

THE TWISTED HELIX

by Robert Morris

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A virus is death distilled. It inhabits a world of molecules where morality ceases to exist. No right or wrong. No justice. No revenge. Only survival, replication, and the laws of physics. Good and evil are human inventions.

I hear their footsteps.

Two. Maybe three sets. Shoes pounding the hard stone floors, one pair much closer. Thirty feet back. At most.

No room for error.

The tunnel. My only way out. I will have to find it through the crazy maze of basement corridors. But first I have to get down from the seventh floor.

Ahead of me, a crowd waits for the elevators. A small boy is the first to notice. He pulls on the sleeve of his mother's rumpled flannel shirt and points. The woman turns to look. Behind her, a short man in a Mariner's cap follows her gaze. Soon, the entire group is staring at me.

From a distance, Dad's white coat seems to fool them. They might even believe that the men running after me, the men from hospital security, are with me. After all, the place has

been crawling with cops and doctors in emergency mode since the outbreak started.

The eyes of the woman come into focus, vacant and red and I know. She has seen it firsthand. I know because I have seen it too, just this morning.

As I get closer, I can see doubt in the other faces. I know I don't look anything like a doctor. Up close they can see that I'm just Jack Boston, a fifteen-year-old kid in an oversized doctor's coat. I can see it in the face of the man in blue coveralls who narrows his eyes as he steps into my path like he wants to stop me.

If they knew why I was running, they would clear a path. If they knew, they would cheer me on.

"They're with me." I blurt out, gesturing toward my pursuers. The man in coveralls hesitates, but steps back.

The crowd moves aside and I dash through the opening.

The footsteps seem to be growing closer.

The stairs. Where are the stairs?

"Stop! Stop right there!"

The words hit like 1000 volts. Juiced with fear, I race around the corner. The green EXIT sign pops into view. I jet towards it, grab the door handle and jerk it open. Blasting into the stairwell, I hear an angry bark. "Code 4-15. Northwest

stairs. White male -" The slam of the heavy steel door cuts the radio call in half.

I grab the steel pipe railing, fly down half a flight, and vault around the bend. My brain is screaming at me to stop.

But I don't. I can't.

I land on the sixth floor. And then I am not alone. A door opens and heavy feet thunder onto the stairs, echoing off the barren concrete of the industrial stairwell.

I spin across the landing. The long tails of my coat flap like a sail as I take the stairs two at a time. Down, turn, down again.

At the fifth floor, I dare to look up. Thick hands on the rail, almost two floors above me. The stairs are slowing them. I'm gaining ground.

Down. Spin. Down. Just five more flights. With this lead, I can lose them in the basement.

I am ahead of myself, planning my route through the basement maze. BAM. Another door slams. More security.

Only this time, they're below me.

I look. Blue sleeves rising to meet me. The police.

I leap down the final five stairs between the fourth and third floors, almost falling and then slamming into the wall at the landing.

"Halt right there!" A voice, loud and gruff.

On the landing between the first and second floors, a tight jawed policeman stares with fierce eyes as he aims his finger at my head.

As the son of a doctor at the hospital, I could probably talk my way out from hospital security. But this isn't just some old guy in a windbreaker with a badge and a clipboard. This is real cops. With guns.

What the hell am I doing?

I've never had an overdue library book and now I'm going to run from the cops. For a millisecond, I consider giving myself up.

The millisecond passes and I power through the door to the third floor.

Monday, June 9

CHAPTER One

Robowars

Three days earlier, the stress in my life involved stuff like making lunch for my twin brothers. That starts with dumping out the remains of yesterday's lunches so I can put in today's lunch wondering why I bother with the trouble of giving them anything resembling a vegetable. As far as I can tell, five-year-olds seem to be able to live entirely on Cheetos. And then, there's the puzzle of why Abe doesn't just dry up and blow away given that his water bottle always comes back full. At least Sam seems to be drinking. In any case, I'm refilling both bottles when the phone crashes the morning.

I ignore it, assuming Dad will answer. All phone calls are for adults. Then I hear the shower. I glance at the clock. 7:10. Dad is a creature of habit.

As the phone rings again, I dive on it, but I know it's too late. The twins are not sleeping through a second ring. So much for a peaceful morning.

"Hello."

"Hi Jack, it's Dr. Martin. Is your dad around?"

"Ah... He's busy. Can I have him call you?"

Trace Martin? Athena's mom? At seven in the morning?

"Is there any way you can get him?"

"Hold on." This better be important. "I'll see if I can get him."

As I open the door to the back stairs Sam's voice bounces down the stairwell at full volume. "That's my shirt! You don't have an Ironman T-shirt!"

I climb to the second floor. From the top step, I can see Abe backing out of the bedroom he shares with Sam, carrying an armful of clothes and ducking as a shoe flies over his head. Unscathed, Abe turns and heads for the shower. He decided, when he was four, that he wanted to take a shower every morning, just like Dad, and has stuck with the plan.

I call to him. "Hey, Abe."

Abe turns and smiles a gap-toothed smile, dropping a sock as he pads down the hall in his Spiderman bathrobe.

I hold out the phone. "Can you give this to dad? Super important. It's a top-secret spy mission."

Abe's eyes widen. "Really?"

"Absolutely. Can I count on you?"

Abe nods with an intent look in his eyes, his brown curls bouncing. "I'm on it." He spins and rushes off, clutching the phone.

I climb back downstairs, pack the boys' lunches and ten minutes later, am headed for the light rail.

###

I don't notice her at first. I hear the coughing, but I think it's just some homeless woman, a heavy smoker dealing with broken lungs. So, I ignore it. I'm working on my laptop, debugging our code for Robowars. I do not want to be interrupted. But she keeps coughing.

So, I look. I can't see her face, but she's in some high-end suit. Definitely not homeless. She's leaning on the seat in front of her, head down, coughing.

At first people ignore her the way they do when they are busy in the morning, in their routine, headed to work or headed to school, like me. Then people start to move away from her, like they are afraid of her. Soon, she is surrounded by a circle of empty seats. I feel badly, like I should help, but what can I do.

"Are you OK? Do you need help?" It's the homeless lady from the station, reaching out to her.

The coughing woman looks up. Her face is pale, scared. She tries to talk, but can only cough. She tries to stand, tries to reach out.

Then she falls.

The coughing won't stop. And she's struggling for air.

There is a collective gasp as the crowd recoils in horror. "Call 911!"

When we arrive at the UW stop, the EMT's are waiting. I watch for a moment as they gather around her. They put a tube down her throat and start to give her oxygen. Then the police come and push us back.

I want to leave anyways. Ambulances make me think of Mom.

I push my way through the gathering crowd. I'm late for school.

