

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Pump

By the time I look up, Athena is holding the tire iron about six inches from my head. "Damn it. I almost turned your brains into mashed potatoes," she says, shaking her head.

"Sorry, I'll knock next time." I wave at the tire iron. "Put that thing down, will you?"

Athena lowers her arm, staring at the tire iron as if she'd forgotten she had it. "You were right." She points at the pump.

That's when I first have a chance to register what's in the van. I jump inside and kneel next to the cage that protects the pump. "Damn."

Athena bends down next to me. "How did you know? Why my mother?"

Without looking away from the pump, I pull the paper out of my back pocket and hand it to Athena. "It has something to do with this."

Athena stares at the first page of the article. "It's just an academic paper from the New England Journal. Some work on SARS..."

I step around the cage, examining every side of the pump. "Well two of the authors on the paper are dead. ..." I stop in mid-sentence and stare at the back of the pump.

"Damn. Look at this."

I point to the small box at the back of the pump, mounted on the power cord. The black numbers on the LCD read 1:20. Then, 1:19 Then, 1:18. This is not the time to talk.

"Where's the damned switch." Athena stuffs the paper into her pocket and crouches next to me.

I don't see one. It looks like everything is routed through the timer. "Whoever started this wants to make sure no one can stop it. There's no switch."

I grab the cage and jerk it as hard as I can. It doesn't move.

Athena reaches for the tire iron. She jams it under the edge of the cage and pulls up hard. It moves only enough to show the heavy bolts holding it to the floor of the van.

She pounds the lock, but can't dent the case-hardened steel.

I start to examine the tubing running from the pump to the hydrant.

"Careful," says Athena. "Rip that tube and we're both dead."

"Don't worry, I won't break it." I examine the tube that runs from the pump to the fire hydrant. It is filled with water There

is no way of knowing if it is already primed with water containing the virus.

"Thirty seconds, Jack. We've got to think." Athena's eyes dart around the van and then back to the timer. She grabs the tire iron and jams it through the cage. She can barely reach the timer.

Athena begins to jab ferociously at the time with the tire iron. I've watched enough movies to know you don't kick a time bomb. "Hey, be careful -"

It's too late.

Athena hits the timer and I watch it explode into splintered chips and plastic shards. Amid the sound of shattering plastic, I hear a second sound.

CLICK.

A low whirring sound comes from the pump. Destroying the timer has simply turned it on.

A faint grey line marks the edge of the contaminated water as it inches toward the fire hydrant. It has already covered the first foot of the eight-foot length of tubing.

Athena is trying to hit the body of the pump, but having no luck.

The battery. Maybe I can get to the power. "Hey, let me try."

Athena hands me the tire iron. I can just reach the connections. I try to pry off the cables, but they are on tight.

The pump continues to cycle. I look over and the grey line is just a few feet from the hydrant.

Suddenly, Athena jumps out of the van. I watch as she grabs the wrench that is lying in the grass next to the hydrant. She slams it down on it onto the top of the hydrant and begins to turn it as fast as I can. The pump continues to turn. The line inch closer.

Of course. "Brilliant."

She keeps turning. The pump cycles. The virus has crawled within a foot of the hydrant. The pump turns. Then, the wrench stops.

We stare at the tube. The pump whirs. The grey line does not move. We have stopped it.

I jump out of the van and fall to my knees next to the hydrant, physically and emotionally spent. Athena just stands, unmoving, breathing heavily.

"You did it." I say.

"We did it," Athena responds.

Then I notice. We have a problem.

With each turn of the pump, the tubing is swelling like a balloon.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Found

Athena jumps to her feet. "Run!"

I am standing at the door to the van, staring at bulging tubing. "No. This thing is going to spray virus all over the place."

"There's no way to stop it! Public Health can send a HazMat team. Let's go." protests Athena.

"I have an idea."

"We don't have time for ideas."

"You go." I pull the sleeve of my hoodie over my hand. Then I pick up the tire iron.

The tubing looks like a well fed snake.

"Get out of there!" Athena starts to lift the flap of the tent.

Reaching into the van, I jam the end of the tire iron under the connector for the negative terminal of the battery. I slam the other end down on the positive terminal. Like a giant switch.

