DEAD TIME

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To Alice Morey and Josie Morey
My favourite teenagers



ONE

Rose looked at the blood on her arm. She held it under her bedside light and saw pinpricks of red across her skin. She blotted them with a tissue, then watched as a shape emerged; tiny ruby bubbles that looked like jewels and formed a raw outline of gossamer wings. Rose carefully unrolled the sleeve of her shirt and covered the wound, letting the cuff hang. She hoped the blood would dry soon. Tonight, of all nights, she didn't want any trouble with her grandmother.

Her arm was still painful, though.

Think about something else, she told herself sternly, think about meeting Joshua, about getting out of the house without her grandmother knowing where she was really going. Think about keeping her butterfly private, covered up with a sleeve. The man in the tattoo parlour had told her to leave the dressing on for five days but she hadn't been able to wait. She'd wanted to take it off in time to see Joshua. And now she'd made it bleed.

Rose, Rose, she said to herself, *don't be so impatient all the time.*

She could hear Anna, her grandmother, downstairs. She looked at her watch. It was almost seven and she needed to leave soon. She picked up her violin case, took out her violin and placed it on the bed. Then she packed her stuff in; her make-up, a top, a notepad, her laptop and a book. She closed the case, making sure it was fastened tightly. She shook her arm, aware of the sleeve irritating and sticking to the raw skin. She looked at her white shirt. The red was seeping through. It would stop soon, she knew that. It would scab over. Then, in days, she would see it come to life on her arm. A Blue Morpho. Her favourite butterfly.

Her violin was still lying on her bed.

She stepped across to the chest of drawers, opened the bottom drawer and made a space. She carefully placed the violin inside, arranging some clothes on top of it so that it was hidden.

Now she was ready. She had half an hour to get to the Dark Brew, the coffee shop she used in Camden. Just thirty minutes and then she would meet Joshua again for the first time in five years.

She was excited.

She didn't mind the blood on her arm any more.

A little bit of bleeding didn't do anyone any harm.

Now all she had to do was to get past Anna.

* * *

'You're wearing black and white again?' her grandmother said.

She was standing by the front door, like a sentry, her eyes travelling up and down Rose, looking closely at her.

'Are you telling me that I can't wear black and white?' Rose said stiffly.

'A little colour wouldn't hurt sometimes,' her grandmother sighed.

'I'm not keen on colours.'

'You look like an old photograph.'

'Is this a new rule? Am I no longer allowed to pick my own clothes?'

'Of course you are. Don't be dramatic. I was just suggesting a bit of colour.'

When Rose didn't answer, her grandmother shrugged, as if in defeat, then opened a large purse and pulled out two twenty-pound notes. Rose couldn't help but stare at her fingernails. Each one carefully manicured and decorated with a line of glitter in the shape of a half-moon.

'How are the violin lessons going?'

'Fine. They're going well,' Rose said, looking down at her boots.

'Because I don't hear much practising.'

'Do you want me to give it up?' Rose shrugged.

'Then what would you do with yourself?'

'There are plenty of things I can do. I could go out with friends.'

'Those awful types from that college? Oh no, dear. I didn't pay for you to go to boarding school for five years so that you could start loitering around with those types of people.'

'I should be off,' Rose said, her fingers tapping impatiently on her violin case. She would not be drawn into another row over Anna's snobbish attitudes.

'At least you've stopped wearing that black make-up on your eyes.'

'You know me,' Rose said, sidestepping Anna and reaching for the front door. 'I always do what you say.'

Rose looked in the mirror of the public toilets. Her eyelids were dark grey and her lashes were thick black. She took a minute to apply some amber lipstick, using a pencil to outline the shape of her lips. When it was done she nodded to herself. She didn't look like Rose Smith any more. Not the Rose Smith that Anna knew.

She left the toilets and headed for Parkway East station. The ticket office was closed and she passed it and walked over the bridge and down the staircase to the platform. She smacked her lips together, tasting the sweetness of the lipstick. She ran her finger along her hardened eyelashes. She was no longer wearing her white shirt. She'd changed it for a black silky top that she had bought online. It was the first time she had worn it.

