

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### The Map

At the heart of the park, a dense forest winds along the course of a small stream. I move silently through the trees. Terry and I grew up here, building forts, conquering invading armies, and escaping from the clutches of evil. In these woods, I am a Ninja.

But the game just became real.

I am more than a mile from home when I reach the fence. I crawl up a series of strategically placed bolts that jut from the corner post and drop down on the far side. As I land, half a dozen chickens scurry and squawk across the yard. A pair of goats, only slightly less freaked out, bleat and skip away from me as I stand up and survey the hillside. I trudge up the steep slope, past a chicken coop, a miniature barn, and a tool shed. Exhausted, I open the gate leading to the house's side yard and make my way past the fruit trees and the herb garden.

A greenhouse stretches along the entire front of the house. A maze of raised garden beds overflows with the beginnings of

everything from beans and zucchini to tomatoes and eggplants. I stop and let my backpack slide to the ground, not sure I have another step left in me.

At the center of the gardens, Terry stands with bent legs, his right arm extended, like an archer. I watch as he eases back the invisible arrow with a long slow steady movement, then releases it. He turns and begins to extend his left arm. As I watch Terry float through his Tai Chi, I realize how my heart is pounding.

Finally, Terry sees me. Without missing a beat, his left hand releases its imaginary bow and turns to hold the neck of an air guitar. His right arm rotates in a perfect windmill strum as he breaks into a raucous version of the opening chords of Jumpin' Jack Flash, complete with sound effects. "Daaaaaah, Dah-Dah-Dah Daaah..."

But, as I approach, the volume cuts out. "Man, you look like somebody just scraped you off their windshield."

Breathing hard, I start to speak, then slump to the ground, giving in to exhaustion, pain, and the weight of the day.

For the next five minutes, Terry sits and listens as I explain the details of what happened, the entire day from Dad's illness to the chase through the hospital, Athena, the cops, and the Maple tree. As I finish, Terry shakes his head. "Epic

indeed. A Ulysses, James Bond, and Batman burrito with Hot Zone sauce." Terry stands and holds out his hand.

I grab it. Terry helps me to my feet.

"Now," said Terry, "First things first. Come with me."

I've got no idea where we're going, but I'd follow Terry off a cliff right about now. Turns out we're just going to the side door. Light from the kitchen glows through a stained-glass image of the sun rising over a forest of Sitka spruce. The window is set in an arched door of beautiful salvaged old growth fir. Terry grabs the door handle, an arch of wood carved into the shape of a leaping salmon. He holds the door and ushers me in. The house always feels to me like a Hobbit Hole, as if Gandalf might pop out from a back room.

A thick stew simmers on the stove. "If I hear right, you haven't eaten all day. It's almost eight. Eat first. Then we have some work to do." Terry fills a bowl and carves a piece of dense, dark bread from a large loaf on the kitchen counter. He sets the food in front of me and disappears into the house.

As soon as I smell intense Moroccan spices of the stew, I realize how hungry I am. Two bowls later, I feel calm for the first time all day.

Meanwhile, Terry has found a roll of gauze, some tape, and a jar of ointment. He set them on the table and sits next to me.

I push the empty bowl away and release a long low sigh. "Man, your mom can cook."

"Actually, Dad cooked this one. Mom had to stay late for some meeting at school. This is his specialty."

"Where is he?"

"Out in the shop." Terry gestures toward the other end of the house. "Now, let's see that paw." He grabs my wrist and pulls it towards him.

I watch in silent exhaustion, while Terry bandages my injured hand. After he finishes taping the gauze in place, he looks over his work. "How's it feel?"

I test my hand, opening and closing it. "Wow. That feels much better. What's in that stuff?"

"Not really sure. Some herbal thing my mom put together. Some kind of Native American goop. Magic, isn't it?"

"Fantastic. Thanks."

Terry grabs a bowl, fills it with stew, cuts some bread, and sits next to me. "So I think I figured out where your brothers are."

"What? Where? How'd you find out?"