A huge blue spark fills the van. I jump back, flying out of the van and tumbling backwards onto the pavement.

Athena stares at me in shock. "Why did you do that?"

"Listen," I say.

"I don't hear anything."

"Exactly."

The whirring of the pump had stopped. Athena stares at it.

"How...?"

"Short circuit takes all the power." I got to my feet. "It also has a nasty tendency to make batteries explode. Let's get outta here." As if to make the point, the battery begins to emit a loud hissing sound.

"Hopefully it doesn't take out the tubing when that happens."

Athena ducks out of the tent. I follow. I expect to see her sprinting from the van, but she is standing on the sidewalk, not moving. "Oh my God."

"What?"

Athena pulls out the paper that I handed her and looks at the first page again. "The lab."

"What about it?"

"Zhao. Alexi." She waves the paper at me.

"Who?"

"The other authors, they could be next."

"Call them."

"Nobody picks up the lab phone. Everything goes to voicemail." Athena shakes her head. "I need to get to the lab."

"I'll go with you. We can take the light rail." I point over my shoulder with my thumb.

"I can get there faster on my bike. I'll be there in ten minutes."

"All right, but I'll meet you there. Shouldn't take me more than half an hour."

The unmistakable smell of melting plastic floats over from the van. The short-circuited battery is heating up fast. "Go! Go! Just be careful." I watch until she enters the alley, and then I turn to walk in the opposite direction.

It is then, just as I emerge from behind the van, that I hear him.

"Hey! Hey you!" The voice is loud and angry. "What are you doing?"

I look toward the voice. The man, his face shadowed by a hoodie is just a block away. And he is running straight at me.

For a second, I freeze. If I run back towards Athena, the man will see both of us.

The man is struggling to pull something out from inside his jacket. When he raises his arm, I can see the gun clearly in the morning sun.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Shot

I dive to the ground. There's a pop, like a firecracker. It doesn't register as a gunshot until a slug slams into the wall of the apartment behind me.

Damn. He's trying to kill me. The surge of adrenaline is like nothing I have ever felt before. Pure, unadulterated terror.

My mind barks commands at me. Stay down! Check the alley! Athena is almost home free. BLAM! A second shot ricochets off the pavement about five feet away. BLAM! A third bullet whistles past me and hits the wall.

The alley. Ready! Up! Stay low! RUN!

The explosion startles me. For a moment I think he's firing something even bigger at me. As I dive for the ground, I remember the battery.

I look back. Smoke is billowing out of the shattered rear windows of the van. I rise in the haze like a sprinter from his blocks and run down the alley. BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! Three shots.

Searing pain rips across my arm. I reach for it and feel the wet, warm, stickiness of my own blood where the bullet grazed me.

I keep running. I'm sure I can outrun him, but trapped between walls on each side, I make the perfect target. I try to zig zag to make a harder target.

But no shots come. I heard six. Is he out? Is he reloading?

As I sprint farther into the alley my hopes rise. I might make it.

Then I hear the growl of an engine and the squeal of tires. I look back to see the huge white van enter the alley.

A sign warns drivers to stay under ten miles per hour. The man in the van is ignoring the signs.

The van accelerates with a deep roar, bouncing over bumps and potholes, thundering after me like an angry bull.

I let go of my injured arm and sprint with everything I've got, my arm throbbing with pain.

The scream of metal on metal fills the alley as the van scrapes a dumpster. I scan the buildings on either side. I can feel the pavement shudder as the van bounces behind me. Ahead,

on the right the alley widens. It is the rear parking lot for Verite Coffee. I hope it opens early.

With the van almost on top of me, I dive to the right between two parked cars. The van blows past. Brakes squeal as it stops in a spray of gravel. I reach the rear entrance of the coffee shop, grab the handle, and pull. It doesn't move.

There are people inside. The place must be open. I bang on the glass. The alley fills with the sound of grinding gears and the roar of the engine as the van surges into reverse. The manager appears, waves and shuffles toward the door.

I rattle the coffee shop door. "Come on!" I cry, "Hurry!" The van screeches to a stop behind me. The manager reaches the door, hesitates, and finally turns the handle. I look back as the gunman jumps out the driver's side door.

