

Friday, June 13

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Bad Luck

I wake to blackness, my heart pounding.

For the past two days, I have been so determined to help my father that I refused to consider the possibility that there is nothing I can do. Now, as the walls close in around me, I allow myself to doubt.

Game over.

Stop it. The puzzle. Stay focused on the puzzle. I search for my backpack, pull out the laptop and switch it on.

Its electronic glow floods the tiny space. I close and open my eyes until they adjust to the light.

4:30. The clock on the screen reminds me of my sleeplessness. "Keep going," I say aloud with no clear idea where I should go.

I start with the USB stick that Terry gave me. Within half an hour, I have ported the data from Terry into our map of the outbreak.

I see Terry has been busy. As before, a small x marks the home of each person with the disease, but not all of the x's are blue. Some are red.

I click on a red x. A bubble appears with the name and age of the victim. Nice work, Terry. There are two dates and times about five days apart. I click on a blue x. A name, an age, and one date appear on the screen. Then I understand the red x's. The second date is the date of death.

Then I run the animation. I watch the entire outbreak. The first x's begin to appear on the screen. The crisis unfolds. As dozens of cases dot the University District, I try to imagine how a water pipe could connect the them. I run the animation backwards and forwards, looking for a pattern. At first, I see nothing. I focus on the very start of the outbreak. But I don't see it until I slow the time scale. Just before the explosion of cases scatters all over the U-district, there is a small cluster. Next to the athletic center.

Of course. The athletic center. Hundreds of people shower there every morning, people from across the district. No single focus.

I continue the animation, watching the outbreak grow, then diminish. Then, a second wave of blue x's appears on the screen, this time in Ravenna. Then, as I move forward in time, the triangle I saw with Terry emerges.

This meant that the first outbreak involved two releases, one near the Athletic Center and one farther north. The cloud of cases from the first release helped obscure the discrete triangle from the second. What if that is intentional? What if whoever did this targeted the gym to throw investigators off his trail?

I stare at the screen. The map looks just as it did when Terry and I first looked at the data. Except for one thing. When we first looked, everyone on the map was alive. Now, almost half of the x's from the early stages of the outbreak are red. People are dying.

I continue my march through time into the lull after the first outbreak. The blue x's have almost disappeared when a third wave of cases begins.

I hit the space bar. The animation stops. A blue x has appeared on top of my house. I shouldn't have been surprised.

But I am.

I hesitate, and then click the x. A text bubble appears. male, Age 48. The x's just became real.

Seeing those words, his name, as I lie alone in the woods, I find myself fighting tears. I know, like no one else, that happy endings are not guaranteed. I know that x can turn red.

I want to freeze time, to hit the pause button on reality until I can unravel the puzzle and save my father. But I have to face this thing. More x's appear. Time restarts.

Then more x's. I march through the next 24 hours. Another triangle takes shape. But this is different from the other triangle. These are people and houses I know; these are neighbors and family friends. For me, every x has a name.

I touch the space bar and another hour of the past slips by. I examine the screen. A second blue x has appeared on my house. I knew it was coming, but it fills me with horror. Reluctantly, I click on the x. Male, age 5.

This is even harder to take. And it's about more than Sam being sick. It is about my father getting closer to dying. It is about Abe, all alone, with no one to turn to. It is even about my mother dying in the ICU. And it is about me and the end of everything.

At least, for now, both x's are blue. For the sake of my father, my brother and my own sanity, I force myself to stay focused on the puzzle. For now, they are just markers on a map. Nothing more. If I think too hard about what the x's mean, they could consume me.

My only job is to make sure they do not turn red.

All of this, the scatter of x's on the map, leaves me with one question. Could bad luck really be this cruel? Some radical

lunatic makes a plan to inflict terror on Seattle, closes his eyes and puts a finger on the map. Why does his psycho finger have to land next to my house? Of the thousands of intersections in the city, why my corner?

It is the same question I asked three years ago. Some random loser who didn't even have a driver's license, just happens to lose control of his car and swerves into oncoming traffic at the exact moment that my mother's car is coming in the opposite direction? I have learned to accept that all of this is fate.

But why does fate hate me?

Stop it. Think.

I have all the pieces. I just need to put them together. There have been at least three separate releases. My family was unlucky enough to live at the heart of one of them. What does it mean? Whoever is responsible has come back again and again. Most terrorists I've ever heard of strike once in a spectacular fashion and either die in the act or disappear.

I heard of another psychopath who drove around Washington, DC with an accomplice for weeks, randomly shooting unarmed civilians. He must have thought he was too smart to get caught.

I try to put my head into the mind of the terrorist. If I wanted to contaminate the water supply, how would I have done it? How would I decide where to strike? Would I strike again? If so, when and where would I do it?

Clearly, the pathogen was injected into the water pipes somewhere close to my house. But those pipes are buried underground. I remember watching with Terry as a crew dug through a sea of mud to repair a busted pipe near my house. There is no way this guy could have burrowed through the mud to contaminate the water. But the pipes must be exposed somewhere.

