Pandora’s Poison by Patrick McKeon

CDC epidemiologist FRANK SKORZENY is sent to Arizona when a member of a Grand Canyon hiking party is evacuated with bubonic plague. As it becomes apparent that the plague strain is resistant to antibiotics, an urgent search is initiated to find the hiker MIKE CARTER, who has returned to Manhattan. In searching for Mike, the FBI enter his apartment and discover his girlfriend lying dead in bed as her dog whines nearby. When Mike is eventually located, he tells Frank that his girlfriend will have been taking the dog to local parks, potentially spreading the disease. Efforts to close the parks are thwarted by Health Commissioner PAWEL POLOPOFF, who fears the political fallout a month before the mayoral election.

When the New York Coroner, JANE SIMMONS identifies a pneumonic plague infection, Frank realizes that the disease can now be spread as easily as a common cold. Needing to find a treatment, he contacts his mentor, who suggests the little known antibiotic alternative of bacteriophages. While they are working to isolate the proper phage, the number of plague cases grows every day and the disease begins to spread beyond New York. Jane notices while working with Frank, that he is uncomfortable dealing with the patients on a personal level, a difficulty attributed to his having failed to save his wife from a resistant infection several years earlier.

While investigating activity at the closed Staten Island Landfill, reporter BROOKE DANIELS discovers that the city has contracted out the disposal of plague victims to a company called Potemkin, which has installed incinerators to cremate the corpses in reopened dumps. During an interview with a plague survivor, Brooke learns that a rich Russian has been offering thousands of dollars to anyone who has survived the plague to make their immune blood available for transfusion into his daughter, ELENA GORDOVSKY, should she become infected. One of those who has agreed to the deal is Mike Carter, who moves into an apartment provided by the Gordovskys. Brooke encounters Elena in the street outside the Gordovsky’s building, and asks if she knows anything about the blood deal. Elena identifies herself and tells Brooke she would like to meet one of the donors. Brooke arranges a meeting with Mike, where Elena reveals that Potemkin is her father’s company and warns Brooke not to become too inquisitive.

Working in Bellevue hospital, Frank and Jane must choose which patients to save after they have identified a phage which is effective against the plague bacillus. As he prepares the selected patients for the phage infusion, his emotional detachment crumbles when one of the patients, a ten year old girl, thanks him and says she loves him. The next morning Frank and Jane are ecstatic as the phage treatment brings dramatic improvements to all the patients. Before they can publicize the results however, Polopoff fires Jane for experimenting with the patients and expels Frank from the laboratory, cutting them off from the phage cure.

Brooke is fired after having a tirade at her office when she learns that her story about the incineration of plague cadavers has been published by another reporter. As she wanders through the streets contemplating finishing the story as a freelancer, she calls Mike for commiseration. While they are talking she sees a news bulletin that the reporter who stole her story has been shot and killed. Mike suggests that they would have killed Brooke if her name had been on the story, and offers her the key to his old apartment for safety. She decides the best way to protect herself is to continue the investigation which she does by interviewing inmates employed loading the incinerators.

When Elena is brought to Bellevue hospital suffering from plague, Mike is summoned by her father to fulfill his side of the deal and donate blood. When Mike mentions the phage solution, Gordovsky and Polopoff have an agitated discussion in Russian, after which they agree to try the phages instead. A Russian doctor who overheard the conversation realizes Gordovsky and Polopoff intend to steal the phages for their own profit, and arranges for the remaining phages to be placed in a package, which Mike is convinced to remove from Bellevue and try to pass to Frank and Jane. Brooke reluctantly agrees to hold them for Frank. Afraid to return to her apartment, she is trying to decide what to do with the phages, when one of the inmates she interviewed, now released, calls her. She talks him into holding them in his apartment.

With the epidemic spreading internationally, Frank manages to enlist the Department of Homeland Security to enter Bellevue and remove Polopoff so the phage development can continue. He learns however, that the phages are no longer there. He contacts Mike, who tells him that Brooke has taken the phages. While they wait for her to arrive, Frank conducts an autopsy on Elena, which reveals that she did not die from plague, but rather poisoning. Brooke arrives and reveals that the phages had been taken to a trailer at the Jamaica Bay Landfill where the inmate works. But he is not able to remove them again. On seeing the poisoned corpse, Mike declares that it is not Elena, but a maid from Gordovsky’s building.

Desperate for access to the phages, Frank arranges for Brooke to contact the mayor directly about recovering the phages. The mayor, who has been having doubts about Polopoff, agrees to authorize them to enter the dump and take whatever they need. Brooke notifies Frank, but while she is leaving City Hall, Elena and Polopoff abduct her and race to the dump to seize the phages first. On the way, Elena confesses that she carried out the murders at Brooke’s newspaper, and that she would also have killed Brooke if she had been there. She intends to keep Brooke as a hostage until they recover the phages and meet her father at Kennedy Airport to escape in a private jet.

After recovering the phages from the landfill, Elena’s escape by car is aborted when they see police cars approaching. She drives to the top of the dump, where the inmates are burning plague victims and she arranges a helicopter to meet her. As Frank, Mike and the police enter the grounds, Elena forces Brooke into the helicopter with the phages. After taking off, Brooke first kicks the phage package out the door into the soft sand, then jumps into the surf. As they all leave the dump to return the phages to Bellevue, they see a plane with the Potemkin logo leaving from Kennedy airport.

Once the phages are back in Bellevue, replication begins and the cure is sent around the world, eventually bringing an end to the plague. While Frank is sitting in a park with Jane, the ten year old girl he had saved recognizes him and thanks him, telling Frank her first name which is the same as Frank’s late wife. Frank finally appreciates that even though his wife is gone, there are other people in the world which make life worthwhile.