

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

The Lab

I open my eyes. My head is throbbing. I try to open my mouth and feel duct tape holding it shut. More tape holds my wrists and ankles. I try to move and feel the searing pain in my arm. It all comes back.

The pump. The van. The alley. The man with the gun. Athena. Athena. The thought jolts me to full consciousness.

Then, I see her. Athena is on the other side of the room. Duct tape covers her mouth and is wrapped around her wrists and ankles. Her eyes are closed. Above her is a laboratory bench. On top of it, a grid of metal rods holds an array of glassware and tubing, ready to perform some elaborate chemical reaction.

The room is about twelve feet long and eight feet wide with a lab bench on each side. The wall at one end is blank, no windows. At the other end is an open door. Through it, I can see a second door, closed tight.

In my groggy state, it takes a moment to understand what this means. Then it hits me. The space between the doors. It's a

decontamination zone. The lab has been built to handle deadly microbes.

That puts me in the killer's kitchen.

This is the origin of everything bad that happened in the past week. The man who built it tried to kill me just hours earlier. The same man has probably killed my father and brother. He tried to kill Athena's mother. He came to the virology lab, probably to kill the last two authors on the paper. Athena must have gotten in his way.

Which means that I got in his way too.

Realizing I might just die here, I struggle, but the tape bites into my skin. It is tough and tight and strong. No way I can break it.

I raise my head and crane my neck, trying to see what is on the lab bench. I have to find something sharp.

As I search, I see movement. The door handle.

I drop my head and close my eyes. Whoever is coming doesn't need to know I'm awake.

The outer door bursts open and hits the wall with a heavy thud.

Footsteps and a man's voice, low and guttural, like a rumbling volcano. Words that sound like Chinese rise in an explosive crescendo.

Something metal scrap across concrete.

Angry words erupt in a howl of fury. A tremendous crash shakes the room. Sounds of shattering glass and clattering steel fill the air.

I peek out through half closed eyes. The grid of reaction vessels is gone from the lab bench. Broken glassware, tubing, and metal rods litter the floor. A metal stool sits in the middle of the debris.

On the other side of the chaos, I see Athena, pale and exhausted, her eyes open now and filled with fear.

The man opens what look like a small refrigerator and pulls out a nylon bag. The bag clatters, glass against glass. He reaches inside, withdraws a syringe and a glass vial. He removes the syringe from its sterile wrapper, uncovers the needle, and jabs it through the rubber stopper. As he inverts the vial and fills the syringe, light filters through the clear, yellow liquid.

The man squats down and stares at Athena, saying nothing. I examine him. He has Chinese features with a long, lean face, topped with a military grade, black buzz-cut. I realize I've seen him before. I'm not sure where, but we have met.

"Alpha will not be happy, but I cannot leave you to die, little sister. I will take you to a safe place. Once I am gone, I will tell them where to find you."

"Little sister"? Had the man really referred to Athena as, "little sister"? How did he know Athena?

The man's name pops into my head. The killer works in Dr. Martin's lab. His name is on the paper. Zhao Zheng.

I watch him lean over and swab Athena's exposed upper arm. "The virus is everywhere now. In the lab, in the van." He wraps a hand around it and, with one motion, buries the needle in her upper triceps and injects the contents of the syringe.

Zhao stands and discards the syringe. "Now, you are safe," he announces, staring at Athena.

I listen in disbelief. It can only be one thing.

A vaccine.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Locked Up

I watch Zhao pull what looks like a wad of clay from his pocket and drop it into the sink. Then he picks up one of the metal rods from the floor and jams it into the sink over and over. He seems to be pushing the clay down into the sink.

Zhao turns the faucet on, then off. For a moment, he stares into the sink. Then he spins, walks from the room, and slams the heavy door. The deadbolt clicks into place.

What was that? I try to ask Athena with my eyes. Whatever this guy is doing, it is not good. We have to get out of here.

Athena nods. Her eyes fill with anger and fear. She seems only partially present. Something has hold of her. But she understands.

In the debris from Zhao's outburst, I spot the neck of a flask, a glass tube. The broken end is jagged and sharp. The rest of the neck is a smooth cylinder, a perfect handle. The result is a knife of broken glass.

Athena and I will have to work together. Because her hands are bound in front, she will have to do the cutting.

I gesture towards the glass with my head. She spots it and the two of us roll and squirm, trying to avoid the scatter shards of glass, until Athena has the makeshift knife in her hands and my back is pressed up against her.

I feel her fingers on my wrists, guiding me to one side. Then pain, the sharp edge of glass. I resist the urge to pull back. As she tries to cut, I put tension on the tape

And wait.

Outside the lab, I think I hear cabinet doors opening and slamming. I can't be sure. The door must be thick and heavy because the sounds are faint. At least the noise means he is busy.

I push my hands towards Athena as she works. The fabric of the duct tape yields slowly, one thread popping at a time.

