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Dead to Me

Written by Lesley Pearse

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LESLEY PEARSE

Dead *to* Me



Never forgive. Never forget.

Dead to Me

LESLEY PEARSE

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Chapter One

1935

'Will you look at that!' Ruby exclaimed, directing her remark to the girl standing near her. She too was staring, mouth agape at the sight of a man being dragged from the Hampstead swimming pond.

'Is he dead?' the second girl asked with a tremor in her voice.

'I reckon so. They ain't even tryin' to bring him round.'

It was early April, just after Easter, and although a sunny day, it was cold. Apart from the two girls there were only a few other people watching – in the main, adult dog walkers.

The girls watched in silence as the two burly policemen continued to haul the sodden body up on to the path beside the pond, and then on to a stretcher manned by two ambulance men.

There were three swimming ponds on the heath: one mixed bathing, and the other two for single sex only. All three were surrounded by thick bushes and trees, and fenced in. The ladies' pond was almost impossible to see into as the foliage was so dense. But the drowned man had chosen the mixed pond, and as a section of hedging had been cut back to enable a fence repair, the girls could see very clearly.

Ruby felt an odd little stab of emotion as she saw the ambulance man cover the drowned man's face. It was the first dead person she'd ever seen, and although she was some thirty yards away and had not known the man, it still felt like a loss.

'I wonder who he is?' the second girl asked. 'And if he's got a wife and children? S'pose we'll have to wait till it's in the newspapers to find out,' she added sadly.

Ruby sensed that this girl felt as she did, and so she turned to look at her properly. She guessed she was a bit younger than her, perhaps twelve or thirteen, her long blonde hair held back off her face by a blue velvet band. She had a posh voice and her clothes were expensive; Ruby was usually invisible to such girls.

'They'll only write about 'im if 'e was rich or important, no one cares why poor people die,' she said with authority. 'D'you live round 'ere? I ain't seen you afore.'

'I live the other side of Hampstead Village, down near Swiss Cottage,' the blonde said. 'I don't normally come up on the heath on my own; Mother thinks murderers prowl up here.'

Ruby liked the way she said that, like she was scoffing at her mother's opinion. 'Do murderers prowl looking for people to kill?' she asked, grinning because she liked the image. 'Don't they usually kill someone they know? Anyway, what's yer name and 'ow old are you?' she asked.

'Verity Wood, and I'm thirteen. How about you?'

'Ruby Taylor, and I'm fourteen. I live in Kentish Town and it ain't nice like round here, 'spect your ma would 'ave a fit if she knew you was talking to the likes of me!'

'I don't much care what she thinks.' Verity tossed her

head and her shiny hair flicked back over the shoulder of her coat. 'Where do you think they'll take that man's body? Will the police find out where he comes from?'

Ruby liked that this posh girl didn't seem to feel it was beneath her to speak to what most people would call a 'ragamuffin'. She was also thrilled that her opinion was being asked.

'They'll take 'im down the morgue, that's the place they cut up dead people to see why they died. If 'e's got stuff in 'is pockets that says who 'e is and where 'e lives, the police go round there to tell 'is family, and make one of 'em go and identify 'im.'

'Fancy you knowing such things,' Verity exclaimed.

Ruby shrugged. 'Mrs Briggs what lives downstairs to me and my ma, she had the police call to say 'er old man was found dead in Camden Town with his 'ead smashed in. My ma went with 'er to identify him. They was both sick cos 'e looked so bad. But when the doctor cut 'im open they found 'e never died from the wound on his 'ead, he'd had a bleedin' 'eart attack and fallen over and smashed his bonce on the kerb.'

'Gosh,' Verity said reverently, looking admiringly at Ruby. 'What a lot you know!'

They fell silent as the ambulance drove away with the drowned man, and watched as four policemen spread out to examine the ground around the pond.

'They'll be looking for sommat to tell 'em whether the man fell or waded in all alone. But if they find other footprints or sommat, they may think someone pushed him in, or even killed 'im first and dumped his body in the water,' Ruby said knowledgeably. 'I reckon 'e was killed

and they dumped 'im in there last night, after the pond closed.'

