

Brian Falkner

hear her tell me that I was eighty-eight. I'm not eighty-eight. I'm seventeen.

I am seventeen.

I am writing this in a spiral-bound notebook I found on my nightstand when I woke up. There was an odd-looking pen on top of it, but it writes well enough.

My name is Robert Powell-Sycamore.

I am seventeen.

I don't know where I am. I don't know why I'm here. The door is locked.



THE KISS

HOME

Samanthah Millah, with an extra 'h' on the end of both of her names, was sweet sixteen, soon to turn seventeen, and she had never been kissed. But there was a reason for that.

It wasn't that boys weren't interested in her, or that she lived by herself on a desert island (although it felt like that sometimes), or that she went to an all-girls school or anything like that.

Nobody kissed anymore.

Not since Marburg.

Marburg was a virus, a cousin of the deadly Ebola virus. Like Ebola it had come out of Africa, Angola to be exact. Countries surrounding Angola had shut their borders, but Marburg was smarter than that. It didn't try to cross the borders; it just flew out on an airliner in the body of a Canadian photojournalist

who had been sent to the country to cover the original outbreak.

For days it slowly multiplied in his bloodstream, before revealing its presence. In that time the journalist infected over seventy-five people. Two weeks later he was dead.

From Canada the disease spread to the United States, and from there it spread to the entire world.

The medical authorities were always three steps behind in trying to contain the outbreak, which had swiftly become an epidemic, and then a pandemic.

Now it was worldwide and it wasn't going away. 'Marburg': a pretty little name for a microscopic organism that loved nothing better than burrowing into human cells and making lots of little baby viruses.

There was no treatment and no cure. There was only prevention.

In a heartbeat, society changed. Kissing, hand-shaking, hugging had been the first to go.

Samanthah could live with that. She had never been much of a hugger anyway, and hand-shaking had always seemed a bit of a male thing, and also a bit dirty to her. Half the time boys at her school had their fingers up their noses, were scratching their butts, or picking at their teeth. Sometimes all three. Who'd want to touch *those* hands?

They probably didn't wash them after using the toilet either.

Samanthah took off her medi-mask even before she had kicked the front door shut with a flick of her foot. She hung it on the peg with her name on it and gave it a spray from the disinfectant bottle on the table underneath. The stuff smelt revolting when wet, but it would dry quickly.

'I'm home!' she yelled, but got no answer. It was after 5. School had finished at 3 but she'd had chess club after that. She'd won two and lost one, which put her almost at the top of the leaderboard, second only to Jun Peng.

Her mother was in the TV room with the volume up loud, the sounds of some daytime soap foaming through the walls. Her sister had band practice and wouldn't be home till later. Her father was still at work.

Samanthah went to the bathroom, peeled off her day-gloves and dropped them into the sanitisation unit.

She showered next, with the antiseptic soap and shampoo. Marburg was not airborne (God help the world if it ever learnt how to fly) but even so it was a sensible precaution to remove the crud of the world from your hair and skin. The atmosphere was a soup, and who knew what you were bringing into the house.

Clean, and feeling fresh, she went straight to her bedroom, opened her computer and filled out her logbook

for the day. Everybody she had met, everybody she had talked to, every place she had been.

That was the law.

Not filling in your logbook correctly, or in full, was a criminal offence.

She could remember a time when it hadn't been. When there was no logging. She was old enough to remember 'BTV', as the kids at school liked to say. Before The Virus. Before Marburg. But that seemed so long ago.

She finished and logged off. There would be more to do after the game tonight, but she'd do that when she got home.

'What time's dinner?' she shouted, and when her voice failed to make an impression on *The Bold and the Beautiful*, she walked downstairs and into the TV room.

Her mother was a thin, rather severe looking woman in her forties, with blonde hair but grey roots.

'What time is dinner?'

'When your sister gets home,' her mother said, smiling.

'But the game starts at 6.30!'

'Make yourself something,' her mother said. 'You're quite capable.'

The ads finished and her mother turned the TV sound back on. On the screen a bold man standing behind a beautiful woman started an earnest conversation with the back of her head.

Samanthah shut the door.

Since Marburg the television had become her mother's only friend. That was an epidemic every bit as real as Marburg. It was safer just to stay at home, so that was all a lot of people did. With phones and social media, who really needed to see anyone in person? Samanthah sighed and went into the kitchen. She would look after her own dinner. Again.