Terry dips a corner of his bread in the stew and bites it off. "I made a couple of phone calls while you were eating. They've set up some sort of emergency facility at Rainier Elementary for kids with sick parents. Sounds like they've got a

whole crew of nurses, doctors, social workers. Even schoolteachers are there to look after 'em. I think the boys are in good hands."

"Man. You are a rock star." I feel a huge sense of relief. Then I pause, imagining Abe and Sam. "They must be terrified," I whisper.

"Those two?" Terry smiles, "It's the nurses who are in trouble with those two around."

"I feel like I left them."

"They need you to do exactly what you're doing. They'll be OK."

"I suppose," I stand up from the table, "but somehow I've got to check in on them."

"We'll figure something out." Terry grabs my glass and bowl, washes them and sets them out to dry. He turns back to me.

"Right now, we need to dig into your dad's data." He walks out the kitchen door and I follow.

Twenty feet from the door, a large Japanese maple, shaped like an open hand, reaches its fingers toward the sky. In its palm, rests an elaborate tree house, its structure blending perfectly into the graceful curves of the branches. The dark green roof seems to disappear in the leaves. It is almost as if the compact wooden structure had always been there, an elaborate outgrowth of the tree.

The tree house had its humble beginnings as the launching platform for a zip line, the remnants of which are still visible above the roof. It evolved over the years as Terry, often with my help, improved, re-imagined, and remodeled it. With the recent addition of electricity, Terry all but lives in the tree house lacking only a kitchen and a bathroom.

Terry scampers up the tree using an almost imperceptible set of hand and footholds that he had worked into the trunk. I know the route well and climb up after him. Terry presses a hidden release in the tree house floor and a trapdoor slowly lifts.

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The interior of the tree house twists and turns around the branches of the tree with a level of precision, and detail worthy of one of his dad's guitars. Neil Rivers dropped out of college in the 70's and started building guitars. He taught himself the craft so well that his guitars are now prized works of art. Terry grew up in his shop and has clearly learned the craft.

Terry designed the triangular space with the compact efficiency of a small sailboat and the detail of a violin. Every square inch has a purpose. The branches of the tree are

integrated into the structure of the tree house. On one side, his bed is nestled between two branches with an arc of windows above it. On another side, a large magnifying glass on a long, flexible arm hovers over a workbench on top of which sits a small vise and a toolbox filled with fine tools from tiny clamps, pliers and screwdrivers to drills, grinders, and saws. Half a dozen gearboxes, armatures, and actuators are spread across the workspace as if some Lilliputian workmen are in the middle of a project. Several of the mechanisms are recognizable as variations on key components of Merlin and Daedalus. The shelves above the workbench are lined with small bins fill with wheels, gears, axles, metal stock, gaskets, and screws, some of which are vanishingly small. On the third wall, is a desk, supported by two large branches, with a laptop computer on top. Above the computer, on the only open wall space, hangs a poster of Bruce Lee in midair, fully extended, about to strike some poor, unseen assailant.

Terry sits at the desk, pulls a second chair over from the workbench and pats the empty seat. "Come on, we've got work to do. Let's see that notebook."

I slide the notebook from my backpack and the two of us look over the pages. "My father was working on a map of these cases. I tried to get into his account, but I ran out of time. I figure we'll have to start from scratch."

"It shouldn't be hard to make our own map."

"Right," I say. "If you can start entering data into a spread sheet, I'll set up an algorithm to map them."

"I'm on it."

I pull out my laptop and we set to work. Terry and I have worked together so long on so many projects that we can anticipate each other's moves. We massage the data and set out the code that will turn numbers into a story. On into the night, we work together in silence. Everything about working with Terry that night feels intensely familiar except for one thing.

Never have the stakes been so high.

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The moon is shining through the window as I enter the data from the last patient. "Done," I proclaim, throwing my arms in the air as if I had just tied up the legs of a calf in a roping competition. Terry and I have finished testing our mapping engine, and he is resting with a cup of tea.

