!" she called out. "I need these specimens, please." She pushed a list over the counter top. "Right away, if possible."

Smith grunted, rose from his chair, and slowly picked up the list, scanning it disapprovingly. "May take awhile to locate, you know. How about tomorrow morning?"

"Please, Mr. Smith. I've heard they might close down the Museum at any moment. I really need these specimens."

Scenting the chance to gossip, the old man became friendlier. "Terrible business," he said, shaking his head. "In my forty-two years here I've never seen anything like it. But I can't say I'm surprised," he added, with a significant nod.

Margo didn't want to get Smith going. She said nothing.

"But not the first, from what I hear. And not the last, either." He turned with the list, holding it in front of his nose. "What's this? *Muhlenbergia dunbarii*? We don't have any of that."

Then Margo heard a voice behind her.

"Not the first?"

It was Gregory Kawakita, the young Assistant Curator who had accompanied her to the staff lounge the previous morning. Margo had read the Museum's bio of Kawakita: born to wealthy parents, orphaned young, he had left his native Yokohama and grown up with relatives in England. After studying at Magdalene College, Oxford, he moved to M.I.T. for graduate work, then on to the Museum and an assistant curatorship. He was Frock's most brilliant protégé, which made Margo occasionally resentful. To her, Kawakita didn't seem the kind of scientist who'd wish to be allied with Frock. Kawakita had an instinctual sense for Museum politics, and Frock was controversial, an iconoclast. But despite his self-absorption, Kawakita was undeniably brilliant, and he was working with Frock on a model of genetic mutation that no one but the two of them seemed to fully understand. With Frock's guidance, Kawakita was developing the Extrapolator, a program that could compare and combine genetic codes of different species. When they ran their data through the Museum's powerful computer, the system's throughput was reduced to such a degree that people joked it was in "hand calculator mode."

"Not the first what?" asked Smith, giving Kawakita an unwelcoming stare.

Margo flashed a warning glance at Kawakita, but he continued. "You said something about this murder not being the first."

"Greg, did you *have* to?" Margo groaned sotto voce. "I'll never get my plant specimens now."

"I'm not surprised by any of this," Smith continued. "Now, I'm not a superstitious man," he said, leaning on the counter, "but this isn't the first time some creature has prowled the halls of the Museum. At least that's what people say. Not that I believe a word of it, mind you."

"Creature?" asked Kawakita.

Margo gave Kawakita a light kick in the shins.

"I'm only repeating what everyone's talking about, Dr. Kawakita. I don't believe in starting false rumors."

"Of course not," said Kawakita, winking at Margo. Smith fixed Kawakita with a stern glare. "They say it's been around a long time. Living down in the basement, eating rats and mice and cockroaches. Have you noticed there aren't any rats or mice loose in the Museum? There *should* be, God knows they're all over the rest of New York. But not here. Curious, don't you think?"

"I hadn't noticed," said Kawakita. "I'll make a special effort to check that out."

"Then there was a researcher here who was breeding cats for some experiment," Smith continued. "Sloane I think his name was, Doctor Sloane, in the Animal Behavior Department. One day a dozen of his cats escaped. And you know what? They were never seen again. Vanished. Now that's kind of funny. You'd expect one or two at least to show up."

"Maybe they left because there weren't any mice to eat," said Kawakita.

Smith ignored him. "Some say it hatched from one of those crates of dinosaur eggs brought back from Siberia."

"I see," said Kawakita, trying to suppress a grin. "Dinosaurs loose in the Museum."

Smith shrugged. "I only say what I hear. Others think it was something brought back from one of the graves they've robbed over the years. Some artifact with a curse. You know, like the King Tut curse. And if you ask me, those fellows deserve what they get. I don't care what they call it, archaeology, anthropology, or hoodooology, it's just plain old grave robbing to me. You don't see them digging up *their* grandmother's graves, but they sure don't hesitate to dig up somebody else's and take all the goodies. Am I right?"

"Absolutely," said Kawakita. "But what was that you said about these murders not being the first?"

Smith looked at them conspiratorially. "Well, if you tell anybody I told you this I'll deny it, but about five years back, something strange happened." He paused for a minute, as if to gauge the effect his story was having. "There was this curator, Morrissey, or Montana, or something. He was involved with that disastrous Amazon expedition. You know the one I mean, where everyone was killed. Anyway, one day he simply vanished. Nobody ever heard from him again. So people started to whisper about it. Apparently, a guard was overheard saying that his body had been found in the basement, horribly mutilated."

"I see," Kawakita said. "And you think the Museum Beast did it?"

"I don't think anything," Smith responded quickly. "I'm just telling you what I've heard, that's all. I've heard a lot of things from a lot of people, I can tell you."

"So has anyone seen this, ah, creature?" Kawakita asked, unsuccessfully stifling a smile.

“Why, yessir. Couple of people, in fact. You know old Carl Conover in the metal shop? Three years ago now he says he saw it, came in early to get some work done and saw it slouching around a corner in the basement. Saw it right there, plain as day.”

“Really?” said Kawakita. “What’d it look like?”

“Well—” Smith began, then stopped. Even he finally noticed Kawakita’s amusement. The old man’s expression changed. “I expect, Dr. Kawakita, that it looked a bit like Mr. Jim Beam,” he said.

Kawakita was puzzled. “Beam? I don’t believe I know him—”

Bailey Smith suddenly roared with laughter, and Margo couldn’t help grinning herself. “George,” she said, “I think he meant that Conover was drunk.”

“I see,” said Kawakita stiffly. “Of course.”

All his good humor had vanished. *Doesn’t like having the joke turned on him*, Margo thought. *He can dish it out, but he can’t take it.*

“Well, anyway,” said Kawakita briskly, “I need some specimens.”

“Now, wait just a minute!” Margo protested as Kawakita pushed his own list onto the counter. The old man eyed it and peered at the scientist.

“Week after next okay?” he asked.

Chapter 16

Several floors above, Lieutenant D’Agosta sat in a huge leather sofa in the curator’s study. He smacked his lips contentedly, propped one chubby leg upon the knee of the other, and looked around. Pendergast, absorbed in a book of lithographs, was reclining in an armchair behind a desk. Above his head, in a gold rococo frame, hung a massive Audubon painting depicting the mating ritual of the snowy egret. Oak paneling with a century’s patina ran along the walls above a beadboard wainscot. Delicate gilded lights of hand-blown glass hung just below the pressed tin ceiling. A large fireplace of elaborately carved Dolomite limestone dominated one corner of the room. *Nice place*, D’Agosta thought. *Old money. Old New York. It has class. Not the place to smoke a two-bit cigar.* He lit up.

“It’s come and gone two-thirty, Pendergast,” he said, exhaling blue smoke. “Where the hell do you think Wright is?”

Pendergast shrugged. “Trying to intimidate us,” he said, turning another page.

D’Agosta looked at the FBI agent for a minute.

“You know these Museum big shots, they think they can keep anybody waiting,” he said finally, watching for a reaction. “Wright and his cronies have been treating us like second-class citizens since yesterday morning.

Pendergast turned another page. “I had no idea the Museum had a complete collection of Piranesi’s Forum sketches,” he murmured.

D’Agosta snorted to himself. This should be interesting, he thought.

Over lunch, he’d made a few surreptitious calls to some friends in the Bureau. Turned out they’d not only heard of Pendergast, but they’d heard several rumors about him. Graduated with honors from some English university—probably true.

A special forces officer who'd been captured in Vietnam and had later walked out of the jungle, the only survivor of a Cambodian death camp—D'Agosta wasn't sure about *that* one. But he was revising his opinion nevertheless.

Now the massive door opened silently and Wright came in, the Security Director at his heels. Abruptly, Wright sat down opposite the FBI agent. "You're Pendergast, I suppose," the Director sighed. "Let's get this over with."

D'Agosta sat back to watch the fun.

There was a long silence while Pendergast turned pages. Wright shifted. "If you're busy," he said irritably, "We can come back another time."

Pendergast's face was invisible behind the large book. "No," he said finally. "Now is a good time." Another page was leisurely turned. Then another.

D'Agosta watched with amusement as the Director reddened.

"The Security Director isn't needed for this meeting," came the voice from behind the book.