And I hate ambulances.

###

I'm late. My pack slams against my back as I race past a huge wooden sign, which reads, "Future Home of the Washington Academy for Advanced Learning". Behind it, the steel skeleton of the new building rises from the dust.

Why don't they just fix the old building? It's this crazy Mansion with carved columns, chimneys poking through the roof like brick fingers, and an actual turret with curved-glass windows that always makes me think of a castle. But they're going to tear it down after the new building is done. So they don't fix anything. The paint is peeling, the fancy woodwork is cracked and broken, and moss fills the gaps between missing slate roof tiles.

The drawings on the sign show clusters of smiling, stylish students walking past soaring walls of glass framed by steel, stone, and huge wooden beams. These virtual students are pretty much the opposite of the nerds and misfits at the academy.

###

The Academy is kind of like a college for kids who have no business going to a regular high school. Instead, they start taking University courses in ninth grade and graduate with a college degree. Years back, a bunch of rich guys put up enough money so that no one had to pay tuition. Other than room and board, it's free and super hard to get into. I mean, I knew I was smart, but I never imagined I was smart enough to go to the Academy. You need an invitation just to apply and supposedly they only invite the brightest kids in the country. I thought my invitation was a mistake.

But I went, I took the entrance exam, and, somehow, I got in. I still don't know how. Maybe they really did make a mistake. What I do know is it's OK to be smart here.

###

Back in middle school, the stupidest thing you could be was smart.

Nothing brought that home quite like the view from the inside of a gym locker or, to be precise, the image, through the ventilation slits, of Owen Parker's buzz cut as he and his meathead friends laughed their way out of the locker room. It turned out I had ruined the curve on the physics exam. A dumb sixth grader wasn't even supposed to be taking physics, much less ruining the curve. It was the gym teacher who finally let me out, I told him I had accidentally locked myself in. No sixth grader was dumb enough rat on Owen.

So, for the privilege of spending an hour in an airless metal box full of stinky socks, I wound up in detention, and Owen was untouched. Middle School justice.

Of course, getting away with it wasn't enough for Owen. He and his goon buddies from the football team found me behind the school, threw me down behind the dumpster, and emptied my backpack onto my head. I can still see him, smiling his stupid smile, while pulling apart my Rubik's Cube, tossing bits of useless, multi-colored plastic at me and announcing that he

would do the same thing to "my stupid genius brain" if I ever even thought about telling on him.

I couldn't quite bring myself to intentionally screw up the physics exam, so I secretly begged the teacher to take me off the curve.

###

But that was then. My Owen Parker days are over. Now I'm at Nerd High. At least that's what most of Seattle calls it. We just call it the Academy.

I pull the cast iron door handle and the huge, carved oak doors swings open on massive hinges. The air inside is thick with the scent of old books and fresh varnish. It must have taken serious scratch to put up all that mahogany. They even have all these stained glass windows, but the pictures are not like some church. Their Gods were salmon, sailors, and giant trees.

Old money, but not old school. It's like the nineteenth century has been invaded by the future. We have the latest toys for analytical chemistry, molecular biology, genetic engineering, robotics, and, of course, computer science. Even with the new building, there's no need to wait for fancy equipment. That can all be moved to the new building.

I rush up the grand staircase and down an empty hall. Ahead of me, I spot the wiry figure of Terry Rivers, a battered shoebox tucked under his arm. The red afro, half-beard, and tie-dyed tee shirt make him look like a refugee from the 60's.

I rush to catch up and Terry throws an arm around me. "Hey, Flash. You ready?"

Running is the only sport I'm any good at (if you can call being the fourth fastest kid on the relay team for the worst track program in the city "any good"). In any case, it gives Terry another excuse for a nickname.

I gesture towards the shoebox. "Full throttle." I gesture towards the shoe box. "Any problems with my code for the new graphics chip?"

"Bug-free, bro."

We push through the doors of what was once the ballroom for the old mansion. Light floods in through twenty-foot windows and glitters off crystal chandeliers. Once upon a time, this was a palace for 19th century Seattle bling. Today, it's ground zero for Robowars.

"Glad you two could make it." It's Athena Margolis, a million gigawatt smile under a frenzied swirl of espresso hair, light brown eyes and a splatter of freckles. Just five feet tall and less than a hundred pounds in a November rain, she has the thundering energy of a blitzing linebacker.

During the first week of school, we were required to form teams for a year-end robotics competition, three or four kids per team. The moment we heard about it, both Terry and I knew we would team up. We had always been a team.

Neither of us really knew Athena, but I had seen her at a couple of math competitions (which she won) and I knew her mother had done some work with my dad. Anyway, we figured out fast that she was super smart, so we decided to make an all-Seattle team.

After nine months of hard work and late nights, Athena and I watch as Terry sets down the shoebox, pulls out Merlin, and sets it on the starting line.

Merlin doesn't look like much. It's essentially the chassis of an old remote-controlled car with a salvaged cell phone screen mounted on each side. But there is much more to Merlin than meets the eye.

At the sound of approaching footsteps, we all turn to watch Kurt Eigen swagger into the room. Skinny jeans, a black t-shirt, boots, a leather jacket, and a blonde bed head Kurt Eigen looks like he just rolled off the production line of some secret factory in New York where coolness is manufactured. The guy must spend at least an hour each day working at looking like he just rolled out of bed.

Close behind, riding in on Kurt's New York coattails, are Marty Schwartzman and Sheri Melnikov.

Everyone knows that Marty and Sheri are the real brains behind Kurt's robot. Marty, with a mop of electric hair, thick wire rim glasses, a scrawny body and high-water pants, looks like nothing less than the king of uncool. The line on Marty is that, if you gave him a pile of Legos and a glue gun, he could build a working Ferrari from scratch.

But the key to Kurt's bot is Sheri. I figure she's the smartest kid at the Academy and I'm sure she did most of their programming. Unlike Marty, Sheri does not follow the nerd dress code. She has a half a dozen holes in her ears and another in her nose for good measure. A forest of fern tattoos curls up her right arm and a double helix of DNA spirals up her left. Her closely cropped hair seems to take on a different color every week. Today, it's cobalt blue.

I'm not saying that Kurt isn't smart. He's brilliant, but brilliant in a creepy, Lex Luthor- Voldemort kind of way. The others made his robot work, but Kurt is the master strategist. It will be Kurt's ideas that make the thing dangerous.

Then I notice the case.

Kurt is carrying a black, hard shell case that, I assume, is custom-fitted to his robot, a far cry from the shoebox under Terry's arm. And it's huge.

Kurt sets down the case, opens it, and lifts out what looks like a cross between the Batmobile and an M-1 Abrams Tank. Clearly, he has not gone for swift and nimble.

