

DELIA SINNI

THE VIRUS

POPPY REMEMBERED BACK to when all this began. She had been in Spain when the outbreak happened the year before. She had stopped at a market stall on La Rambla in Barcelona, admiring the fresh fruits and vegetables, while the blood rippled in her veins to the tune of a busker's Spanish guitar. She had heard all the health warnings on the Spanish news about the outbreak, but she had been living on the backpacker's diet of fast food and two-minute noodles for the past two months and her mouth now salivated at the mere thought of the cool, acidic crunch of the fresh Greek salad and the heartiness of the spicy carrot and tomato soup she was going to make that night.

'It's probably just a media beat-up. I bet it's not even real.' She thought to herself, cynically.

She bought the ingredients for both dishes at the market stall and headed back to her apartment, where she whipped up a mouth-watering feast. She went to bed with her hunger deeply satiated.

That night however, Poppy woke to find herself drenched in cold sweat and with a strange blistering sensation all over her body. She felt the angry storm welling up in her stomach and made it to the toilet bowl in time to see last night's dinner come back to haunt her. She sat there on the bathroom floor, heaving for the whole of the night and the next morning.

A doctor was called. An ambulance was called. She heard the wail of the sirens stop outside in the street. Rubber-gloved astronaut-looking men came wading into her room, cautiously approaching the bed where she lay, speaking in breathy foreign tongues. Stethoscopes, thermometers, needles and drips became her suns and moons over the next few days in hospital.

Poppy was afraid. On the second day they put a blindfold over her eyes and she struggled to free her bound hands so she could remove it.

'What kind of a country is this, blindfolding and restraining their hospital patients?' she thought to herself in disbelief.

She demanded they tell her what was happening, but nobody spoke English and all of her pleas to be released went ignored. Poppy began to doubt her own sanity. Was she hallucinating? Was she in a psych ward? Had she been kidnapped and was now the victim of some cruel science experiment?

After a fortnight had passed, Poppy was beginning to feel better. Her appetite had returned and the blistering feeling in her skin had ceased. But she felt different. She felt heavy and solid when she tried to sit up in bed. Her skin felt tight around her muscles in a way it never had before. She wondered what day it was and how long she had been in hospital. She had no concept of time as the unchanging routine of meal-medication-sleep made it seem as though the days had all merged into one long, never-ending nightmare.

One day, out of the clutter of hospital beeps, shuffling feet and foreign accents, Poppy identified a man's voice speaking in English outside her room. The man's footsteps became louder as he entered. He stopped at the end of her bed and she heard the shuffling of papers and the scratching of biro on a clipboard. She heard the snap of his pen making a full stop.

After two weeks of being frustratingly mute, Poppy recovered the use of her voice.

'Excuse me,' she asked in a weak, bed-ridden tone. 'Would you be so kind as to explain what I am doing here and why I am bound and blindfolded?'

The man seemed surprised at her request.

'What? You haven't been told?'

'No. Nobody's told me a thing since I got here.'

The man sighed and she heard him shift his weight to his other foot. A page was turned and he whispered under his breath as he scanned through her notes.

'You're a doctor right? Tell me what's going on!' Poppy demanded.

The doctor let out the long, slow breath he had been holding for the past minute and a half.

'It isn't good news, Poppy. You've contracted a strain of a particularly serious virus. You may have heard about the recent outbreak in Europe?'

'What?' Poppy was stunned. 'No!'

The truth finally dawned on her. 'NO!'

'Yes, Poppy I'm afraid you have contracted the C1-Rt virus.'

There was a long pause before Poppy could react.

‘Take the blindfold off me! TAKE IT OFF!’

Poppy squirmed and struggled to free herself from her bonds.

‘I’m afraid I can’t do that yet Poppy. As you may know, the side effects of this condition are fairly disturbing. Your state of health at the moment is fragile and the stress of seeing . . . well . . . it won’t do you much good.’

The doctor remained composed, as if he had had this conversation many times before.

‘So I’ve got the vegetable virus?’ said Poppy with exasperation.

She had used up what little energy she had left and had become too weak to continue to struggle.

‘Yes, quite a serious case of it, I’m afraid.’

He sat down on the chair next to her bed.

‘The doctors here have managed to halt the progression of the virus any further throughout your body, so you are lucky enough to still have full use of your limbs and internal organs. But what damage has already been done is unfortunately, irreversible,’ said the doctor.

‘Irreversible.’

Poppy repeated the word under her breath. They sat together in silence for several minutes. After a little while, the doctor got to his feet.

‘Wait, doctor.’ Poppy gulped, as she finally mustered up the courage to ask the question she’d been burning to know the answer to. Although she dreaded the answer to this question with every fibre of her being, she just *had* to know.

‘So what . . . what have I become?’ her voice faltered weakly.

The Doctor sat back down in his seat and cleared his throat. ‘Poppy,’ the Doctor’s voice softened with empathy. ‘The virus that you have is contracted by humans when they eat a C1-Rt infected vegetable. The main side effect of human contraction of this virus is that the human takes on the characteristics of the ingested vegetable. It’s skin, it’s foliage, it’s roots, everything. Poppy, the doctors here analysed your stomach contents when you were admitted. We believe that you ingested an infected carrot.’

It was Poppy’s first day of her new job promoting carrot juice for a juice bar that had just opened in a busy shopping strip. It was thirty-five degrees outside and she could feel herself cooking in the rays of heat that were rippling up from the pavement. She began to feel light-headed and the street around her started to throb in time to the pounding pain behind her eyes. Her throat

stung as her lungs recycled the hot air around her. She had to be careful about too much sun exposure. She really needed a cool drink.

As it was almost knock-off time, Poppy decided to desert her post at the shopfront, (where she had been shouting out to passers-by, spruiking the many benefits of carrot juice) and walked around the corner to a nearby drinking fountain. As she strolled along looking straight ahead, avoiding her reflection in the shop windows, she noticed an attractive young man with sandy blonde hair walking around the corner from the opposite direction. The man's eyes caught Poppy's swift glance and although she quickly averted her eyes, she could still feel his stare boring into her very being. Poppy was used to being stared at, but she tried not to let it bother her too much.

As they approached each other, with a sudden, jerky movement, the man, stepped right up to Poppy, bent down, unhinged his jaw as wide as a shark's and proceeded to take a huge bite out of Poppy's right arm.