Jenny, younger by four years, was obviously her parents' favourite. But there was no use crying about it. Samanthah's boyfriend Darren was playing striker tonight and she didn't want to miss it. If she wasn't going to starve through the entire game, she'd have to feed herself.

She scanned the contents of the fridge. There was a packet of chicken thighs in a plastic tray at the back of the bottom shelf. She was halfway through slicing them, intending to fry them and make a wrap, when she remembered to check the expiry date.

The chicken went straight in the bin.

She still made the wrap, but replaced the chicken with a little lean ham. A brand new pack, well before its 'Best By' date.

Half an hour later her mask was back in place with new gloves, already disinfected, and she was wheeling her bicycle out of the garage, past the Audi, which her mother barely used now.

In the early days of Marburg her father had built a huge stone wall in front of their house, topped with broken glass. He had also strengthened the fence around their backyard and fortified that with barbed wire. Samantha had joked that he was expecting *The Attack of the Mutant Zombies*. Her father just said it was best to be prepared.

Samanthah knew what the wall was really for. If Marburg got out of control there could be a complete breakdown of society. Anarchy. And if that happened it would be everyone for themselves.

The gate was a sturdy metal thing, with sharp spikes on the top. It slid open quickly, and she made sure it shut behind her before heading off to the hockey pitch.

THE GAME

Darren had been lucky. A winger in the school footy team, he had been one of those with the natural ability to make a switch when football, like all other full contact sports, was banned.

Darren's speed and his hand-eye coordination had won him a place on the school hockey team, one of the sports that was still allowed, provided the players wore masks.

The hockey complex was sponsored by a freight removal company and their logo was imprinted on the artificial turf, as well as on the side of the main clubhouse. There were four fields, named after planets for some reason known only to those who had built it.

Darren was playing on Jupiter, the main ground, where they played the rep games on weekends. That was good, the seats were better. Samantha made her way along the stands to where a group of her friends were sitting. Most of them had boyfriends or brothers in the game, or were in the girls' team, which was playing next.

Hockey, in the age of Marburg, looked like a horror movie. The hockey masks were made of fibreglass with holes for the eyes, nostrils and smaller holes for breathing, and presumably sweating. There were built-in filters, to prevent infection. Although hockey was not a contact sport, nobody wanted to take any chances. But in the harsh glare of the pole-mounted floodlights, the game looked like a field full of psychotic killers trying to hack each other to death with scythes.

It was cold. It was always cold here, even in summer. Darren had a theory that the sprinklers they used to dampen the turf before games had an effect on the local atmosphere, creating a sub-climate where heat could not penetrate.

Samanthah thought it was just something to do with the way the surrounding hills and the nearby lake

channelled the wind across the grounds. Whatever the reason, during night hockey games it was the coldest place in the universe.

But viruses didn't like the cold either.

The game was exciting, a real nail biter. Locked up with one minute to go, it was Darren who busted open the right wing with a long weaving run, leaving three opposition players in his wake. The defenders blocked him, but he flicked a pass off to Tom, in the centre, then looped around the defenders and received the ball back with only the goalkeeper to beat. He feinted to the right, then tapped to the left and the ball slipped past the keeper's outstretched feet and hit the backboard with a harsh clack.

The buzzer sounded for the end of the game and the rest of the players were all over Darren, cheering and hugging him, forgetting all about the safety rules. The referee and the sideline umpires were immediately in there, blowing whistles, trying to break up the celebration. Viral Safety came first. Everybody knew that.

When Darren stood up, Samantha was hardly concerned to see that his mask had come off. It wouldn't be a problem. Every player was tested weekly. You wanted to play, you had to get tested – simple as that. And there hadn't been a new case of Marburg in Australia in the past three months. Who cared about a slipped mask.

Darren walked her home, holding her hand, skipping beside her like a small child, full of adrenalin, endorphins and excitement. With her other hand Samantha pushed her bike.

'There were scouts at the game,' he said. 'National scouts. Of all the games to have a blinder, whoa, it's just like, whoa.'

'Did they speak to you when it was over?'

He shook his head. 'No, but they were there, and I had one of the best games of my life. They have to have noticed.'

'Yay you,' Samantha said. She was genuinely happy for him. Hockey was already shaping up as one of the major new television sports. Players were being recruited for outrageous sums of money, some straight out of high school for the big clubs' development programs. No wonder Darren was excited.