Kurt looks over at us, his perfect, white smile broadening. "Merlin, meet the Terminator."

"Original name, Kuht," says Terry in his best Austrian accent, "Been vatching Ahnold's greatest hits?"

"It's going to Terminate you," squeaks Marty in a voice that is still changing pitch. Kurt doesn't even acknowledge Terry's comment.

Athena turns to Terry and me. "It's a monster," she whispers.

Terry smiles and puts a hand on Athena's shoulder. "Chill my sister. Little Merlin will run circles around that doorstep. Besides, the Terminator will chew up batteries like salted peanuts."

"Are we a bit nervous, Margolis?" Kurt carries their robot to the starting gate. "Don't worry, we promise not to crush you." He drops the Terminator at the starting line with an ominous thud. After pausing to admire his creation, he looks up

and smiles at Athena. "Unless you get in our way." Athena's eyes blaze in anger.

Kurt's black monster has a long hammer-like arm folded along its length. Hinged at the base, its head is an aluminum plate covered with spikes. Everyone assumed there was an unwritten rule against intentionally destroying the other teams' robots.

Kurt does not play by unwritten rules. One hit from the arm will crush Merlin like a cheese puff.

"So," said Kurt "that's really your bot?"

Next to Kurt's behemoth, Merlin seems to shrink before my eyes. But, I can't let Kurt see I'm worried. He and Marty are staring at Merlin with clear derision.

"Yeah, is that a joke?" snorts Marty. Sheri just stares at the robot, like she's dissecting it with her eyes.

"Kurt my friend," says Terry, "You'll never know what hit you." He reaches into his backpack and pulls out a plastic box. Inside, resting on a foam cushion, is a tiny machine just a few inches long that looks like a cross between a hummingbird and a minute video camera. Kurt and Marty's looks turned from disdain to wide-eyed disbelief in an instant.

"What's the deal, Boston?" Kurt recovers his cool. "One tiny robot not enough?"

I suppose Kurt has some reason to think our strategy is nuts. The rules for Robowars limit everyone to just two small batteries for power. The robots have to search the maze, find a target and bring it back to the start. After struggling to come up with a robot that could search the maze quickly and still have the strength and battery power to carry the target back to the start, we hit on the idea of using two robots instead of one. One robot had to be strong enough to carry the small steel box out of the maze. That would be Merlin. The second could be smaller, since it would only need to find the target and direct Merlin on the best course to find it.

I am sure no one else opted to build two robots and absolutely stone-cold certain no else is using flapping wings. They are notoriously hard to make. But Athena spent months researching the flight mechanics of insects, studying other attempts to mimic insect flight and working out a brilliant design. Terry spent countless hours in his father's shop refining the delicate mechanism to duplicate the twisting and flapping of a fly's wings.

Terry reaches into the box, delicately removes the miniscule machine from its box with two fingers and sets it down next to Merlin.

"Small is beautiful," responds Terry, "And this beauty is Daedalus."

Greek mythology has Daedalus building a working pair of wings out of wax and feathers. His bonehead-son, Icarus, takes the wings, blows off his father's warning about not flying too close to the sun, and takes off. The wax melts and idiot-boy plummets to earth. For some reason, Icarus gets all the attention, I suppose because this is really about always obeying your parents. To us, Icarus was a loser with no self-control. Daedalus, on the other hand, who built a pair of working wings out of wood, wax, and feathers, had some serious chops.

At that moment, Dr. Larson, a small man in thick wire-rimmed glasses walks into the room wearing the ratty, stained lab coat he seems never to remove. He's almost bald and his body curves in the shape of an underfed question mark, like it was bent by the sheer weight of his brain. "Ah, Mr. Eigen," he proclaims, squinting at Kurt through his glasses "just under the wire."

"Well, Dr. Larson," said Kurt, "as you know, perfection takes time."

"Let's see what you've ..." he looks across at Daedalus, "Oh my." He stares in silence. "Very daring. Flapping wings. Very daring, indeed. The quest for birdlike flight is the unraveling of genius." He walks over to examine it. He circles, muttering to himself and nodding slowly. "Interesting. Very interesting. A bold strategy, Mr. Boston."

"It's a team strategy, Dr. Larson. And Athena designed it."

"Well, good luck to your team. This should be an interesting match-up. David vs. Goliath."

###

The three robots sit like racehorses at the entrance to the maze. Dr. Larson has set up the walls of the maze using office partitions laid out across the ballroom floor. We all climb up to the mezzanine level, which overlooks the entire course.

Dr. Larson flips a switch and the maze goes dark. After five seconds, Dr. Larson closes the switch with a dull thunk and the floodlights buzz back to life. The return of light is a signal to the robots.

Daedalus rises and hovers above the middle of the room. Merlin zips over to the far wall of the first room, and parks.

Then Merlin disappears.

Sort of. A camera on the side facing the partition has taken a photograph of its view of that partition and sent it to the side facing away from the wall. When that image appears on the screen on the opposite side of the robot, Merlin simply looks like the wall.

As it fades into the wall, Dr Larson nods. "Elegant design Mr. Boston," he said, "Nice trick."

We all watch in silence as the Terminator lumbers forward. Its two forward-facing camera lenses are mounted on a revolving turret. In nature, two eyes pointed forward are the mark of a predator.

From above we can all see the obstacles intended to slow the robots in their search. We can all see the target in the far corner, but our robots need to find it on their own.

It's too early to feel confident. Flying sucks up tremendous amounts of energy, but being above the target gives Daedalus a huge advantage. The advantage of our strategy becomes obvious when, less than thirty seconds after the competition starts, Daedalus is perched on the wall just above the target.

In the entrance room, Merlin is parked next to the wall, waiting for a signal. The Terminator sits near the finish line. Its spiked arm poised and its glass eyes scanning the room. Obviously, its program assumes the hunt will unfold at a far slower pace.

Merlin whirs into action. Hugging the wall, it eases forward, its screen reflecting the patterns behind it. I brace myself as it passes the Terminator.

But the big robot isn't moving and Merlin, creeping along the wall, is almost even with it. With Daedalus buzzing above and Merlin disguised below, the Terminator has failed to detect either robot. The apparent absence of a competitor seems to have

confused the huge robot. Merlin slides past it and I breathe a sigh of relief.

I steal a glance at Kurt and think I see a moth of worry flutter across his face. I look back at the Terminator, stalled at the entrance to the hallway. It has missed a prime opportunity to crush the opposition and seems so confused it has failed to start searching for the target.

Merlin, meanwhile, following guidance from Daedalus, drives straight to the target. Now Terry and Athena are smiling. Merlin extends an arm from underneath its chassis, grabs the target, and retracts.

