

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Scrubs

A short, round man in a lab coat looks down at me through black wire-rims. "What the ...," he begins to say before his face widens to a grin and then a laugh. "Jonathan? What are you-"

It's not clear who is more surprised. "Dr. Lu, you have to help me. I..." I pant, exhausted.

Dr. Lu turns serious. "What is wrong Jonathan? Are you-"

"It's Dad. I'll explain. But you need to hide me," I whisper, holding my finger to my lips.

"I heard about Charles. I am hoping-"

"Dr. Lu, please, you have to let me into your lab..."

Footsteps approach. "NOW. I'll explain later."

Dr. Lu opens his eyes wide, smiling and shaking his head as he reaches for his keys.

I say nothing as I squeeze into his laboratory.

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Moments later, peeking through the small window in the lab's walk-in incubator, I see two, armed policemen barge into the lab. Dr. Lu, looks up from his lab bench, where he is pretending to taking notes.

"May I help you, officers?"

A tall, flabby officer, who looks to me like an over ripe linebacker, does the talking between gasps for breath. "Sorry to bother you doc." His face is red. "We've had an intruder." He coughs, unable to offer more than one sentence at a time. "He could be down here." Judging by his appearance and his heavy breathing, this cop is not built for hot pursuit. "Have you seen anybody?"

"No, officer. Just me." Dr. Lu, Zen calm.

"I heard voices." The officer, still panting.

"It is just me."

"Now, doc, this sounded to me like a conversation."

Dr. Lu gestures towards an old boombox sitting on a lab bench. "It must have been the radio. I just turned it off. Now, how can I help you."

The policeman reaches over and flips on the radio. A piano sonata laced with static drifts across the room. "That doesn't sound much like a conversation to me."

Inside the incubator, the air is a constant 98.6 degrees with high humidity. The perfect temperature to grow bacteria. And to make me sweat like a pig.

"Please, officer. How can I help you?"

"We are pursuing someone who impersonated a doctor and infiltrated the Hot Zone in the ICU. When confronted by

security, he fled. We believe he is still in the building on one of the lower floors. Mind if we have a look around?"

"Not at all. Please." Danny Lu throws his arms wide, gesturing toward the corners of the room. "But my office has been locked."

As the men glance around the room, I duck down and press my ear to the door. The sweat is already soaking through my clothes.

Outside, I can hear them opening and closing cabinets. There are three offices that surround the central lab, so this could take a while, but eventually they will get to the incubator. Then I'm screwed.

So, I listen as they rattle around for a while. I hear them ask the occasional stupid question.

Then a voice just inches away.

"Hey, doc, you mind if we look in here?"

I hear Dr. Lu, muffled by the door. "I prefer not."

The cop's voice. Louder this time. "Doc, this guy could be some crazy terrorist. We can't let him get away."

"I understand, officer, but that incubator contains sensitive experiments. It should not be opened unless there is a serious emergency."

"We got an emergency right now."

"Officer." Dr. Lu's voice takes on a tone I've never heard from him before. Something about it makes it crystal clear who is the professor and who is the student. "There is no need. That unit is locked. Only I know the code."

"Let us have a quick look and we'll be out of your way."

"You can see everything through the window in the door."

"I'd like a quick look. Can you please open it?"

"If you wish, but you should know two things. First, there is no one in there. Second, I study the prion that causes Mad Cow disease. If you insist on going in, I can't guarantee your safety."

I hear the police officer back away from the unit. "OK, doc, but be careful. Keep your door locked at all times. This guy could be armed and might even be carrying biological weapons. Stay near the phone and call security if you see or hear anything."

"I will officer. Thank you very much for your concern."

"We are going to search the entire hospital. If we don't find him, I'll be back. With a warrant."

I hear the door lock and moments later the door to the incubator opens. I stand and step out of the musty fog, a dripping sweatball.

Dr. Lu smiles, shakes his head and lets out a gentle laugh.

"Armed? Bioterror weapons? Am I harboring a dangerous fugitive? What have you done?"

"I just wanted to see Dad. They weren't letting anyone in."
Dr. Lu went to college with my father. He has been a family friend since before I was born. He is like an uncle to me. But I can't tell him everything. Not yet.

"Why did you run from the police officers? You're in trouble and I'm harboring a fugitive."

"I know. I know. I just panicked. I didn't want to be caught."

"Well, now it seems we are both caught."

"I have a plan, but I need to get to the steam tunnel and there's no way to get past security now."

Dr. Lu stares at me. Then, he slowly begins to nod his head.
"Maybe not, Jonathan. Maybe, not."

