

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Flight

Showers. Abe takes showers every morning. Just like Dad.

For a moment, I can't move. All the exhilaration I felt from solving the puzzle vaporized with Sam's phone call.

And I thought the stakes couldn't get higher.

But if I want to do anything, I have to disappear. Now.

Terry is a step ahead of me. He shoves my backpack into my chest. "I already put in some food and water. You should be good for a couple of days."

Without thinking, I take my backpack and heft it up on one shoulder. Terry reaches for his computer and pulls out a USB stick. "While you were cracking the code in the shower, I got all of the latest data on hospital admissions by hacking into Athena's mother's computer. Looks very up to date. I included the revised mapping algorithm, but haven't entered the data yet.

You'll need to do that. I also put all of the SARS references I could find on there."

"Wow. Thanks."

Terry pulls out his cell phone and hands it to me. "Take this. For an emergency. They're probably monitoring calls, so be careful how you use it."

"You sure you want to give this up?"

"For emergencies."

I try to smile. "When I'm rich and famous, remind me to make you my personal assistant."

"Done. Totally done. Be careful."

I open the trap door and am just about to climb down when the first flashes of red and blue burst through the window. I shut the door and Terry scrambles to look outside.

"Whoa. Cop city."

Over Terry's shoulder I can see a dozen men in blue, FBI windbreakers fanning out across the yard.

I watch as the agents spread out, like two wings wrapping around the house. At their center, two men walk directly towards us, a thin, hawk-faced man and a tall black man with a shaved head.

Terry's dad is standing in the path of the two men, legs spread, looking like an angry biker. His voice is loud and firm. "What seems to be the trouble, officer?"

"Special Agent Vince Hardacre. I have reason to believe you are harboring a fugitive by the name of Jack Boston." It's the hawk-faced man. He hardly looks at Terry's dad.

Neil Rivers side steps to stand between Hardacre and the tree house. "Have you got a warrant?"

Hardacre looks at him in disbelief.

"Are you serious?"

"Stone cold."

As Hardacre moves to step around him, Neil Rivers shuffles in front of him.

Hardacre stares at Neil in disbelief. "I've got probable cause and, just in case, I've got a warrant on the way. So, you stand down, or I'll add an obstruction charge to the harboring a fugitive charge I've already got on you."

"It's not obstruction until you have a warrant. Until you do, you're trespassing."

"I've got probable cause. You have five seconds to move or I will have you arrested."

"Up here man."

I turn to see Terry motioning me towards an open skylight in the tree house roof. "Going up there isn't going to make me any less up-a-tree."

"Zip line."

The zip line? I was barely out of elementary school last time I tried that. "Seriously?"

"You got another way out?"

"No, but that thing is as likely to drop me on top of a cop as get me out of here."

"I built it. It will hold you."

"I haven't used that since I weighed eighty pounds." Outside, the two men have pushed past Neil Rivers. They are headed straight for the tree house.

"It's your only shot."

"They'll see me for sure."

"I've got a plan." Terry opens his palm to reveal a spider bot. "Just wait for the moment."

[NOTE TO READERS: THE SPIDERBOT IS A SPIDER-LIKE AUTONOMOUS ROBOT, WHICH SHOULD HAVE BEEN INTRODUCED IN CHAPTER 2, BUT THE VERSION POSTED INITIALLY WAS INCORRECTLY EDITED AND EXCLUDED IT. IF YOU WANT TO SEE IT, THE CORRECT VERSION OF THAT CHAPTER IS NOW POSTED.]

"You're going to stop them with that?"

"Just trust me."

"Like I have a choice."

I climb up on a chair and push the skylight open just enough for me to lift myself up and crawl out onto the roof. I peer back down at Terry. "Now, even I think I'm crazy."

"Hey, I almost forgot. Take this." Terry holds out what looks like a reprinted scientific article, folded into wad of paper. "You might find it interesting."