When Merlin backs up, turns, and heads for the finish line, the prize is in its teeth. The Terminator is still frozen in place, its arm raised.

I glance at Kurt. As I see his smile, it hits me. Kurt's robot isn't moving because he never intended it to search the rooms. It wouldn't need to.

Kurt knows that every team in the school can design a robot to retrieve the target. That meant someone like Kurt, who understands that the easiest way to do a task is to get other people to do it for you, could just wait for their hard working little robots to arrive after completing the task. At that point, the Terminator could simply pummel them and take their lunch money.

With the Terminator all but blocking the finish line, our only hope is Merlin's camouflage. As Merlin approaches, the Terminator doesn't move. I hold my breath.

At first, nothing is happening.

Then, movement. Almost imperceptible. A slight turn of the turret. The two cameras, like the eyes of a silent tiger, are stalking their prey.

For a moment the eyes are off target, panning back and forth, perhaps fooled by the camouflage. Suddenly, the Terminator flicks on a single glaring LED. In the brilliant light, the image on Merlin's screens changes. Instead of a picture of the wall behind it, Merlin shows a crystal clear image of its own shadow. The camouflage is rendered useless. The turret turns. The predator eyes lock on.

The hammer lashes out.

It hits with a sudden crunch. The spiked plate just catches the back end of Merlin, taking out one of the screens and lodging in the rear right wheel. The camouflage was enough to protect it from a direct hit.

But the attack is not over. The Terminator raises its hammer to strike again.

The spikes of the hammer are wedged so tightly into Merlin's frame that the entire robot begins to rise with the

hammer. The motor on the Terminator strains as it tries to lift the additional weight.

Merlin struggles to pull away, its wheels spinning against the floor. The whine of its tiny motors sounds like the screams of a wounded animal. The hammer arm rises up and down, shaking both robots wildly. It seems for the moment this could end in a draw with both bots stuck together.

Then, Merlin drops, and the Terminator's hammer rises up. Merlin drags itself forward on its remaining wheels as the Terminator takes aim. With one wheel broken Merlin can only crawl in slow, painful circles.

The Terminator turns, lining itself up for a deathblow to its wounded opponent. "Sorry, Boston, but this is not going to be pretty," says Kurt.

The hammer lashes out again and Merlin lies motionless. A mechanical claw shoots out from under the Terminator. With one bite, the Terminator claims the target and, moments later, carries it across the finish line with the remains of Merlin still attached.

CHAPTER Two

The Draw

I am working a monster slice of Black Hole pizza ("no topping can resist its pull") as we sort through what just happened. Athena, Terry and I are stuffed into our usual booth at Radical Pi, the best pizza place on the planet. The tiny shoebox of a restaurant is thick with hungry students and the aroma of roasting garlic. Over the bar, a large sign reads, "Our Pi's Are Squared," a nod to their rectangular pizzas.

Athena is sitting, her left elbow on the table and her head, cocked to one side, propped up by her left fist. She stares at the remains of Merlin. "I suppose this sucks." She is sporting a rare sad face. Then she almost laughs as she cracks into a ginormous grin. "But it was so worth it just to see Kurt's face turn red."

The red face came after Professor Larson called the contest a draw. That came after we pointed out the line in the rules:

The first team whose robot crosses the finish line with the target shall be declared the winner.

"I thought Kurt was going to haul off and slug the old guy."

"So, can you fix this in time?" Athena pushes the remains of the robot towards Terry, who is fiddling with a tiny eight-legged, spider-like robot he has just fished out of his backpack.

"Of course," says Terry, without even bothering to look up. He is focusing on the spiderbot, that is now sitting on his open hand. He leans towards it and whispers, "Spider on." The spiderbot immediately comes to life, creeping off his hand and onto the table. "I even have plans for a little improvement to Daedelus."

"We'll need it, I'm sure Kurt is already plotting his revenge." Athena is ignoring the robot.

"Probably holed up in his fancy apartment with his team, planning for our total annihilation."

"Or asking his dad to hire him a consulting engineer."

Suddenly, the little spiderbot scurries across the table, up Athena's arm, and onto her neck. She flicks it off with a shriek. "Damn it, Terry!"

The spiderbot sails across the table, lands on its back, and instantly rights itself. It starts back towards Athena, who raises her fist to crush it. "Shut it off Terry."

"Spider off," commands Terry, and the robot freezes. Terry

picks it up with two fingers. "Sorry about that. It was locked on to your voice. Probably picking up on anxiety."

"If it crawls on me again, I'll give it some anxiety and give you some tiny pieces to pick up."

"You do not appreciate great art."

At that moment the door flies open and Sheri Melnikov steps inside the Pi. As soon as she sees us, she comes straight to our table.

"Hey Sheri," says Athena as she approaches.

"Hi, guys." Sheri stands for an awkward moment next to our table before speaking. She looks at me and speaks in this soft voice that doesn't seem to fit with the toughness, tattoos, and piercings. "Look, ah, I just want to congratulate you guys. Your flying bot was brilliant." Her voice picks up speed and fills with excitement as she talks. "I assume you had to use the rotating wing design to eliminate von Karman vortex shedding at the leading edge, but how did you deal with aerodynamic instability, especially during takeoff? I know the research group at Caltech struggled with that for years. I mean with the turbulence at those high Reynold's numbers ..."

"Slow down, Einstein." I have no clue what she's talking about, but it is way above my pay grade. "You need to talk to

these guys," I say, jerking a thumb toward Terry and Athena. "I just made it think."

"Well nice work on that too. When this is all over, I'd love to see your code for the 3-D search algorithm."

I have never really paid that much attention to Sheri, never really looked at her past the crazy tattoos and the smarts that make her stand out, even at the academy. Right now, the girl is on fire.

The door slams and Sheri stops short. We all turn to see Kurt striding across the restaurant with Marty Schwartzman in tow. Sheri tenses as the excitement drains from her face.

Kurt's anger is gone and he is all charm and smiles again. "Hey, Melnikov." The product of east coast private schools, Kurt follows their tradition of calling everyone by their last name. "I hope you're not leaking any trade secrets."

Sheri looks like a kid in the principal's office. "I just wanted to congratulate them."

"Ah, of course. Very sporting of you." Kurt looks at me. "Congratulations to all." Kurt makes this backhanded sweep of his arm, closes his eyes and dips his head in an exaggerated half bow, holding his arm extended to the side.

Kurt stands again and turns to Sheri. "You had me worried, girl. I thought for a moment you might be working out some new summer plans."

"No. I had a few questions about their design." The spark has disappeared from Sheri's voice.

Kurt gives her a tolerant look then speaks to her like a parent trying hard to be patient. "Which they, of course, didn't answer."