"You know, this is just an exit..."the manager begins.

I jerk a thumb toward the alley. "Do not let that guy in here," I say and I push past him. The manager is covered with tattoos and piercings and has the face of a crackhead, He looks at my bleeding arm. Then at the van. And the man with a gun.

"What the hell?"

I nearly crash into a girl who is texting and walking across the shop like a zombie. As I sidestep her, I bump into a man taking sipping coffee.

The man spins with coffee dripping from his face and hand, ready to explode. "What the..." He stops short, his eyes locked on the blood-soaked arm of my shirt.

I hold up an equally bloody hand. "Really sorry."

The man backs up in horror. Text-girl looks up and screams as I blow out the front door and into the street.

"HONK!" A silver SUV swerves and I jump back, dodge a green pick-up, and run across the street. The Light Rail station is just a block away. Hopefully, I have bought myself enough time to reach it. If not, I can only hope that Athena's 911 call will bring help.

As I reach the sidewalk, I hear the growl of the van's engine as it accelerates towards me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Alexi

Nothing makes sense. As Athena flies down the north end of Capitol Hill, her mind is spinning.

Why would anyone care about a research paper that is almost a decade old, much less try to kill its authors? It makes no sense. But without that, she couldn't answer the more important question: Who has just tried to kill her mother?

Athena arrives at the Virology Institute, parks her bike, fishes her ID out of her pocket and rushes to the entrance. The only car in the lot is Alexi's. Maybe he will have some answers. At least she can warn him. Assuming the killer hasn't found him already.

The lab is strangely silent.

There is light spilling from the open door of Zhao's office. There was no sign of his car in the lot, but maybe he's here. She sprints down the hall to warn him.

As she approaches the door, a string of angry Russian curses shatters the silence. She has heard Alexi's tirades before. Even for him, this is extreme. But it is not the anger in his voice that scares her.

The wave of fear comes from something more basic. The voice is not coming from Alexi's office. It is coming from Zhao's. What is Alexi doing in Zhao's office?

A drawer slams shut. A boom that sounds like a fist pounding on a table follows. "Damn it Zhao. I will kill you!"

Athena froze. What if...? It couldn't be. But she couldn't shake the thought.

Alexi.

Could it be Alexi?

He knows about SARS. He has no love for Americans. Or anybody for that matter. And here he is, in Zhao's office, looking for something and screaming about killing him.

Now she is alone in the lab with him. She can't let him see her.

Athena crouches low along the far wall, she creeps past Zhao's door, and then sprints into the darkened end of the

corridor. Alexi continues to pound and slam his way through Zhao's office, opening and closing drawers, cursing as he goes.

The sounds of searching stops. Had he heard her? Athena finds the door to the storage room. As quietly as possible, she eases it open and slips inside.

In the moment before she pulls the door shut, she examines the room. It is small, about eight feet long and five feet wide. The shelves are filled with glassware and reagents, ranging from the poisonous to the explosive. She reads the labels: Benzene, Acetone, Hydrochloric Acid, Sulfuric Acid ... Knock one over and deadly fumes will fill the room in an instant.

Alexi will be done soon. Athena closes the door and stands in the dark.

Outside, in the hall, a door slams. Another opens. Alexi is searching for something. Or someone.

In the blackness, Athena tries to silence her own frantic breathing.

SLAM. He is close. Five, maybe six doors away.

What can he be looking for?

Athena has always hated tight spaces. With Alexi outside, this is worse than a tight space.

SLAM. A door closes. Another opens.

Maybe he will skip the storage closet. If he doesn't, she is dead. She has to hide.

SLAM. He couldn't be more than four doors away.

Her only chance is to hide behind the door. She has to get to the corner. She inches past shelves of huge glass bottles. Feeling her way, she runs her hand along the door until she finds the shelves on the far side. She squeezes back against them.

Her head brushes up against something. It is large and round. She feels it tip. She raises her left hand to stop it, but it rolls to the side, tumbling. She tries to catch it with her right hand, but the smooth, curved glass gives her nothing to grab. The huge spherical flask slides down her arm. She turns in a final attempt to catch it.

Time stops as the flask slips past her startled fingers, drops to the floor, bounces once, and shatters.