In a pair of borrowed scrubs, the pajama like outfit of surgeons and lab workers, I look enough like Danny Lu that I might just make it. We are almost the same height. The bulge of my street clothes stuffed into my shirt gives me a passable

imitation of Dr. Lu's belly. The surgical cap hides my hair. A surgical mask conceals my teenage cheeks and a spare pair of his glasses tops off the look. I shuffle down the hall with a cart laden with laboratory glassware and tagged with a large, orange BIOHAZARD sign. We are hoping this will discourage security from getting too close. As a cop appears in the hallway, I could only hope it will work.

"Good afternoon, doctor."

I nod, silently, just as I have seen Dr. Lu do, and point at the biohazard sign.

The police officer spots the biohazard sign, waves awkwardly, and skirt along the far wall as I continue on my way.

I shuffle down the corridor. I can barely see through the distortion of the thick glasses. Almost there. Down a dead-end hallway. I open the door to the women's bathroom and shove the cart inside. Next to it, an unmarked door covered with worn grey paint opens onto a narrow set of stairs.

The steam tunnels have always felt like a relic from another era. I often imagined I would emerge, not just into another building, but into the 1800'sdddd. This place seems to belong in a world of steam, horses, and glowing gas lamps.

Instead, the tunnel puts me into an aging medical research building. I discard the cap and mask as I cut through the basement and emerge next to a clump of trees and bushes. From behind one of them I pull out my bike and backpack. Glancing around, I strip off the scrubs, yank my clothes out of the backpack, and put them on. I put the sample jar into a plastic bag and ease it into his backpack.

Athena. I slip out my phone and punch in a text message,
Where r u. I need u.

Wherever she is, I need to get as far from the hospital as possible. I head south in the general direction of Athena's house.

Five minutes later my pocket vibrates. I pull to the side of the bike trail. A butterfly is dancing across the white flowers of the blackberry bushes in the late afternoon light. I glance at my phone.

Fencing

I shoot back,

Wait 4 me

I adjust my course towards downtown and the Cascade Fencing Center.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Fencing

It's women's night at the Cascade Fencing Academy and Athena Margolis is supposed to lose. More precisely, she is supposed to lose to Charlotte Danton. Charlotte has trained with an Olympic gold medalist in Los Angeles since age seven. Losing is simply not something Charlotte does.

The slash of Charlotte's blade scores a point, stinging Athena's left arm. 12-13. Charlotte only needs two more points. Athena has to stay focused. The only thing distracting her at that moment is hoping Jack hasn't done anything stupid. She pushes the thought aside. Charlotte is at least half a foot taller, so her only chance of avoiding those long arms is speed.

Athena's saber flashes in the afternoon sun as she explodes from the start with a relentless attack, which catches Charlotte off guard and pushed her steadily backwards down the piste, the

long narrow rectangle they must stay inside. When she stumbles slightly, Athena lunges. A touch on Charlotte's arm triggers a beep from the sensor. 13-13.

Charlotte removes her helmet long enough to brush back a mane of thick blond hair and fix a vicious glare on Athena. Athena is not supposed to offer a serious challenge. She is just a townie and homegrown fencer. She has only been fencing for two years and doesn't even have a regular coach.

Athena knows what's coming. They come to the line and Charlotte explodes from the start. A ferocious slashing attack. As Charlotte presses, Athena gives ground. Back. Back. Wait for the lunge she tells herself, wait for the lunge.

Charlotte drives, her saber whistling with each step forward, as if she is trying to remove Athena's head. Athena reaches the back of piste. If she steps out, it will cost her a point.

Charlotte smells blood. She lunges. Right on cue. As Charlotte extends, Athena jumps to the right and swings upward as hard as she can. She parries with such force that Charlotte's saber flies from her hand. With Charlotte defenseless, a quick touch makes the score 14-13.

Charlotte storms to the line. Her fury sends her on a sudden, even sloppier attack. When it comes, Athena stands her ground. A quick parry- riposte. Defense, counterattack. The block surprises Charlotte and puts her off balance. It's Athena's turn

to lunge. Arms, legs, and torso extend. If she does not score, she will be completely exposed, giving an easy point for Charlotte.

Beep. A touch for Athena. Beep. Her point. Her win.

Athena relaxes for an instant, then feels an intense searing pain across her back as Charlotte's blade crashes down on her unprotected flank.

Athena crumples to the mat. Other fencers rush over to check on her. "You OK? You OK?" As she lies there, one of the coaches comes with an ice pack and holds it to her back.

Then Charlotte is standing above her, staring down through perfect blue eyes, her mask cradled under her arm. "Sorry, Athena. I didn't expect you to dive under my attack. Are you all right?"