Sheri glances at Kurt for an instant, and then looks down at the table. "Well, no."

"Don't forget, it's a competition." Kurt looks at Terry, Athena, and me, raises his eyes toward the ceiling, and shakes his head as if to say, "Can you believe this innocent?"

Kurt turns back to Sheri and gestured towards the door. "Come on. Let's go. Marty and I decide we'd rather have teriyaki."

"Actually, I want to get some piz..." Marty begins to speak.

"Don't change your mind on me again, Marty." Kurt's tone is exasperated, as if he had been watching not one, but two impulsive children all afternoon.

"Hey Kurt! Let's go." Charlotte LeBlanc is standing in the doorway with her arms folded, propping the door open with her shoulder.

Even I have to admit to the utterly perfect visuals of this girl. I look at her like a moth who should know better than to fly towards a flame.

Charlotte looks only at Kurt, as if the rest of us don't exist and gestures toward the street with a flick of her head. She and Kurt are not "together", but they are together more often than not, like two giant stars unable to resist each other's gravity.

Sheri shoots a questioning look at Marty who responds with a helpless shrug. She faces Kurt. "Right. OK." Then, she turns back to me with an apologetic look. "Maybe another time. See you guys."

"Later, Sheri." Athena is the only one who responds. Terry and I watch in silence.

"Yeah. See you Sheri," I finally blurt out as they all follow Charlotte out the door.

"What was that all about?" asks Terry with a stunned look.

"Didn't you hear?" Even though Terry tends to stay out of the back-channel gossip around the school, I'm surprised he hasn't gotten word on this one.

"I guess I missed the memo," replies Terry, "What gives?"

Athena answers, "Kurt offered Sheri an internship at his father's hedge fund in exchange for helping his team. People kill for those internships. There is no way to get one without an inside track. Someone like Sheri doesn't get one in a million years." With Ukrainian parents who run a convenience store in the Bronx and hardly speak English, Sheri is about as unconnected as you can get. "She wouldn't even get in the door of a place like that."

I fill in. "I think Kurt even used his connections to get Marty a deal at the American Museum of Natural History working on a new exhibit. He's got those two in his pocket."

Terry takes a bite of his Biodiversity Calzone, uses the back of his fingers to wrangle bits of mango and fennel that threaten to escape from his mouth, and shakes his head. He chews for a moment to clear a path for his words through the jungle of vegetables and fruit, and then looks toward the door. "I'd hate to be one of his Pocket Pals."

"Likewise. But I'm guessing we'll be seeing Kurt and his Pocket Pals again in the finals." I look up and realize that Terry is not listening.

"Wow, did you guys hear about this?" He's staring at his phone.

"Hear about what?" I ask.

"Some mystery disease has put 38 people in Seattle in the hospital since yesterday. Some kind of lung disease. Seven people in intensive care."

"Let me see." Athena grabs Terry's phone. Her eyes widen and she put her hand to her mouth. "Oh my God... That's it." She continues to stare at the phone, lost in thought.

"That's what?" I ask.

"Last night. In the Arboretum. Mom gets this call and I think she'll blow him off because she never goes in on Sunday. Instead she gets all serious, takes off for home at a full sprint like I'm not even there. By the time I get home, she's dressed and blowing out the door to the hospital."

"You think it was this thing?" I ask, pointing toward the phone.

"Sure sounds like it. I mean, Mom comes home almost two hours later and disappears into her office. I can see her pulling out textbooks and scanning through journal articles on her computer. She makes a couple of phone calls. Then her phone rings again.'

'Next thing, she's putting on a jacket and is headed out into the night. Another case, she tells me. She says that she's

never seen anything like this before. And then she's gone again."

As Athena talks, *I* remember a phone call, from this morning.

"She called my dad."

"What?"

"This morning. Your mom called my dad."

"That seals it." Athena shook her head to indicate that such a phone call killed all other explanations. "When a virologist calls an epidemiologist at a time of day when nobody calls anybody, bad things are happening."

CHAPTER Three

Sam

As soon as I get inside the house, I hear Sam and Abe upstairs, squeals of delight that can only mean they're on my computer playing video games. The babysitter is talking on the phone to her boyfriend and pretending to do the dishes. I walk and she heads to the hall closet to get her coat without missing a beat.

I think her name is Tanya. Or maybe Trina. It doesn't matter. They all come from the same mold. She puts the sit in babysitting.

Dad hates to call the agency and I was supposed to watch the boys tonight, but he had to work late and I had to work on the robots, so Tanya was the only option. I owe him.

Not sure what they had for dinner, but the smell of curry and onions makes me think Mom. Cooking. And dancing. To Bob Marley.

Trina breezes back into the kitchen and the memories of Mom disappear like smoke. Still talking on the phone, Trina (or maybe she is Tanya) gives me a backwards wave of the hand as the door slams behind her. I grab an apple, climb the back stairs to

my room, and find the boys, as predicted, on my computer in the midst of a game of Alien Vengeance, which they are losing badly.

I chase them out and they head downstairs. I change my password again and get to work. We found a few glitches in the new code for the robot that I have to fix and then I have that small matter of studying for my final exams, all of which happen right after Robowars.

Dad says my room looks like radio shack after a car bombing.

I am stuck on one final problem in the code when I'm interrupted by a long series of thumps and a tremendous crashing sound, followed by howls of five-year-old laughter. I glance at the clock. Crap, it's past nine. I bolt out of my room to find that the boys have covered the stairs with huge sheets of cardboard and piled cushions at the bottom that they must have stripped from every piece of furniture in the house. Abe is lying, half-buried in the mountain of pillows, wedged into a tipped-over laundry basket with a toy Green Bay Packers helmet jammed on his head and a pillow stuffed up his shirt, convulsed with hysterics.

Sam is at the top of the stairs, pumping his fist in the air. "Oooh, baby! Yeah!" he chants in triumph.

"Damn it, Sam. Clean this up." They whine pathetically. I give them "one more run" but let them have two runs so they can feel they snuck something past me.

I am still wrestling them into bed when I hear the slam of Dad's car door at 9:30. I shut the light, close the boys' bedroom door and fly back to my desk. Moments later, Dad pokes his head in my room.

"Hey, Jack. How was your day?"

Mom used to say Dad and I both got the angles and elbows gene. He's not totally down with his personal grooming. But tonight is off the charts. His wire-rimmed glasses make him look like Albert Einstein. With his hand in a light socket.

"Hi, Dad. What's up?"

"This outbreak. Have you been following it?"

"Not really, I had to shut off the net so I could get my work done." I spot the glitch that has been putting the robot in an endless loop, like a dog unable to stop chasing its tail. Not really listening to him, I rattle off a line of code to fix the problem. "Hey, can you drive me to the track meet on Saturday?"