Valves. Utility workers have to be able to shut off the water to the leaking pipe. I pull up the satellite images and zoom in on the streets around my house. I spot the closest manhole and imagine myself slipping through it and drilling into a water main.

But how would this guy drill into a water pipe full of water. And shutting a valve would have blown his cover.

Then, I see the answer.

Not far from the manhole. The satellite view is blurred. I switch to street view. There it is. At the base of the triangle of cases. Just at the midpoint. A direct connection to the water main. With a valve on top.

A fire hydrant.

It is the perfect way into the system. Connect a high-pressure pump, open the valve, and turn on the pump. Disaster on tap. It is all speculation, but I have a strange sense that I have just figured it out.

But what did that tell me? It did not take me closer to finding the killer and definitely did not get me closer to saving my father and brother.

I lie back and stare through the roof. Just above me, in the glow of the computer, I can see the chambers of an ant colony through the clear Lexan roofing. The ants have used the hard surface of the roof as the base for the queen's chamber. I watch as the sisters of the queen scurry in and out, rearranging eggs, carrying food in and soil out. Their movements seem random, a blur of activity that somehow created the intricacies of the colony.

I focus on a single ant, following her as she works to remove a clump of soil that has dropped into the middle of the chamber. She struggles for almost a minute to break off a piece and then carry it up and out of sight. Then I watch another ant move an egg across the chamber, set it down and return for another.

I watch for twenty minutes, one ant, and then another. The movement is anything but random. Each ant is engaged in its own, private struggle.

Every action has a purpose.

Then it strikes me. How could I have missed it? How could everyone have missed it? Like everyone else, I started with the assumption that the victims are chosen at random.

What if they weren't?

I look back at my laptop to check my theory. If I am right, I need to reach Athena. Fast.

This is not a matter of bad luck. This isn't even terrorism.

This is murder.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The Fourth Target

In his narrow, cramped laboratory, Vector holds a syringe up to the light. The fine powder inside looks like nothing more than grey flour, but it represents billions of fatal doses of the virus. Death dehydrated. Just add water and stir.

He has worked through the night to get the final syringe ready. The throbbing bruise on his right cheek from the blow he took in the alley is nothing compared to what would come if he does not deliver the virus. Time is running out.

Vector steps into the decontamination zone, closing the inner door behind him. He turns on the makeshift shower and flips on the pump that injects powerful antiseptic chemicals into the water to kill lingering virus. The spray rains down on him and rivulets of the purifying chemicals run down his plastic suit

and into the drain. After five minutes, Vector peels off his gloves and his suit, which he hung by the outer door.

Everything is ready and carefully stacked on the table. Vector checks his duffle bag for his passport and tickets. He straps on the holster for his powerful Sig P232 handgun, and pulls on a white canvas jumpsuit with the initials, SPU, on the back. He slides the syringe from the lab into his pocket.

On the table are the two sets of syringes he has recovered from the freezer during the night, each one in a sealed, sterilized bag. Vector picks one from the set of syringes containing the encephalitis virus and adds it to the SARS syringe in his pocket. He put the remaining syringes into a small backpack for Alpha.

A wedge of dawn is splitting the morning sky as he reaches the parking lot. Vector opens the door of a large, white utility van and slides the backpack and duffel bag onto the passenger seat. From under the driver's seat, he pulls a thin, flexible sign with magnetic backing. He glances around parking lot before centering the sign on the driver's door. With the words, Seattle Public Utilities, and the stylized image of Chief Seattle tucked into the S, the emblem makes the van look to all the world as if this is just another truck full of utility workers taking care of the city's water.

Forty minutes later, Vector parks by a fire hydrant and cuts the engine. He gets out, opens the side door of the van, and erects a white, nylon tent that extends from the open door out over the hydrant.

Inside the tent, Vector pulls on a pair of latex gloves and takes a large pipe wrench out of the van. It takes just ten minutes to connect the flexible tubing from the pump to the hydrant. He eases open the valve on the fire hydrant. No leaks. Everything is in place.

One step remains.

Vector pulls out the two syringes. He removes one from its bag, uncaps it and screws it onto a port that he has installs in the side of the polyethylene water bottle. He pulls back the plunger to draw water into the syringe. As he does, the water swirls with countless copies of the deadly virus. Then, with a single thrust, he injects them into the water jug.

He repeats the process with the second syringe. Using two viruses was also his idea. Two severe infections at the same time would be almost impossible to survive. Modifying the two viruses to suit their purposes and growing them in his lab has taken years of work, all leading up to this moment. As he

watched the virus blend into the water, he felt a surge of excitement.

Vector peels off the gloves and pulls off the jumpsuit. He puts on a pale grey hoodie from the duffel bag and zips it, checking to make sure it covers the holster. He slides the bag of syringes into a backpack and pulls the hood up around his face.

He does not like the idea of leaving the van, but he has to make the delivery. He has picked a park just four blocks away. He won't be gone long and has convinced himself that no one would decide to poke around in an SPU van at six in the morning.

Even if they do, there would be nothing they could do.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Intersection

5:05. No way to know how much time I have. Or how little. I can only hope it's enough.

I suppose I could call the police, but I have no chance in hell of convincing them of my theory. Until I have more evidence, I will need to stay under their radar.