"Mr. Ippolito is part of the investigation—"

The agent's eyes suddenly appeared over the spine of the book. "I'm in charge of the investigation, Dr. Wright," Pendergast said quietly. "Now, if Mr. Ippolito would be so kind—?"

Ippolito glanced nervously at Wright, who flicked his hand in dismissal.

"Look, Mr. Pendergast," Wright began as the door closed. "I've got a Museum that needs running, and I don't have much time. I hope this can be brief."

Pendergast laid the open book carefully on the desk in front of him.

"I've often thought," he said slowly, "that this early classicist stuff of Piranesi's was his best. Do you agree?" Wright looked utterly astonished. "I fail to see," he stammered, "what that has to do with—"

"His later work was interesting, of course, but too fantastical for my taste," Pendergast replied.

"Actually," said the Director in his best lecture voice, "I've always thought—"

The book slammed shut like a shot. "*Actually*, Dr. Wright," Pendergast said tightly, his courtly manner gone, "it's time to forget what you've *always* thought. We're going to play a little game here. I'm going to talk, and y'all are going to listen. Understood?"

Wright sat speechless. Then his face mottled in anger. "Mr. Pendergast, I will not be spoken to in that manner—"

Pendergast cut him off. "In case you haven't read the headlines, Dr. Wright, there have been three grisly murders in this Museum in the last forty-eight hours. Three. The press is speculating that some kind of ferocious beast is responsible. Museum attendance is down fifty percent since the weekend. Your staff is very upset, to put it mildly. Have you bothered taking a stroll through your Museum today, Dr. Wright? You might find it edifying. The feeling of dread is almost palpable. Most people, if they leave their offices at all, travel in twos and threes. The maintenance staff is finding any reasons it can to avoid the Old Basement. Yet you prefer to act as if nothing is wrong. Believe me, Dr. Wright, something is extremely wrong."

Pendergast leaned forward, and slowly folded his arms on top of the book. There was something so menacing in his deliberateness, so cold in his pale eyes, that the

Director sat back involuntarily. D'Agosta unconsciously held his breath. Then Pendergast continued.

"Now we can handle this one of three ways," he said. "Your way, my way, or the Bureau's way. So far, your way has been far too much in evidence. I understand that the police investigation has been subtly obstructed. Phone calls are returned late, if at all. Staff are busy or not to be found. Those who are available—such as Mr. Ippolito—have not proven particularly useful. People are late to appointments. Why, it's enough to make one suspicious. As of now, your way is no longer acceptable."

Pendergast waited for a response. There was none, and he went on.

"Ordinarily, the Bureau's way would be to close the Museum, suspend operations, cancel exhibitions. Very bad publicity, I assure you. Very expensive, to the taxpayers and to you. But my way is a bit more hospitable. All other things being equal, the Museum can remain open. Still, there will be certain conditions. Number one," he said, "I want you to assure complete cooperation of Museum personnel. We will need to speak to you and other senior staff members from time to time, and I want total compliance. I will also need a list of the entire staff. We want to interview everyone who works in, or has had any reason to be in, the vicinity of the murders. There will be no exceptions. I would appreciate your making sure of this personally. We'll be setting up a schedule, and *everyone* is to show up on time."

"But there are twenty-five hundred employees—" began Wright.

"Number two," Pendergast continued. "Starting tomorrow, we're going to be limiting employee access to the Museum, until such time as this investigation is concluded. The curfew is to be for the safety of the staff. At least, that is what you will tell them."

"But there's vital research going on here that—"

"Number three—" Pendergast casually pointed three fingers, derringer-like, at Wright "—from time to time we may need to close the Museum, either fully or in part. In some instances, only visitors will be denied entry; in others, the Museum will be closed to staff as well. Notice may be short. Your cooperation will be expected."

Wright's fury mounted. "This Museum is closed only three days a year: Christmas, New Year's, and Thanksgiving," he said. "This is unprecedented. It will look terrible." He gave Pendergast a long, appraising look. "Besides, I'm not convinced you have the authority to do that. I think we should—" He stopped. Pendergast had picked up the telephone.

"What's that for?" Wright demanded.

"Dr. Wright, this is growing tiresome. Perhaps we should discuss this with the Attorney General."

Pendergast started to dial.

"Just a moment," said Wright. "Surely we can discuss this without involving other people."

"That's up to you," said Pendergast as he finished dialing.

"For Heaven's sake, put down that phone," Wright said angrily. "Of course, we'll cooperate fully—within reason."

“Very good,” Pendergast said. “And if in the future you start to feel that anything is unreasonable, we can always do this again.” He replaced the receiver gently.

“If I’m going to cooperate,” Wright continued, “I think I’ve a right to be informed about just what’s been done since this latest atrocity. As far as I can see, you’ve made precious little progress.”

“Certainly, Doctor,” Pendergast said. He looked at papers on the desk. “According to your time clocks, the most recent victim, Jolley, met his demise shortly after ten-thirty last night,” he said. “The autopsy should confirm this. He was, as you know, lacerated in a fashion similar to the previous victims. He was killed while making his rounds, although the stairwell where he was found wasn’t part of his normal route. He may have been investigating a suspicious noise or something of that nature. He may have just stopped for some reefer. A recently smoked marijuana cigarette was found near the archway directly outside the stairwell exit. We will, naturally, be testing the body for drug use.”

“God, that’s all we need,” said Wright. “But haven’t you found any *useful* clues? What about this wild animal business? You—”

Pendergast held his palm up and waited for silence. “I would prefer not to speculate until we discuss the available evidence with experts. Some of these experts may be from among your own staff. For the record, we’ve found no signs as yet that any kind of animal had been in the vicinity.

“The body was found lying at the bottom of the stairwell, although it was clear that the attack occurred near the top, as blood and viscera were found along the length of the stairs. He either rolled or was dragged to the bottom. But don’t take my word for it, Dr. Wright,” Pendergast said, picking up a manila envelope from the desk, “see for yourself.” He pulled out a glossy photograph and laid it carefully on the tabletop.

“Oh, my God,” Wright said, staring at the photograph. “Heaven help us.”

“The right-hand wall of the stairwell was covered with splattered blood,” Pendergast said. “Here’s a photograph.”

He handed it to Wright, who slid it quickly on top of the first.

“It’s a simple matter to do a ballistics analysis on splattered blood,” Pendergast went on. “In this case, the evidence is consistent with a massive blow directed downward, instantaneously disemboweling the victim.”

Pendergast replaced the photographs and checked his watch. “Lieutenant D’Agosta will be checking in with you to make sure that everything is proceeding along the lines we’ve discussed,” he said. “One last question, Doctor. Which of your curators knows the most about the anthropology collections here?”

Dr. Wright seemed not to have heard. Finally he said, “Dr. Frock,” in a barely audible voice.

“Very good,” said Pendergast. “Oh, and Doctor—I told you earlier that the Museum can remain open, *all other things being equal*. But if anybody else dies inside these walls, the Museum will have to be shut down immediately. The matter will be out of my hands. Understood?”

After a long moment, Wright nodded.

“Excellent,” Pendergast replied. “I’m very aware, Doctor, that your *Superstition* exhibition is scheduled to open this coming weekend, and that you have a large preview planned for Friday evening. I’d like to see your opening proceed unvexed,

but everything will depend on what we discover in the next twenty-four hours. Prudence may require us to delay the opening party.”

Wright’s left eyelid began to twitch. “That’s quite impossible. Our entire marketing campaign would be derailed. The publicity would be devastating.”

“We shall see,” Pendergast replied. “Now, unless there’s anything else, I don’t think we need keep you any longer.”

Wright, his face drained of color, stood up and, without a word, walked stiffly out of the room.

D’Agosta grinned as the door closed. “Softened up that bastard nicely,” he said.

“What’s that again, Lieutenant?” Pendergast asked, leaning back in the leather chair and picking up the book with renewed enthusiasm.

“Come on, Pendergast,” D’Agosta said, looking cagily at the FBI agent. “I guess you can drop the genteel act when it suits you.”

Pendergast blinked innocently at D’Agosta. “I’m sorry, Lieutenant. I apologize for any unseemly behavior. It’s simply that I can’t stand pompous, bureaucratic individuals. I’m afraid I can become quite short with them.” He raised the book. “It’s a bad habit, but very hard to break.”