"Fine work, grasshopper," Terry offers. "Let's have a look." I transfer the data and launch the program. A map of Seattle appears on the screen. Then hundreds of small blue crosses pop into view. Each represents what I think is a hospitalization



from the outbreak. The cases seem to be scattered around the University District.

The two of us stare at the screen for several minutes. Terry shakes his head. "Sorry, dude, but I'm not sure what your dad is seeing."

I feel a sense of disappointment. There is no clear pattern. I hoped we would immediately see what Dad saw, but there is nothing in the image that jumps out at me.

"It's gotta be there," I say. "We're just not looking at it right."

"Your dad worked on this for days. We might need some time to figure it out."

"Time is exactly what we don't have." I had somehow convinced myself this would be easy. It is now clear that nothing is going to be easy. "This looks just like the map my father was using," I say. "He saw something in it that told him what was happening."

"Any idea what that might be?" Terry gives me a doubtful look. After working deep into the night, he can be forgiven for wondering if my puzzle really has an answer.

"I'm not sure. My father's notes have some stuff about plants and gardens, like maybe he thought this was related to contaminated food, but I don't see where he got that. Athena figures that this is the result of some sort of airborne virus

and, as I understand it, every epidemiologist in the world agrees with her. Except my dad."

Terry looks back at the screen. His eyes seem to lock onto something. "Didn't you say the cops mention something about terrorists?"

"Yeah, that's why I have half the police in Seattle on my case."

"It also means they'll come here before long. And it means the feds are going to get involved. We need to be careful."

"Maybe that explains the black SUV."

A look of shock widens Terry's face. "Black SUV? Pause and rewind, bro."

"Well, I wasn't sure it meant anything, but there was this monster SUV sitting in the alley behind my house when the cops came today."

"And? This is Seattle. Everyone's mom drives a giant SUV. How else can they pick up groceries?"

"Well, I've never seen this one before. The windows are all tinted. I think I saw two guys in it."

"Two guys?" Terry sounds worried.

"Yeah, big guys."

"Oooh. That's bad. They were definitely not buying groceries. Grown men do not sit in alleys in darkened SUV's unless they're dealers or the man. This is bad. CIA, FBI, MI6, special ops. Why

didn't you tell me? Sounds like the feds are already flipping over rocks on this one."

"I had too much else to tell you." I thought for a moment. "Look, I don't want to get you in trouble. I could sleep in the hideaway." Years back, Terry and I built a secret fort in the park. It is dry and hidden with utmost care. It is not long on creature comforts, but it is the one place where no one could find me.

"I got you covered. You're staying here for now. Sounds like they're letting the local cops handle this one. No need to worry too much, at least not yet. Now let's get some sleep."

Sleep sounds good. Over the years, I have spent many nights in Terry's treehouse. Book-fill shelves surround a pair of windows in the center of the wall that stretches between Terry's bed and his desk. Above them is a long wooden panel. I press it. The panel tilts up to reveal a narrow bunk hidden under the eaves.

I climb in and lie down. I try to rest, but my mind won't shut off. I can't escape the sense that I'm missing something, something obvious. But what is it?

The sky is already turning light before I finally fall asleep.

But I don't sleep long.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### The Twisted Helix

As Athena slides the samples from the plastic bag, she reminds herself of the awesome power of the virus. Even with the hooded paper jumpsuit, the double latex gloves taped at the cuffs, the respirator and the facemask, even with the samples locked in a glove box that holds them in isolation, she feels a jolt of fear. With her arms in the long rubber gloves that extend from the sides of the box and her face pressed up against its clear plexiglass wall, she opens the first sample.

Knowing what she holds in her hands, Athena shakes her head in disbelief as she imagines Jack, running through the hospital with the virus stuffed into his pockets. She is still kicking herself over becoming part of his crazy plan. Unsure of what to do with Jack's sample, she brought it to her mother's lab, planning to dump it in the biohazard disposal bin.

But Athena wasn't able to bring herself to throw it out. Every time she tried, the sad, desperate look in Jack's eyes came back to her along with the image of him disappearing as he rode alone through the city.

