

DAMAGE CONTROL

CHAPTER ONE

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Redmond, Washington

Dr. Frank Pilgrim adjusted the flexible lamp clipped to the edge of his cluttered metal desk, but the additional illumination did not keep the typewritten words on the page from blurring. He set his wire-framed glasses above his bushy gray eyebrows and pinched the bridge of his nose. His eyes had reached their limit; they could no longer take the strain of a night reading small print.

Pilgrim glanced across the room, the details a blur. It wasn't too long ago he could watch the television screen atop the military- green filing cabinets without glasses. Now he could barely make out the cabinets, even with prescription help. His cataracts were getting worse. It didn't matter. With all the reality-TV crap being broadcast, he had long since relegated the television to background noise. It kept him company at night. He liked to listen to the Mariner baseball games, though the team continued to disappoint him. At seventy-eight, he didn't have many years left to experience a World Series in Seattle.

The telephone on his desk rang at precisely ten p.m, as it had every night for the past forty-eight years. "I'm just finishing up," he said, speaking into the old-fashioned handset. He rocked in his chair, bumping against floor-to-ceiling shelving cluttered with a lifetime of books and knickknacks from his and his wife's trips around the world. Their next stop would be China in the summer. "Just a couple more minutes and I'll be done, dear."

His wife told him to be careful walking to his car, reminding him that he was an old man with a cane and an artificial hip and no longer the starting wingback at the U-Dub. "I'm as young as you are, beautiful," he said. "And

as long as I still feel like I'm eighteen, I intend to act that way." He told her he loved her and hung up, looking out through the wood-shuttered window of his ground-floor office. His fifteen-year-old BMW sat parked in its customary spot beneath the flood-lights' tapered orange glow. When he'd opened his practice, the lot had been surrounded by cedar and dogwood trees, but that was a good many years ago, when getting to Redmond required taking a ferry from Seattle across Lake Washington. With the construction of the 520 and I-90 bridges, the population on the east side of the lake had exploded. Office complexes and high-rise condominiums now shadowed his medical building.

Pilgrim rolled back his chair, closed the file, and carried it to the cabinet, pulling open the drawer to the file he'd angled as a marker and sliding it back in place. Then, as was also his routine-rain or shine-he slipped on his raincoat and hat that he used to think made him look like Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*, and reached to shut off the television. He hesitated at the lead news story.

"Robert Meyers was at the Washington State Convention and Trade Center in downtown Seattle today to give the keynote address at a conference on global warming."

Pilgrim turned up the volume and watched the charismatic young senator enter the convention center, shaking hands with some of the attendees. "Meyers took the opportunity to continue his attacks on the current Republican administration's record on the environment."

The broadcast cut to a shot of Meyers standing at a podium behind a throng of microphones. "This is an issue whose time has come," he told the audience. "The people of the Pacific Northwest know this as well as any in the United States. The current administration's continued disregard for the environment is a further demonstration that it is out of touch with issues that will affect the future generations of this great country."

The story ended, and Pilgrim switched off the television. Curious, he raised his glasses back onto the perch above his eyebrows and used his finger to trace the faded letters on the white cards on the front of the file drawers. His daughter remained determined to modernize the practice, which was now hers, but to him the computer screens, hard drives, and printers throughout the rest of the office made it look like the control room of a spaceship. Not so in the sanctity of his four walls. All he needed were cabinets and the twenty-six letters of the alphabet—a filing system that had worked just fine before Bill Gates and computers. His daughter had relented, but only after he agreed to separate his active from his inactive files. In exchange, she promised not to ship any of his files to storage. His cabinets would leave his office with his body.

He stepped to the cabinet containing his closed files and slid open the third drawer down, straining to read the faded ink on the raised tabs. He pulled the file from the crowded drawer and raised the next in sequence to mark its place, then walked to his desk. Sitting, he heard the familiar sound of the bells indicating the front door had opened. At this time of night, he locked the front door, though the janitor had a key, and Emily occasionally came back to do paperwork after putting her two children to bed. She had her father's gene for long hours.

Pilgrim stood and pulled open his office door. "Emily, is that you?" The well-dressed man in the dark suit and raincoat stood like a giant amid the miniature chairs and tables. More curious than concerned, Pilgrim asked, "Can I help you?"

"Dr. Frank Pilgrim?" "Yes. How did you get in?" The man closed the outer door, locking it. "I brought a key." "Where did you get a key?" The man approached. He did not answer. "What is it you want?" Pilgrim asked. "I have no money here, or anything that would even remotely be considered a narcotic."

The man reached into the pocket of his raincoat, pulled out a syringe, and

removed the stopper at the end of the needle. "That's okay, Dr. Pilgrim. I've brought my own."

Pilgrim's eyes narrowed. He balled his fists. "My daughter is here. She's . . . she's in the office right over there." He called out. "Emily! Emily, there's a man here. Call the police."

The intruder stepped forward, displaying no concern. Pilgrim stumbled into his office and closed the door, but the man caught the edge and pushed it open, knocking Pilgrim backward. He closed the door behind him. Pilgrim scrambled for the telephone, but his momentum abruptly stopped, and he felt himself being pulled back by his collar. Instinctively, he turned. The man grabbed him by the throat and jabbed the hypodermic needle into Pilgrim's chest, depressing the plunger. A burning sensation spread quickly across Pilgrim's shoulders and down his arms and legs. Pain gripped him, constricting the flow of air to his lungs. He righted himself, then fell backward into the filing cabinet, shoving closed the drawer. The images blurred, distorted and unrecognizable. He lurched for the telephone and managed to grasp the receiver, but the strength in his legs dissolved and he collapsed across the desk, sliding to the floor, his arms pulling forty-eight years of clutter on top of him.

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