What would Joshua think of the girl he hadn't seen for five years? What would she think of him? For a second she

faltered, pausing on the steps. Was she really doing this? Meeting Joshua against Anna's express instructions? She carried on down, putting a spring in her step. But to see him again, after so long! What could be better? What did it have to do with Anna anyway? She was weary of her organising her life, telling her what to do. In two years' time she would be at university and then she would get a flat on her own. She wouldn't have to live with Anna any more. At twenty-one she would have her mother's money, then she would be truly independent.

The platform was almost empty. Further along was a single figure, a young man. She glanced at him and then looked away. The electronic board showed that she'd just missed a train and it was eleven minutes until the next one was due. She should have been quicker in the toilets.

She could have taken the bus, it was only half a dozen stops, but she liked the train. She liked the way it cut through the landscape, the neat, clean track that sliced its way through the urban brickwork from one place to another. The bus, by contrast, stopped and started and wove in and out of the chaotically untidy roads. This she didn't like. It irritated her. Clean straight lines made her feel calm.

She was aware that the young man further along the platform was moving in her direction. She frowned. She realised then that she knew him. Her shoulders tensed

and her fingers tightened on the violin case. It was Ricky Harris, a student from her college. She didn't like him. He was in her form group and seemed to pick on her constantly.

'Hi, posh bird,' he said.

She gave a stiff smile. It was always better to rise above this kind of stupid talk.

'What you up to, posh bird?'

She held up her violin case.

'What you got in that? A machine gun?' he said, laughing out loud at his own joke. 'You look different,' he said. 'You don't look half bad.'

He was standing very close to her, in her personal space. His eyes dropped down to her sparkly top and he stared at her chest. She stepped away from him but he moved with her as though drawn by a magnet. She looked past him at the electronic board and saw that her train had been delayed by three minutes.

'Can't you shove off?' she said. 'I prefer to be on my own.'

'That's not very polite.'

'I'd rather you didn't talk to me.'

'*I'd rather you didn't talk to me!*' he mimicked her voice in a silly way.

'Push off,' she said, stepping sideways.

'Stuck-up cow,' he said, following her, grabbing hold of the sleeve of her jacket just above her raw tattoo. 'Just

because you went to a private school you think that you're better than everyone else.'

'I don't!' she said, pulling her arm away.

He'd said this sort of stuff to her in college. There she was able to ignore him, to sink back into the crowd, to watch him get swallowed up by other people and other conversations. Here, on the platform, there was no way to avoid him. She stared across the tracks, letting her eyes blur. She would just blank him, not respond to a single thing he said. Then maybe he would get tired and go away. A beep sounded, distracting him. He pulled his phone out of a pocket and studied it. She strode away to the furthest point of the platform, clutching her violin case as if she was afraid of him taking it. She stopped when she got to the barrier and felt herself calm down. The track stretched off into the silent darkness. On one side were houses and on the other was the local cemetery.

This was how she liked it. On her own.

Away from people like Ricky Harris.

She didn't socialise much in college. There were a couple of girls she liked in her English group, Sara and Maggie. Sara and Maggie had been best friends since nursery but they seemed happy for Rose to tag along for a sandwich with them at lunchtime. Mostly, though, Rose preferred to be alone. The students in her college had come through *normal* schools and she was the only one who had come from a boarding school. She sounded different to them,

she acted differently to them. In the few weeks that she'd been in college she'd learned to keep herself to herself.

'Hey!'

Ricky Harris called out to her.

'I heard a story about you the other day.'

He was walking towards her. She looked up at the electronic board. It showed that it was still six minutes until her train. Even then she might not get rid of him. He might insist on sitting beside her, talking at her through the whole journey, spoiling the moments when she could relax and think about the evening ahead.

'Someone told me that your mum got murdered.'

She stood very still.

'Is it true?'

She couldn't manage an answer. A blank feeling was holding her to the spot. He was looking at her in a questioning way, his head bent to the side as if in sympathy. She realised she disliked him a hundred times more than she had five minutes before. She stepped round him and walked away towards the bridge, but he followed her. When she got to the middle of the platform she gave up and stopped.

'Well?' he said.

'My mother did not get *murdered*. She disappeared,' she said, turning to him, her voice strong and direct. 'There's no evidence that she is dead. No one knows exactly what happened to her.'

'More than likely dead, though.'

'She just *disappeared* five years ago.'