Silence.

Footsteps in the corridor. "Who iz der?" demands an angry voice with a thick Russian accent. "Who da hell iz back der?" Alexi storms down the hall. "Come out!"

She presses herself against the wall as the door flies open and smashes into the side of her face.

Light floods the room.

Please, don't find me. Please. Don't. Find. Me. Athena can hear Alexi panting, enraged. She waits, her face throbbing with pain.

The light stays on. Alexi is just standing there. What is he doing? Her lungs are ready to burst. She closes her eyes and fights the overwhelming desire to breathe.

Then, another string of Russian curses and the light goes out. The door slams and again, Athena is in the dark. She takes a long slow breath.

She has never seen Alexi so angry. And she has seen him angry a lot. But she and Jack have smoked him out. They destroyed his pump. He is like a wounded animal. More dangerous than ever.

Athena isn't sure how long she stands there, frozen in darkness. Finally, she hears Alexi cross over to the other side of the lab.

She is about to slip out of the closet when she hears another sound. Another door. But on her side of the lab. It couldn't be Alexi.

Someone else is in the lab.

Who? Not Jim. He usually rolls in around noon. Zhao. It has to be Zhao.

She has to warn him. Fast. Before Alexi realizes he is there.

She wraps a hand around the doorknob, opens the door a crack, and peeks down the hall. A triangle of light paints the carpet outside Zhao's office.

Athena slips out, fear and adrenaline coursing through her. She dashes down the hall.

She darts into Zhao's office, closes the door behind herself and flips the deadbolt. Only then does she breathe a sigh of relief.

Zhao, who has his back to the door when Athena enters, turns towards her, startled. Her desperate warning comes in a frantic burst of words. "It's Alexi. He's crazy. I think he might be trying to kill us... I mean you. You and my mother. You... we have got to get out of here."

A voice booms across the lab. "Zhao? Zhao! Iz dat you?"

"Don't answer," she hisses. Heavy footsteps thunders across the lab. "It may sound crazy, but Alexi is the killer. He caused the epidemic."

Zhao stares at her, saying nothing.

"Zhao, do you haf key to lab freezer?"

The door handle turns and Alexi pushes against the deadbolt.

Alexi pounds on the door. "Zhao! Why you use lock? Open up!" Athena feels the door shudder as Alexi slams into it with his shoulder. The deadbolt held tight

Zhao opens a drawer of his desk and take out what looks like a roll of duct tape. He steps toward the door. Athena shook her head frantically and mouths the words, "No, no, don't open it."

Alexi pounds again, furiously. He is screaming. "Why do you take key? I need to get into freezer!! I am looking for two hours!"

Zhao steps closer toward Athena. He looks at her, raises a finger, and put it to his lips. Then he raises a gun and jams it into her temple. For the first time, she notices the angry purple welt on his cheek.

Zhao pushes her backwards and down, towards the floor. Athena collapses, as much from shock as from the force of the gun. Nothing makes sense.

Pinning her arms with his knee, he wraps tape over her mouth, looping it around her head in one quick motion.

Athena looks at him and sees a face she hardly recognizes, hard and vicious, as if he has put a mask over the friendly face she has seen each day in the lab. Then it dawns on her that he has not put on a mask of anger; he has removed a mask of kindness.

Within moments, she is bound and gagged.

"What is going on in dere?" Alexi pounds on the door, but the ferocity of his pounding seems to have diminishes. "Don't give up," she thought. Alexi, the man she has been thinking was a homicidal terrorist, has just become her only hope.

Zhao brings his head close to her. She can feel his breath on her ear. Then something hard, the barrel of the gun, against her skull. "Don't worry. I am not going to kill you." His words smells like garlic and evil.

"OK. Take it easy." Zhao says to Alexi, his voice calm as death, "I'm coming."

Athena braces herself as Zhao stands. The deadbolt clicks open. The door flies open, slamming against Athena's feet. Alexi's voice seethes with black anger. "Why you take key? Give it to me."

Zhao closes the door. Alexi turns. His eyes widens in horror. "What the...."

There is no hint of emotion in Zhao's face as he raises the gun and puts a bullet through Alexi's skull.