

Chapter 1

She'd be lucky if she got out of this alive . . . and she'd never been lucky in her life.

A heavy tread stopped outside the cell that caged Claire Ashe, steel rods squealed free, and the thick door opened to expose a massive guard reeking of North African spices and booze. The sweat soaking her clothes added to the stench.

"Come with me," he ordered.

"No."

He seized her with cobra quickness and wrenched her into his barrel-chest.

She stiffened. "Who are you? What do you want from me?"

"Red."

Pretty strange name in this part of the world, and his answer to her second question was to heave her into a narrow passage where a door suddenly opened and closed. In that instant she glimpsed familiar lab equipment. Then Red pushed her inside a white tiled room with head to foot showerheads on the opposite wall, a crude approximation of a decontamination unit. Her pulse missed the next beat.

"Undress. Shower." A leer accompanied his demand.

She grit her teeth and held her ground. "I will not." Maybe she shouldn't challenge him, but there were only two ways to go – defiance or capitulation. And she refused to submit blindly without knowing what was going on.

A knife blade surfaced from the crease between Red's thumb and fingers, and razor-edged steel slit the threads of her shirt buttons. They clattered at her feet, and the sharp knifepoint pressed against her chest, sinking between the cups of her bra.

She held her breath and managed to back up enough to pinch the blade with her own fingers to urge it away from her ribcage. "Okay, you win." This time.

Red smirked and his knife disappeared in his pants.

She turned her back to remove her clothes and step into the freezing spray. The familiar tang of microbial disinfectant used in Biosafety Level 4 containment facilities chilled her more than the water's temperature. Who brought her to a lab equipped to handle the world's most dangerous infectious agents, and why? Now she dreaded the answers as much as she

wanted them.

Red's eyes followed her every movement while she completed the cleansing routine. When she finished he tossed her a towel and shoved a dusty shopping bag in her direction. Inside she discovered not the lab clothes she expected, but a black raw silk evening dress she'd brought to Casablanca for official functions. Usually this conservative dress made her feel less exposed, but even after she put it on she felt Red's eyes breach the opaque fabric. Did he see her goose bumps? She snatched her floral scarf from the bottom of the bag, yanked back her wet hair, and tightened the scarf to the point of pain around a makeshift ponytail.

"Now what?"

He didn't bother to say but pushed her down cool sand-colored corridors roofed with adobe until he jerked to a halt before a shuttered door. He rapped smartly.

"Enter," a commanding voice responded.

Red swung the door wide and motioned her into a spacious, well-appointed room, so unlike the spare surroundings she'd seen so far, and all the scarier for that. An attractive man in his thirties with a shaved head, flawless features except for a jagged scar near his left eye, looked up from a laptop perched on a glass desk. He was dressed in black linen pants and a silk shirt, the sort of casual uniform favored by certain well-heeled Europeans.

"Welcome to Tivaz, Dr. Ashe."

She didn't feel welcome and struggled to keep her wits. She concentrated on identifying his accent, which sounded like a mix of British and French, but neither seemed like his native tongue.

"Please, have a seat," he said while gesturing toward the center of the room where two low-slung black leather chairs and a matching sofa rested atop a rippling silk oriental carpet.

Much as she wanted to sit before she started to shiver, she wanted to understand her situation. "Who are you?"

"I'm called Mr. Brown."

First Red, now Brown. What the hell was this all about?

"I'm in charge of Tivaz."

No kidding. At least her brain was still working. "Tivaz? What sort of facility is this?"

"Research and development."

Not like I'm used to. "What kind of R & D?"

"The kind you're familiar with."

"I'm -"

"I know who you are."

Uh-oh.

He strolled to a small glass and brass table lined with liquor. Very unusual in Morocco, meaning he either wasn't a Muslim or didn't practice his religion. She wasn't sure if that made her more or less worried. Mr. Brown seemed fixated on the bottles and she wondered if he was deciding what to say or what to drink. Above him she noticed an abstract painting with blocks of disparate color violently colliding, just like the acid inside her stomach. He spun toward her and her heart thumped, but she managed not to overreact.

"You're an up and coming American microbiologist spending time in Morocco with a local drug firm to help them manufacture BCG vaccine for TB. They plan to test it in Africa where tuberculosis runs rampant because of HIV."

How did he know so much? "So why am I here?"