Athena went home for dinner, leaving the sealed bag in a locked drawer, telling herself she would toss it later. But she couldn't. How can you not help a friend who is trying to avoid becoming an orphan?

So, the game is on and there is no turning back. If she is careful (and Athena is always careful), no one will be at risk. She was foolish enough to get involved with Jack's scheme but, she is still smart enough to make it work.

Athena has come in late at night hoping to have the lab to herself, but the lab never sleeps. Jim, Alexi and Zhao are still there. Alexi Markov, a Russian post-doc, is hunched over the microtome, shaving tissue samples for the electron microscope. Dark, gaunt, and brooding, he is a man of few words. Athena takes the fact that he grunted hello at her when she came in as a sign that things were going well for him that night. Jim Donatello, an amiable graduate student, is in the tissue culture room trying to make human lung cells grow in a test tube. Zhao Zheng, another post-doc and, along with Alexi, the leader of the lab, is adjusting the PCR machine.

In the past, Athena has always counted on Zhao for help with her projects. For some reason, he had taken her under his wing and helped her with any problem she ran into in the lab. But this project is different. Athena is on her own in her search

for the genetic code at the heart of the virus, either RNA or DNA. A wisp with the power to kill.

DNA is nature's masterpiece. It might be more correct to say nature is DNA's masterpiece. Every curve of every face, every beat of every heart, every breath ever taken is ultimately defined by the double stranded helix of DNA and its single stranded relative, RNA. Each organism on the planet has its own version of the code. Nature is what DNA invented to make copies of itself.

Athena needs to extract that code from the deadly virus. To do that she will have to manipulate a profoundly complex mixture of molecules, human cells intertwined with viral invaders. If she does everything right, and much can go wrong, she will be left with a mere smudge of purified molecules. Getting that smudge and analyzing it will take all of Athena's skills and patience.

And it will take time.

Athena stares through the thick glass of the glovebox and unscrews the lid from the sample container. A liquid spider of sweat crawls down her brow. She wipes it against her upper arm. The only easy part of this will be making a mistake.

It was just past eleven when Alexi's gruff voice startles Athena.

"Why you use glove box?" English is not Alexi's strong suit.

Athena turns to find him standing behind her, his steely eyes fixed in a derisive stare.

"When you verk with hazardous agent, you register in log." Alexi points toward a book at the laboratory entrance. "Even if you are boss's daughter." The last two words drip with disdain. Alexi has never made a secret of his belief that Athena has no business being in the lab and his resentment of what he considers to be the special treatment she got as Dr. Martin's daughter.

"Sorry." He is right, even if he was talking to Athena like she was a child. "I'll get it done as soon as I finish."

"You should do eet now." Alexi's voice is ice, drained of warmth. "Vhat is agent?"

"A rhinovirus." Athena hopes Alexi will believe she is simply studying a cold virus. "I am studying an outbreak at my school."

Alexi watches as Athena pulls her arms out of the glove box and writes in the log. When she finishes, he stares at what she has written. She hopes he will not see through her cover story.

"You do not need glove box for this." He stares at her. "Finish quickly. Next time, talk to me." He turns and walks back to the room that housed the electron microscope.

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It is just after midnight when Athena opens the centrifuge. Jim has gone home, Zhao has disappeared into his office and Alexi is still working at the electron microscope. She gently extracts the tiny sample tube. Inside, if she had done everything right, were the codebooks of the enemy.

By spinning the sample hundreds of times a second, the centrifuge has sent a pellet of DNA molecules, each one containing the instructions to build a deadly virus, down to the bottom of the tube. Athena slides her clammy hands out of the glove box and sits down to rest for a moment, her back wet with sweat.

She did it. She has safely isolated the primal spiral, the viral genome. Next she will need to amplify the sample with the PCR machine, a copy machine that can turn a few molecules of DNA into billions. It will be another two hours work before the PCR is complete and the gel is ready. Then she adds the enzyme that will break the DNA into pieces and put the samples into the chamber that will separate the fragments by size.