Athena rises slowly to her feet, wincing. That was no accident. She lifts her mask and forces a smile at Charlotte. "I'll be fine. Sorry you couldn't get those last two touches. Maybe next time." Athena walked to the locker room, doing her best to hide the effect of the hit.

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Ten minutes later, Athena steps out onto Harrison Avenue where the sun has finally burned through afternoon clouds. She

looks up and down the street. No sign of Jack. What could have been so urgent? She hopes he's dropped his crazy notion of trying to get a sample from somewhere.

"Dart. Over here." A voice from the alley. Jack?

When she reaches the alley, Jack peeks out from behind a dumpster and waves her over.

"Hey, Jack. What's up?"

"I got the samples." Jack whispers.

"You what?" she shoots back.

"I got the samples, just like we discussed."

"You got the samples?!" Athena shakes her head, her eyes wide. "You mean you went into the hospital?"

"How else could I do it? We talked about this."

"Jack! That was all hypothetical. I didn't expect you to actually do it. I sure as heck didn't tell you to do it. You just broke half a dozen federal laws."

"Don't I know it? I've got half the cops in Seattle after me."

"You what?"

"Look, I can fill you in later. Right now, I just need your help."

"You've got the police chasing you, you want me to help you, but you can't explain why? I know you're crazy, but don't expect me to be too."

"We don't have much time. You don't want to be seen with me and I don't want to be seen, period." He crouches down and opens his backpack. He pulls a plastic bag half-way out to show her. Inside are two small, plastic containers.

Athena's jaw falls open and her eyes grew wide. She stares down at Jack. "What are you thinking? These samples belong in a level 4 lab."

"You've got to help me. You told me this was my dad's only hope."

Athena just stares at Jack, biting her lip and shaking her head.

"I can't lose him." Desperation cracks Jack's voice.

"I understand, but we don't even know this will help. For something that might tell us nothing, the risks are huge."

"But I found something. My dad took a sample from Sam when he was sick. He wanted to compare it with a sick adult."

"Maybe you're right. Maybe that's what he had in mind. But we still don't know why he wanted to make the comparison."

"And we'll never know if we don't look."

Athena pauses and looks into Jack's eyes. "Maybe I can ask my mom. I could give her the sample from Sam and she could get a sample from an outbreak patient. She could do it the right way."

"What if she doesn't agree? What if she just destroys the sample we've got? I can't lose this chance."

They both pause, catching their emotional breath as they weighed their choices. Jack speaks first. "Look Athena, you've got to do what you think is right. If this is too risky, I understand. For me, if there is anything I can do, and I mean anything, then I am going to do it. I have to do it."

A familiar voice breaks through the tension between them. "Hope I'm not interrupting anything."

They both turn toward the street. Charlotte stands at the end of the alley, her posture perfect, her voice has lost the jagged edge it had after the fencing match. "I heard about your father, Jack. I hope he recovers soon. Is there anything I can do?"

The late afternoon sun pours golden light into the alley. Somehow, Charlotte always manages to stand so the light hit her in just the right way. Her face flush with the energy of exercise, she seems to glow. Even in the midst of this crisis, Jack couldn't help, but notice. "Ah, no, no. I'm OK. Thanks, Charlotte."

"Are you sure? Do you need help with your brothers."

"Thanks, Charlotte. They are with someone. They'll be OK." Jack glances at his watch. "Actually, I've got to go."

He walks to the wall behind the dumpster and grabs his bike. Now out of Charlotte's line of sight, he sets the plastic bag with the two samples on the ground.

"Please," Jack mouths to Athena. He points at the bag and stares at her with stray dog eyes.

Athena's jaw drops and she shakes her head slightly, trying to hide the gesture from Charlotte.

As Jack emerges with his bike, Charlotte calls to him, "Let me know if I can help. I mean it." Charlotte turns to leave. Athena has a bad feeling. Had Charlotte heard them? Had she seen something?

Jack waves, "OK. Thanks." Jack turns back towards Athena. "I'll call," he whispers.

Athena glowers at him. "Don't do this to me," she pleads.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what else to do." Jack jumps on his bike and, with a few quick strokes of his pedals, rides off alone into the steep streets of Seattle.

Athena watches Jack grow smaller until he fades into the buzz of the city. She looked back at the bag. It's hard to believe that the monster that was wreaking havoc on Seattle was hiding inside.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Windows

I shouldn't have put the squeeze on Athena. That girl never even colors outside the lines. I lean on the pedals. But what choice did I have? I'm not usually a rule breaker either, but I'm not usually trying to save my father's life.