She could feel his grip through the layers of protective rubber, although she couldn't feel his skin. It would be nice to feel his skin. But nobody did that anymore. Well, almost nobody.

Was it love – what she felt for Darren? The other girls at school were always talking about love. For some of them that was all they talked about. How their love was pure and great. She wasn't so sure. Maybe she was in love with him. She missed him when they weren't together. Was that love? She sometimes saw his face in

her dreams. Was that love? She strongly wanted to kiss him. Maybe that was love.

She'd had a good day, jumping almost to the top of the leader board at chess club. He'd had a great day, too. They were both buzzing.

It was outside her house that it happened. Standing in the shadow of the big stone wall with the broken glass top to keep out the mutant zombies and crazed Marburg killers.

She stopped on the side, where the security cameras her father had installed could not see.

'Kiss me,' she said.

He leant forward but she put a hand on his chest and pushed him gently away.

'Masks off,' she said.

'Are you sure?'

'You're not infected,' she said. 'I'm not infected. Why not? Other people do it.'

'Who?'

'Jennifer and Gary,' Samantha said. 'She told me.'

'Not true,' he said. 'I heard about that. They clissed.'

Cling film kissing, or 'clissing', had become popular since the outbreak of the disease. A layer of cling film provided protection and it was said to feel almost like the real thing.

'That's what Jennifer told her parents, and what she

told Gary to say,' Samantha said. 'But I know that after a couple of minutes they threw away the cling film and carried on without it.'

'But Gary said—'

'She swore him to secrecy. Doesn't want her parents to find out. She only told me because I'm her best friend.' She stopped, reflecting on what she had just said. 'Don't you say anything to anyone!'

'I won't,' he said. 'I wouldn't.'

'I mean it. Don't you dare breathe a word! If it got back to her parents—'

'I won't,' he said. 'Really. I won't.'

The moment stretched, a bit uncomfortably. She wheeled her bike over to the wall and rested it against the stone surface, then looked around, checking for cars, or passers-by.

On the other side of the street was a small park, deserted at this time of night. The nearest neighbours on that side were a long way down. Nobody could see them. Even so, she took Darren's gloved hand and pulled him into the deepest shadow of the wall, before slowly slipping her mask down to her neck.

He seemed uncertain, but eventually did the same.

It was amazing to see his lips. Strong lips, not thin or dry like her father's or soft and coloured like her mother's. It made her realise how seldom she saw

anyone's lips, except those of her own family. Noses, too, were always covered by a medi-mask.

His nose was straight, and not too big or small. He was quite handsome underneath his mask. The thought of what she was about to do thrilled her. It wasn't just about a kiss; it was the thought of breaking all the rules that were making life so sterile and dull.

She looked up at him and parted her lips slightly, waiting. He moved forward and slowly bent down. Closer, closer. Then there was just the lightest brush of skin, bare, unprotected skin, on skin. His lips on hers, a soft warmth that was only there for the time it takes a heart to beat, then it was gone. A butterfly dancing across her face, no more, and now he was pulling back.

'We shouldn't do this,' Darren said. 'That's how germs are spread.'

'But neither of us has any germs.'

'Even so,' he said.

'Even so,' she agreed, and in some inner place she was relieved. She pulled her medi-mask up quickly, and gave him a long hug goodbye so he'd know she wasn't angry with him, then she opened the gate and slipped quickly inside, into their sanitised, isolated home.

She could still feel Darren's lips on hers as she parked her bike and took off her jacket. She could still smell him.

And taste him.

THE DEBATE

The TV was on in the lounge room when she got home, but her parents were upstairs and Jenny was in bed. Some evening current affairs show was on, in the middle of a panel discussion about Marburg. Normally it wouldn't have interested her, such things had been debated over and over for years, but tonight she dumped her jacket over the arm of a sofa and sat down, absentmindedly running her index finger around the outline of her lips.

On one side of the argument was a woman named Claire Newbourne, an anti-masker, a member of a group opposed to the government regulations on Marburg. Presenting the case for the other side was Dr James Mahoney, a famous virologist.

Melissa Woolley was the moderator. She had a reputation as a tough cookie.

Newbourne had high cheekbones that jutted above her medi-mask. (She might have been opposed to wearing masks, but she wasn't allowed in the studio without one.) Her cheeks seemed gaunt and her hair, although tied back, had escaped here and there and stuck out at odd angles.

Dr Mahoney, on the other hand, looked exactly like the experienced professional that he was. He wore wire-rim glasses and what was left of his grey hair was cut extremely short.

