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# **The Red Road**

Written by Denise Mina

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# THE RED ROAD

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# I

1997

Rose Wilson was fourteen but looked sixteen. Sammy said it was a shame.

She was alone in his car, in a dark city centre street of shuttered pubs and clubs. Outside, the soft summer breeze stirred the silt of a Saturday night, lifting paper wrappers, rolling empty cans. Rose watched a yellow burger box crab-scuttle from the mouth of a dark alley and tentatively make its way across the pavement to the kerb.

She was waiting for Sammy to drive her back. It had been a long night. A sore night. Three parties in different flats. She used to think she was lucky she wasn't freezing on the streets but she wasn't sure tonight. He was off arranging next week. Lots of dough, he said with a twinkle in his eye.

Rose leaned her head on the window. Sammy was full of shit – they weren't making a lot of money. She shut her eyes. They weren't even doing it for the money. He was doing it to make other men like him, so he had something they wanted. She was making them pay for what they were taking anyway. But they went through this pretence, like it was a big moneymaker, her being underage. He said the money was lower than he promised because she did look sixteen, but never mind, eh? She still had a good long time to make her money. The men weren't interested in her age. They weren't perverts. Rose knew all too well that those men just befriended some daft junkie cow with six weans and took it for free. The men Sammy fed her to were just normal men. They liked that she was young because they knew

no one would believe her. Nothing easier than making a wean shut up.

But Sammy needed to lie to himself, pretending he was a businessman or something. He'd save the money, he said, and they'd live together when she was legal. It was about the money and he loved her, they loved each other. Whenever he said that he looked deep into her eyes, like a stage hypnotist she once saw at the Pavilion.

Before her mum died, Rose never went out. She hardly even went to school. She couldn't leave her mum alone with the young kids because she was always nodding out and dropping lit cigarettes, letting anyone into the house. But she went out that one time because she didn't want to let Ida down. Ida T. was their neighbour back in the flats. Ida was decent. She knew there were problems, more than normal. Thinking Rose's mum was like herself, but with loads of kids, Ida thought she'd feel better if she got more fun out of life, had a laugh. She bought two tickets for the late-night hypnotism show. By the time Ida came to collect her Rose's mum was asleep and looked like staying that way, so Rose pulled her coat on and went instead.

When the lights went down and the show started the hypnotist got everyone in the audience to press both hands together as if they were praying, and then told them that their hands were stuck.

In the dark theatre Rose's tiny hands came apart easily. So did Ida's. They both thought the trick hadn't worked until people began to stand up, lifting prayerful hands, laughing, baffled. They kept their hands together as they clambered over knees and bags, making their way to the aisle, and assembled on the stage, prayer-stuck, beseeching the Almighty for a bit of naughty fun.

The hypnotist gave them orders, stupid things to do, and the rest of the audience laughed at them. Some of the people on stage were having sex with chairs, taking their tops off, snogging invisible movie stars; some of them weren't hypnotised. Rose

could tell. They were pretending, so they could get up on stage and act stupid and get attention or something. It was a lie they all agreed to tell each other.

When Sammy looked deep into her eyes and said they were doing it for the money she pretended like she was hypnotised. Love you too. But Rose's hands came apart in the dark. She was waiting until she could get away from him, until she could find someone else, someone that she didn't need to lie to. You did need somebody to cling to, she knew that.

She looked out at the street of pubs and clubs, where pals and cousins and sisters and workmates had met and spent the evening together. Her brothers and sisters had been scattered all over, adopted into different families down in England. It wasn't even that long ago but she couldn't remember all of their faces properly. She didn't miss the responsibility, the weight of them all. She watched them leave, relieved. They wouldn't miss her, she was sure. Wherever they went would be better than where they'd been. They might do all right, in a new place. She let them go. Rose had been twelve and a half, too old for adoption, she knew that. People wanted to adopt fresh kids, and she wasn't that.

Everyone else had someone. They weren't even grateful. Mostly they complained about who they had. Rose hated kids at school whining about their folks. Moaning because someone demanded to know where they'd been all night, angry if they came home covered in bruises, smelling of sick and spunk.