Chapter 17

The laboratory looked out over the East River and across to the warehouses and decaying industrial buildings of Long Island City. Lewis Turow stood in the window and watched an enormous barge, piled with garbage and surrounded by countless seagulls, being pushed out to sea. *Probably one minute’s worth of New York City garbage*, he thought.

Turow turned away from the window and sighed. He hated New York, but one had to make choices. The choice for him was enduring the city and working in one of the best genetic labs in the country, or working in some halfassed facility in a nice rural spot somewhere. So far he’d chosen the city, but his patience was running out.

He heard a low beeping, then the soft hiss of a miniprinter. The results were coming through. Another soft beep indicated the print job was finished. The threemillion-dollar Omega-9 Parallel Processing Computer, which took up a series of large gray boxes along one wall, was now completely silent. Only a few lights indicated that anything was happening. It was a special, hardwired model designed for sequencing DNA and mapping genes. Turow had come to the lab six months before specifically because of this machine.

He fetched the paper out of the bin and scanned it. The first page was a summary of the results, followed by a sequence of nucleic acids found in the sample. Next to those were columns of letters that identified primer sequences and mapped genes from the target group.

The target group, in this case, was unusual: big cats. They had asked for gene matches with Asiatic tiger, jaguar, leopard, bobcat. Turow had thrown in the cheetah, since its genetics were so well known. The outgroup chosen was, as

usual, Homo sapiens, a control to check that the genetic matching process had been accurate and the sample sound.

He scanned the summary.

Run 3349A5 990 SAMPLE: NYC Crime Lab LA-33 SUMMARY

TARGET	GROUP	%	matches	degree	of	confidence
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Panthera leo	5.5	4%	Panthera onca	7.1	5%	Felis lynx	4.0	3%	Felis rufa	5.2	4%
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Acinonyx jubatus	6.6	4%									
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OUTGROUP CONTROL Homo sapiens	45.2	33%									
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Well, this is complete bullshit, thought Turow. The sample matched the outgroup a lot more than it matched the target group—the opposite of what should have happened. Only a 4 percent chance that the genetic material was from a big cat, but a 33 percent chance it was from a human being.

Thirty-three percent. Still low, but within the realm of possibility.

So that meant trying GenLab for a match. GenLab was an enormous international DNA database—two hundred gigs and growing—that contained DNA sequences, primers, and mapped genes for thousands of organisms, from the *Escherichia coli* bacterium to *Homo sapiens*. He would run the data against the GenLab database, and see just what this DNA was from. Something close to *Homo sapiens*, it looked like. Not high enough to be an ape, but maybe something like a lemur.

Turow's curiosity was piqued. Till now, he didn't even know that his laboratory did work for the police department. *What the hell made them think this sample came from a big cat?* he wondered.

The results ran to a hefty eighty pages. The DNA sequencer printed out the identified nucleotides in columnar format, indicating species, identified genes, and unidentified sequences. Turow knew that most of the sequences would be unidentified, since the only organism with a complete genetic map was *E. coli*.

C-G G-C Unidentified G-C G-C * G-C Homo sapiens T-A * C-G T-A * A-T A-1 allele T-A * T-A marker T-A * C-G G-C * A-T Al C-G * A-T Polymorphism C-G * A-T begin C-G * A-T * T-A * G-C * G-C * T-A * T-A * G-C * T-A * T-A - A-T - T-A - G-C - C-G - C-G Al Poly end

Turow glanced over the figures, then carried the paper over to his desk. With a few keystrokes on his SPARC-station 10, Turow could access information from thousands of databases. If the Omega-9 did not have the information he sought, it would automatically dial into the Internet and find a computer that did.

Scanning the printout more closely, Turow frowned. *It must be a degraded sample*, he thought. *Too much unidentified DNA.*

A-T Unidentified A-T Hermdactylus A-T - T-A turcicus A-T - C-G cont'd A-T - T-A * A-T C-G * A-T - T-A * T-A - G-C * G-C - G-C * G-C - G-C * A-T *Hemidactylus G-C * T-A turcicus G-C * C-G * G-C * G-C * G-C * G-C - G-C * T-A * G-C * C-G * G-C * A-T * G-C *

He stopped flipping the pages. Here was something truly odd: the program had identified a large chunk of DNA as belonging to an animal named *Hemidactylus turcicus*.

Now what the hell is that? thought Turow. The Biological Nomenclature Database told him:

COMMON NAME: TURKISH GECKO

What? thought Turow. He typed, EXPAND.

HEMIDACTYLUS TURCICUS: TURKISH GECKO.

ORIGINAL RANGE: NORTHERN AFRICA

PRESENT BIOLOGICAL RANGE: FLORIDA, BRAZIL, ASIA MINOR, NORTHERN AFRICA.

MEDIUM-SIZE LIZARD OF THE GECKO FAMILY, GEKKONIDAE, ARBOREAL, NOCTURAL, LACKING MOVEABLE EYELIDS

Turow flicked out of the database while the information was still scrolling by. It was pure nonsense, obviously. Lizard DNA and human DNA in the same sample? But this wasn't the first time something like this had happened. You couldn't blame the computer, really. It was an inexact procedure, and only the smallest fractions of the DNA sequences of any given organism were known.

He scanned down the printed list. Less than 50 percent of the matches were human—a very low proportion, assuming the subject was human, but not out of the question in a degraded sample. And there was always the possibility of contamination. A stray cell or two could ruin an entire run. This last possibility was looking more and more likely to Turow. *Well, what can you expect from the NYPD?* They couldn't even get rid of the guy who sold crack openly on the corner across from his apartment building.

He continued his scan. *Wait*, he thought, *here's another long sequence: Tarentola mauritanica.* He punched up the database, entered the name. The screen read:

TARENTOLA MAURITANICA: WALL GECKO

Give me a break, Turow thought. *This is some kind of joke.* He glanced at the calendar: April first was Saturday.

He started to laugh. It was a very good joke. A very, very good joke. He didn't think old Buchholtz had it in him. Well, he had a sense of humor, too. He started his report.

Sample LA-33

Summary: Sample conclusively identified as

Homo Gekkopiens, common name Gecko-man...

When he finished the report he sent it upstairs immediately. Then he went out for coffee, still chuckling. He was proud of how he'd handled it. He wondered where in the world Buchholtz got his gecko samples from. *Probably sold them in pet stores.* He could see Buchholtz blending up sample cells from two or three geckos in the ultrablender with a few drops of his own blood. *Let's see what our new man Turow makes of this*, he'd probably been thinking. Turow, returning with the coffee, had to laugh out loud. He found Buchholtz waiting for him in the lab, only Buchholtz wasn't laughing.

Chapter 18

Wednesday

Frock sat in his wheelchair, dabbing his forehead with a Gucci handkerchief. "Sit down, please," he said to Margo. "Thank you for coming so promptly. It's dreadful, just dreadful."

"The poor guard," she replied. Nobody in the Museum was talking about anything else.

"Guard?" Frock looked up. "Oh yes, quite a tragedy. No, I mean this." He held up a memorandum.

"All sorts of new rules," said Frock. "Very inconvenient. Effective today, staff are only allowed in the building between ten and five. No working late or on Sundays. There will be guards stationed in each department. You'll be expected to sign in and out of Anthropology each day. They are asking everybody to carry IDs at all times. Nobody will be allowed to enter or leave the Museum without one."

He continued reading. "Let's see, what else ... ah, yes. Try as much as possible to keep to your assigned section. And I'm supposed to tell you not to go into isolated areas of the Museum alone. If you need to go somewhere, go with someone. The police will be interviewing everyone who works in the Old Basement. Yours is scheduled for early next week. And various sections of the Museum are being posted as off-limits." He pushed the memo across the desk.

Margo saw a floor plan attached, the off-limits areas shaded in red. "Don't worry," Frock continued. "I note your office is just outside the area."

Lovely, thought Margo. *Just outside where the murderer is probably lurking.* "This seems like a complicated arrangement, Professor Frock. Why didn't they just close the whole Museum?"

"No doubt they tried, my dear. I'm sure Winston talked them out of it. If *Superstition* doesn't open on schedule, the Museum will be in deep trouble." Frock held out his hand for the memo. "Shall we consider this discussed? There are other things I wish to talk to you about."