Athena leaves the lab that night with a sense of elation. She has taken a huge risk for Jack. And, so far, it's working. She has begun to unravel the long, twisted helix that might hold the secrets to helping Jack's father.



Thursday, June 12

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### Time and the Red Volvo

Time.

I forgot about time.

I tumble from my bunk, boot up the computer and open Dad's notebook. I scan the neat, precise list of names followed by the addresses that we had used to make the map. But Dad had also written a date and time for each case.

And we just ignored those numbers.

I look over at Terry. He's snoring like an old drunk, so I let him sleep. I can do this on my own. I modify the mapping engine and start to enter the time of diagnosis.

Two hours later the work is done and I begin to look at the data. In an instant, I can see what happened. I am double checking, just to be sure, when Terry finally drops from his bunk and walks up behind me, scratching his head. "Whachya got?"

"Watch this." I point to the empty map of Seattle on the screen. With a few keystrokes the screen jumps to life. Blue

crosses begin to appear. "I entered the time and date information."

As cases began to appear across the map, I hit the pause button. "I set up a time-window so cases disappear after twenty four hours of virtual time. These are the cases from the first twelve hours of the outbreak. See anything?"

Terry stares in silence at the map. "Not much. Maybe a few extra in this area," He points to a concentration of crosses near the university, "but it's not impressive. To be honest, I see nothing."

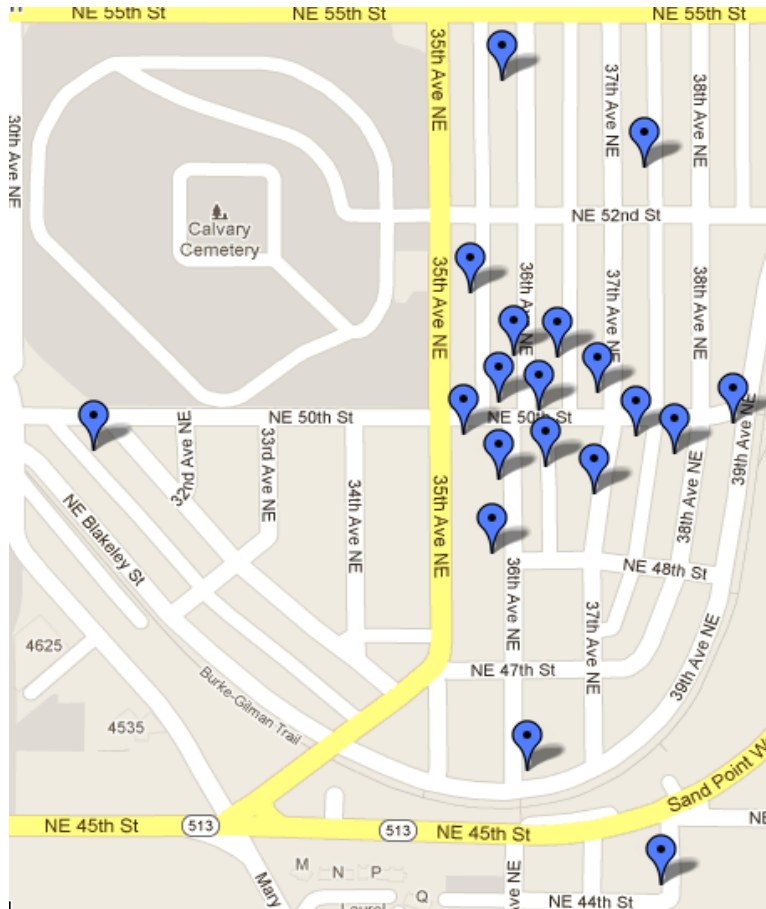
"Exactly. And there's nothing over the next twelve hours either." I hit a key and the map fills with blue crosses in no apparent pattern.

I hit the pause button and point at the lower right-hand corner of the map. "Now watch this area. These are cases from the third 12-hour period." I hit the same key and even more dots fill the screen, but in the corner where I'm pointing, with the cases from the first 12 hours now gone, there appears to be a cluster of cases. "Do you see it?"