Sorry for herself, she felt that familiar plummet in mood. She couldn't control the drop, or slow it, because she was so tired, it was morning, and she was heading back for a fight with the care-home staff because she had been out all night. She ran through the night staff rota in her head: that new woman was on, the tall one, so Rose wouldn't even be able to fall back on the old trick to get out of a grilling: she couldn't pull her clothes off and force the male support worker to leave the room. The staff were always calm, she hated that. They never raised their voices or got

excited or screamed because they loved you. Sammy screamed and shouted. Sammy's mood rose and fell, swooped and dived from extreme to extreme. That's what first made her notice him. He stopped her on her way to school and said she was beautiful and she got embarrassed and told him to fuck off. The next day he was there, waiting to see her, but now he was angry and told her she was full of herself, wake up, hen, you've got an arse the size of Partick. Then the next day he was sorry, he looked sorry too. He just wanted to talk. He felt this connection between them, that's why he came back. Rose had kept her eyes down since her mother died. The first time she looked up it was for Sammy's bullshit.

Her mood was shifting now, swooping low, low, low, below angry. Random memories that echoed her mood came to mind: taking her pants off in a hallway stacked with bin bags; a grubby avocado-coloured bath with yellow fag burns; four men looking up at her from a living room.

She'd never admit it to her psychologist, but she did use some of his techniques: she shut her eyes, breathed deeply and summoned Pinkie Brown.

Pinkie holding her hand, his big hand over her small hand. Pinkie stirring a pot of food. Pinkie in their clean, wee flat. Pinkie holding a baby, their baby, maybe.

It worked. The breathing and the images shifted the tar-black mood. The psychologist said you could only hold one thought in your head at a time and she could choose that thought. It wasn't easy, he said, but she could choose.

Pinkie sitting on a settee watching a football match on telly, wearing joggers and no top. Pinkie's hand brushing his buzz cut.

The truth was that she didn't really know Pinkie Brown. She'd spotted him a couple of times when they fought with Cleveden, the other kids' home nearby. She saw him standing at the back, a head taller than everyone else. He was different. He was in charge. She noticed him cup the elbow of a crying child, his wee

brother Michael, as it turned out. He'd be good with kids, she knew he would. He caught her eye twice, once in the street, once outside school. A girl at school said Pinkie had asked about Rose.

Pinkie Brown got stuck in her head and she made up stories about him: Pinkie was her childhood sweetheart. Sure, they both grew up in care, but they understood family, like those wee girls in the home with bad teeth: their mum walked all the way across the city to visit so she could spend her bus fare on sweeties for them.

In Rose's story she and Pinkie grew up together. They stayed true to each other. When they were old enough they got a wee clean house, had a baby. They wore matching rings from Argos. He never cared what she'd done in her early life either. He understood and she made good money. Maybe she'd stop it when she got older and could. Maybe she'd go to college and become a social worker, not like her social worker but a really good one, one who actually knew what went on, and could stop stuff happening to kids like her.

Better. A warm lift took the black edge off her. She felt the mood subside. Getting dozy, she sat up and bit her cheek to keep herself awake. She had to stay on guard because when she got in the staff would take her in the office and quiz her about where she had been all night. She must not say anything about Sammy or the parties or the men. They'd kill her. They never threatened her but she heard them talk. Easiest thing in the world, getting rid of a girl no one was looking for. And the staff: she didn't want them to know about this other world. The kids all said they hated the staff but there was something sweet about some of them, hoping they could help. She didn't want to spoil things for them

So she opened her burning eyes, sat up and found herself looking straight at Pinkie Brown.

He stepped out of a dark alley, side-wall to ChipsPakoraKebab. He was looking straight back at her. Her pulse throbbed in



her throat. He had come, as if her yearning had conjured him from the filthy dark.

Stepping out of the shadows, he kept his eyes locked on hers as he walked fast towards the car. Street lights hit him and she saw his dark T-shirt was ripped at the hem, wet all down the front.

He reached forward, pulled the passenger door open. 'Rosie fae Turnberry.' He was breathless, skin glistening with sweat and panic. 'Come on.'

