

your body is dissolving, on the inside as well as the outside. And every part of it is infectious. It is ludicrous to suggest that our government, that any government, would deliberately inflict that on their citizens.'

Newbourne clapped slowly. 'Very descriptive, doctor, and yes, accurate. But that doesn't change the fact that the risk of contracting the disease is still very low. Especially with everyone else walking around in masks and gloves.'

Mahoney was suddenly quiet. He folded his arms across his chest. 'So that is your solution? Everybody else takes precautions so you won't have to?'

Newbourne tried to backtrack, but her cause was already lost.

Samanthah turned the TV off. She sat quietly and thought of the taste of Darren on her lips.

THE CALL

Darren rang the following afternoon while she was studying history. Not her favourite subject. Basically it was pretty interesting, learning about places, people and societies in the past. But school somehow had a way of taking a really good subject and making it incredibly boring. She would love to have learnt about the

Romans, or Egyptians, or one of the great world wars. But their topic was political parties in Italy.

It was hard to find anything to get excited about there.

She let Darren ring two or three times before answering.

'Hello, lover-boy,' she said.

From the silence on the other end she knew immediately that something was wrong.

'What is it?' she said, before he could get a word out.

'I'm getting re-tested.'

'Re-tested? Why?'

'The whole team's getting re-tested.'

'Yes, but why?'

Her heart was pounding and there was a knot of fear growing in the pit of her stomach.

'Preston, he plays fullback—'

'I know where he goddamn plays! What's wrong with him?'

'He just tested positive.'

Time stopped.

'How—What—' she managed.

'His brother's girlfriend is one of those anti-maskers. They think she gave it to the brother and the brother gave it to Preston.'

'They're testing you.'

'This afternoon,' he said.

She clamped a hand over her mouth to stop herself from screaming. *Positive!* Nobody she knew had ever tested positive. That happened in isolated communities or crowded city centres where people didn't bother, or sometimes forgot to be careful. Not Preston! She thought of Mahoney's description of how the disease progressed and felt bile rise in her throat.

'But you're okay, right?' she said.

Another silence.

'Darren? Darren!'

'Sure. Sure. I'm okay. We'll know for sure when they get here to do the test.'

'What do you mean when they get here? Aren't you going down to the testing clinic?'

Silence.

'Darren, you better talk to me,' she said.

'We're in quarantine,' he said. 'Anybody that had any kind of contact with Preston is in lockdown. I'm not allowed to leave the house, and neither are any of my family.'

'Oh, my God!'

'Just until we get tested,' he said. 'After that, everything will be fine.'

The knot in her stomach had turned into a hard lump, as though she had swallowed a hockey ball.

'Will you tell them?'

He frowned. 'Tell them what?'

'Don't be a dick,' she said, thundering in a whisper. 'You know what. The kiss.'

'I have to,' he said. 'I have to list everybody I've had contact with since the game.'

Samanthah swore. She was glad her mother had the TV up loud in the other room.

'Don't tell them,' she said.

'I have to, Sam.'

'No you don't. If you do, then next the men in white jumpsuits will be plastic wrapping my house. Don't tell them.'

'I don't have a choice,' he said.

'Then wait. Wait till after you're tested. If you're clear, then I'm clear, right?'

'I guess,' he said.

'I'm not going anywhere. And neither is anyone else in this house. Dad'll be home soon, too. So even if we're all infected, we're not going to do any damage tonight, right?'

'I guess.'

'Call me as soon as you know,' she said.

After he rang off she closed her study books. The House of Medici was going to have to wait. There was no way she was going to study now.

The knot of fear kept growing. Could a simple touch of the lips have been a death sentence – not just for her, but for her whole family?

Had she infected them? Maybe. Through surfaces she touched, plates, cutlery, taps in the bathroom, the flush button on the toilet.

By dinner time she had no appetite at all. Her stomach was just a solid tight balloon.

Her mum had made spag bol but the red sauce looked like blood and vomit on a bed of intestines and after bravely lifting the fork to her mouth she put it back down.

'Are you all right?' asked Dad.

'Just worried,' she said.

'About what?'

She thought about that. She couldn't tell them. Not yet. After Darren's test, if it was positive, then she'd have to. But until then ...

'I was watching TV last night.' She'd decided to stick to safe truths. 'A doctor gave a pretty detailed description of what Marburg does to the human body.'

'Ewww,' Jenny said. 'Gross!'

