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A BEAUTIFUL, TERRIBLE THING

Miranda Moore



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For you, whoever you are

Chapter One

Nathan

30 June, Edinburgh
The boy, he's dying.
He's dying in front of me, on the tarmac, and there's nothing I can do.
I've killed him.
I've killed a boy.

It's supposed to be the first day of the rest of your life. A new beginning.

When the teachers wish you all the best for the future, they wheel out all the clichés. They talk about unwritten books, new chapters, dreams, ambitions, opportunities, oysters. They talk about creating your own destiny. They don't pull you aside and say, 'Hey, Blakey, yours starts and ends tomorrow.'

My new beginning lasted two hours and thirty-seven minutes,

from the moment I woke up to the moment the world stopped.

So. I was driving my mum's car, feeling mighty chuffed with myself. I was off to meet Scotty at the shops. The morning haar was starting to burn off and there was a summer buzz in the air – you know, when the sun's shining and everyone's smiling and the whole world's happy – or maybe it was just me. I was fiddling with my tunes on my phone, turning up 'Starlight' – my favourite track on my favourite album – thinking: *Thursday, no Maths, no Geography. Freedom!*

I looked up, braked hard, roared.

Thud.

My body lunged, the seatbelt slamming me in the chest. Filling my vision, a boy, four or five years younger than me. His eyes were saucers, fixed on mine, his mouth open in a scream, head arcing back, then his eyes glazed and he slid down the front of the car, leaving a big scarlet smear. My mind pulsed to the backing track of my heart pounding, so loud – a thrash-metal beat inside my throat.

Everything was slow-mo, frame-by-frame. I unclipped my belt, opened the door, stepped out. A blizzard of noise and movement exploded and people shouted and screamed. A purple sari fluttered on a rail outside a shop, next to a red 'Kebabs' sign with the 'abs' hanging off.

The boy, pale, brown-haired, in skinny jeans and green checked shirt, lay slumped, earbud flung from his left ear, phone smashed on the tarmac; grey eyes open, unblinking. I stumbled backwards – the air spinning away from me like I was trapped in a vortex, all bass reverb.

A giant fist gripped my chest, squeezing, squeezing. I fought to take in a breath. The blue stripes of his Spezials jumped out at me. Same shoes as my little brother.

A man with a black crew cut was in my face, yelling, his own face twisted. I stepped back. Another man with white hair in a ponytail stepped in front of me to block the punch coming my way. Two men, three, held Crew Cut, told him to calm down.

'He needs to be locked up,' he shouted. 'Fucking wanker.' I took a puff of my inhaler.

I don't know how long I was standing there before the siren wail seeped into my consciousness. I heard them before I saw them: ambulance, police. The paramedic jumped out, checked the boy for a pulse, started chest compressions.

Nothing.

Another bottle-green uniform fitted a tube into his mouth and squeezed something, then pulled up the boy's sleeve and injected him with a syringe.

One officer cordoned off the area, another directed backed-up traffic and blocked the lane. It was all a mess of people and noise and blue flashing lights.

'Two minutes,' said the paramedic doing the compressions.

The other one stuck wires under the boy's shirt and checked the screen. She said something.

A patch of red soaked through the boy's shirt, pooling on the road. The face was grey, the lips draining of colour as I watched. The hand, flung out to the side, was white, dead-looking, small.

The bottle-green bodies blurred, pumping, waiting.

The hydraulic hiss of brakes of a bus then a lorry, and the drone of a motorbike growled in my head, like a defibrillator shock. I looked over and locked eyes with a wee girl with a Greta plait, on the top deck of a bus in the far lane, her jaw gaping.

'Four minutes. Adrenaline.'

They swapped places.

A policeman shoved away a man filming on his phone.

A car horn. Voices on phones. A kid, wailing.

A policeman spoke into his radio. He looked at me, shook his head, bunched up his mouth, more sad-looking than angry. He took my phone, asked my name, age, address and whose car it was, and I was breathalysed. I blew into the tube until it beeped. 'Pass.' I don't know why I was so calm. It was like watching someone else. I couldn't stop staring at the boy.

'Eight minutes.'

'Come on, son,' said a voice. The policeman. 'Come on,' he said again. He bundled me into the back of the blue and yellow car. I'd heard about people being 'bundled' into police cars in media reports. I hadn't ever considered the bundle might one day be me.

I stared out the window.

A moment of stillness, of surrender.

A small shake of the head.

The paramedic's lips moved.