Elated, Rosie stepped out to meet him, and then she saw the red splatter on his neck, on his forearm. His T-shirt was soaked in blood.

He shut the car door behind her and pulled her deep into the alley. Heavy chip-fat air was cut through with the sharp smell of piss.

'S that your blood?' she asked, aware that it was the first thing she had ever said to him in real life.

'Nut.' The alley was dark. 'Guys frae the Drum jumped us. Battered our Michael.' The kid he'd comforted: his brother – he cared about that kid. 'I'd tae get them off him.'

'Was it another home?'

'Nut.' He looked at her then, to see if she understood, and she did. When not-in-care gangs came, they were after all of you. Cleveden or Turnberry meant nothing to them. To them you were all care-home scum. They knew you'd get the blame for everything.

'Rose.' Pinkie lifted a hand between them. 'Take this?'

Not a ring from Argos. Instead, in his open palm, sat a Rambo knife, curved blade, ragged teeth. The handle was gaffer-taped silver, spongy with blood.

'Put it down your sock and I'll come for it later?' He raised the hand towards her face. 'Gonnae hide it for me? The polis'll search Cleveden for sure. I need it but I can't keep a hold of it.'

The bloody knife was inches from her nose.

He watched her expectantly but Rose didn't move. Her eyes

brimmed with stinging tears. She kept staring at the blurry knife. She blinked and behind her lids saw yellow burns on a green bath. She opened them and a tear fell, landing on the dirty blade: a clean silver splash on the red.

‘Don’t be scared,’ he said, but Rose wasn’t crying because she was scared. ‘You like me, don’t you?’

Rose lifted her hand slowly and took the knife by the handle. It was wet and sticky. It didn’t matter. She had touched worse.

Pinkie smiled, whispered, ‘Your prints are on that now.’

A trap. Eight men in a flat, not Sammy’s one friend. Drunk men, dirty bed, vodka to wash her mouth clean. Her hold tightened on the handle and blood oozed from the gaffer tape, like mud through toes.

He sensed the change in her and tried to soften it. ‘I like you too, Rose.’ But he said it flat, like ‘nice to meet you’, like ‘it’s for your own good’, like ‘we’re only trying to help’.

Pinkie Brown had clocked her like she clocked punters with cash and a conscience. She could read compunction like other kids read crisp flavours and Pinkie Brown had read her. He would never hold her hand or stir a pot or coo at a baby. There was no one in the wee clean house. There was no house. When she made up those stories about him, she had been pressing her hands together, convincing herself they were stuck. Well, they were unstuck now.

This was all there was. Dirt and piss smells and Sammy and filth. She shut her eyes tight.

‘Rose, I’ve see ye at school—’ Pinkie’s shadow was over her, his breath in her face.

Hope exhausted, she shoved him away.

Except she didn’t.

She meant to shove him, slap his shoulder in a flat cold rage. But he had moved and she’d forgotten the Rambo knife in her hand. The sensations registered in her elbow: teeth catching in meat. Warm wet flecked on her cheek. Disgust and panic made

her jerk her hand down fast, sawing through whatever she was caught on. Down and down, the knife ground free. She dropped it, heard the chink of cutlery on stone. She shut her eyes tighter, pressing her lips together so that nothing splashed into her mouth.

A suck of air signalled the weight of him dropping to the ground. She heard him land, heard him grunt with surprise. She heard a splash on cobbles. The rubber sole of his trainers shrieked as he scrabbled against the floor. Then he was still.

She couldn't look. The wet on her face began to cool.

Wary, she opened the eye closest to the wall. Normal. Dark, smelly, night. The stench of piss and fat. She looked down. The cobbles were molten.

Pinkie was on the ground and next to him lay the knife. He had fallen sideways, arms out, eyes half open. He lay completely still except for something moving under his neck, a brief throb that caught the silver light.

Rose watched the beat slow. She stood, barely breathing, looking sixteen, feeling twelve. A slow dawning realisation: a door had shut. She would never get away. They'd cut her up and leave her in a bag.