'That's irresponsible.' Mum put her fork down.

'It's not irresponsible,' Dad said. 'She should know. Everyone should.'

'Well, they're scaring them,' Mum said, her voice rising.

'And they should be scared.' Dad nodded. 'Otherwise—'

He never got to finish.

Samanthah's stomach heaved and she yakked the remains of her lunch all over her spaghetti bolognaise.

THE BATHROOM

Ten minutes later, she was in the bathroom, sitting on the toilet. She had already heaved her stomach dry, but now it was pouring out of the other end.

'Oh my God,' she said. 'Oh my God. Oh my God.'

'I can't believe she kissed him,' she heard her father say in a low voice, trying not to be heard. 'Without any kind of protection!'

'The ... ambulance is on its way,' her mother said in a much louder voice.

From the slight hesitation, 'ambulance' meant the Emergency Medical Teams that had been set up to deal with the outbreak.

The police would probably be the first to arrive and seal off the area. The ambulance would be next, to take her to the isolation ward. The house would be sealed; her logbook was already open to investigators. Her life was over, and so maybe was that of Jenny, the tuba player, her only sibling. Maybe her parents' lives also.

Outside of that, people were safe. At school, at the shops, everywhere she'd been she had worn her mask

and gloves. She should not have spread the disease. It was funny that at a time like this her first concern was how many other people she might have infected.

The pain inside was intense. Her stomach was on fire. Her skin felt like it was crawling and she was shivering, which she knew was the first sign of fever.

Eight to nine days. That was how long she had to live. Two weeks if she was lucky.

All because she had desired those strong full lips.

She was crying now, snot and tears running down her face, then her stomach turned over again and she had to quickly turn and let it pour into the bowl. She shut her eyes.

THE ISOLATION WARD

She had a private room. Everyone started off in one, the nurse had told her. Only once your illness was confirmed as Marburg were you moved to the main ward. There was no longer any need to keep you isolated. Except from the outside world.

The room was sterile. The walls were stainless steel. So was the floor. And the ceiling. Everything shone, reflected her, lying there on the stainless steel bed.

There were two doors to get into her room, creating a kind of airlock. The inner door wouldn't open until

the outer one was shut. In between the two doors was an emergency shower.

Samanthah was on anti-emetics to stop her vomiting, and anti-diarrhoeals as well.

The drugs were being dripped into her through a tube in her arm, because there was no point in taking pills. Because. Well—

There was a bucket beside her bed, so she only had to turn her head and lean out a bit. But the anti-emetics seemed to be working. She had used the bucket only once. There was also a toilet in this private room, but her system seemed to have emptied itself out at home and she hadn't gone again since she got here.

The pain was intense, despite the painkillers they assured her were also being drip-fed into her.

This would only get worse. There was no cure. No treatment. It would keep on getting worse until she died.

She felt light-headed, even though she was lying down.

Darren was sitting in one of the chairs beside the bed. A woman in a doctor's uniform was in the other. They had just appeared there, like magic, but that couldn't be true.

She had blacked out, or maybe just slept. It could have been the painkillers. But what was Darren doing here? He didn't even look sick.

'I'm clear,' he said, as soon as he knew she was awake. 'Clear?' her voice, like her brain, seemed to be wrestling with thick sludge.

'No Marburg,' he said, and it was as though he was struggling not to laugh with the joy of that news.

'Lucky you,' Samantha said. How could she have caught it if Darren wasn't infected?

'Your tests are clear, too,' the doctor said.

Samanthah looked at her. She wore a full biohazard suit but the helmet was off and her face was covered by no more than a standard medi-mask.

'I don't understand,' she said.

'Have you eaten any undercooked chicken recently?'

Samanthah shook her head. 'There was some old chicken in the fridge but I threw it out.'

'Did you wash your hands afterwards?' She tried to remember.

'You have salmonella poisoning,' the doctor said. 'It usually comes from eating undercooked chicken, or touching it then touching other food.'

'I don't have Marburg?'

The doctor smiled. 'You're all clear.'

Funny, even just hearing that, Samantha felt a bit better. She sat up straighter in bed and took a sip of orange juice from the glass on the nightstand. The acidity cut through the thick feeling in her mouth, and washed away the bitter aftertaste of sick.

'All clear,' Darren said. 'Just like me.'

Samanthah began to laugh, but he got out of his chair and stopped her.

Despite the law, despite the virus, despite the presence of the doctor, he did it with his lips.