Newbourne was in the middle of a scathing attack on what she called the 'nanny state'.

'The government wants to interfere in every aspect of your life,' she said. 'They put fluoride in your water, they stick vaccination needles in your arms, they want to control everything you do. Our ancestors didn't have to deal with this kind of interference and they survived okay.'

'Ms Newbourne,' Dr Mahoney said. He looked at her and smiled, considering how to frame his answer. He seemed to have heard these kinds of arguments many times before. 'Fluoride is put in water because it reduces tooth decay and gum disease. Vaccinations save millions of lives around the world, including here in Australia, every year. But we are not here to debate either of those issues—'

'Vaccinations cause autism,' snapped Newbourne.

'Well, no, actually they don't,' Mahoney said. 'That lie has been thoroughly debunked. But we are not here to debate vaccinations. Marburg is much simpler to understand. It is a virulent, deadly, contagious disease. If you contract it, you will almost certainly die. Three-quarters of all people infected die within two weeks. There is no cure. There is no treatment. Only prevention.'

'It's a conspiracy,' Newbourne said. 'All this logging. Do you really believe that's about some obscure virus?'

It's about the government monitoring where you are. Who you meet. Controlling every aspect of your life.'

She had a fiery zeal about her. That didn't make her wrong, but it did make her seem like a bit of a psycho.

'It is not an obscure virus,' Mahoney spread the fingers of his right hand and pressed them to his forehead as if he had a headache. 'Millions of people have died. More are dying every day.'

'But not in Australia,' Newbourne said.

The moderator jumped in at that point.

'It is a valid point, though, about the logging, isn't it?' she said. 'It's worse than 1984. The government knows your every movement, because you, by law, are required to tell them.'

Mahoney nodded. 'That is true. It's a terrible invasion of privacy. I don't dispute that, and I don't like it. But I am a virologist, not a politician. Without that data there would be no way to contain an outbreak. And there are laws in place that prevent anyone accessing the private information unless there is a Marburg outbreak.'

'We are a first world country,' Newbourne said. 'This is a third world disease. It affects India and Africa — places like that.'

Her opinion of 'places like that' was clear from the expression on her face.

Mahoney sighed. 'The problem is far greater in those countries because of poor sanitation. But that

doesn't diminish the problem here. If one infected person was to use public transport without taking the proper precautions, then everyone else on that train or bus would be at risk.'

The moderator leant forward. 'The question I am going to pose to you, Ms Newbourne, is simple. Is it worth the risk?'

'This is scaremongering,' Newbourne said. 'The solution is out of all proportion to the actual problem.'

'Dr Mahoney, your response to that?'

Mahoney took off his glasses and polished them with a cloth he took from a pocket. He was stretching out the moment, rather than unsure what to say next. Perhaps he wanted the viewers to consider Newbourne's words carefully before he responded.

'It's easy to say things like that, but it doesn't make them true.' Mahoney poked the cloth back into his pocket. 'Say them often enough and some people will start to believe you. And that's the real danger here. The reason we have such a low rate of Marburg infection in Australia is precisely because of the early government intervention. The insistence on masks and gloves and other precautions. If we can stop this virus spreading, then eventually we will wipe it out.'

'It is a government conspiracy. Many people, many very intelligent people, some of the best, have suggested

that the disease was created by the government simply to control the lives of the population.'

'That is simply absurd,' Mahoney said. 'Even disregarding the fact that the disease began in Africa, not Australia. Let me describe what we are up against. It starts with a headache—'

'Scare tactics.'

'No, I am just stating facts.' Mahoney turned to the moderator. 'If your viewers would rather not hear this I could direct you to a fact sheet on our website.'

'Carry on,' she said, and Newbourne glared at her.

'Painkillers do not help the headache.' Mahoney shrugged. 'Then comes the backache, then nausea and fever. You become sullen and withdrawn as the virus multiplies in the brain. Your eyelids appear droopy and your eyes themselves turn bright red.'

Newbourne looked away.

'By now you have severe diarrhoea and are vomiting, constantly,' Mahoney said. 'Your vomit is black and frothy. It smells like an abattoir. Already the virus has started eating into your insides, and you are bleeding internally. This vomit, by the way, is seething with the virus, as is all of your blood by now. Your entire body is becoming jammed with blood clots. It is as though your whole body is having a stroke. And then comes stage four. I won't describe that in detail, but let me just say that it is as though