On the car radio, a woman's voice: 'Fatal RTC, vehicle versus pedestrian on Haddington Place, Leith Walk, outside Gigi's. Ambulance on scene. Can the traffic sergeant and collision investigators be asked to attend?'

Fatal RTC.

The police officer climbed into the back seat beside me and recited his arrest spiel. I hadn't noticed a woman officer in the driver's seat. She indicated, pulled out. I felt cold, so cold; a marble sculpture of myself.

Fatal RTC.

Two officers with white tops and gadgets were doing stuff with Mum's car as we drove past.

It couldn't be real – none of it. Except I was in a police car. On the way to a police station. Real.

I'd only been driving four months. I'd passed my test first time.

The policeman talked into his radio. I could see him, didn't hear him though. I just saw him, the grey-black side of his head. Short back and sides. His mouth moved, but my head was crammed with silence. The streets were a blur. I had no idea where we were. All I saw was a series of stills, like some sick slideshow. The body, the neat, white jaw. The smell of blood. A red light. Hands – fine, like child's hands. Spezials. Earbud. What had he been listening to? My mind wandered, scanned, skirted round him, touring along the perimeter, avoiding the bit in the middle: the lifeless heart, the dead eyes.

The dam couldn't hold; the truth flooded in, choking me.

The boy – he was dead. I had killed him. I had killed a person. Silence gave way to thumping: the thumping of my heart, loud, louder, like a kick drum. Thumping out my existence.

Fuck. What was he doing, wandering across the road?

Too busy listening to his tunes.

Man, why did you do this to me?

Fuck.

The door opened. I hadn't noticed we'd stopped. I looked down: concrete paving stones, dotted with discs of chewing gum. Looked up again. Brown bricks. The policeman's black shoes walked three steps, through a door. I seemed to be following.

'Have a seat,' my policeman said, waving a muscled forearm towards a chair. He was medium-tall and looked like the sort that runs ultras for fun – classic copper's build.

A man and a woman sat behind a glass-slider partition. The man looked up and slid open the window a head's width.

'He's in for the fatal on Leith Walk,' my policeman said, leaning in, his voice lowered. He thought I couldn't hear him, but my hearing zoned in just on him, like it was making some monumental effort to filter out other sounds and follow the script. 'Best get him a cup of tea and a biscuit. Worst sort of driver, these young lads – think they know it all. Worse than women.' And he winked at the pretty, brunette officer, her hair scraped back under her hat. She pulled a face.

It's not funny.

'The lad killed – how old?' she asked.

'Thirteen. Poor lad.'

They nodded, shook their heads.

'And the lad that did it?'

'Just turned eighteen.'

They looked at me.

'Watty and Trish got the job of informing the family, poor bastards,' said the policeman – my policeman. 'They'll take them to ID the kid.'

The man and woman shook their heads again.

'Come with me,' my policeman said, leading me along a corridor and into a room where another officer was typing at a computer. A harsh, blue-white light buzzed overhead, giving a high-pitched hum. Everything seemed twice as hot, twice as bright, twice as loud as usual. The other officer glanced round then returned to her typing. I had to empty my pockets – house key, wallet, inhaler.

'Sergeant Spencer – the custody sergeant – will be with us shortly,' said my policeman. 'Do you want a solicitor informed, or we can arrange the duty solicitor?'

Custody sergeant?

Solicitor?

I blinked. He sighed.

A female officer entered the room. Straight, fair hair, tied back.

'Sergeant Lisa Spencer,' she said.

My officer – I'd missed his name when he told me – asked my full name, date of birth, place of birth, address, occupation. I told him I'd just finished S6 – didn't have an occupation. Grease stains from white tack shone from the four corners of a child's drawing on the wall. The foreground was green crayon. Three flowers – red, yellow and blue – stood to attention beside a stick man with a big round belly and a big U smile, a black suit and a black cap. Blue sky and sun in solid rays formed a band across the top of the page, above a big blank space – no man's land between earth and sky.

Sergeant Spencer sat down and swivelled to face me. 'Do you want us to contact another reasonably named person?'

I stared at the straightness of her fringe, a floating line.

She looked at the officer and back at me. 'I've got a son myself. Turns seventeen in two weeks. Desperate to learn to drive.' She leaned in. 'Will we call your mum – ask her to come?'

My officer bent forward in his chair, stared at the floor, his elbows resting on his knees. A smell of coffee, a trace of sweat.

Mum?