"I hope you can help us."

Something told her standing up to this man was important so she unclenched her jaws to speak. "You abduct prospective employees? You could've invited me for an interview and offered me a fat paycheck."

"I couldn't risk you might decline."

"Then hire somebody else. The world is full of microbiologists, many with lots more experience than me."

"Ah, but you've devoted your career to studying the TB reproductive cycle, and we've isolated a particularly dangerous tuberculosis strain."

"Didn't you think I'd be willing to help you find a cure?"

His response was to press a flute of champagne into her hand. She hadn't even noticed him pouring it. "You passed through our decontamination area?"

"Was that necessary?"

He shuddered.

At last a reaction like a normal human being.

"Absolutely necessary. Dr. Black's lab is full of gruesome bugs, as you scientists call those tiny viruses and bacteria. I insist everyone be decontaminated before they see me. Red was following my orders."

"Did you order him to cut my clothes off?"

He dismissed it with a wave of his hand, and she noticed he wore a big amethyst ring. "I'll speak to him. You're to be left alone to help Dr. Black evaluate the stability of his TB strain."

"The more unstable the less likely to spread."

"If it's unstable, we need your help stabilizing it."

Claire's gut twisted. There was only one reason to make a lethal microbe more stable. "You mean weaponize it."

"Did I say anything about delivery systems?"

"You know, the U.S. and Moroccan governments are sure to look for me." Pray God her voice showed more conviction than she felt.

"Dr. Ashe, this part of the Atlas Mountains is claimed by many governments, but controlled by none."

She stuck her neck out. "That doesn't mean I'll help you."

He smiled. "I'm told you have a curious mind. Dr. Black's research will interest you."

"Not likely." Anyone called Dr. Black wasn't a person she wanted to know.

"At any rate, you can't fault me for asking for cooperation first. I've got nothing to lose."

"Neither do I," she shot back, perhaps a bit foolishly. She fingered her antique gold wedding band to comfort herself. How far she was from the windswept coast of Maine on the sunny summer day she married Ben, and then his funeral too soon afterwards. "I've already lost everything I value."

"Really? Don't be too sure. Life holds many opportunities." He pointed toward a small table set with white linen, bone china, silver, and cut glass crystal. "Shall we dine? Please take a seat."

He clapped his hands, the door opened, and a barefoot local glided in bearing two bowls of pale soup. "We'll start with vichyssoise. Afterwards coq'au'vin with a fine red burgundy."

The best epicurean meal on the planet wouldn't tempt her tonight even as she wondered if she'd live to eat another meal. To stand any chance of that she needed to really figure out this man, so she studied the place setting in front of her and waited for his next move.

"You like my china?"

"Limoges?"

He chuckled. "You're full of surprises. Yes. How old do you think?"

"Old. Maybe early 19th century?"

"Right again. I take a few place settings wherever I decamp." He narrowed his eyes. "Now you look surprised."

"I didn't expect luxury in no man's land."

"Westerners forget Persia was a sophisticated culture while

Europeans were still breaking bones in caves."

Her survival odds took a major dive. "You're Iranian?"

"I'm cosmopolitan. I've spent my life in Europe." He picked up his polished silver soup spoon while motioning for her to do the same.

Did he expect her to trust his civility in this insane situation?

"Tonight's for pleasure, before you begin work."

She eyed the wall behind him, where a curved sword with a decorative hilt hung on display. She wouldn't put it past him to use it to chop off her head when she refused to assist Dr. Black.

"Please, enjoy your soup."

She waited for him to take the first taste, but he clearly expected her to begin so she sampled the cool potato soup, delicately light . . . yet difficult to swallow.

Dr. Black presided over his well-equipped scientific kingdom with authority that would be crystal clear in any language. And he stunned and devastated her with the news he'd accomplished what she'd failed to do, decipher the secret of TB reproduction. But she soon learned that while he may have bested her there, the survival profile of his bioengineered tuberculosis bacillus evidently remained a mystery to him. Without that, he couldn't achieve the stabilization necessary to weaponize his creation. She hated to admit what small consolation that was in light of her personal failure as the scientist who would uncover the key to TB's reproduction.

"You will be responsible for tests to determine precisely how long my TB strain will survive in the air, and isolate its points of vulnerability," Black clarified as they passed a state-of-the-art centrifuge.