The blue crosses form a triangle that gives the appearance of Christmas ornaments, hanging on the branching streets of a small portion of the district. Terry nods. "Totally."

"Now, we go for another 12 hours." A few more keystrokes and the Christmas tree of cases fills in and grows. With the first

24 hours of data gone, there's nothing more than few other cases are scattered across the district, but the picture tells a clear story.



"You're onto something, Jacko. What do you make of it?"

"I'm not sure, but it looks like something unusual happened right here." Jack touches the screen at the center of the triangle of cases. "We just have to figure out what it was."

Terry nods his head slowly. "Maybe we should go have a look."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean go over there and have a look."

"What do you think we're gonna find?"

Terry shrugs his shoulders. "I don't know. I just have this feeling that being there, seeing the territory, will help us think this through."

"How do you plan to get there? I don't have my bike, it'll take us about an hour to walk. Given that the police are looking for me, I'm not sure a long morning stroll is a great idea."

"I guess it's time for a little disguise." Terry opens a drawer and pulls out a baseball cap and a pair of sunglasses.

"Brilliant. Who is that supposed to fool? I walk around lookin' like some homeboy and we may as well add a t-shirt that says, LOOK AT ME."

"Who said anything about walking?"

"What are we gonna do, take the bus?"

Terry holds up a set of car keys, smiling as he dangles them from his fingers and rattles them. "Volvo." Terry and his father have restored a vintage Volvo and Terry has been learning to drive in it.

"You're fifteen. They catch you driving without your dad and you'll never drive again."

"Well then, I guess I'd better not let them catch me."

"You're insane."

"Hell, Jack, I've got a permit, I'll have my license in a couple of months."

"That doesn't make you any less crazy. In fact, that makes you more crazy."

"Time's a wastin'. If we want to crack this case, we'd better go."

###

The bright red Volvo, a 1968 i30 sedan with the gently rounded contours of another time, rolls through traffic. Lying across the back seat, I stare at the printout from the map of cases as Terry drives. "Are you sure your dad's gonna be gone all day?"

"He went down to Olympia to check out a new shipment of wood. That's three hours just for the driving."

"I'm still not convinced we're going to get anything useful out of this."

"Patience, little bee. We must open our minds to the wisdom of the random."

"I'm open, oh wise one."

"Then we're good to go."

We roll down a steep hill towards a red light. I look down at the map. "Left at the light, then take your second right," I

instruct Terry, directing him toward the base of the "Christmas tree" of cases that we saw in the map.

Soon, we are surrounded by modest homes with perfect gardens. Morning sun floods the streets. Well-tended gardens overflow with spring flowers. Each yard seems to have a sandbox or a play structure. Bicycles and soccer balls dot the lawns and walkways.

Terry slows. "You seeing what I'm seeing?"

I survey the neighborhood. "Beautiful day, nice quiet neighborhood." What's he talking about? "I don't see anything."

"Exactly." Terry nods. "You don't see anything."

"What do you mean?"

"Sunny days in June are like freakin' crack in this town. This place should be crawling with people."

Terry waits to let me think. "But there's nobody. No parents pushing strollers. No toddlers. No kids on tricycles. Nothing. Even the yards are empty."

"Wow. You're right. It's a ghost town," I whisper.

Terry slows and points at a beige craftsman bungalow. "What's that?"

"What?" I ask as I poke my head up and look. Then I see it.

"Oh my God." The sight of the small orange rectangle brings everything home.

"Quarantine," I said. "The orange notices mean someone in the house is sick."

I look at the map. "And we have a blue cross in the same spot."

"There's another one." Terry points up the street, then look down at my copy of the map. "And there's the cross."

The third orange sign appears half a block later on a blue house with a green play structure. Two houses down, the fourth. Then another. Each time, a blue cross on the map marks the spot.

I am silent. These are no longer just marks on a map. They are lives and families ripped apart. I know too well.