A few minutes later, the slamming stops.

Zhao is coming back.

I tap a warning to Athena and then roll back toward the wall. Our only hope is surprise. Frantically, I squirm across the floor, hoping she got the message.

I push with hips shoulders and knees. Bits of glass bite through my shirt and pants.

The deadbolt clicks and the steel door flies open. Glassware rattles.

I push up against the wall, trying to match the position he left me in. I listen as Zhao storms in and drops something heavy on the floor. I peek out and see a large red plastic jug. The odor is instantaneous and overpowering.

Gasoline.

Then I see him set something else on the lab bench. Four metal canisters about the size of soda cans wired to a kitchen timer and wrapped in duct tape.

And it's ticking.

Zhao is going to blow up the lab.

And he is taking no chances. Zhao picks up the red jug and empties it into the sink. As the smell of gasoline fills the small room, I finally understood the reason for the wad of clay.

A bomb and a sink-full of gasoline. This guy is not planning to leave anything behind. Whatever survives the blast will be burned to a crisp in a gas-fueled fireball. Zhao appears to have

some plan to save Athena, but I am expendable. He is going to turn me into charcoal.

A sharp click pulls my eyes back to Zhao. It is the slide of the P220, the sound of a round entering the chamber. "You destroy my plans. All of my work. Everything." He slowly the raises the gun. "You are no child. I can take no chances."

Reflexively, I close my eyes. I brace myself for the impact of the bullet. Time slows. I hear the click of the hammer retracting, then the explosion of the bullet and, a moment before that, a howl of pain. Bits of plaster rain down on me as a bullet hits the wall above my head.

I open my eyes to see a gun sail across the narrow room, hit the far wall, and clatter to the ground. I look up to see Zhao holding his wrist.

Athena has risen to her knees, still bound and gagged. In her upraised hands, she wields one of the thin steel rods. Her eyes blaze with rage, a fury like nothing I have ever seen in her before. As Zhao turns to face her, she launches a ferocious strike.

The impact sends Zhao staggering backwards.

I can see Zhao's eyes go cold. Like a dog preparing to attack. A sudden, ferocious snap kick catches Athena in the shoulder and sends her crashing to the floor.

He pulls a knife from his pocket and flicks it open. Athena tries to push herself up, still wielding the steel rod like a saber. Zhao raises the knife. She braces herself in the corner formed by the lab bench and the wall. As Zhao moves in, Athena swings down on his arm.

Zhao spins sideways, avoiding the rod, and snapping his foot into her extend arm. The rod flies from her hand as she falls to the floor. Hard.

Zhao advances. Stunned from the fall, Athena squirms to get away. I watch in horror. Bound in tape, she has no chance.

I push my shoulders against the wall, arch my back and pull my knees up to my chest, coiling like a spring.

The moment Zhao raises the knife I strike, kicking with both feet at once. I catch his ankle full on.

With a cry of pain and surprise, Zhao stumbles backwards, dropping the knife. I squirm towards him and strike again.

Zhao staggers backwards and falls, headfirst, slamming into the half open outer door and crashing onto the apartment floor beyond it.

Athena is already on the move. The gun. She launches herself towards the spot under the bench where it fell.

A visceral roar, like the sound of a wounded bear fills the apartment. I look out the door. Zhao is on his feet. Blood covering the left side of his head. His eyes, the vicious eyes

of a killer, giving a death stare to Athena and me. Then he storms towards us.

Athena rolls back to face the door, gun in hand. She points it at Zhao, her face tight, as if every muscle in her body is focused on the single act of pulling the trigger.

The explosion of the 38 calibre round fills the tiny room just as the heavy door slams shut. The slug can only dent the steel door. The deadbolt clicks into place.

The closed door makes the sound of the second bullet deafening. It hits the door and I look back. Athena pulls the trigger again. Boom. Thud.

"NO!!" she screams as she throws the gun at the closed door.

Then silence.

Except for the relentless sound of the ticking timer.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

XV-17

Nothing squeezes a cop's juicebox quite like the sudden appearance of a body in a biohazard bin.

Cruising south on I-5, Cliff Hardacre is a happy bloodhound on a hot trail. The 911 calls. The reports of an explosion and shooting on Capitol Hill involving a white van. The evidence at the fire hydrant. The appearance of a white van at the Virology lab. And then the body of the Russian.

After five days of frustration, hunting the man behind the outbreak with nothing to show for it, the pieces all fell into place in the time it took him to throw down his first cup of Joe.

The whole scene at the lab is like a big neon arrow pointing to this Zhao Zheng character. And his boss, Dr. Martin, after

she recovered from the shock, had one of those how-can-I-have-missed-it moments.

"XV-17," she gasped, "Oh my God, it's XV-17." She has paused, shaking her head. "I was so sure we had destroyed it all." But she said it like maybe she hadn't been so sure, like she has some doubts all along. "He must have been planning this from the start. He must have saved some."