Dejected she'd lost out on the dream she'd been chasing and at the same time desperate to understand what Black had discovered about TB's reproductive cycle, she nonetheless knew she couldn't be part of his noxious project. "We might as well cut this tour short. I'm not interested in helping you." There, she'd said it, even though her words were certain to have catastrophic consequences.

"Such a sudden decision."

"Yes."

"TB is a cunning microbe, Dr. Ashe, and nearly impossible to eliminate from the body with antibiotics that disrupt the cell cycle. You, above all others, appreciate that, and have searched for the elusive signals that control TB's reproduction rate. Surely the challenge of learning more about my discovery is persuasion enough?"

Bastard. She'd tried to disguise her curiosity by glancing beyond Black's close-cropped salt and pepper hair to Red, who stood at the lab's entrance. But she knew Black recognized her temptation to know what he'd figured out. Any scientist would be curious. No! The price of knowledge is way too high. "Nothing can persuade me."

"How unfortunate. Our collaboration would have been fruitful. Your most recent article, speculating on the role of protein kinase as the messenger molecule that allows TB to adapt its reproduction rate, was very perceptive."

His flattery caught her up short. So, not only did he know her research, but also he'd chosen her specifically to bulletproof his lethal strain. That meant he also understood her approach to curing TB was unique and that she represented competition. Once she helped him stabilize his lethal bug, she'd be dead in two seconds flat. "I won't help you."

Black waved Red over. "Get rid of her. I told Brown she'd refuse. So be it."

She watched Black swipe a hand across his oily brow and flick sweat from his fingertips while she fought her fear, aware that soon she'd discover how life ended, as up close and personal as Ben had, and her parents, and . . .

Then, through a window she caught sight of a little girl in a containment bubble and jerked to a halt. "Oh my God."

The small naked body lay on a full-sized hospital bed cocooned by sheer plastic that didn't conceal the festering sores on her pale chest. The girl's head was bald in patches and her dark eyes stared into another universe.

The mesmerizing horror even stopped Red in his tracks.

She shouted at Black, "What have you done to her?"

"She has become infected with my TB strain."

"Who is she?"

"Leila."

"What are you treating her with?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? You have to try something. Anything."

"Treatment is useless, Dr. Ashe."

"You must do something for her!"

He came up to her, palms turned heavenward in a parody of supplication. "You are free to try. Consider her my special gift to you."

She blanched. "You infected her to prove something to me?"

He ignored the question, and continued speaking. "Go ahead. Attempt a cure. The resources of my lab are at your disposal. We are equipped for Level 4 containment." He pointed to protective suits hanging on the far wall. "Take precautions. Leila will show you death is not always easy."

She couldn't and didn't say no to his challenge. In fact, the Level 4 routine of showering and robing provided a touch of normalcy in this hostile environment where children were deliberately infected. She knew her Ph.D. in immunobiology wasn't the same thing as an M.D. in infectious disease, but she'd been blessed to work in Don Strong's lab and he always insisted his researchers spend clinic time to remind them their goal was to cure patients, not publish test tube results. And she was determined to help this child, who appeared to have no parents to protect her . . . just like the 5 year-old Claire on that awful day. She stashed her memories back in their lock box and refocused on the small girl in the bubble.

Right now the TB bacillus was destroying Leila's young life, the abscesses in her lungs literally erupting through her chest wall. Claire wished there weren't so many layers of rubber between her hands and the girl's tender frame as she inserted her arms in the sleeves of the bubble. If the plastic barriers hadn't been present, she was sure her own nostrils would protest the cheesy odor of the child's labored breathing. She'd smelled it on other kids near death during her aid mission to Zaire with Don Strong not so long ago.

Practicing what she'd observed in the best doctors, she told Leila everything she was about to do, though she'd no idea if the child understood English or could hear anything in her isolation.

"Leila, I'm opening your mouth. I'm going to put a swab on your tongue." The child's blank eyes showed no understanding, but Claire persisted. "It might tickle, but I'm doing this to help you get better."

She transferred the sample to where one of Black's assistants had stacked petri dishes and antibiotic-laden discs. Antibiotic sensitivity testing was automated these days, but there was nothing wrong with the old-fashioned methods. She brushed Leila's sample across the agar-laden petri dish and used tweezers to place antibiotic discs on top. The entire history of drug warfare against TB was present: streptomycin, PAS, contebin, rifampin, pyrazinamide, ethambutol, and isoniazid.