Ruby was very interested in detective work. Coming from rough, slummy Kentish Town she was used to seeing policemen searching for evidence after a crime. She'd often been questioned about whether she'd seen this or that person, and just as often she questioned the young constables about the incidents they were investigating. She'd learned from the moment she could talk that she should never 'grass' on anyone, and she wouldn't – but there was no law, written or unwritten, against gathering information for her own satisfaction.

The girls watched for a little longer, but seeing nothing further of interest they began to walk away, towards Whitestone Pond and Hampstead Village.

'You got any bruvers or sisters?' Ruby asked, keen to hold this posh girl's interest for as long as she could.

'No, I wish I had, it can be very lonely being the only one,' Verity replied.

Ruby didn't really understand what lonely meant. Living in one room with her mother, with all the other six rooms in the house holding entire families, there was always noise and people. That was why she'd walked up to the heath today, to have quiet and solitude.

'I likes being alone,' she said with a shrug. 'Well, at least I likes quiet – don't get it where I live – but I likes being with you. You ain't rowdy, and you're real pretty.'

'Well, thank you,' Verity said and turned to face Ruby. The girl had curly red hair which, although it needed a good comb, was a lovely colour, and her green eyes enhanced it. 'You are pretty too, I like your hair, and I like

being with you because you know so much. The girls from school are all so dull and prissy, all they can do is giggle and talk about frocks.'

'I can't talk about frocks cos I've only got this one,' Ruby said. It was a rough brown cotton one that fitted where it touched and was very grubby. Over the top she wore a boy's tweed jacket. Her mother had found it on the way home from the pub one night and would have worn it herself but it was too small. 'But I'm glad you like my 'air, most people call it carrots.'

'It isn't a carrot red, it's more copper and very lovely,' Verity said. 'Though I think you should try combing it now and again.'

Ruby didn't really know how to respond to that. Verity obviously came from the kind of home Ruby had only ever glimpsed at the pictures. A place where brushes and combs sat on a dressing table, where a hot bath could be run any time, and someone picked up her dirty clothes and washed and ironed them for her.

Ruby knew Verity wouldn't have any idea what it was like to live in one small room with a mother who was always in a drunken stupor when she was home, or where washing yourself and your clothes meant hauling a bucket of water up to their room, or choosing to do it down at the communal tap out the back. When Ruby washed her dress she had to watch over it while it dried, wearing only her petticoat with a sack around her shoulders, in case someone even worse off stole it. Even the comb was always going missing.

'If I had a comb, I would,' Ruby said, not taking offence at what Verity had said. She noted the girl's thick navy-blue

coat with a brown fur collar and cuffs, and would do anything to have such a coat. She could see too that Verity's dress which peeked out from under the coat was pink wool. She even had thick stockings to keep her legs warm. 'I'd also like a nice warm coat like yours, and a dinner every day, but as my gran used to say, "If wishes were 'orses, beggars would ride."'

Verity's face fell and she looked embarrassed. 'I've been rude, haven't I? I didn't think. I'm sorry.'

'Nuffin to be sorry for,' Ruby said airily. 'Your sort don't know nuffin about the poor. I bet you don't normally go beyond your own street? You should, though, London is an amazing place.'

Verity's blue eyes sparked with interest and she looked questioningly at Ruby. 'Would you show it to me?' she asked.

Ruby shrugged. She was in fact thrilled that a girl like Verity would even walk across the heath beside her, let alone wish to spend more time with her. 'If you want,' she said, as nonchalantly as she was able. 'My school's on 'oliday this week, is yours? We could do sommat tomorrow?'

'Yes, yes!' Verity danced from one foot to the other, smiling broadly. 'That would be wonderful.'

Ruby laughed, such enthusiasm making her forget she was hungry and cold. 'You'll need a bit of money for the underground or the bus, and if you want to eat anything. I ain't got any.' She didn't want to sound like she was begging, but she had to make her situation quite clear.

'That's fine, I've got some money,' Verity beamed. 'Would you like to get something to eat and drink now, and we could talk about where we'll go tomorrow?'

Ruby stiffened. She very much wanted to eat and drink, but she didn't think she'd be welcome in the kind of places Verity was probably used to visiting. 'I'd like that, but –' She broke off, unable to bring herself to say that.