Margo nodded. *The Museum will be in deep trouble.* It seemed to her that it already was. Her office mate, along with half of the Museum staff, had called in sick that morning. Those who did show up were spending most of their time at the coffee machines or photocopiers, trading rumors and staying in groups. If that wasn't bad enough, the Museum's exhibit halls were nearly empty. The vacationing families, school groups, shouting children—the normal visitors—were few and far between. Now the Museum attracted mostly ghoulish rubberneckers.

"I was curious whether you'd obtained any of the plants for your chapter on the Kiribitu yet," Frock continued. "I thought it might be a useful exercise for both of us to run them through the Extrapolator."

The telephone rang. "Blast," Frock said, picking up the receiver. "Yes?" he demanded.

There was a long silence. “Is this necessary?” Frock asked. Then he paused. “If you insist,” he concluded, dropping the phone into its cradle and heaving a great sigh.

“The authorities want me down in the basement, Heaven knows why. Somebody named Pendergast. Would you mind wheeling me down? We can chat along the way.”

In the elevator, Margo continued. “I was able to get a few specimens from the herbarium, though not as many as I’d wanted. But I don’t understand. You’re suggesting we run them through the G.S.E.?”

“Correct,” Frock replied. “Depending on the condition of the plants, of course. Is there printable material?”

G.S.E. stood for Genetic Sequence Extrapolator, the program being developed by Kawakita and Frock for analyzing genetic “prints.”

“The plants are in good condition, for the most part,” Margo admitted. “But, Dr. Frock, I don’t see what use they could be to the Extrapolator.” *Am I just jealous of Kawakita?* She wondered to herself. *Is that why I’m resisting?*

“My dear Margo, your situation is tailor-made!” Frock exclaimed, using her first name in his excitement. “You can’t replay evolution. But you can *simulate* it with computers. Perhaps these plants are allied genetically, along the same lines as the Kiribitu shamans have developed for their own classification. Wouldn’t that make an interesting sidebar for your dissertation?”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Margo said.

“We’re beta-testing the program now, and this is exactly the kind of scenario we need,” Frock continued eagerly. “Why don’t you talk to Kawakita about working together?”

Margo nodded. Privately, she thought that Kawakita didn’t seem like the type who wanted to share his spotlight—or even his research—with anybody.

The elevator door opened onto a checkpoint manned by two police officers armed with shotguns. “Are you Dr. Frock?” one asked.

“Yes,” Frock replied irritably.

“Come with us, please.”

Margo wheeled Frock through several intersections, arriving at last at a second checkpoint. Behind the barricade stood two more policemen and a tall, thin man in a somber black suit, blond white hair combed severely back from his forehead. As the policemen moved the barricade, he stepped forward.

“You must be Dr. Frock,” he said, extending his hand. “Thank you for coming down. As I told you, I’m expecting another visitor, so I wasn’t able to come by your office myself. Had I known you were—” he indicated the wheelchair with a nod, “—I would never have asked. Special Agent Pendergast.” He held out his hand. Interesting accent, thought Margo. *Alabama? This guy doesn’t look anything like an FBI agent.*

“Quite all right,” said Frock, mollified by Pendergast’s courtesy. “This is my assistant, Miss Green.” Pendergast’s hand felt cool in Margo’s grasp.

“It’s an honor to meet such a distinguished scientist as yourself,” Pendergast continued. “I hope time will permit me to read your latest book.”

“Thank you.” Frock nodded.

"In it, do you apply the 'Gambler's Ruin' scenario to your theory of evolution? I always thought that backed up your hypothesis rather well, especially if you assume most genera start out close to the absorbing boundary."

Frock sat up in his wheelchair. "Well, ah, I was planning to make certain references to that in my next book." He seemed at a loss for words.

Pendergast nodded to the officers, who readjusted the barrier. "I need your help, Dr. Frock," he said in a lower tone.

"Certainly," Frock said amiably. Margo was amazed at how quickly Pendergast had won Frock's cooperation.

"I must ask, first of all, that this discussion be kept among ourselves for the time being," said Pendergast. "May I have your assurance? And that of Ms. Green?"

"Of course," said Frock. Margo nodded.

Pendergast motioned to one of the officers, who brought forward a large plastic bag marked EVIDENCE. From it he removed a small, dark object, which he handed to Frock.

"What you're holding," he said, "is the latex cast of a claw found embedded in one of the children that were murdered last weekend."

Margo leaned forward for a closer look. It was about an inch long, perhaps a little less, curved and jagged.

"A claw?" Frock said, bringing the object close to his face and examining it. "Very unusual. But I'd guess it's a fake."

Pendergast smiled. "We haven't been able to identify its source, Doctor. But I'm not sure it's a fake. In the root canal of the claw we found some matter, which is now being sequenced for DNA. The results are still ambiguous, and our tests are continuing."

Frock raised his eyebrows. "Interesting."

"Now this," said Pendergast, reaching into the bag and withdrawing a much larger object, "is a reconstruction of the instrument that raked the same child." He handed it to Frock.

Margo looked at the cast with disgust. At one end, the latex was mottled and uneven, but at the other, details were clear and well-defined. It ended in three hooked claws: a large central claw, and two shorter talons on either side.

"Good heavens!" said Frock. "This looks saurian."

"Saurian?" asked Pendergast dubiously.

"Dino-saurian," said Frock. "Typical ornithischian forelimb, I should say, with one difference. Look here. The central digital process is thickened enormously, while the talons themselves are undersized."

Pendergast raised his eyebrows in mild surprise. "Well, sir," he said slowly, "we'd been leaning toward the big cats, or some other mammalian carnivore."

"But *surely* you know, Mr. Pendergast, that all mammalian predators have five digits."

"Of course, Doctor," said Pendergast. "If you would indulge me for a moment, I'd like to describe a scenario to you."

"Certainly," said Frock.

"There is a theory that the murderer is using this—" he hefted the forelimb—"as a weapon to rake his victims. We feel that what I'm holding might be the

impression of an *artifact* of some kind, something made by a primitive tribe out of, say, a jaguar or lion forelimb. The DNA appears to be degraded. It may be an old artifact, collected by the Museum a long time ago, then stolen.”

Frock’s head lowered until his chin was on his chest. The silence stretched out, broken only by the shuffling of the policemen by the barricade. Then Frock spoke.

“The guard who was killed? Did his wounds show evidence of a broken or missing claw?”

“Good question,” Pendergast said. “See for yourself.” He slid his hand into the plastic bag and removed a heavy plaque of latex, a long rectangle with three jagged ridges down its middle.

“This is a cast of one of the guard’s abdominal wounds,” Pendergast explained. Margo shuddered. It was a vile-looking thing.

Frock peered at the deep ridges intently. “The penetration must have been remarkable. But the wound shows no indication of a broken claw. Therefore, you are suggesting that two such artifacts are in use by the murderer.”

Pendergast looked a little uncomfortable, but nodded.

Frock’s head sank once more. The silence went on for minutes. “Another thing,” he suddenly said, quite loudly. “Do you see how the claw marks *draw together* slightly? How they are farther apart at the top than at the bottom?”

“Yes?” said Pendergast.

“Like a hand clenching into a fist. That would indicate flexibility in the instrument.”

“Granted,” said Pendergast. “Human flesh, however, is rather soft and easily distorted. We cannot read too much into these casts.” He paused. “Dr. Frock, is any artifact capable of doing this missing from the collection?”

“There is no such artifact in the collection,” said Frock with a faint smile. “You see, this comes from no living animal I’ve studied. Do you see how this claw has a conical shape, a deep fully enclosed root? See how it tapers to an almost perfect tripyramidal cross section near the top? This appears in only two classes of animal: dinosaur and bird. That is one of the reasons some evolutionary biologists think birds evolved from dinosaurs. I would say it is from a bird, except that it is far too large. Thus, dinosaurian.”

He placed the latex claw in his lap and looked up again. “Certainly, a clever person familiar with dinosaur morphology could have shaped a claw like this, and used it as a tool for murder. I assume you have tested the original fragment to see if it indeed is composed of a genuine biological material, such as keratin, rather than being cast or carved from some inorganic material?”

“Yes, Doctor. It is real.”

“And you are sure that the DNA was real, and not simply blood or flesh from the victim?”