Athena might not even do anything. She might just throw the samples out. That's probably what she should do, but I have to at least try.

As for me, right now, I'm not even sure what rule to bust. The clues on Dad's note are totally played out for now. I do have an idea, but it comes with a big problem.

I cut up the east side of Lake Union, over the University Bridge. I'm just turning on to Pacific when it hits me. "Stupid," I mutter to myself as the U-district whizzes past. "So stupid."

The map. My father worked on it for days. Somehow, that map was critical to breaking the case and it was the whole reason I risked going back to the house in the first place. I didn't get it, but I now understand that I didn't need it. Everything I need to create the map is in the notebook. And I left it behind.

It would be crazy to go back. The quarantine nurse almost found me the first time. Now I have the police after me. I have double the risk.

But I have no choice. My only alternative is to do nothing, while Dad is dying.

That's not an option.

So, I catch the Burke-Gilman and ride north. Fifteen minutes later, I'm slipping through the basement window, leaving it ajar so I can escape in a hurry. Maybe this will be easier than I thought.

In the cool of the basement, I stand and listen.

Silence. I wait. Nothing.

Slowly, quietly, I climb the basement stairs. They have to be here. Where else could they be?

When silence greets me in the kitchen, I know something has happened. There is no way the twins could stay so quiet. Noise is a way of life for the boys.

The strange quiet follows me up the stairs to the second floor and on into the attic. The boys are gone. The nurse is gone.

Where? The yard is empty. She can't take them anywhere, not with a quarantine. Is something wrong?

Could they have the disease?

No. No way. Little kids don't get this thing. Maybe they've brought all the quarantine kids together. That must be it. A school or a community center or something. They are OK. They have to be.

Sam and Abe are alone. I should have been there with them.

But they need me to do what I'm doing.

I cruise the house, flicking deadbolts to the outside doors so I don't get surprised, then rush up to Dad's office. My program will certainly have found the password by now. I can simply put the map on a stick and go.

At Dad's desk, I hit the spacebar to wake the computer. Nothing. The computer is off.

Damn. The stupid nurse must have shut everything down before she left.

I'll have to start from scratch.

I boot up the computer and restart the password cracker. With an empty house, I can simply wait out the program. My only other option is to enter the raw data that I saw in Dad's notebook and that would take many hours.

While I'm waiting, I find the notebook and skim through the pages. Each case appears to include the age and sex of the patient with what I assume to be the home address along with a date and time. Page after page.

While it runs, I skim through the addresses. They all seem to come from the northeast part of the city, the area around the U, but I don't see an obvious pattern.

The loud buzz of the doorbell startles me.

I jump up and check the window facing the street. A police car has pulled up in front of the house. A second car is just arriving.

What? How did they know?

I'm not about to stick around and find out.

At least the house is locked. I just have to get out before they get to the back yard. I grab my backpack and head for the stairs. As I hit the second floor, I hear it.

Click.

I stop and listen. It's the deadbolt for the front door.

Before I can move, I hear the door open. They're inside.

I race back to the attic. Voices slither up the stairs behind me. "You check upstairs. I'll check the main floor."

I look out the back window and look out.

To my left, the branches of a huge maple tree reach toward me. Terry and I used to climb onto the limbs of the tree from the roof. Until my mother caught us and had the tree trimmed to make it unclimbable.

But it's grown back. I think I can make it. I have to make it.

Bad kid's art projects clutter the bookcase underneath the window. I shove them to one side, set my pack on the bookshelf and climb out the window. The roof is steep. I grab the window frame with one hand, reach back through the window for my pack, and pull it out.

On its way out the window, the pack brushes against a crude ceramic seahawk with sad, stubby wings. I can only watch as the unfortunate bird tumbles out the window, skids down the steep roof, bounces once off the gutter, and plummets to earth.

I wait for it to hit. The 30-foot fall takes long enough for me to imagine myself doing the same thing. By the time the gull explodes into dust I am no longer sure that climbing out the window was my best idea.

Leaning against the window frame, clutching my pack in my lap, I press my palms and feet against the rough, asphalt shingles. The roof feels steeper than I remember. I take a few deep breaths before leaning forward to put my pack on. I slide one arm into the strap, then twist and reach my other arm through the second strap. As I pull it on, I begin to slip.

I press harder with my hands and feet. Slipping. The tiny sharp stones in the roofing bite at my hands. I skid toward the edge.

As my feet reach the gutter, I roll onto my belly. The pebbled surface rips at my cheek. I throw my left arm above my

head. My hand catches the lip of the window frame. I stop, but now I am lying on the roof, face down, barely holding myself with a few fingers, my heart pounding even harder than before.