"Forty-eight cases and counting," Dad continues. "If this keeps up, there won't be a track meet."

"No track meet?" Should I tell him about the lady on the train? He'll probably just tell me to stay home from school.

"What's causing it?"

"No good leads on the source yet. Doesn't seem to be bacterial. It looks like this could be a totally new pathogen, probably a virus. The CDC has started working on it, but they are headed in the wrong direction."

I don't totally get what Dad just said. I know the CDC is some federal government agency that is supposed to control disease outbreaks, so they must be trying to figure out what kind of bug caused the outbreak. "Maybe you'll have to figure it out for them," I suggest. I decide to wait. See how I feel.

Dad smiles. "I'm working on it."

"Nobody's died yet, right?"

"No, not yet, but these people are seriously ill."

"And no one from around here is sick, right?"

"Right, they all seem to be from one neighborhood."

"So we should be safe."

"In all likelihood," he says.

Dad steps out of the room and I breathe a sigh of relief as Dad heads for the stairs. A minute later, he calls to me from his office.

"Hey Jack!" Dad is calling down from his office in the attic.

"Yes, Dad?" I try not to show my frustration.

"Whatever this thing is, you'd better be careful. You don't want to catch this monster. Keep your hands washed. And look out

for your brothers, too. You all steer clear of anyone with a cough. It always starts with a cough."

"I'm always careful, Dad." Seriously? He's reminding me to wash my hands? What kind of idiot does he think I am?

###

It's almost ten, the boys are finally in bed and I am deep into studying for my Evolution of Culture final, when I hear a timid knock at my door. "Come in," I say, trying not to be pissed off that Sam or Abe has come to bug me.

The door swings open and Sam appears, holding his belly. "I feel like I'm going to puke," he complains.

"You'd better get to the bathroom."

"I think I need some medication."

"Talk to dad."

"He's busy."

"Interrupt him. If you don't feel well, dad's your guy."

"He might get mad at me."

"Not if you're sick, Samster."

"Can you come with me."

"Dad will help you. Don't worry."

"Are you sure?"

"Double sure."

"Pinky Swear?"

"Pinky Swear." I offer him a pinky and Sam coiled his own around it with his eyes locked on mine to make sure I understand that this is serious business.

"Pinky swear," Sam says in his five-year-old version of a serious voice. He stares at me for a second, then shuffles down the hall and up the stairs to dad's office. A few minutes later, I hear him throw up and begin moaning in the bathroom. I hear Dad's voice too as he rummages through the medicine cabinet and then takes a trip to the kitchen. I hear Dad take Sam back to his bedroom and then, ten minutes later head back up stairs.

I have been feeling a little queasy myself, but was thinking it was just the pizza. With Robowars and the finals, I can't afford to be sick. I work for another hour and am feeling better when I finally go to bed.

At about two, I wake up to the sound of Sam in the bathroom again. I'm thinking I should go help him when I hear Dad's voice. Moments later, I hear Sam's misery as he throws up again. Poor guy. At least he doesn't have a cough.

Tuesday, June 10

CHAPTER Four

The Cough

RING. The jarring old phone ringtone rips into my sleep. RING. I squint at the clock. Who is calling at 7:03? RING. Please pick it up, Dad. No way it's for me. I slap the snooze bar and roll over.

But it's too late. Sleep is over. Lying in a fog, I hear dad getting the boys ready for preschool. Strange. I thought he had a meeting to go to. Where's the nanny?

"Hey, Jack." Dad's voice. I roll over. Dad's head appears in my doorway. "I'm taking the boys over to school, so you're on your own."

"What happened to the nanny?"

"She's having car problems, so she can't take the boys today. I have to get to a meeting, so you're on your own."

"What are they doing for lunch?"

"I'll pick something up. We'll make it work."

I suddenly remember Sam. "Hey, what about Sam? Isn't he sick?"

Dad shrugs. "Seems like he's feeling better. Both the boys seem to have a mild gastroenteritis." I've heard my dad speak doctor long enough to know he's talking about some combination of puking, diarrhea, and plain old, gut-wrenching, misery. "Sam's not quite 100%, but I think he'll be fine."

I push myself up on my elbows. "OK. See you tonight." I climb out of bed as my father heads downstairs. It is not like Dad to send a sick kid to preschool, but I suppose, with the nanny out of commission, he doesn't have much choice. Since Mom died, life has been filled with compromises. I hope Sam will be OK.

#

We have two more rounds of Robowars today. Terry has done a brilliant job of getting the robots up and running and after the battle with Kurt these contests are cakewalks.

By the end of the day, my prediction about the finals is looking more and more likely. The Terminator's lunchroom bully strategy has worked perfectly. We can expect to see Kurt again in the finals.

But the finals will be a very different contest. We will all go in knowing each other's tricks and they are sure to have

worked out a better way to take down camouflage and wings. So we need new tricks, before we face Kurt again.

#

I set Daedalus down on my desk and examine Terry's delicate work on the wings. He says they will be even quieter than the original wings. The guy is an artist. The real beauty is underneath. The ink sprayer. The plan is to use it on the Terminator if we have rematch. The only thing better than being invisible is to blind your opponent.

It is not like Dad to be on the phone so much in the evening. Occasionally his voice rises and I recognize a mix of anger and frustration. But I don't give it much thought.

I have just filled the sprayer with water to test it out, when Dad's voice comes back down the stairs. "Hey, Jack."

I really want to ignore him, but his voice has that tone that means he's going to keep after me until I respond. "Yes, Dad," I say, in a sing song I hope will discourage him from bothering me.

"Can you come up? I want to show you something."

I'm sure Dad has a brilliant explanation of the outbreak he wants to drop on me. But there were almost no new cases today, nobody has died. Figuring it out just doesn't seem so mission critical.

"Sure, Dad. Just let me finish what I'm working on." With a bit of luck, I can count on him to get lost in his work and forget.

###

Daedalus soars down the hallway, takes a tight turn, and strafes the laundry basket with a full spray of water. Perfect strike.

Then, to see if the wings are truly quieter, I bank sharp left, shoot up the attic stairwell and hover just outside Dad's office. I can see him from the neck down. He is facing the door, so I park on the wall and wait until he turns his back to the door before flying in to land on his filing cabinet.

Dad is on the phone, listening with a big scowl. Definitely not his happy face. Even in low resolution, I can see the frustration grow. "I don't care if the CDC has dismissed it," he snaps into the phone, "You need to listen. They have Hong Kong figured wrong. I..."