Verity frowned. Then, as if she suddenly understood, she grinned. 'I think I know just the right place. So come on,' she said, and held out her hand to take Ruby's.

The girls ran down Heath Street, hand in hand, laughing because people were looking at them. When they got to the underground station Verity led Ruby down towards Belsize Park and, around five hundred yards further on, turned left into a narrow alley. There were several small shops there – a cobbler's, a haberdasher's and a hat shop – all of which were a bit scruffy, and once past these there was a pie shop. A wonderful smell was coming from it and Ruby's stomach contracted painfully with hunger.

'A maid we had for a while took me in here once,' Verity said. 'She said they make the best pies in London. I couldn't say if that was true as our housekeeper makes lovely ones, but I thought the one from here was really tasty.'

Ruby could see it wasn't an ordinary pie and mash shop because it didn't have one of those big counters to keep the pies hot, and she thought they must sell their pies on to other shops and restaurants. But it did have two small tables for anyone who wanted to eat a pie here.

'If you think it's alright for me to go in, then I'd love one,' Ruby said, finding it hard to form the words because she was salivating so much. 'I'm starving,' she added.

That was no exaggeration as she'd had nothing at all to eat for two days. Her sole reason for coming to Hampstead today had been to steal whatever she could find.

She'd discovered that people here had daily deliveries of bread, milk and other groceries and if they were out the delivery man would often leave them in a porch. But she'd been sidetracked by the activity at the pond as she walked across the heath and had temporarily forgotten her hunger and her purpose in being there.

Verity asked for two meat pies and two cups of tea and within minutes their order arrived at their table.

'Oh, Gawd!' Ruby exclaimed as her nose was assailed by the aroma of steak and kidney beneath the golden pastry. 'I'm so bleedin' 'ungry, I'm gonna show you up gulping that down.'

'Our housekeeper takes it as a compliment if I bolt down food she's cooked, and I expect they will here too.' That was in fact a lie. Miss Parsons would not be impressed by anyone bolting their food, no matter how delicious. She had a big thing about good manners. But Verity wanted Ruby to feel comfortable.

Ruby sensed the lie, but decided it was kindly meant, because she doubted that the woman who had brought the pies to their table would take any pleasure in seeing her eat. It was likely she was out the back right now wondering how to separate a little rich girl with a kind heart from a guttersnipe who was probably planning to rob her. But right now Ruby wasn't concerned with what anyone thought of her, she just wanted to fill her belly.

Ignoring the knife and fork, she lifted the hot pie up to her mouth and took a bite. It was without a doubt the best pie she'd ever tasted, rich and succulent, the meat almost melting in her mouth. As for the pastry, that was flaky and

as light as a butterfly's wing. She closed her eyes, the better to savour the taste and the delicious aroma.

The pie was gone in a flash and she opened her eyes to see Verity toying with hers using a knife and fork. 'That were great,' she said breathlessly, licking her fingers and wiping her mouth on her sleeve.

All at once she became aware just how uncouth she must seem to Verity. She had stuffed the pie into her mouth with dirty hands, and even if Ruby had never watched rich people eat, she knew it wasn't done like that. She was flooded with shame and tempted to run out of the pie shop and back to Kentish Town.

But Ruby was too grateful for the food to want to hurt Verity's feelings still more.

'I'm sorry,' she said, her eyes cast down. 'I ate that like a pig, didn't I? I was just so 'ungry I couldn't 'elp myself. I showed you up, and you eating so daintily.'

Verity just smiled, a real smile that made her blue eyes sparkle. 'You couldn't help it, not if you were really hungry. Eat the rest of mine, I've had sufficient. But don't eat it so fast or you'll get indigestion, that's what Miss Parsons always says.' She pushed her plate, with more than half of her pie remaining, over to Ruby.

Ruby needed no further encouragement, but this time she picked up the knife and fork and tried to copy the way Verity ate.

Outside the pie shop, some ten minutes later, Verity caught hold of Ruby's arm. 'Are you often hungry?' she asked. 'Doesn't your father go to work?'

'I ain't never seen my father,' Ruby said gruffly. ''E were

gone afore I was born. And bein' 'ungry is usual. I come up 'ere today to nick stuff to eat. That's usual too.'