I take the paper and stuff it in my back pocket. "Unless it's a get out of jail free card, it probably won't help." I flatten myself on the roof.

"Just have a look at it. Stay safe, dog." Terry closes the skylight. Through it, I can see him turn on the spider droid and whisper to it. Then he drops it out the treehouse window. It lands softly on the moss.

As Terry lowers the skylight, I turn to look at the trolley for the zip line. It is weathered and rusted. Under any other circumstances, I wouldn't think about riding it. Now I can hear someone struggling up the tree. "Go find a ladder," said a man's voice, "I can't figure out how to get that door open."

I crawl toward the trolley and grab it. As it moves, the wheels let out a horrible squeal. "Crap," I mutter to myself.

Whether the trolley can hold me or not doesn't matter. It will make so much noise that I might as well have bells tied to me.

I lie down above on the roof, just above the skylight, out of sight of anyone looking up. I listen as the police arrive with a ladder, feeling my options disappear. I scan the nearby trees wondering if I can climb from one to another, but they are all too far away. I can only lie here and hope they won't look on the roof.

I listen as Hardacre and Cloverdale stomp clumsily into the tree house. I can hear them talking to Terry. For five minutes, I lie there, barely breathing. Below me, cabinet doors and drawers were opening and closing. Voices and footsteps tell me that the police and the FBI are closing in.

After about five minutes, the sound below me begins to die down. I hear the trap door open. They are giving up. I allow myself to breathe again. I might not have to test the zip line after all.

Then the acorn falls.

It hits the metal roof like a drum. I hold my breath again, hoping that they won't make anything of the sound. I hear nothing, then shuffling below me in the tree house. Then, I see a hand reaching up towards the skylight.

I watch as the lower edge of the skylight cracks open. It tilts up and a hand slips through and grips the frame. Then another.

I can hear the man grunting as he struggles to pull himself up through the opening. It's over.

I can only watch as the top of a man's head appears. I wait for his eyes. Maybe it will be a relief to stop running. Hopefully the police will let me see Sam and Abe.

I am rehearsing what I will say to the FBI when an ear-splitting wail rips through the air. Startled, I almost lose my grip on the roof. The head in the skylight drops from view.

It takes a moment to realize I am hearing the burglar alarm from Neil River's shop. Terry's dad has tens of thousands of dollars in tools and a guitar collection worth ten times that, so he takes his alarm very seriously. The spiderbot. Terry must have sent his spiderbot to the shop to trigger the motion sensor. This is the opening.

Without hesitating, I reach up and grab the trolley. Compared to the last time I used it, it feels like a toy. I pull down on it, testing it. The rusted mechanism squeals, but the alarm is louder.

I peer over the edge. There is a good chance the entire zip line will collapse under my weight. If it does, I will fall at

least twenty feet. As I crash to the ground, the twenty-pound trolley will slam into my skull.

But no way I turn back.

I look around and see the agents converging on the shop. Now or never. Holding tight, I step out into space.

I drop. The cable, loosened by years of disuse, is slack. Headed for the ground, I prepare myself for impact. An instant later, the cable snaps taught and the metal handle jerks under my full weight.

Then I stop. Corrosion has all but frozen the mechanism of the trolley. The wheels squeal in protest. I hang there, just six feet from the roof, barely moving.

For the moment, most of the agents are swarming around the shop. However, there is one almost directly underneath me. He is looking in the direction of the shop, but all he would have to do is look up to see me hanging there like a trussed turkey.

I swing my legs, hoping I can break the mechanism free without attracting attention. The trolley jerks forward, then stalls again. I swing my legs again. Again, it lurches forward and stops. Then again.

The alarm is still screaming, keeping the agents distracted from my spastic Tarzan imitation. How much longer will it last?

I notice a shower of rust each time I force the trolley forward and watch it drift down toward the agent. He is still

watching the shop. For now. Again I swing. And again. And then, suddenly, I feel myself moving. Haltingly, but definitely forward.