Whoever is on the phone with him is talking, not listening. Dad falls silent. I watch him dig a pad out from a pile of papers and write a couple of lines on it. I have never seen him so focused, so intense, so angry. He writes a few more notes, then slams down his pen. "Damn it! If they don't change their approach, people are going to die."

Dad listens again. Dying? I haven't seen anything on the newsfeed about people dying.

Dad types something. I can see what looks like a map on this monitor. The map shifts as he types. Then he starts talking again, loud and impatient. The silences are growing shorter.

"I know I'm not giving you much to work with, but I'll have more proof by tomorrow. This could stop the thing. It might give us a vaccine, maybe even a cure. They've got it wrong and nobody's getting out of the hospital until they get it right."

Has Dad figured out a cure for the mystery disease?

"They want to just wait the thing out. I think there's more going on. There's something else coming. When it hits, all bets are off. If I'm right, this could get much worse."

More listening. Dad is staring at the map on his monitor. I can see that the map is cover with little blue markers.

"Look, I'll finish writing this up tomorrow morning and send it to you along with the sample. Just look it over and you'll see what I mean." He taps the image. "Talk to you later. Bye." I can hear the exhaustion in his voice.

Dad shuts off the phone, sets it down on the table, and writes a few more notes on the yellow pad.

As Daedalus slips off the file cabinet and glides down the stairs back to my room, I am wondering if the story of the outbreak and Dad's theory might be more interesting than I had

imagined. He's probably forgotten about asking me to come up, but I make a mental note to ask him to explain his idea in the morning. I pick up Daedalus, fill the sprayer with ink, and slide it into my backpack.

After putting the twins to bed, I spend the next two hours plowing through the rest of my homework until I collapse into bed. I am already falling asleep when a faint sound makes its way to me through the darkness. A coarse rasping sound, like the bark of a distant dog. I ignore it.

For some reason, I don't recognize the sound of my father coughing.

Wednesday, June 11

CHAPTER Five

Epidemic

Usually, Dad's coffee cup and plate are in the sink by the time I come down in the morning. I figure he was up late and don't give it much thought. Instead I just get the bread out and start making sandwiches, turkey for Sam and peanut butter for Abe. I can't remember who doesn't eat crusts, so I cut the crusts off both sandwiches.

I can't lie. It's hard without mom. Crazy hard. And in the morning it's double black diamond hard.

I have no idea how Mom pulled it off. She had it all going on in the morning. Like it was fun.

And she got it all right. I never knew how hard it is to do that, to remember that Sam thinks mayonnaise tastes like slug slime or Abe has stopped eating turkey because he saw a live one at Kelsey Creek Farm and decided there was no way he could eat anything that ugly. And she definitely knew who hated crusts.

I am packing up the sandwiches when I hear Dad heading down the upstairs hall. I hear him hacking and wheezing. But I'm too

preoccupied to make much of it. Instead I start slicing carrots, still thinking about Mom.

It's not that Dad didn't help. He had to, what with the twins and all. But Mom was like this drug we all had to have in the morning to make the day work.

And then the accident and she was gone. Now it's like there's this enormous hole in the middle of the morning. So, when it's my morning to do lunches, there I am, standing in that hole.

The only thing I can do is to remember.

Right after it happened, I remembered all the time. I would see the coffee cup that she would sip on as she made lunches, the one I gave her with my picture on it, or her purple garden clogs in the mudroom, or the picture of her on top of Mt Rainer and the memories would be so strong. It would be like she was right there, only I couldn't touch her or ask her the questions. She was there, but not there. And I would feel that weird hollow pain. And I would try not to remember.

But how could I not remember, even if it hurt.

So Dad put all her things away. And I got better at not thinking about her. Sometimes, I could even go for an hour or two without remembering. Especially if I was working at something.

But I couldn't decide which was worse, remembering or forgetting.

Then I decided remembering would be OK if I could control when I remembered. So I asked Dad for the Amber.

I reach into my pocket. That's where I keep it. It is so smooth after three years of polishing by my pocket lining. I squeeze it and she comes to me. I close my eyes and I can see it hanging in the hollow of her neck.

I pull out my hand and open it. She used to tell me it was frozen sunshine and, in my palm, it seems to glow. I can still remember sitting in her lap and playing with it. She would take it off and we would look at the bee that was trapped inside it millions of years ago. She would tell me stories about bees and dinosaurs and giant flowers and we would wonder how this poor guy got stuck in a big blob of sap. I figured, whatever happened, it was one unlucky bee.

The crash makes me drop the knife. Abe is screaming. I run upstairs, expecting to find him pinned under a toppled bookcase. He is standing in the middle of the hall, wrapped in his Spiderman bathrobe, his eyes filled with tears and horror. He isn't injured.

"It's Daddy. It's Daddy. In the bathroom"

"It's OK, Abe. What happened?" I step past Abe and look in.

I freeze. It's not OK. Dad is sprawled across the floor. The shower rod is on the floor and the curtain is crumpled beneath him. Blood oozes from his forehead.

Time stops. I cannot speak. Images play in my head, Dad collapsing in the shower, reaching for the shower curtain, pulling it down, his head catching the sink as he crashes to the floor.

Somebody should help him. Somebody should cover him. Somebody should do something. Somebody.

"Dad! Are you OK? What's wrong?"

Dad tries to raise himself, but can only manage to roll to his back. The desperation in his eyes scares me. Something is horribly wrong.

Abe's voice stabs at me. "What's happening? What's happening to Daddy?" Abe sobs, and shakes with tears. The desperation in his voice takes me by the throat.

"What should I do, Dad? How can I help you?" All medical questions go to Dad.

Dad, unable to speak as he struggles for air, mouths a single word.

Help.

Then another.

Me.

Then his eyes lock onto mine. The message in his eyes is clear. There is no somebody. There is you. Only you.

I am the only somebody left.

Now.

I grab a towel and drape it over my father like a blanket.

"Is he ...?" It is Abe's voice. I look up to see my brother's wide-eyed, tear-reddened face. "Is Daddy, going to die?"

"It's OK Abe. It's OK. Daddy's not going to die."

"What's wrong with him?"

"It's just a bad cold, Abe. Daddy's fine." The lie feels like something stuck in my throat. As if to mark the deceit, a wave of coughing shakes Dad. Then another. Then a third.

I lift Dad's head and slide a folded towel underneath. Abe is silent now. His eyes wide and wet. I grab my phone and dial 911.

The 911 operator assures me that the ambulance will come in a matter of minutes. "Until they get there, make your father as comfortable as possible. I'm gonna stay right here on the line with you," she tells me.

I go back to the bathroom. The tile is cold on my feet. I crouch and rest a hand on Dad's forehead. I have never cared for anyone sick before, but, after years of watching Dad, I know what doctors do. As I touch his forehead, even I know I am feeling a fever.