At that moment, the police cruiser appears. It crawls around corner towards us. I immediately slide down behind the front seat. "I told you this was insane," I whisper as I cover myself with a blanket.

The cruiser flashes its lights and pulls up next to us.

I squeeze down into the well between the front and back seats. I can feel the vibration of the cruiser's powerful engine through the frame of the tiny Volvo. The crank squeaks as Terry rolls down the window.

I hold my breath. How had they known?

"What is it officer?" says Terry as calmly as possible.

"Where you headed, son?" the officer asks in his deep, intimidating, police officer voice.

"Just running a few errands for my grandmother, sir," Terry answers in a perfect performance.



"Are you from this neighborhood?"

"No, sir, just passin' through."

"Well, as you may have noticed from the signs on the houses, this area was hit pretty hard by the outbreak. You'd best avoid it."

"Can we cut through if we don't stop?"

"Sorry, but I suggest you turn around. The health department is doing some testing and has closed off about ten blocks."

"No problem, officer. Thanks for the warning."

"OK," the officer calls back, "drive carefully."

I can hear the cruiser back up and grumble while it waits for us to turn around. Terry backs into a driveway and manages to shift into third instead of first gear. The engine chugs and moans to point out his mistake, as we pull forward and Terry finds his way to first gear.

I finally dare to speak. "Is he gone?"

Terry shifts into second and the engine calms. "Yeah, no problem"

"No problem?!" I poke my head up. "I almost soiled my pampers. Let's get out of here."

"OK, I just want to check one thing."

"Forget checking! Neither of us can afford to get caught."

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Terry turns right. Then, a few blocks later, I feel the car swing to the right again. I peek out. He is circling the neighborhood. A tense knot of cars bulges into the intersection two blocks ahead. The lights of the two police cars blocking the street flash blue and red.

I look at my map and see we are approaching the trunk of the "Christmas tree". I lie down on the back seat. We crawl forward, waiting for the police officer in the middle of the intersection to wave us through. I whisper nervously from the back seat.

"What's going on? What do you see?"

"The street is blocked off. The police are questioning somebody who wants to go down it. Must be half a dozen state vehicles. Looks like mostly department of public health."

Terry slows. "Whoah! Check out those guys in HazMat suits. Looks like their taking samples from the street and the yards."

Terry drives off and I'm feeling relieved that we're heading home, when I feel the car slow.

"What are you doing?"

"I gotta park."

"Park?!?"

"Yeah, I saw a guy walking his dog. I want to talk to him."

"You what?" I am no longer whispering.

Terry slows further. "Oh! There's a spot."

He's gone nuts. "No way, Terry. Half the police in Seattle are looking for me, we're in an antique car the color of a stop sign, and you're not even old enough to drive," I hiss from beneath the blanket. "Now we stumble into the rest of the police force and you think you've found the perfect spot to park and have a nice chat with a dog walker!?"

"Damn," said Terry, "A freakin' fire hydrant. I knew that spot was just too good to be ..."

A gruff voice barks at us from behind. "Hey! You in the red car. Let's move it along."

The car picks up speed. Glad that Terry will not be able to stop, I start to crawl into the seat when the car lurches to a halt, throwing me back to the floor. Then, Terry begins to back up.

"TERRY! WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU??" I rasp from under the blanket I had just pull over my head.

"I found a spot."

"A spot! A spot for what? Getting both of us arrested?"

Terry finishes parking and shuts off the car. "Look, I have an idea," he says, "I just want to get some information. Don't worry. We're far enough from the action that no one will notice you."

I stay under the blanket. "Whatever idea you're having is from the bad box. Don't do this Terry. GET US OUT OF HERE!"

But Terry is already out of the car. The metallic thunk of the door leaves me trapped under the blanket, half worried, half furious.

I can only wait. Seconds freeze, crawling past as if nothing were wrong, as if my father were not dying and my biggest worry were winning Robowars.

Endless minutes later, Terry jumps in and starts the car without a word.