I twist my neck to see the tree. The closest solid branch is at least five feet away. If I go straight off the roof, I can only pray that, farther down, somewhere out of sight, there is a branch I can catch.

Through the window I hear a policeman's voice. "First floor is clear. You check the back two rooms, I'll get the front. Then we can clear the attic."

As I imagine them in the attic, I remember that I left the computer running. It won't take the police long to discover that there's a password cracking program running. About a nanosecond after that, they'll realize I've been in the house.

Get to the tree. Now.

Holding on to the windowsill with my left hand, I extend my right arm and leg as far as I can. I am about halfway there. I have no choice.

I let go.

To my surprise, I do not slide. Trying to keep as much of my body on the rough surface as possible, I inch sideways across the roof. I just might make it. Then, I begin to slip again. I scuttle sideways wildly, crablike as I accelerate down the roof. Again, the coarse shingles tear at my skin.

As my feet shoot over the edge, I spin onto my back so I am facing the tree. I slow for a second as my backpack bumps over the gutter and sends me out into space.

I grab a branch with both hands.

The branch bends under my weight. I swing toward the trunk of the tree. For a moment, the branch slows my fall.

Then, it snaps. I fall through foliage with nothing but leaves to grab at.

I smash against a lower branch. I try to wrap an arm around it, but I slip off. I feel a burst of pain in my ribs. The stub of a branch stabs my left hand as I try to grab hold. My feet land on a third branch, and then slip off.

As I fall past it, I grab the branch with both hands and hold on. For a moment, I hang there, my feet dangling about twenty feet off the ground.

I can hear the voices of the police as they circle toward the back of the house. Did they hear the branch snap?

I can't stay there, exposed. My hands, now raw and injured, sting as I struggle to climb up onto the branch

I hear other voices. Two police officers.

Pain sinks sharp teeth into my injured hand as I swing my legs down and search for a foothold. I have just crawled onto the branch when the first police officer comes around the corner of the house.

I flatten myself along the limb, fighting the urge to cry out in pain.

Daring a look down through the branches, I can see the two police officers positioning themselves by the side door and the basement door. Good, they think I'm still inside. They'll never guess I jumped off the roof.

I work my way along the branches toward the trunk of the tree, watching the two police officers for any sign that they had heard me. Once I reach the trunk, I move to the far side of the tree. With the trunk between me and the police, I climb silently down the tree until I am just ten feet off the ground.

"Hey, Jerry," one of the officers call, "Check out this window."

The basement window. I had left it open.

I glance at the police. I can see one of them examining the remains of the ceramic seahawk. The other sees it too and then they both look upwards.

Go! I hold on with both hands and drop, swinging my legs down. As my hands take my weight, my injured hand and ribs scream in pain. I hold for just an instant before crashing to the ground in the neighbor's yard.

I lean an ear against the fence. No voices. It will not be long before they discover I was in the house. As soon as they do, the place will be crawling with cops.

I listen again. Silence. No sign that they heard me. Get up. Move fast.

I cut across the neighbors' yard through some bushes and across the next yard. I can only hope the rest of the street is at work.

As I start into the alley, I freeze. An enormous black SUV is parked next to the neighbor's garage. Motor running. Two large men, silhouettes behind tinted glass, watch the rear gate of my yard.

I duck back under cover. I am not sure who they are. They don't look like police, but I know I do not want them to see me.

Time to jet. Crawling over fences and squeezing through hedges, I begin to make my way from one house to the next. By cutting through neighbors' yards, I make it to the street without coming into view of the SUV. I stop to catch my breath and make my next step. With no place to go back to, I am officially on the run.

My bike is now at least four blocks away. Those four blocks will soon be crawling with cops. But I have another idea.

First, I'll have to cross the alley in full view of the SUV. Time is ticking.

Across the street, a team of landscapers is finishing work. Their aging truck is overflowing with grass clippings. A trailer full of mowers and blowers is ready to roll. One of the men is at the house talking to the owner.

Staring at the huge pile of cut grass, I make a plan.

Two minutes later, the battered truck and trailer, overflowing with yard waste, drives past the alley. The truck turns the corner, heads north, and pulls up to a stop sign. The men in the SUV can't see me emerge, spluttering, from beneath the grass and leap onto the street.

I wave to the surprised garden crew, run two blocks, and turn right. At the end of the street I see the green refuge of Ravenna Park. I accelerate towards it.

At that moment, the air explodes with the sound of sirens. From every direction. My ears tell me they are converging on my house. But they seem to be everywhere. I can't slow down. As I cross the last street and disappear into the lush forest, I can only hope I haven't been seen.