So I have a plan, but I will need Athena's help to make it work. My first challenge is reaching her without raising an alarm.

I check for nearby Wi-Fi. I find the network of a neighbor that Terry and I "borrowed" back when they were using the hideaway. To my relief, they are still foolish enough to use their last name as the network password. So far, so good.

Now, I'm online. Now, I can get to Athena. But I still have to be discreet. The FBI is probably watching everything that

comes into her computer. I don't want to get her into more trouble than I already have.

I create a folder on the team's Dropbox account and label it Dart. I open a text file and write:

Urgent: Your mom must not take a shower. No joke. Her life may depend on it. Warn her NOW.

I encrypt the file and put it in the folder. She probably isn't on her computer at 5 in the morning. She probably isn't even awake. I pull out Terry's phone. I can't call from the hideaway. If they are watching the phone, it will give up the location of my only refuge. I will need to wait.

I pull on my shoes, grab my backpack and peek out of the shelter. Morning light is filtering through the trees.

The light rail stop on Roosevelt is almost a mile away. I glance at my watch 5:10. The first trains start at 5:19.

So, as morning seeps into the streets of Seattle, I begin to run.

In a dead sprint, I emerge from the park, blowing past a pair of early morning joggers. When I am a few blocks out of the woods, far enough that I will not draw attention to the park and the hideaway, I decide I can't wait any longer to call Athena. I

duck into an open garage and pull out Terry's phone. I turn it on, and punch in a text message.

Dart rbwrsdbx

Athena will figure it out right away. Hopefully, anyone else who sees the message will not be able to interpret it fast enough to do anything.

I shut off the phone and, tired and hungry, begin running again.

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In the early light, Athena carefully pulls her bike out of her father's garage. Her mother hasn't responded to her text and hasn't answered her calls. She cuts through the Arboretum and begins the long climb up Capitol hill to Snow Street, still trying to make sense of Jack's message.

He must have concluded that this thing is spreading through showers. That part even made sense. A respiratory virus might be able to spread through drinking water if you didn't drink it. But why is it so important she warn her mother? What does he know?

She crosses 23rd Ave. and the grand old homes of Seattle, spring up around her. Athena's world stopped making sense when the outbreak began. Now, as she twists and turns through the

neighborhoods of hundred-year-old mansions, she feels sure that she is riding towards an explanation.

Remembering her mother's words, Athena decides it would not do to have her mother see her in the street, so she circles around the block, cuts through an alley, and turns onto 14th street.

The intersection of Snow and 14th is empty. Nobody. Athena stares down the naked street in the eerie morning quiet. Then, she turns to look behind her.

A white van is parked half a block away.

A tent extends from the side of it onto the sidewalk. Athena gets the strange sense that the van might contain the reason for Jack's message.

Athena glances up and down the street, then back at the van. She walks towards it, continuing to scan the street. She circles it. The emblem for Seattle Public Utilities on the door gives her pause. Could this be just someone from the water company? Was this really just coincidence? She leans in next to the tent and listens.

Silence.

Carefully, she touches the corner of the tent. Peeling back the edge, she peeks inside. No one.

The tent covers a fire hydrant. A hose runs to the hydrant from inside the van. She pulls back the flap and steps inside.

The hose passes through a pump and into a sealed plastic container. A pair of wires runs from the pump to a battery casing. The entire pump and battery are locked inside a steel cage along with a large plastic container. Other than a tire iron and a few tools lying on the floor, the van is empty.

This is not an SPU van. A real utility van would be full of parts and tools. This van has only one purpose. To pump something into the water.

As the meaning of Jack's message becomes clear, the rattlesnake of fear strikes.

Someone is trying to kill her mother.

Athena jumps into the van and begins to examine the pump. It is primed and ready to start. She has to make sure it never does.

Athena looks at the connections and then the plastic jug. What is in it? Then she sees the syringes connected to the side of the jug. Something has been injected into the jug. Once the pump starts, it will only take a minute or two for the water to reach her mother.

Athena pulls out her phone and calls her mother, hands shaking. She waits, staring at the pump. Ring. No answer. A second ring. Then a third. "Come on, mom, pick up." It rings again. "Pick up, damn it." Another ring. Then a click.

"Mom! Mom! Listen..."

"Hello, this is Dr. Martin. I am not able to come to the phone..."

"Damn." She would have to settle for leaving a message. "Hi mom, this is Athena..."

A sound. Clear in the morning silence. Someone running toward the van.

She freezes.

Please, let it be a jogger.

The footsteps grow louder, closer. Athena pockets her phone and glances around. The van offers no place to hide. She picks up the tire iron.

Suddenly, the footsteps stop, just outside the van.

Whoever owns the van has no qualms about killing someone. She isn't sure she will have a chance against him. But she will not go down without a fight. Athena flattens herself against the wall of the van and raises the tire iron like a saber.

A hand reaches into the tent and jerks the fabric back.

Athena holds her breath, straining for silence. She hears the tent flap close.

He is inside. Inches away, breathing hard.

As a hand reaches toward the pump, Athena coils to strike.