Once I am sure we have driven far enough, I crawl out. "So, what did you find out? What is your brilliant idea?"

"Well, I'm no epidemiologist, but something about this wasn't making sense to me."

"You don't have to be an epidemiologist for this not to make sense."

"I don't know about you, but every house we saw with an orange sign was also marked with a blue cross on our map." Terry turns to look at me.

"Is that surprising?"

"Did you see a single sign at a house where we don't have a cross?"

"No."

"Doesn't that seem strange?"

I crawl up into the seat. "What, that our maps are so accurate?"

"Our maps are based on cases that occurred between Sunday evening and Wednesday evening."

I continue to peek out the window, scanning for police.

"Right."

"But today is Friday. Right?"

"Right."

Terry slaps his palm on the steering wheel. "But there are none."

"Just tell me what you're thinking." I rise a bit higher in my seat.

"If this thing is spreading from person to person, there should be new cases."

I sit upright. I'm not sure, but I think I'm beginning to understand where he's going. I finish Terry's thought. "And new cases would mean more orange stickers, recent stickers that wouldn't be on our map."

"Ah! Your mind is opening like a lotus blossom little woodchipper." Terry grins and nods his head.

Then I get it. "So if this thing doesn't spread from person to person and a whole neighborhood got sick at almost the same time, then there has to have been a sudden massive exposure."

Terry smiles. "Right again. But that could only happen naturally if the whole neighborhood showed up at some event and

either contaminated food was served or somebody with the disease showed up to make them sick."

"But," Terry raises the pointer finger of his right hand, "My friend the dog walker tells me there have been no big gatherings or parties in the neighborhood any time in the past month."

I am already at Terry's conclusion. "So, something caused a sudden, massive release of the pathogen in this neighborhood."

"Right," Terry sharpens his point. "Something ... or someone."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### Vector

vec·tor [**vek**-ter]

**noun**

...

3.a.an insect or other organism that transmits a pathogenic fungus, virus, bacterium, etc.

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They have created him.

But they don't know him. The people at work see him, but they don't see who he is. The people who live in the Olympic View Apartments don't see him at all. Even though he lives in the basement, even though he fixes their leaking toilets or their noisy fans while they were at work, Vector doesn't exist.

But Vector sees them. And when he does, he remembers what they did. He remembers what they did to him and what they did to his sister. Because what they did created him. But he will have last word.

He has created death.

Vector scans the news headlines on his monitor.

NEW CASES FLOOD HOSPITALS- Total number of infections tops 500. No new leads on cause.

TWENTY-FIVE DIE OF ENCEPHALITIS- Dozens more in critical condition as mystery infection spreads to brain. Prominent Medical School Professor, Cornelius Stone, among victims.

DEATHS CLOSE SCHOOLS- Health Commissioner Christine Stewart orders shutdown. Many businesses follow suit.

CDC CONSIDERS QUARANTINE FOR CITY- Plan would restrict all travel out of the city until epidemic clears.

MARTINEZ MOBILIZES NATIONAL GUARD- Governor Carlos Martinez order National Guard troops to assist in maintaining quarantine around affected homes.

Each headline brings a new surge of excitement. In lab tests, the virus was deadly. All the exposed mice had pneumonia within one week and were dead within two.



But humans are not lab mice. They usually take longer to get sick, if they get sick at all. Exposing humans to the virus, was the only true test and no one could be sure of the outcome.

Until now.

They have succeeded beyond anything Vector could have hoped for. This is a great beginning for the Alliance. But there is more to do.

The Alliance has made this possible. Alpha will be waiting for the virus so that he can initiate the next phase of the plan.

But Alpha will need to wait a bit longer. The harvest is almost complete and the virus will be ready, but Vector has his own special project to complete.

He pours his own tea and lets it steep for a moment before bringing the scalding liquid to his lips. The first stab of pain makes him smile.

Vector needs to be careful. He must not anger Alpha. He once saw him break a man's arm for serving tea that was too hot.

A single gram of viral particles has put the city in his hand.

But they have no idea.

Their problems are just beginning.