I swing my legs as wildly as I dare until, with one wild movement, the trolley began to roll steadily along the cable. Slowly at first, but the trolley begins to pick up speed. The faster it moves, the faster it sheds rust, the smoother it runs. With each turn of the wheel, I accelerate.

In a few moments, I am whizzing through the trees.

Whack. A branch that had grown into what had once been the clear path of the zip line slams into my right shoulder, knocking my right hand off the trolley.

I cling to the trolley with one hand, flailing about with my free hand, trying to grasp the handle as I whistle forward.

Whap! Another branch hits me in the leg.

A third branch approaches. I manage to swing my legs and avoid it.

Picking up speed, I sail past the back fence. The slope below me drops off steeply. I am almost thirty feet off the ground.

I am flying.

Terry and I were more concerned with maximum speed and excitement than safety when we built the zip line. I am hurtling toward the massive cedar tree at the end of the line. I have crossed the ravine, but the ground is still twenty feet away.

The rusted, old trolley screams.

The first rivet pops with a bang so loud that I think for a moment that someone has taken a shot at me.

The trolley twists. A second rivet pops.

In an instant, the wheels slip, jamming the axles against the cable. The trolley grinds to a sudden halt, but I am still moving.

I lose my grip.

I tumble and twist through the air, glance off a tree and land with a thud, my fall barely broken by a dense clump of ferns.

As I lie there, the wind knocked out of me, my heart pounding, the alarm stops.

On the silent forest floor, I can smell the cool, damp cycle of rot and renewal.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Hideaway

I roll into a ditch and listen. The quiet won't last. Other than a few more bumps and bruises, I'm none the worse from the fall.

I can hear the crackle of radios but can't make out the words. They don't seem to be coming this way yet. But they will.

I haven't been to the hideaway in almost two years. Three years before that, Terry and I spent much of one summer sneaking through the park with supplies and materials to a spot where two tremendous old trees had fallen next to each other in a storm. We built the shelter between those trees in a spot where they crossed an eight-foot-wide gully. The shelter hangs in the space between the massive trunks to avoid water that had collected on the ground.

We made the hideaway large enough for both of us to crawl into and lie down, about three by seven feet with a four-foot ceiling. We covered it with corrugated plastic roofing and covered that with soil and ferns, so that it would blend in with the surrounding forest floor. Finally, we planted a bush to hide the entrance.

We covered the door with a slice from a large tree trunk so that it appeared as if three trees had fallen rather than two. With a large bush in front of the door, which was covered with cedar bark, even I had a hard time finding it. Bushes and ferns had grown up around the fallen trees. And everything, including the trees seemed smaller, probably because I've grown 7 inches in the past two years.

Finally, I find the door, open it, and reach in to pull out a candle lantern and matches from a small shelf by the entrance. I light the candle, sending flickers into the corners of the shelter.

Spider webs. I freeze. I hate spiders. I mean everybody hates spiders. But I really hate spiders. Like jump-up-on-a-chair hate spiders. I'm not sure why. Mom told me a story about finding me screaming in the corner of my crib and staring at a huge wolf spider in the center of my mattress.

Whatever the reason, I hate spiders. In fact I have a problem with any small animal that wants to poke holes in me. Even the buzz of a mosquito makes my skin crawl.

But I've got no place else to hide right now. So I find a big stick, set down the candle and spend the next ten minutes clearing out the webs.

Once I am absolutely certain that the space is clear, I hoist myself up and crawl in. At least the hideaway is sturdy, dry and well built. We built it out of a mix of scavenged wood including scraps of exotic hardwoods from Neil's shop and put them together. Terry did all the finish work. Not up to his current standards but, even then, he was an artist.

The space seems more cramped than I remember, even after I allow for my new height. I find our box of survival supplies, or at least what we thought of as survival supplies when we were twelve, mostly stale energy bars and Band-Aids. When I push the box to one side, an angry hobo spider the size of my palm scurries out. I explode from the shelter as if shot from a cannon.