Shock widened Verity's eyes. 'That's dreadful,' she said. 'I mean dreadful that you have to, not that you were dreadful. I wish I could take you home with me and make everything right for you, but I can't.'

'Of course you can't,' Ruby laughed. 'Talking to me and buying me a pie was more than enough. If your folks saw you with me, they'd have fifty fits.'

'But we can be friends, can't we?' Verity asked. 'I like you.'

A warm feeling washed over Ruby, and it wasn't just because she'd eaten and had a cup of tea. 'And I like you too,' she said. 'But if we're gonna be pals, you'll have to teach me some manners.'

'I can do that, and you have to teach me about London,' Verity said. 'Starting tomorrow.'

Verity let herself in the basement door at her home in Daleham Gardens very quietly, hoping she could sidle up the stairs to her bedroom unseen. But luck wasn't on her side, and she ran straight into Miss Parsons the housekeeper coming out of the laundry room.

'Where have you been, child?' she asked in her usual sharp tone.

Verity's heart sank, the housekeeper always reported any misdemeanours. 'I just went for a walk up to the village. I'm sorry, was Mother looking for me?'

Miss Parsons was a small, bony, middle-aged woman who had come to work for the Woods when they first bought this house. Verity had been about three then. That

she came from Cambridge was the limit of Verity's knowledge about her background; she never divulged anything about herself.

Even her mother found the woman chilly. Verity had overheard her talking to a friend about Miss Parsons. She'd said she thought most housekeepers working for a family for so long would become almost like an aunt or a cousin, especially towards a child they'd watched grow up. She was quick to add that Miss Parsons ran the house superbly, and she couldn't manage without her, but she just wished she wasn't so stern and had the ability to chat in a friendly manner.

Verity had ventured up to her room in the attic a few times, when she knew the woman was out for the afternoon, in an effort to discover something more about her. But she was always disappointed. The room was as neat and tidy as the housekeeper was, the white counterpane smoothed as if she'd taken the flat iron to it, her navy-blue uniform dress hung on a hanger behind the door, her stout, highly polished black lace-up shoes tucked beneath the dressing table. Beside her narrow iron bed were a few library books and an alarm clock. Verity hadn't been rude enough to look in drawers or open the wardrobe, but she had hoped to see a few photographs or something which might suggest the woman had family and friends.

'Yes, she was looking for you. She wanted you to accompany her to Selfridges. She wasn't best pleased, Verity,' Miss Parsons said, pursing her lips in disapproval.

Verity knew she would get a lecture later, and it wasn't fair because whenever her mother went to Selfridges she only wanted to look at dresses or try on hats, and her role

was to just stand there and be admiring. There was no point in even trying to get Miss Parsons on her side, she always seemed to relish Verity being in trouble.

'I'll go and read in my room,' she said, and walked quickly up the backstairs to the entrance hall.

Meeting Ruby had made a huge impact on Verity. It wasn't just that she was from a completely different way of life, however fascinating that was, but it felt as if she'd been intended to meet the girl for some specific reason as yet unknown to her.

That was why she paused in the hall; she was trying to see her home as Ruby might see it. She thought her new friend would be awed by the large semi-detached, three-storey house with a basement. Even from the front gate it looked rather grand, with the manicured front garden, the stone lions on each side of the wide stone steps, and the impressive front door at the top of them.

Once inside, the entrance hall was spacious, the floor tiled black and white like a chequerboard. A glass door opened on to the front veranda, with her father's study next to it. Then, at the back of the house, overlooking the garden, were the drawing and dining rooms. The staircase was wide with polished wood banisters and a beautiful stained-glass window at the turn of the stairs, halfway up.

At Christmas time her father always had a big tree delivered for the hall, and her mother made garlands of holly and red ribbon to decorate the banisters. All the presents, including those for people who joined them for Christmas Day lunch, would be arranged around the tree. Until last Christmas Verity had thought it a completely magical time, and that she was lucky to have such a wonderful home.

But on Christmas Night something had happened that spoiled that belief for ever. Verity had tried to blot it from her mind, but she couldn't, and she lived in fear of it happening again. Once she wouldn't have dreamed of going out alone, but now outdoors – even alone – seemed a great deal safer, even if she did incur her mother's wrath by going out without permission.

