CDC epidemiologist Frank Skorzeny struggles to avert a new Black Death when an untreatable bubonic plague strain leaps from the Grand Canyon to Manhattan. With all antibiotics failing, he turns to his mentor Rudi, who suggests a little known alternative--phages. As they try to identify the right phage to target the plague bacteria, Frank’s management of the epidemic is complicated by an emotional distance from his patients, rooted in his failure to save his wife from a resistant infection several years earlier.

With the epidemic spreading beyond New York, and then internationally, Rudi and Frank finally isolate an effective phage treatment, which cures the infection quickly and consistently. But before the discovery can be announced, a corrupt politician in New York with a financial interest in the epidemic continuing, expels Frank from the laboratory and confiscates the phages, while at the same time disparaging him for not being able to save his own wife.