I land on the ground and try to pull myself together. My problems with small, biting animals gets even worse when you add poison to their fangs.

It takes a few minutes before I am calm enough to look back inside. It takes me a few more minutes, leaning into the shelter

with a shoe on each hand trying to squash the thing before I find the object of my terror and crush it.

I dispose of the corpse, check every corner with extreme care, and crawl in again. The space is not ideal, but it is dry, relatively clean and will suit my purpose. I close the door, roll out my sleeping bag and lie there in the candlelight. I am tired.

Sam. This is the first moment of calm I have had since his phone call and it comes rushing back. The confrontation with the FBI had forced me to shut out the terror in his voice and the horror of his words. The thought of Sam, all alone, with Dad and Abe in the hospital and without me, makes it hard to breath.

I stare up at the clear Lexan roofing and let my thoughts drift. Through it, I can see dark forest soil, the tangle of roots, squeezed against the corrugations of the roof, and the occasional worm or insect burrowing through the black and white maze.

I pull a homemade granola bar from the food that Terry gave me, eat it, and drink some water. As I eat, I listen to the noises of the night. The walls of the hideaway seem to amplify the sounds, the wind in the trees, the chirp of the crickets, and the squeal of the tree frogs. The FBI must have realized by now that I escaped. I can imagine that they are combing the

woods, looking for me. I try to strip away the sounds of night creatures in the forest and listen for footsteps.

As I turn to press my ear to the wall, a rustling sound startles me for a second before I realize it is the paper that Terry handed me as I was leaving the tree house. I raise myself up on one elbow, unfold it, and smooth out the wrinkles on the floor of the shelter.

Genetic drift and mutations in the SARS virus genome and their relationship to demographics, environment, and disease virulence

Martin T, Stone C, Zelner D, Markov A, Zhao Z, Boston C

It's the paper my dad wrote with Athena's mom. The title sounds like Greek to me. I skim through the article, trying to get a sense of its meaning. It seems to be describing the different strains of SARS associated with different outbreaks in Asia and North America. There are extensive discussions of genetic sequences that I can't understand at all.

I do notice that the paper is from the New England Journal of Medicine. I understand enough to know that this is the king of medical journals. A single paper in the New England Journal could launch a medical career. Whatever is in this article is

important. But I don't see anything that will help me solve my puzzle.

I roll onto my back, alone and tired. I have hardly slept since my father collapsed almost two days earlier. But my sense of isolation is even more powerful than my fatigue. Not only are my father and brother seriously ill, but I have also been cut off from my two closest friends. Even trying to contact them could put them, and me, at risk.

The hideaway, for the moment, feels more like a tomb than a refuge.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Blots

Athena walks down University Avenue toward Lake Union and the Virology lab feeling renewed. After a day of constant work, she has some food in her belly. Far more important, she has a plan.

Jack cut off their conversation before she could explain to him the critical challenge they face. If Jack's father is to have any hope of beating the second virus with a vaccine, someone would have to run it through the EVAP. But that meant someone would have to sequence RNA from the virus. That, in turn, meant someone would have to know about the virus and believe it is important.

Her mother's lab has a sequencer, but it would take months to sequence the virus on a single machine. They only have a day or two. There is only one laboratory in Seattle she knew of with

the analytical horsepower required to do the work in the time available is the NIEDL.

Athena has no prayer of slipping into the NIEDL. Unless her mother will help. For two days, she's has been doing everything she could to hide what she is doing from her mother. Now, she realizes, her mother is her best shot, maybe her only shot, at helping Jack and his father.

But is there any chance her mother will help? Can she come clean and tell her the whole story? If she shows her mother what she has found, explains that sequencing the encephalitis virus is the only hope for saving people who are dying, including Jack's father and brother, her mother might just help.

On the other hand, her mother might also banish her to another planet. But that is a chance she would have to take.

Athena can see her mother's car in the lot as she approaches the lab. She can't decide whether she should be pleased or terrified that her mother is finally back from the NIEDL. Either way it is time to come clean.