She moved on then, turning to run up the stairs to her bedroom. Like the rest of the house, it was beautiful – a large room overlooking the back garden, and decorated in soft peach and cream. She had a wardrobe full of clothes, a huge doll's house complete with a whole family of dolls living in it. She had hundreds of books, jigsaw puzzles, games, dolls and other toys, all sitting neatly on shelves, yet she hardly touched them now. Something dark and bad had entered this room at Christmas and she could still feel its presence, even in bright sunshine.

Yet it wasn't so obvious today, after meeting Ruby. She knew her parents would be horrified if they knew she'd been fraternizing with what they would call 'a guttersnipe', but Verity had really liked her and, regardless of their opinions, she fully intended to see Ruby again tomorrow.

Cynthia Wood sipped her pre-dinner gin and tonic and looked out on to the garden reflectively, wondering what to do about Verity. It was dusk now, Miss Parsons would be ready to serve dinner soon, and if Cynthia was going to punish her daughter by making her stay in her room without any dinner, then she had to act now.

She really couldn't be bothered with this sort of confrontation, but she knew Miss Parsons was likely to tell

Archie what had taken place when he returned home from his business trip. He would be angry if she hadn't taken a firm line, both with her and Verity.

Archie always seemed to be angry these days, and she seemed to spend a huge amount of time trying to appease him. Once upon a time, she would have sneered at any woman who did that, but the truth was she had become scared of him. Nowadays when he flew into a rage it was like viewing a really dangerous twin brother who was normally locked away.

Cynthia got up from her armchair by the window and looked at herself in the overmantel mirror. She had been a very pretty child – tiny, blonde and blue-eyed – but now, as a woman of forty-two, she could see her features were too sharp and birdlike to be thought of as pretty, and her once pink and white complexion was a little muddy, with many fine lines around her eyes. Other women envied her slender shape, and her dress sense, but in truth she would rather be envied for being fun, or for her intelligence, than for a shape that owed everything to being too nervous to eat much. Besides, anyone could learn good dress sense if they studied fashion magazines and browsed through Selfridges as often as she did.

Sighing deeply, Cynthia left the drawing room just as Miss Parsons was coming up the stairs from the basement.

'I'm going up to tell Verity she'll get no dinner tonight and must stay in her room,' Cynthia told her housekeeper. 'I think I'll have my dinner on a tray in the drawing room, as my husband won't be coming home tonight.'

'Very good, Mrs Wood,' said Miss Parsons. 'I'm glad to

see you being firm with her. Girls of her age do tend to be wilful and disregard parental advice.'

Cynthia was tempted to remind the woman she was a housekeeper, nothing more, and to keep her opinions about how to deal with wayward girls to herself, but she didn't. If Miss Parsons was to leave, or to tell Archie what she'd said, neither outcome would be a happy one. Cynthia needed a housekeeper. Without one, she'd never be able to hold her head up on her bridge nights, as everyone who was anyone in Hampstead or Swiss Cottage had one. As for Archie, he would almost certainly slap her around because he loved Miss Parsons' cooking and claimed his wife couldn't boil an egg without burning it.

Without knocking, Cynthia went straight into Verity's bedroom and found her lying on her stomach on the bed, reading a book.

'No dinner for you tonight,' she said sharply. 'Perhaps being hungry will make you sorry you chose to ignore the fact I'd said we were going out together this afternoon.'

'I'm sorry, Mother,' Verity said, sitting up on her bed. 'I was just walking and forgot the time. I didn't mean to upset you.'

'You know your father doesn't like you wandering around alone,' Cynthia said, irritably. 'There are all kinds of dangers out there for young girls. We just want to keep you safe. Now promise me you won't do it again?'

'I can't promise that, Mother,' Verity retorted. 'Situations just crop up sometimes and change things. But I will promise that in future if you've asked me to go somewhere with you, I will be there.'

Cynthia was quite aware that her daughter hadn't given her the kind of pledge that she'd wanted, but it was enough for now.

'Make sure you do,' she said, and backed out of the room.

Verity smiled with relief as the door closed. It was clear her father wasn't coming home tonight, as her mother hadn't changed for dinner.

Verity couldn't care less about missing dinner. She had no appetite, and she had some biscuits in a tin if she felt hungry later.

She'd got off lightly.