“Yes,” Pendergast replied. “As I said, it came from the root canal, not under the cuticle.”

“And what, pray tell, *was* the DNA from?” “The final report isn’t in yet.”

Frock held up his hand. “Understood, But tell me, why aren’t you making use of our own DNA laboratory, here in the Museum? We have facilities equal to that of anybody in the state.”

“Equal to anybody in the country, Doctor. But you must understand that our procedures forbid it. Could we be sure of the results if the tests were conducted at the crime scene? With perhaps the murderer himself operating the equipment?” Pendergast smiled. “I hope you’ll forgive my persistence, Doctor, but would you be willing to consider the possibility that this weapon is constructed from relics belonging to the Anthropology collection, and to think about what artifact or artifacts this cast most closely resembles?”

“If you’d like,” Frock replied.

“Thank you. We can discuss it again in a day or so. Meanwhile, would it be possible to obtain a printed inventory of the Anthropology collection?”

Frock smiled. “Six million items? You can use the computer catalog, however. Would you like a terminal set up?”

“Perhaps later,” said Pendergast, replacing the latex plaque in the plastic bag. “It’s kind of you to offer. Our command post is currently in the unused gallery behind reprographics.”

Footsteps sounded behind them. Margo turned to see the tall form of Dr. Ian Cuthbert, Deputy Director of the Museum, followed by the two officers from the elevator.

“Look here, how long is this going to take?” Cuthbert was complaining. He stopped at the barricade. “Oh, Frock, so they’ve got you, too. What a damned nuisance this is.”

Frock nodded imperceptibly.

“Dr. Frock,” said Pendergast, “I’m sorry. This is the gentleman I’d been waiting for when we first spoke. You’re welcome to remain; if you’d care to.” Frock nodded again.

“Now, Dr. Cuthbert,” said Pendergast briskly, turning to the Scotsman. “I asked you to come down because I’d like some information about this area behind me.” He indicated a large doorway.

“The Secure Area? What about it? Surely somebody else could—” Cuthbert began.

“Ah, but my questions are for you,” Pendergast interrupted, politely but firmly. “Shall we step inside?”

“If it won’t take much time,” Cuthbert said. “I’ve got an exhibition to mount.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Frock, his tone faintly sardonic. “An *exhibition*.” He motioned Margo to wheel him forward.

“Dr. Frock?” Pendergast said politely.

“Yes?”

“I wonder if I might have that cast back.”

The copper-sheathed door to the Museum’s Secure Area had been removed and a new steel one installed in its place. Across the hall was a small door labelled PACHYDERMAE. Margo wondered how the staff had been able to fit huge elephant bones through it.

Turning away, she wheeled Frock into the narrow walkway beyond the open door to the Secure Area. The Museum kept its most valuable artifacts in small vaults on either side: sapphires and diamonds; ivory and rhinoceros horns heaped on racks like cordwood; bones and skins of extinct animals; Zuñi war gods. Two

men in dark suits stood at the far end, talking in low tones. They straightened up when Pendergast entered.

Pendergast stopped at one open vault door, much like the others, sporting a large black combination knob, brass lever, and ornate decorative scrollwork. Inside, a bulb threw a harsh light across the metal walls. The vault was empty except for several crates, all of which were quite large except one. The smaller crate's lid was removed, while one of the larger crates was badly damaged, with excelsior-like stuffing protruding.

Pendergast waited until everybody was inside the vault. "Allow me to provide some background," Pendergast said. "The murder of the guard took place not far from this spot. It appears that afterward, the murderer came down the hallway just outside. The murderer attempted to break down the door that leads to the Secure Area. He may have tried before. The attempts were unsuccessful.

"At first we weren't sure what the killer was after. As you know, there is a lot of valuable material in here." Pendergast motioned to one of the policemen, who came over and handed him a piece of paper. "So we asked around, and found that nothing has come in or out of the Secure Area for six months. Except these crates. They were moved into this vault last week. On your orders, Dr. Cuthbert."

"Mr. Pendergast, allow me to explain—" said Cuthbert.

"One moment, if you please," said Pendergast. "When we inspected the crates, we found something very interesting." He pointed to the damaged crate. "Notice the slats. The two-by-sixes here are deeply scored by claw marks. Our forensic people tell me the marks on the victims were probably made by the same object or instrument."

Pendergast stopped and looked intently at Cuthbert.

"I had no idea—" said Cuthbert. "Nothing had been taken. I merely thought that..." His voice trailed away.

"I wonder, Doctor, if you could enlighten us as to the history of these crates?"

"That's easily explained," said Cuthbert. "There's no mystery about it. The crates are from an old expedition."

"I gathered that," Pendergast said. "Which expedition?"

"The Whittlesey expedition," Cuthbert replied.

Pendergast waited.

Finally Cuthbert sighed. "It was a South American expedition that took place over five years ago. It was ... not entirely successful."

"It was a disaster," Frock said derisively. Oblivious to Cuthbert's angry glance, he continued. "It caused a scandal in the Museum at the time. The expedition broke up early, due to personality conflicts. Some of the expedition members were killed by hostile tribesmen; the rest were killed in a plane crash on the way back to New York. There were the inevitable rumors of a curse, that kind of thing."

"That's an exaggeration," Cuthbert snapped. "There was no scandal of any sort."

Pendergast looked at them. "And the crates?" he said mildly.

"They were shipped back separately," Cuthbert said. "But this is all beside the point. There was a very unusual object in one of these crates, a figurine created by an extinct South American tribe. It's to be an important element in the *Superstition* exhibition."

Pendergast nodded. "Go on."

“Last week, when we went to retrieve the figurine, I found that one of the crates had been broken into.” He pointed. “So I ordered all of the crates moved temporarily to the Secure Area.”

“What was taken?”

“Well, now, that was a little odd,” said Cuthbert. “None of the artifacts were missing from the crate. The figurine itself is worth a fortune. It’s unique, the only one of its kind in the world. The Kothoga tribe that made it vanished years ago.”

“You mean *nothing* was missing?” Pendergast asked. “Well, nothing important. The only thing that seemed to be missing were the seed pods, or whatever they were. Maxwell, the scientist who packed them, died in the plane crash near Venezuela.”

“Seed pods?” asked Pendergast.

“I honestly don’t know what they were. None of the documentation survived except for the anthropological material. We had Whittlesey’s journal, you see, but that was all. There was a little reconstructive work done when the crates first came back, but since then ...” he stopped.

“You’d better tell me about this expedition,” said Pendergast.

“There’s not much to tell. They had originally assembled to search for traces of the Kothoga tribe, and to do a survey and general collection in a very remote area of the rain forest. I think the preliminary work estimated that ninety-five percent of the plant species in the area were unknown to science. Whittlesey, an anthropologist, was the leader. I believe there was also a paleontologist, a mammalogist, a physical anthropologist, perhaps an entomologist, a few assistants. Whittlesey and an assistant named Crocker disappeared and were probably killed by tribesmen. The rest died in the plane crash. The only thing we had any documentation on was the figurine, from Whittlesey’s journal. The rest of the stuff is just a mystery, no locality data, nothing.”

“Why did the material sit in these crates for so long? Why wasn’t it unpacked and cataloged and put in the collections?”

Cuthbert stirred uncomfortably. “Well,” he said defensively, “ask Frock. He’s the chairman of the department.”

“Our collections are enormous,” said Frock. “We have dinosaur bones still crated up from the 1930s that have never been touched. It costs a tremendous amount of money and time to curate these things.” He sighed. “But in this particular case, it’s not a question of mere oversight. As I recall, the Anthropology Department was forbidden to curate these crates upon their return.” He looked pointedly at Cuthbert.

“That was years ago!” Cuthbert replied acidly.

“How do you know there are no rare artifacts in the unopened boxes?” Pendergast asked.

“Whittlesey’s journal implied that the figurine in the small crate was the only item of importance.”

“May I see this journal?”

Cuthbert shook his head. “It’s gone missing.”

“Were the crates moved on your own authority?”

"I suggested it to Dr. Wright after I learned the crates had been tampered with," Cuthbert said. "We kept the material together in its original crates until it could be curated. That's one of the Museum's rules."