She gripped the sides of her violin case. How dare he speak to her like this! He didn't know her one bit and yet he thought he had the right to pry into her darkest places.

'I heard she was murdered,' Ricky Harris said, his voice more determined.

'You heard wrong,' she said curtly.

The platform seemed darker. She wished she could hear the sound of the train in the distance. A curl of noise that started small and got bigger as it got closer. She longed to see the lights of the engine tunnelling its way through the darkness towards her.

Instead Ricky's phone began to ring and he looked at her and put one finger in the air to indicate a call as if she hadn't already worked it out. She felt angry. How many people knew about her life? She had thought she was safe at her new college.

Up above, on the bridge, the walkway lights were on. The usual dodgy one was flickering on and off. It looked quaint, like something from a film that was set in the past. During the day there were always people going back and forth across the walkway. Now it was empty. It was almost quarter to eight. It wasn't cold but there was something in the air that suggested autumn. A whiff of burning fires, a hint of sulphur from a match, the damp smell of leaves that had been trodden into a pulp.

Ricky Harris's voice interrupted her thoughts.

'Change of plans. Got to meet someone,' he called.

She tried to keep a straight face. It was a relief that he wasn't coming on the train with her. He began to walk off. After a few moments he shouted, 'Here's your train, posh bird.'

She leant forward and looked up the line. She saw the lights of a train. She allowed herself to move back along the platform and watched him disappear up the stairwell. She felt herself relaxing. He was a hateful character and she'd just have to try harder to avoid him. All that stuff about her mum. How could he ask that? How could he intrude into her deepest, saddest places?

The train was coming nearer so she stepped towards the edge of the platform. It wouldn't be long until she was meeting Joshua. A tingle of pain from her arm made her clasp it gently. What would he think of her butterfly tattoo? What would he think of *her*, Rose Smith, seventeen years old, his stepsister, who he hadn't seen for five years?

'See you later, posh bird!'

Ricky Harris's voice came from above and she looked up to see him walk on to the bridge. There was someone coming from the other end. A man in a hoodie striding out, rushing probably, so as not to miss the train. She glanced down at the track and saw the engine slowing, then her eyes travelled back up to the bridge.

Ricky Harris was talking to the man in the hooded top.

She stared, puzzled.

There was a row, loud voices which she couldn't make out because of the sound of the approaching train. She glanced down at the track and then back up at the bridge; once, twice, three times. There was a tussle of some sort; tugging, pushing, pulling.

But it stopped suddenly.

The hooded man turned and walked away, jauntily as if his shoes were on springs. She saw the back of his hood disappear across the bridge. She strained her eyes to see if she could glimpse Ricky Harris's head above the side of the bridge.

Had he been knocked out?

She huffed. Why should she care?

The train pulled up in front of her. A noise like a long sigh emanated from it and inside a man in a black overcoat got up from a seat and walked towards the door. Rose looked up at the bridge again. There was still no sign of movement.

What did it matter?

The carriage doors were about to open. Rose could see the man inside waiting patiently, looking at his mobile. There were only a couple of other people on the train, both reading newspapers.

She stepped back and looked up. Had she somehow *missed* Ricky Harris getting up, stumbling off towards

the ticket office, following the other man out of the station?

The doors of the train stayed shut. The man inside was looking puzzled, his finger poised to press the *Open Doors* button again.

She was only a few metres from the stairs. She took a quick decision and walked towards the stairwell. Then she ran up the stairs, her violin case bumping at her back as she went. At the top she stopped to get her breath. When she looked along the walkway she saw Ricky Harris lying face down about halfway across. Above him the dodgy light flickered on and off, stuttering against the night sky.

She heard the sound of the train doors opening down below.

'You all right?' she called.

She turned back, looking down the stairwell. She needed to catch that train

'Are you OK?' she said, louder.

He didn't move. She could hear footsteps on the stairs behind her. More than one person. She hesitated. She had to catch that train. She turned to go but something caught her eye.

A glint of red. It was by Ricky Harris's waist, on the walkway. Rose stared at it. Then she heard the doors of the train shutting below.

It was too late for her to catch it now.

There was blood on the walkway coming from underneath Ricky Harris. It seeped out from beneath his jacket, dark red. She stood perfectly still. The blood glinted under the flickering light like liquid jewels. She didn't move. She *couldn't* move.