Once inside the lab, Athena heads straight for the biohazard bin. She needs to rescue the gels from Sam's Southern Blot. They contains the only remnants of the RNA from the second virus. As she rushes down the hall, she can see Alexi in his office. Otherwise, the lab is empty.

Stored at one end of the corridor, in a closet devoted to lab trash, are three bins, recyclable, non-recyclable, and deadly. One quick look back down the corridor. All clear. She grabs a pair of latex gloves from a receptacle on the wall and slips them on. Then she flips the lid of the biohazard bin. Carefully she pushes aside Petri dishes, gowns, gloves and other bits of disposable lab wear.

Where are the gels?

They have to be here. There is almost a week's worth of trash there. But no gels. She keeps digging. Then she hears footsteps. Her heart pounding, she pulls off her gloves, drops them inside, and closes the lid.

"Looking for something?"

Athena steps out of the trash closet to see her mother standing in the middle of the hall. Athena stares for a moment before she believes her eyes

In her mother's outstretched hands, are the gels.

It feels like a gut punch.

"Ah, yeah..." What could she possibly say? "They're from a school project. I was"

"You are in a hole, young lady. I suggest you stop digging." Mom glares. She is not buying it. She points back down the hallway. "In my office. NOW."

"Young lady"? Not good. The last time her mom called her "young lady", Athena was eleven and had just kicked a soccer ball into the china cabinet. Hard. She is screwed.

Athena's mother walks into her office, steps around her desk and drops the gels down on top of it. She points at the pair of armchairs across from her desk. "Sit."

Athena takes the chair closest to the door.

For a moment, Mom said nothing, like she just wants the tension to moment. Athena sat, staring through the walls of glass behind her mother at the boats on Portage Bay.

"I am going to cut to the chase to spare you the embarrassment of getting caught in a bunch of lies. I want you to answer three simple questions: One, where did you get a sample from an outbreak patient? Two, why are you crazy enough to monkey around with a deadly virus? And three, what in God's name were you thinking when you brought the virus into my lab?"

Athena's head is spinning. How did she know? How did she found the gels? How did she know they were from the outbreak virus? She felt her jaw moving, but no sound came out.

"Damn it, Athena. I count on you to be responsible, especially in the lab. I don't know what the hell you are doing. I suspect it involves Jack Boston. Am I right?"

Athena sat stone still.

"Jack gave it to you, didn't he?"

Again, Athena could not formulate an answer.

"And the sample, I assume, came from his father."

Athena knew not to get into a verbal sparring match with her mother. "Look, Athena, I'm sorry about his dad... But there is nothing you can do."

"But..." Athena began to protest, but Mom cut her off with a sharp wave of her hand.

"I am going to destroy these gels and you are going to bring me any samples you have so I can destroy them as well. Then, you are going to go back to your dad's house. You will stay there until the epidemic has cleared. I do not want to see you in this lab."

"But, mom, we found out there are two-"

"Just stop, Athena. This was a boneheads move of colossal proportions. I am shocked, appalled, and disappointed. I suggest you leave before I really get angry. Game over. Now go."

"But mom, look at the gels. It is the only way to save..."

"Believe me. I have looked at the gels. NOW GO!" Dr. Martin stares blazing white fury at her daughter.

Athena stops. Never mess with white fury.

A few minutes later, Athena leaves the lab with a horrible realization.

It's a long shot with limited chance for success, but her plan is Jack's only hope. Without it, his father and brother are going to die.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Alpha's Messengers

Vector walks out of the QFC into the darkness. He hates the QFC. The Americans tear what they want from the world, rip out its heart, and put it in bright plastic packages to fill the shelves of their supermarkets. Then they fill their carts with more than they need and the lady takes their plastic money and says, "Hello. How are you? Have a nice day!"

The hollow words of shallow Americans.

But Vector pretends to be an American. He smiles and says, "I'm doing well, how are you?" and pretends he cares. I would not need to pretend much longer. The virus is making the world right again.