Abe squeezes my arm. "Are you sure he's going to be OK?"

His fear forces me to be strong. "I need you to help me. Can you go get Dad a pillow and a blanket?"

Calmed by the sense he could help, Abe rushes off. I hook a hand under each of Dad's arms and, struggling against the dead weight, drag him into the hall. Abe comes back and the two of us manage to get some clothes on Dad, put a proper pillow under his head and cover him with a comforter. As we finish, Dad tries to speak, but his words dissolved into fits of coughing.

I sit, trying to comfort Abe and Dad. Over the past three years of stepping in for my mom, I had come to believe I could handle anything.

Except this.

The EMT's storm in like space invaders with protective suits, gloves and facemasks. They are already lifting Dad onto the stretcher, when Sam, who had somehow slept through the whole thing, stumbles into the hallway. His bleary eyes widen in shock. "What are they doing? What are they doing to Daddy?!" The last word dissolves into tears.

"It's OK, Sam. Dad needs to go to the hospital, but the doctors there will make him all better." I hug him, wishing I could believe my own lie.

The two men worked quickly and seem to know exactly what to do. Soon after they place an oxygen mask on Dad, his faces turns from grey to pink and I feel a surge of relief.

Dad is looking at me, his mouth moving inside the mask. I can't make out the words. He begins to pull at the mask.

The taller and stronger of the two EMT's grabs Dad's hand. "Calm down, sir. You need that."

Dad struggles and shakes his head, but, in his weakened state, he is no match for the EMT.

"He wants to say something," I protest.

The other EMT, a shorter man in glasses with thick black rims who has been doing most of the talking and appears to be running the show, speaks in a calm authoritative voice. "It's OK son. You'll be able to talk with him all you want after the doctors have had a chance to help him. Right now, we need to get your father to the hospital."

I start to say something, then stop. Of course. Dad will get through this. The doctors at the hospital will take care of him. I can talk to him later.

So I just watch as they slide Dad into the back of the ambulance and the larger of the two EMT's climbs in with him. I walk to the front of the ambulance and open the passenger door, wondering what I should do with Abe and Sam.

A hand grabs my shoulder. "Sorry, son." The man in glasses looks me in the eyes. "You will need to stay here with your brothers. Someone should be here any minute to help out."

"But, I just want to go with my father..."

"I understand, but those are the rules. Don't worry. We'll take good care of him."

"OK, I'll get someone to watch my brothers. They'll be OK here." I turn to climb into the seat.

The EMT throws an arm across my chest to block me. "Son, you need to stay here. No ride-alongs. Go inside the house."

I step back and the man with glasses jumps into the driver's seat. He lowers the passenger window and calls to me. "Take your brothers inside and wait. A team will be here to look after you any minute now."

With that, he flips on the flashing lights and pulls away from the curb. The street glows with flickering red and blue as we watch the ambulance drive off. I stare at the fading light until the ambulance turns and Dad disappears.

The man's voice echoes in my head. My brothers. I am all that Sam and Abe have left.

"Come on boys." I walk back to the house in a stupor with the boys in tow.

Be strong. Think clearly. Your brothers need you. Your father needs you. Stay focused.

Dad will get better. I can visit Dad once the boys are settled and, in a few days, Dad will come home.

The pour two bowls of cereal for the boys and set them on the table. They dig in like a pair of hungry wolves. I have no appetite.

I lean against the kitchen counter. What if I am wrong? What if Dad doesn't recover?

As the food brings boys back from their state of shock, they pepper me with questions. "What are they doing with Dad? When can we go see him? Who will take care of us?"

"The doctors will do everything they can for Dad," I tell them. "They are sending somebody to help us until he's better."

Sam furrows his brow and looks up at me. "When will he come home? I want him back."

"So do I, Sam. Dad will come home soon. A couple days, tops." As I speak, I hear Dad's words from the previous night. "They've got it wrong and nobody's getting out of the hospital until they get it right."

Then I understand what I have to do.

I have to get to Dad. To see him. To talk to him. Dad will know what to do.

Bam, bam, bam. Knocking. The front door.

I rush to the living room and peek out the curtain. Two figures stand on the front steps. One, a woman in surgical scrubs, latex gloves and a surgical mask reaches up and knocks again. With most of her greying hair tucked up into a disposable surgical cap, she looks like she is ready to operate, not bake cookies and read stories to the boys.

But it is the other figure that sends a tremor through me.

The sight of a police officer in gloves and a surgical mask is alarming enough, but it is what he holds in his hand that catches my eye. The bright orange sign has the word, **QUARANTINE**, printed across it in bold black letters.

They were going to isolate us. Lock us in the house and keep us there for days, maybe even weeks.

And they will not let me see Dad.

Bam. Bam. The knocking again. Insistent.

I am trapped.

One hour. I just need to get away for one hour before they lock me up. That would give me time to get to the hospital, see Dad, talk to him, and get his advice.

Then I will come back.

Just an hour.

I hunker down so that I am at eye level with my brothers. This is going to take my best performance.

"Listen boys." I try to stay as calm as possible. I don't want them to sense my emotions. "There is a woman at the door who'll take care of you."

"Like a nanny?" Abe asks.

"Kind of," I say, "She'll look after you and make sure you get fed. I need to go talk to Dad."

"We hate nannies," says Sam.

"I know, but she's a nice nanny. She'll help you."

"We want to go with you." Sam looks like he might cry again.

"You can't come now, but I'll come back for you soon."

"Take us with you," says Abe.

"I wish I could, but they won't let me. Right now, I need you to be strong. I promise I'll be back really soon."

"Pinky swear?"

"Yeah, but you have to pinky swear that you won't tell them where I went. When you let them in, tell them I went to the grocery store."

"You mean we should lie to them?"

"No. But I have a secret mission. You need to keep it secret."

"Like spies?" asks Abe.

"Yeah," I said, "Like spies."

Abe and Sam look at each other, then back at me. "OK," they say in unison and both offer a pinky.

I watch my brothers walk to the front door. I have to shake off the sense that I have just betrayed them. I am only doing what I have to do. I have to believe that they will be OK.

I slip out the back door and cross the backyard to the garage. I pull my bike off the rack and, in a few minutes, am riding down the Burke Gilman trail toward the hospital.

The dense morning fog follows me past the lush green bushes and trees that line the bike trail. As I ride, struggling to absorb what has happened, I hardly see the other cyclists.

I imagine Dad, strengthened, sitting up in bed waiting for me. The doctors at the hospital will have him up and he will tell me all about the outbreak and his theory, just like he had wanted to do last night.

Only this time, I will listen.