"So the crates were moved late last week," Pendergast murmured, almost to himself. "Just prior to the killing of the two boys. What could the killer have been after?" Then he looked back at Cuthbert. "What did you say had been taken from the crates? Seed pods, was it?"

Cuthbert shrugged. "As I said, I'm not sure what they were. They looked like seed pods to me, but I'm no botanist."

"Can you describe them?"

"It's been years, I don't really remember. Big, round, heavy. Rugose on the outside. Light brown color. I've only seen the inside of the crate twice, you understand; once when it first came back, and then last week, looking for Mbwun. That's the figurine."

"Where is the figurine now?" Pendergast asked.

"It's being curated for the show. It should be on display already, we're sealing the exhibition today."

"Did you remove anything else from the box?"

"No. The figurine is the unique piece of the lot."

"I would like to arrange to see it," said Pendergast. Cuthbert shifted irritably on his feet. "You can see it when the show opens. Frankly, I don't know what you're up to. Why waste time on a broken crate when there's a serial killer loose in the Museum and you chaps can't even find him?"

Frock cleared his throat. "Margo, bring me closer, if you will," he asked.

Margo wheeled him over to the crates. With a grunt he bent forward to scrutinize the broken boards.

Everyone watched.

"Thank you," he said, straightening up. He eyed the group, one at a time.

"Please note that these boards are scored on the *inside* as well as the outside," he said finally. "Mr. Pendergast, are we not making an assumption here?" he finally said.

"I never make assumptions," replied Pendergast, with a smile.

"But you are," Frock persisted. "All of you are making an assumption—that some one, or some thing, broke *into* the crate."

There was a sudden silence in the vault. Margo could smell the dust in the air, and the faint odor of excelsior.

And then Cuthbert began to laugh raucously, the sound swelling harshly through the chamber.

As they approached Frock's office once again, the curator was unusually animated.

"Did you see that cast?" he said to Margo. "Avian attributes, dinosaurian morphology. This could be the very thing!" He could scarcely contain himself.

"But, Professor Frock, Mr. Pendergast believes it was constructed as a weapon of some sort," Margo said quickly. As she said it, she realized that she wanted to believe it, too.

“Stuff!” Frock snorted. “Didn’t you get the sense, looking at that cast, of something tantalizingly familiar, yet utterly foreign? We’re looking at an evolutionary aberration, the vindication of my theory.” Inside the office, Frock immediately produced a notebook from his jacket pocket and started scribbling.

“But, Professor, how could such a creature—?” Margo stopped as she felt Frock’s hand close over hers. His grip was extraordinarily strong.

“My dear girl,” he said, “there are more things in heaven and earth, as Hamlet pointed out. It isn’t always for us to speculate. Sometimes we must simply observe.” His voice was low, but he trembled with excitement. “We can’t miss this opportunity, do you hear? Damn this steel prison of mine! You must be my eyes and ears, Margo. You must go everywhere, search up and down, be an extension of my fingers. We must *not* let this chance pass us by. Are you willing, Margo?”

He gripped her hand tighter.

Chapter 19

The old freight elevator in Section 28 of the Museum always smelled like something had died in it, Smithback thought. He tried breathing through his mouth.

The elevator was huge, the size of a Manhattan studio, and the operator had decorated it with a table, chair, and pictures cut from the Museum’s nature magazine. The pictures focused on a single subject. There were giraffes rubbing necks, insects mating, a baboon displaying its rump, native women with pendulous breasts.

“You like my little art gallery?” the elevator man asked, with a leer. He was about sixty years old and wore an orange toupee.

“It’s nice to see someone so interested in natural history,” Smithback said sarcastically.

As he stepped out, the smell of rotting flesh hit him with redoubled force; it seemed to fill the air like a Maine fog. “How do you stand it?” he managed to gasp to the elevator man.

“Stand what?” the man said, pausing as he rolled the hoistway doors shut.

A cheerful voice came ringing down the corridor. “Welcome!” An elderly man shouted over the sound of the forced-air ducts as he grasped Smithback’s hand. “Nothing but zebra cooking today. You miss the rhinoceros. But come in anyway, come in, please!” Smithback knew his thick accent was Austrian.

Jost Von Oster ran the osteological preparation area, the Museum Laboratory in which animal carcasses were reduced to bones. He was over eighty, but looked so pink, cheerful, and plump that most people thought he was much younger.

Von Oster had started at the Museum in the late twenties, preparing and mounting skeletons for display. His crowning achievement in those days had been a series of horse skeletons, mounted walking, trotting, and galloping. It was said that these skeletons had revolutionized the way animals were exhibited. Von Oster had then turned to creating the lifelike habitat groups popular in the forties,

making sure every detail—down to the saliva on an animal’s mouth—looked perfectly real.

But the era of the habitat group had passed, and Von Oster had eventually been relegated to the Bug Room. Disdaining all offers of retirement, he cheerfully presided over the osteological lab, where animals—now mostly collected from zoos—were turned into clean white bones for study or mounting. However, his old skills as a master habitat sculptor were still intact, and he had been called in to work on a special shaman life-group for the Superstition exhibition. It was the painstaking preparation of this display group that Smithback wanted to include as one chapter in his book.

Following Von Oster’s gesture, Smithback stepped into the preparation area. He’d never seen this famous room before. “So glad you could come see my workshop,” Von Oster said. “Not many people down here now, what with these dreadful killings. Very glad indeed!”

The workshop looked more like a bizarre industrial kitchen than anything else. Deep stainless-steel tanks lined one wall. On the ceiling near the tanks hung massive pulleys, chains, and grappling hooks for handling the larger carcasses. A drain was drilled into the center of the floor, a small broken bone caught in its grill. In a far corner of the workshop a stainless-steel gurney stood, bearing a large animal. If it hadn’t been for the large, hand-lettered sign taped to one leg of the gurney, Smithback wouldn’t have guessed that the creature had once been a Sargasso Sea Dugong; it was now almost fully decomposed. Around the corpse lay picks, pliers, tiny knives.

“Thanks for taking time to see me,” Smithback managed.

“Not at all!” Von Oster exploded. “I wish we could give tours, but you know this area is off limits to the tourists, the more is the pity. You should have been here for the rhinoceros. Gott, she was something!”

Walking briskly across the room, he showed Smithback the maceration tank containing the zebra carcass. Despite a hood drawing the vapors away, the smell was still strong. Von Oster lifted the lid and stood back like a proud cook.

“What you think of *zat!*”

Smithback looked at the soupy brown liquid filling the vat. Under the muddy surface lay the macerating zebra carcass, its flesh and soft tissues slowly liquefying.

“It’s a little ripe,” Smithback said weakly.

“What you mean, ripe? It just perfect! Under here we got the burner. It keep the water at an even ninety-five degrees. See, first we gut the carcass and drop it in the vat here. Then it rot and in two weeks we pull the plug and drain everything down the sink. What we got left is this big pile of greasy bones. So then we refill the vat and add a little alum and boil those bones. You don’t want to boil them too long, they get soft.”

Von Oster paused again for air. “You know, just like when they cook the chicken too long. Phhhhtui! Bad! But those bones still greasy, so we wash them *mit* the benzene. That make them pure white.”

“Mr. Von Oster—” Smithback began. If he didn’t redirect this interview quickly, he would never get out. And he couldn’t stand the smell much longer. “I was

wondering if you could tell me a little about the shaman group you worked on. I'm writing a book about *Superstition*. You remember our conversation?"

"Ja, ja! Of course!" He charged over to a desk and pulled out some drawings. Smithback switched on his microcassette recorder.

"First, you paint the background on a double-curved surface, so you get no corners, see? You want the illusion of depth."

Von Oster began describing the process, his voice pitched with excitement. *This is going to be good*, Smithback thought. *The guy's a writer's dream.*

Von Oster went on for a long time, stabbing the air, making sweeping gestures, taking deep breaths between his heavily accented sentences. When he was finished, he beamed at Smithback. "Now, you want to see the bugs?" he asked.

Smithback couldn't resist. The bugs were famous. It was a process Von Oster himself had invented, but was now in use by all the large natural history museums in the country: the beetles would strip a small carcass of its flesh, leaving behind a cleaned, perfectly articulated skeleton.

The "safe" room that housed the beetles was hot and humid, and little larger than a closet. The beetles, called dermestids, came from Africa and lived in white porcelain tubs with slick sides, roofed with screens. The beetles slowly crawled over rows of dead, skinned animals.