The test would demonstrate which of these antibiotics were effective against this particular TB strain. But Leila didn't have the luxury

of time, and Claire couldn't wait for the results. Taking bottles of rifampin and isoniazid from the shelf, she studied the little girl's wasted, sore-ridden body with as much detachment as she could muster. Then she estimated Leila's body weight, made a rough calculation of dosage, and added the medicine to the IV line delivering saline.

Would these antibiotics be effective? Was the standard starting regimen the best place to begin? The sensitivity tests wouldn't reveal answers immediately, since TB was notoriously slow growing and it often took weeks for bacterial colonies to become visible. She returned to the incubator to double-check that the agar dishes were in an environment ideally suited to the bacteria's reproduction . . . and refused to believe her eyes.

Streaks of bacterial colonies were already visible on the surface of the growth medium. She checked the clock – less than half an hour.

Impossible. This couldn't be TB!

She extracted a sample and began the staining process. When she focused the microscope, she observed the characteristics of TB's waxy cell wall. Somewhat irregular, yes, but she was rushing. Why? Because nothing she knew of, in nature or science, was capable of moving fast enough to outpace this demon microbe. She looked at Leila. Her wheezing breaths were shorter and more rapid than just a few minutes ago. What chance did the child stand, even with the aid of all available antibiotics, against such a consumptive foe?

Claire stayed by Leila's side, speaking to her softly, trying to keep her own tears from fogging her helmet, knowing that every labored breath carried Leila toward death. It didn't help to know she'd done everything she could to rescue Leila. She'd failed. All she could do now was control her voice so what the child heard wasn't sobs. And she could give Leila drugs to make her death as comfortable as possible. It wasn't much. Would she ever be able to look at a little girl again without feeling the shame of not saving Leila?

Dr. Black was waiting outside for her after Leila died. Defeated, she acknowledged, "The tuberculosis progressed unbelievably rapidly."

"Now you've seen for yourself. My TB strain is unlike any other. Perhaps you'll reconsider?"

Mute, Claire watched lab assistants, also dressed in Level 4 protection, carefully collapse the containment bubble and remove Leila from the room for incineration. She bowed her head in a silent prayer of respect for the life of Leila. "You deliberately infected her," she accused

him once more. When she looked up she saw he was still waiting for her to answer.

"She became ill. What else matters?"

"She was just a child, for God's sake."

"Yes, her immune system had not fully developed."

His scientific recitation of facts made her cringe inside. "I can't believe –"

"Do not trouble yourself. The girl was an orphan. She will not be missed, and what did life hold for her?"

She squeezed her fists. Who was he to prejudge the possibilities available to a young girl without a family? She was the one who'd awakened decades earlier strapped in the back of a wrecked auto, her parents unable to answer the screams of their little girl.

"Take some time to think," Black said. "I can promise you limitless intellectual challenge."

His beady eyes gored her in a cheeky dare, and if she could've spit on him over her facemask she would have.

When Red took her to the decontamination room outside the lab she noticed he kept his distance. She took her time in the cleansing shower, despite having undergone a heavy-duty version of the procedure in Black's lab. No wonder Mr. Brown insisted everyone go through this process before seeing him. One thing for sure, the TB Dr. Black had bioengineered was as rapid and lethal as any of the hemorrhagic viruses like Ebola. How had he done it? Her dream had been to solve the mystery of the TB replication center, a scientific breakthrough that could eradicate the scourge of TB. But Black had found the secret ahead of her, and would use his discovery to kill, not cure.

By the time she emerged from the cold spray her nipples had hardened to sharp points. She ignored Red's leer when he lobbed a towel in her direction. Slowly she lifted her arms and took time to dry her hair even though it kept her in his sights longer. Her decision was made. She'd live in this world of men who hid their identities behind a palette of colors, and discover everything she could about the killer TB strain sheltered at Tivaz. Tuberculosis was the study of academic laboratories, not bioterrorism sleuths. When Black's strain was unleashed, the world would be unprepared to respond unless she found a way to get outside these walls and give them a heads-up. And, she would, damn it.

She smoothed her black silk dress over her hips with steady hands.

"Take me to Mr. Brown."