I didn't realize how nice the police were until the solicitor arrived. Seven feet tall, just about. Tall and thin. Pinstriped suit. Pink tie. He shook my hand. His was cold – long fingers that gripped my knuckles in a vice. He had narrow, black-rimmed glasses and his scalp shone, like it had been polished. It probably had, like his shoes.

'Stephen Jeffreys,' he said, with no human glint in his eye. His nose puckered in silent appraisal.

'I'm Nathan,' I said. 'Nathan Blake.' Inside my head, my voice sounded strangled.

My officer found a room for the solicitor and me, then left, pulling the door behind him.

The solicitor rummaged in his briefcase and gestured for me to sit. 'Can you describe exactly what happened, in detail?'

I tried. I told him anything I could remember.

'Where's my mum?' I asked.

'Pacing around in reception, asking why they're holding her son.'

I shivered, picturing her.

'Here,' he said, handing me his phone. 'Want to give her a call?'

How can I just ring her? What am I supposed to say?

'Mum?' I said in a low croak, shrinking back in the chair.

'Nathan?' she said. 'What's happened? Tell me you're all right.' Her voice was tight.

'I crashed the car.'

'But you're not hurt?'

'I'm not hurt.' My voice quavered.

'You're all right?'

Silence. I couldn't find the words, the courage.

'Why have they arrested you? Where's the car?'

'Leith Walk.' Or maybe on the back of some recovery vehicle. I didn't tell her it was smeared in blood.

'What is it, Nathan? Tell me.'

'I ran into a boy in the car. I don't think he was looking – he wasn't looking. He was listening to music.'

A pause. 'This boy – is he injured?'

I heaved a great sob that stole the air from my lungs – couldn't hold it in.

'It's OK, love. It's going to be OK.'

I couldn't speak, couldn't control my chokes and grunts. They burst out of me with a ferocity I'd never experienced. I heard Mum too, choked up.

'The boy's injured? How bad?' she said, in a voice that was quiet, flat, scared.

The dark blue of the carpet blurred.

'He's dead.'

Silence.

Say something, Mum.

Mum, you have to say something.

'He's what?'

'He's dead.'

'No,' she said. 'Are you sure?'

'He's dead, Mum.'

The solicitor looked up at me.

'Oh, God,' she said at last, in a voice that didn't sound like Mum. 'God, Nath, no.'

Then a silence, loud and frightening, from the receiver. I'd never had the shakes before.

'A child?' came Mum's voice, barely audible.

'Thirteen. I'm sorry, Mum,' I managed, after a rasping wheeze. The solicitor scribbled in his notebook.

I swallowed and gulped, echoed by Mum, still on the line.

'OK. Try to breathe.'

I hung up. She was here, on the other side of a few doors.

Scotty. I should have told her to ring Scotty. I pictured him, still waiting, texting me.

The solicitor stood up, filled a paper cup with water, handed it to me, pursed his lips in a sympathy smile.

A Cardigans song played in my head. 'Erase/Rewind'. The boy's big round eyes jumped out at me, pressed up on the bonnet staring right into mine in pure terror.

Where had he come from? How come I hadn't seen him?

I retched. The solicitor shoved a bin under my face. I puked, the bile burning my throat.

So this was my new beginning. A grim realization gripped my stomach. I would always be the one who had killed a thirteen-year-old boy. Twenty years from now. Fifty. No matter what else I did. No matter if I saved 10,000 lives. It was inescapable. My newly created destiny.

A blackness stretched before me.

He should have been paying attention. You don't just wander across the road. I was only fiddling with my phone for a second or two.

It wasn't my fault.

We were led into an interview room. The officer and a woman officer – the driver, maybe – sat opposite the solicitor and me. The solicitor breathed in my direction. Garlic breath.

My officer noted the time and listed our names. He fixed his brown eyes on mine. 'Nathan Blake,' he said, 'I am charging you with causing death by dangerous driving.'

Death by dangerous driving. The words rammed me in the chest.

I stared at the ceiling: a white blur that slowly turned black. My future had been ripped from me by some sick magician. A sleight of hand, like that tablecloth trick. I'd been sitting at the

kitchen table drinking tea from my World's Greatest Son mug only a couple of hours before, staring at the shiny red apples of the tablecloth Mum liked, thinking: year out, travel maybe, get a job? Save up, go somewhere cool, learn to scuba dive. Voluntary work in Chile or something. Then see if I can get into uni. Some sort of engineering.

How had it happened? I'd only looked away for two seconds, three max.