"What are those things?" Smithback asked, peering at the bug-covered carcasses inside the tubs.

"Bats!" said Von Oster. "Bats for Dr. Huysmans. It will take about ten days to clean up those bats." He pronounced it "zose bets."

Between the odors and the bugs, Smithback had had enough. He stood up and extended his hand toward the old scientist. "I gotta go. Thanks for the interview. And those bugs are really something."

"You're most welcome!" Von Oster responded. "Now, wait. Interview, you say. Who you writing this book for?" The idea had suddenly occurred to him that he'd been interviewed.

"For the Museum," said Smithback. "Rickman's in charge of it."

"Rickman?" Von Oster's eyes suddenly narrowed.

"Yes. Why?" Smithback asked.

"You working for Rickman?" Von Oster said.

"Not really. She's just, well, interfering mostly," Smithback said.

Von Oster broke into a pink grin. "Ach, she poison, that one! Why you working for her?"

"That's just the way it happened," Smithback said, gratified at having found an ally. "You wouldn't believe the kind of crap she's put me through. Oh, God."

Von Oster clapped his hands. "I believe it! I believe it! She making trouble everywhere! This exhibit, she making all kind of trouble!"

Suddenly Smithback was interested. "How so?" he asked.

"She in there every day, saying zis not good, zat not good. Gott, that woman!"

"That sounds like her," Smithback said with a grim smile. "So what wasn't good?"

"That, what you call it, that Kothoga tribe stuff. I was in there just yesterday afternoon and she was carrying on. 'Everybody leave the exhibition! We bring in Kothoga figurine!' Everybody had to drop work and leave."

“The figurine? What figurine? What’s so sensitive about it?” It suddenly occurred to Smithback that something so upsetting to Rickman might someday be useful to him.

“That Mbwun figurine, big deal in the exhibition. I not know much about. But she was very upset, I tell you!”

“Why?”

“Like I tell you, that figurine. You not heard? Lots of talk about it, very very bad. I try not to hear.”

“What kind of talk would that be, for instance?”

Smithback listened to the old man for quite a while longer. Finally, he backed himself out of the workshop, Von Oster pursuing as far as the elevator.

As the doors rolled shut, the man was still talking. “You unlucky, working for her!” he called after Smithback just before the elevator lurched upward. But Smithback didn’t hear him. He was busy thinking.

Chapter 20

As the afternoon drew to a close, Margo looked up wearily from her terminal. Stretching, she punched a command to the printer down the hall, then sat back, rubbing her eyes. Moriarty’s case write-up was finally done. A little rough around the edges, perhaps; not as comprehensive as she would have liked; but she couldn’t afford to spend any more time on it. Secretly, she was rather pleased, and found herself eager to take a printout up to Moriarty’s office on the fourth floor of the Butterfield Observatory, where the project team for the *Superstition* exhibition was housed.

She thumbed through her staff directory, looking for Moriarty’s extension. Then she reached for her phone and dialed the four-digit number.

“Exhibition central,” drawled a voice. There were loud good-byes in the background.

“Is George Moriarty there?” Margo asked.

“I think he’s down at the exhibition,” the voice responded. “We’re locking up here. Any message?”

“No, thanks,” Margo replied, hanging up. She looked at her watch: almost five. Curfew time. But the exhibition was being unveiled Friday evening, and she’d promised Moriarty the material.

As she was about to get up, she remembered Frock’s suggestion that she call Greg Kawakita. She sighed, picking up the phone again. *Better give him a try.* Chances are he’d be out of the building now, and she could just leave a message on phone-mail.

“Greg Kawakita speaking,” came the familiar baritone voice.

“Greg? This is Margo Green.” *Stop sounding so apologetic. It’s not like he’s a department head or anything.*

“Hi, Margo. What’s up?” She could hear the clacking of keys coming over the line.

"I have a favor to ask. It's a suggestion of Dr. Frock's, actually. I'm doing an analysis of some plant specimens used by the Kiribitu tribe, and he suggested I run them through your Extrapolator. Perhaps it will find some genetic correspondences in the samples."

There was silence. "Dr. Frock thought it might be a useful test of your program, as well as a help to me," she urged.

Kawakita paused. "Well, you know, Margo, I'd like to help you out, I really would. But the Extrapolator really isn't in shape yet to be used by just anybody. I'm still chasing down bugs, and I couldn't vouch for the results."

Margo's face burned. "Just anybody?"

"Sorry, that was a poor choice of words. You know what I mean. Besides, it's a really busy time for me, and this curfew won't help matters any. Tell you what, why don't you check with me again in a week or two? Okay? Talk to you then."

The line went dead.

Margo stood up, grabbed her jacket and purse, and went down the hall to retrieve her printout. She knew he was planning to postpone her indefinitely. Well, to hell with Kawakita. She'd hunt Moriarty down and give him the copy before she left. If nothing else, it might get her that guided tour of the exhibition, maybe find out what all the fuss was about.

A few minutes later, Margo walked slowly across the deserted Selous Memorial Hall. Two guards were stationed at the entrance, and a single docent stood inside the information center, locking away ledgers and arranging sale items in preparation for the next day's visitors. *Assuming there are any*, thought Margo. Three policemen stood just under the huge bronze statue of Selous, talking among themselves. They didn't notice Margo.

Margo found her thoughts returning to the morning's talk with Frock. If the killer wasn't found, the security measures could get stricter. Maybe her dissertation defense would be delayed. Or the entire Museum could be closed. Margo shook her head. If that happened, she was Massachusetts-bound for sure.

She headed for the Walker Gallery and the rear entrance to *Superstition*. To her dismay, the large iron doors were closed, and a velvet rope was suspended between two brass posts in front of them. A policeman stood beside the sign, motionless.

"Can I help you, Miss?" he said. His nameplate read F. BEAUREGARD.

"I'm going to see George Moriarty," Margo replied. "I think he's in the exhibition galleries. I have to give him something." She brandished the printout in front of the policeman, who looked unimpressed.

"Sorry, Miss," he said. "It's past five. You shouldn't be here. Besides," he said more gently, "the exhibition's been sealed until the opening."

"But—" Margo began to protest, then turned and walked back toward the rotunda with a sigh.

After rounding a corner, she stopped. At the end of the empty hallway she could see the dim vastness of the Hall. Behind her, Officer F. Beauregard was out of sight around the corner. On impulse, she veered sharply left through a small, low passage that opened into another, parallel walkway. Maybe it wasn't too late to find Moriarty, after all.

She moved up a wide flight of stairs, and, looking carefully around before proceeding, walked slowly into a vaulted hall devoted to insects. Then she turned right and entered a gallery that ran around the second level of the Marine Hall. Like everyplace else in the Museum, it felt eerie and deserted.

Margo descended one of the twin sweeping staircases to the granite floor of the main hall. Moving more slowly now, she passed by a life-size walrus habitat group and a meticulously constructed model of an underwater reef. Dioramas such as these, originally fashioned in the thirties and forties, could no longer be made, she knew—they had become much too expensive to produce.

At the far end of the Hall was the entrance to the Weisman Gallery, where the larger temporary exhibitions were held. This was one of the suite of galleries in which the *Superstition* exhibition was being mounted. Black paper covered the inside of the double glass doors, fronted by a large sign that read:

GALLERY CLOSED.
NEW EXHIBITION IN PROGRESS.
THANK YOU FOR YOUR UNDERSTANDING.

The left-hand door was locked. The right one, however, pushed open easily. As casually as possible, she looked over her shoulder: nobody.

The door hissed shut behind her, and she found herself in a narrow crawl space between the outer walls of the gallery and the back of the exhibition proper. Plywood boards and large nails were strewn around in disarray, and electrical cables snaked across the floor. On her left a huge structure of Sheetrock and boards, hammered clumsily together and supported by wooden buttresses, looked very much like the back side of a Hollywood set. It was the side of the *Superstition* exhibition that no Museum visitor would ever see.

She moved carefully down the crawl space, scouting for some way to get into the exhibition. The light was poor—metal-shielded light bulbs, spaced about twenty feet apart—and she didn't want to stumble and fall. Soon she came across a small gap between the wooden panels—just big enough, she decided, to squeeze through.