Carrying Teriyaki takeout and a bag of groceries, Vector turns into the alley, trying to avoid the potholes.

Then something moves. A blur.

Then a flash of light and pain as the first, thunderous blow strikes Vector's head. He stumbles. The bags spill across the pavement. As he turns towards his attacker, a sweep kick comes

from his blind side, catching the back of his knee. His legs buckle and he goes down hard, landing on the remains of his groceries and smashing his head on the bottle of water.

Vector scans. Three men, dressed in black, circle like wolves. One of them, the largest, steps forward and slams a heavy boot into Vector's belly. He's holding a baseball bat, slapping it against an open palm. "He's not happy." To make the point, one of the other men catches him from behind with a hard kick to the kidney that sends a jolt of sharp pain through his body.

But kicks will be nothing compared to a blow from the bat.

"You have put everything at risk. You have not followed the plan." The leader kicks him again in the chest. "He wants the delivery now."

Out of the corner of his eye, Vector spies the bottle of mineral water, just inches from his fingers. He coils like a cold, steel spring. Two years in special forces prepared him well for this moment. His attackers have no idea.

The leader steps toward Vector and snaps his massive leg forward, aiming a tremendous blow at his head. Vector jerks to one side, dodging the kick. As the leg skims past his head, Vector whips his arm up. The perfectly timed blow catches the side of the leader's leg. It knocks the him off balance, sending him spinning to one side and falling to the ground.

Vector grabs the heavy glass bottle of water and jumps to his feet. The other two men converge. One is tall and wiry, the other looks stronger, but slower. Vector throws the water bottle at the slower man with such force and accuracy that it explodes against the side of his head. He howls in pain and falls to his knees as Vector turns to face the third attacker.

The tall wiry man is already in the air, his arms wide, his foot snapping forwards. Vector just manages to dodge it and let the kick glance off his shoulder. As the man lands, Vector prepares to strike.

He swings at the man's head with a sweeping roundhouse kick. The windup of the long spinning kick gives the wiry man enough time to step back and avoid it. He does not realize that Vector is not concerned about making contact.

The spin turns Vector and he lands with his back to his attacker. The trap is set. Rising to the bait, the tall man rushes forward to attack Vector from behind.

At that instant, Vector launches an explosive back kick. The most powerful of kicks, it hits the charging man like the hoof of an angry a mule. He crumples.

Vector looks up and sees that the lead attacker has gotten to his feet and is charging towards him with the baseball bat raised. Before Vector can move, the man swings the bat down towards Vector's head.

Vector dives to his right and lands on his knees as the bat crashes into the pavement inches from his head. He jumps to his feet as the large man swings the bat again. This time, Vector is ready. Starting with his right side towards the attacker, he suddenly spins back to his left, pivoting on his right foot and using his momentum to launch himself into air. Continuing to spin a full 360, he drops his left foot and snaps his right foot forward. The devastating force of the kick catches the larger man in the side of the head. The bat clatters to the ground and he collapses, unconscious.

Vector looks around. The man he hit with the bottle is lying on the ground, moaning and bleeding. The wiry man is on his hands and knees gasping for breath. Vector steps over to him. He puts his foot on the man's neck, rolling him over and forcing him to the ground.

The man gasps for air as Vector squeezes his windpipe. "When your friend wakes up," Vector gestures with his head toward the man with the bat, "he can tell Alpha he gets the virus tomorrow at 5:30, just like I said in last message." The man's face has turned from red to purple as Vector pushes down with his foot.

Vector steps back as the man gags and gasps for air. "I let you live. Come again and I kill you all." Vector kicks the man in the head, careful not to kill him. He does not need any dead bodies in the alley to draw attention to him. Not now. He

surveys the three figures, limp, but breathing on the pavement.
He knows they would not want to be found either.

He returns to his apartment seething with anger. Alpha and his thugs have just ruined his dinner.