Then she has gone silent, shaking her head.

She told him how, five years earlier, her lab was looking for a vaccine for this SARS virus. They played around with the genes, some laboratory hocus-pocus, to make potential vaccines.

Each time the team came with a new inactive virus, they injected it into a group of hamsters, waited a week, and then exposed the hamsters to the active SARS virus. Without a vaccine, about half of the mice would die within two weeks.

The team tests 16 different vaccines. Every time, the SARS virus killed about half of the mice. Nothing worked. Nothing changed until they tested the 17th vaccine, XV-17.

For the first time, the virus did not kill the mice. They did not lose half of the mice as they had in every other test. They lost all of the mice. Not one survivor.

But the biggest difference is when they died. They mice were all dead within five days. Before they could even give them the active SARS virus. They had not created a vaccine.

With XV-17, they had created a super virus.

Only the six people associated with the project knew about what happened. If anyone else found out, the project would be shut down. They were convinced they were close to a breakthrough with the vaccine. No one had been harmed by XV-17. They were convinced that, if XV-17 took down the research program, it would also destroy something that could save thousands of lives.

So, they decided to keep it quiet. No one needed to know. All the samples of XV-17 were destroyed. Or so they thought.

No one ever imagined that Dr. Zhao would keep a little sample of XV-17 for his collection. "I can't believe it. I can't believe it," Martin kept saying. Everyone thought he was just a nice little lab rat.

Wrong on that one.

With two of the six researchers from the XV-17 project dead, another one in the hospital, another almost joining him, and a fifth in a trash can with a ventilated cranium, the list of possible suspects is short. The last man standing is Zhao Zheng.

Hardacre has seen some crazy stuff in his life, but this has to be near the top. Extreme wack job. But, with half the cops in the Northwest converging on this guy's apartment, his days on the outside of a prison cell are numbered.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Confrontation

As Athena and I try to untangle the impossible snarl of wires, tape, timer and explosives with our eyes, the timer works its way down. Zhao's knife makes quick work of the rest of the duct tape. But that has become the least of our problems.

I find the end of last layer of tape and prepare to work a fingernail under it.

"Don't even think about it." Athena's voice startles me.

"Don't you remember the pump?"

"Of course, I do." After the pump, I know that anything this guy made is not going to be easy to beat. The seconds flash down. The heavy gasoline fumes are making my head spin and I feel like puking. "What choice do we have?"

"How?" Athena's voice is sharp. "If we pull the wrong wire, we're toast."

"Then help me find the right wire, dammit." I pick at the edge of the tape with my fingernails. "I just need a look at the circuit."

Athena examines the mechanism and shakes her head. "I guarantee that he has design it so that, the moment you start pulling off the tape, you'll find the wrong wire."

"What the hell am I supposed to do!? I don't see a lot of options," I bark at her.

Tick, tick, tick. The sound fills every momentary silence. Relentlessly counting down.

"Look I don't want to die any more than you, but ..."
Athena's eyes pan the room. "There has to be a way out of here."

The room is like a bunker. Athena's wild shooting episode hardly dented the door. There is no window. The end wall and one side wall seem to be made of concrete. Athena curls her hand into a fist and pound on the other wall.

"This wall." She grabs the knife off the lab bench and begins to dig into the surface. "If it's just sheetrock, maybe we can cut an opening."

"He'll just shoot us if we get through it."

"Hopefully, he's gone." Athena digs at the wall as she talks. But as the bits of plaster fall to the floor, they reveal the layer of wood underneath. Getting through the lath and plaster with anything less than a sledgehammer would take hours.

"Damn." Athena throws down the knife in frustration.

I turn back to the bomb and, with two fingers, ease up a corner of the tape.

Athena turns her head away, squints, and holds up her hands, as if they might protect her from the blast. She watches out of the corners of her eyes. "Someone might come. You said you called 911. They must have gone to the lab. They must have found Alexi. The police. The FBI. They have to be looking for Zhao. They'll come to his apartment. Somebody must be coming."

I speak as I continue to pull back the tape, slowly and cautiously. "Don't count on it. We are the only somebodies around."

I feel the bulge of a wire beneath the tape and pause to make sure I can remove the tape without pulling on it.

"Wait!" Athena's voice stops me. She continues, "What if we just move the bomb? Put it next to the outer door."

Now it's my turn to be skeptical. "That bomb's gonna do us in no matter where we put it."

"We could close the inner door."

I examine the inner wall of the decontamination zone. "I don't know. A big explosion might just turn that wall into shrapnel. Even if it doesn't the explosion is likely to turn that gas into a fireball and fry us both."

"Can we drain the sink?"

"You saw him jam the clay in. I don't know how to get it out."

Athena lowers her head and closes her eyes. Moments later they pop open.

"I have an idea," she says.