

## CHAPTER 4

### *Mark O. Hatfield United States Courthouse*

**A**llison had been one of the first down the stairwell. The man in front of her pushed open the heavy door, and the sound of dozens of sirens rolled over them, so loud that she winced and put her hands up to her ears. She blinked in the pale sunshine and looked out at a world entirely different from the orderly one of the courthouse. She stopped short, but then a hand pushed her shoulder from behind. She stepped to one side, so that she wasn't blocking the exit, and pressed her back against the cold granite wall.

People were running in all directions. They cut across the street without regard to traffic. Cars sounded their horns and pulled into bike lanes and even into the oncoming lane in a futile effort to find a clear path.

Chaos.

“Move! Move, people, move! Move away from the downtown core!” A policeman standing on the corner shouted into a megaphone, but his words were nearly drowned out by the sirens. “Go across one of the bridges. Get out of downtown!”

Looking past him, Allison could see what she guessed must be the source of the problem. Half a block away was a knot of fire trucks, police cars, ambulances, cops, and firefighters—but what really froze

her blood were the men in white hazmat suits milling around, waving wands in the air as they checked small handheld machines. She thought of the thumbnail sketches of the victims of the recent terrorist attack that the *Oregonian* had been running. Would her picture and two paragraphs about her life be in next week's paper?

A section of sidewalk in front of an office building had been cordoned off by orange cones and yellow tape strung around spindly street trees. And in the middle, a tall Asian-looking woman stood in what seemed to be a blue kiddie pool, screaming as more men in white chemical suits and blue rubber boots sprayed her off with a high-pressure hose. Her eyes were closed, and her arms were wrapped around her head. And as Allison watched, she toppled over.

Allison didn't know where to go—just away from the sirens, away from whatever had happened to that poor woman. Get away before it got her too. A woman in a turquoise blouse darted in front of a dark sedan, and the next second she was on top of the hood, her body pressed against the windshield. Allison gasped in horror, but the woman pushed herself off the car and started running again, limping, before Allison could help her.

An older man in a heavy overcoat doubled over right in front of her, his breath wheezing. He clutched his fur collar. "It's in the air!" he yelled. "It's in the air! Terrorists! Sarin!"

Allison's breath caught in her chest. Sarin! What could that do to her developing baby?

All around her, dozens of people were trying to clear their throats, gagging, swaying, coughing, even falling to the ground. Allison stood frozen for a second. Should she try to help someone—maybe drag the middle-aged woman who sat panting in the middle of the sidewalk? But to where? Was any place safe? Would stopping to help just strike her down too? *Dear God*, she prayed, *help me know what to do*.

Her heart was beating so fast. The air smelled sour. Her mouth tasted like metal. She took one more look at the poor woman in the wading pool. She was still now, and the men in white suits were cutting off her clothes, dropping each scrap into a red plastic bag marked with hazard symbols.

Allison realized she had to save herself. Save herself and the baby inside her. If she didn't get out of here right now, they might both be dead.

All around her more and more people staggered, coughed, fell to the ground. One woman was crawling, still trying to get away. Others had given up. And in the middle of the crowd stood a Hispanic toddler, screaming. Allison hesitated. No one was rushing to her side. The child was all alone. And in a second she might succumb, as so many were, gagging, eyes rolling, falling to the pavement.

Allison raced to the little girl, grabbed her and held her close, and began to run.

Run while she still could.