She found herself in a large, six-sided anteroom. Gothic arches in three of the walls framed passages that receded into the gloom. Most of the light came from several backlit photographs of shamans high up on the walls. She looked speculatively at the three exits. She had no idea where she was in the exhibition—where it began, where it ended, or which way she should go to find Moriarty. "George?" she called softly, somehow unable to raise her voice in the silence and gloom.

She took the central passage to another dark hall, longer than the last and crowded with exhibits. At intervals, a brilliant spot illuminated some artifact: a mask, a bone knife, a strange carving covered with nails. The artifacts appeared to float in the velvet darkness. Crazy, dim patterns of light and shadow played across the ceiling.

At the far end of the gallery, the walls narrowed. Margo had the odd feeling that she was walking back into a deep cave. *Pretty manipulative*, she thought. She could see why Frock was upset.

She went deeper into the gloom, hearing nothing but her own footsteps padding on the thick carpet. She couldn't see the exhibits until she was almost on top of them, and she wondered how she'd retrace her steps to the room of the shamans. Perhaps there would be an unlocked exit—a well-lit unlocked exit—someplace else in, the exhibit.

Ahead of her, the narrow hall forked. After a moment's hesitation, Margo chose the right-hand passage. As she continued, she noticed small alcoves to either side, each containing a single grotesque artifact. The silence was so intense that she found herself holding her breath.

The hall widened into a chamber, and she stopped in front of a set of Maori tattooed heads. They weren't shrunken—the skulls were clearly still inside, preserved, the label said, by smoking. The eye sockets were stuffed with fibers, and the mahogany-colored skins glistened. The black, shriveled lips were drawn back from the teeth. There were six of them, a crowd grinning hysterically, bobbing in the night. The blue tattoos were breathtakingly complex: intricate spirals that intersected and reintersected, curving in endless patterns around the cheeks and nose and chin. The tattooing had been done in life, the label said, and the heads preserved as a sign of respect.

Just beyond, Margo could see the gallery narrowing to a point. A massive, squat totem pole stood before it, lit from beneath by a pale, orange light. The shadows of giant wolf heads and birds with cruel, hooked beaks thrust upward from the pole and splashed across the ceiling, gray against black. Certain she had reached a dead end, Margo approached the totem pole unwillingly. Then she noticed a small opening, ahead and on the left, leading into an alcove. She continued slowly, walking as quietly as possible. Any thought of calling out again for Moriarty had long since vanished. *Thank God I'm nowhere near the Old Basement*, she thought.

The alcove held a display of fetishes. Some were simple stones carved in the shapes of animals, but the majority were monsters depicting the darker side of human superstition. Another opening brought Margo into a long, narrow room. Thick black felt covered all of the room's surfaces, and a dim blue light filtered from hidden recesses. The ceiling was low above Margo's head. *Smithback would have to go through here on his hands and knees*, she thought.

The room broadened into an octagonal space beneath a high groined vault. A dappled light filtered down from stained-glass depictions of medieval underworlds set into the vaulted ceiling. Large windows dominated each wall.

She approached the closest window and found herself looking down into a Mayan tomb. A skeleton lay in the center, covered with a thick layer of dust. Artifacts were scattered around the site. A gold breastplate sat on the ribcage, and gold rings encircled bony fingers. Painted pots were arranged in a semicircle around the skull. One of these contained an offering of tiny, dried corncobs.

The next window displayed an Eskimo rock burial, including an Eskimo mummy-bundle wrapped in skins. The next was even more startling: a lidless, rotting European-style coffin, complete with corpse. The corpse was dressed in a much-decayed frock coat, tie, and tails, and was well on its way toward decomposition. Its head was bent stiffly toward Margo as if prepared to tell her a secret, sightless eye sockets bulging, mouth ossified into a rictus of pain. She took a step backward. *Good God*, she thought, *that's somebody's great-grandfather*. The

matter-of-fact tone of the label, which tastefully described the rituals associated with a typical nineteenth-century American burial, belied the visual hideousness of the scene. *It's true*, she thought; *the Museum is definitely taking a chance with stuff as strong as this.*

She decided to forego the other windows and proceeded through a low archway in the far side of the octagonal room. Beyond, the passage forked. To her left was a small cul-de-sac; to her right, a long, slender passage led into darkness. She didn't want to go that way; not just yet. She wandered into the dead-end room, and stopped suddenly. Then she moved forward to examine one of the cases more closely.

The gallery dealt with the concept of ultimate evil in its many mythic forms. There were various images of a medieval devil; there was the Eskimo evil spirit, Tornarsuk. But what arrested her was a crude stone altar, placed in the center of the gallery. Sitting on the altar, lit by a yellow spot, was a small figurine, carved in such detail it took Margo's breath away. Covered in scales, it crouched on all fours. Yet there was something—the long forearms, the angle of its head—that was disturbingly human. She shuddered. What kind of imagination gave rise to a being with both scales and hair? Her eyes dropped to the label.

MBWUN. This carving is a representation of the mad god Mbwun, possibly carved by the Kothoga tribe of the Upper Amazon basin. This savage god, also known as He Who Walks On All Fours, was much feared by the other indigenous tribes of the area. In local myth, the Kothoga tribe was said to be able to conjure Mbwun at will, and send him on errands of destruction against neighboring tribes. Very few Kothoga artifacts have ever been found, and this is the sole image of Mbwun known to exist. Except for trace references in Amazonian legends, nothing else is known about the Kothoga, or about their mysterious "devil."

Margo felt a chill creep over her. She looked closer, repulsed by the reptilian features, the small, wicked eyes ... the talons. Three on each forelimb.

Oh, dear God. It couldn't be.

Suddenly, she realized that every instinct she had was telling her to keep absolutely still. A minute passed, then two.

Then it came again—the sound that had galvanized her. An odd rustling, slow, deliberate, maddeningly soft. On the thick carpet, the footsteps had to be close ... very close. A horrible goatish stench threatened to choke her.

She looked around wildly, fighting down panic, searching for the safest exit. The darkness was complete. As quietly as possible, she moved out of the cul-de-sac and across the fork. Another rustling noise and she was running, running, headlong through the darkness, past the ghoulish displays and leering statues that seemed to leap out of the blackness, down twisting forks and passages, trying always to take the most hidden path.

At last, thoroughly lost and out of breath, she ducked into an alcove containing a display on primitive medicine. Gasping, she crouched behind a case holding a trepanned human skull upon an iron pole. She hid in its shadow, listening.

There was nothing; no noise, no movement. She waited as her breath slowed and reason returned. There was nothing out there. There had never been anything out there, in fact—it was her overzealous imagination, fueled by this nightmarish tour. *I was foolish to sneak in, she thought. Now, I don't know if I'll ever want to come back—even on the busiest Saturday.*

Anyway, she had to find a way out. It was late now, and she hoped people were still around to hear her knocking, should she come up against a locked exit. It would be embarrassing, having to explain herself to a guard or policeman. But at least she'd be out.

She peeked over the case lid. Even if it *had* all been her imagination, she didn't care to go back in the same direction. Holding her breath, she stepped quietly out, then listened. Nothing.

She turned left and moved slowly down the corridor, searching for a likely looking route out of the exhibit. At a large fork she stopped, eyes straining in the darkness, debating which of the branching pathways to take. *Shouldn't there be exit signs? Guess they haven't been installed yet. Typical.* But the hall to her left looked promising: the passage seemed to open up into a large foyer, ahead in the blackness where sight failed.

Movement registered in her peripheral vision. Limbs frozen, she glanced hesitatingly to the right. A shadow—black against black—was gliding stealthily toward her, moving with an inky sinuousness over the display cases and grinning artifacts.

With a speed born of horror, she shot down the passage. She felt, more than saw, the walls of the passage roll back and widen about her. Then she saw twin slits of vertical light ahead, outlining a large double doorway. Without slackening her pace, she threw herself against it. The doors flew back, and something on the far side clattered. Dim light rushed in—the subdued red light of a museum at night. Cool air moved across her cheek.

Weeping now, she slammed the doors closed and leaned against them, eyes shut, forehead pressed against the cold metal, sobbing, fighting to catch her breath.

From the crimson gloom behind her came the unmistakable sound of something clearing its throat.

*** End of Part I ***