Keeping her hands on the wall behind her, she bent down, picked up the knife and tucked it into her sock like Pinkie said to. She slid upright against the wall, fingers sticky because her jeans and socks were covered with blood.

Rose blinked and turned off all her physical sensations, she knew how to do that. Then she clung onto the wall, edging backwards out of the alley, smearing bloody prints as she edged away.

She crossed the pavement to the car, not even looking to see if there was anyone there. Back inside the car she locked the door, pulled on the seat belt and sat still, looking blankly out of the window.

As soon as Sammy saw what she had done she was dead. Like her mum. A man on top of her. A fat, smothering man on top

of her mum in the dark kitchen, heels kicking the floor, a fat man on top of her. She kept kicking, as if it would help. Kicking against air, looking for a thing to kick against. Rose closed the bedroom door and stood against it, watching the wee ones, praying that none of them would move or wake or make a noise. She stood behind the door until the man left. A drunk, fat, clumsy man, brushing against walls on the way out, never seen again, never found. Her mum had tried suicide many times, failed and was sorry she'd failed and yet she died kicking against air.

Rose sat in Sammy's car and thought about that for an hour or a day or a minute, she couldn't tell. Finally Sammy sauntered along the street. He walked up to the car, not looking in the alley. As he put the key in the door his plump belly flattened against the window. He would kill her. Or take her to the men who would kill her. Soon as he saw the blood on her she was dead, but he climbed back in without looking at her.

Sammy was bald at only twenty-four. He was fat too. He looked about fifty to her. She looked sixteen but he looked fucking fifty or something, disgusting.

'Fucking hell, guess what?' he said, looking out of the windscreen, his voice normal and loud and cheerful.

'What?' Rose asked, numb.

'Princess Diana's dead.' He huffed a small laugh. 'Magine! Died in a car crash in Paris.'

Rose couldn't see how that was relevant. 'Fuck off,' she said, mechanically.

He smiled at that and started the engine. 'Aye. In a car crash.'

'King hell,' said Rose.

Sammy flicked the lights on and pulled out into the deserted street.

'Wow,' he said as he drove. 'Makes you think.' He seemed excited about the whole thing. 'She was young to die. And those boys. What d'ye think Charles'll have to say about it?'

Rose wasn't used to discussing current events with Sammy, or

anything with Sammy. It made the night feel even more strange, him being chummy, like they always talked about stuff like this.

He nudged her with his fat elbow as they drove down Bath Street. 'What d'you think? Charles: what'll he be feeling?'

'Dunno.' She had to say something. 'Gutted?'

'Nah.' He smiled as he took a turn at some lights. 'Not gutted. He's free to marry that other one now.'

He gibbered on about it, about the Queen and Prince Charles. Rose tuned out. She didn't know about politics. She was so deep-down tired that she forgot Pinkie Brown. All she could remember was that she was dead and there was blood. Death filled her consciousness like an ache.

They were drawing up into the mouth of Turnberry Avenue. She reached down to absent-mindedly scratch away an itch from her ankle. As dampness registered on her fingertips she remembered: it was itchy because it was covered in Pinkie Brown's blood and she had killed him. She froze, bent double, her fingers touching the car floor like a sprinter on the blocks.

The kids' home was in a big Victorian villa at the heart of the posh West End. Sammy's eyes flicked around the street, checking for staff or witnesses.

'Good girl,' he said, seeing her bent down, thinking she was hiding for him.

He parked two hundred yards further up the road, in the deep shadow under a big old tree. A branch sagged down in front of them under the weight of leaves, heavy, swaying, leaves flipping over and back in the breeze, silver, black. Orange street lights winked through but dawn was already bleeding into the night. Rose stayed down.

Sammy was chatting away now, she thought he'd had a smoke or something while he was out of the car.

He said, 'One day you'll grow out of me, hen, you know? You'll move on in your young life, but I hope you'll remember me kindly. I think the world of you, you know.'

He waited for the responsorial lie – I'll never move on from you, Sammy, you're the only one in the world who gives a fuck about me – but Rose didn't say anything. She was thinking about air and kicking air and felt that same urge rise up in her.

Her eye fell on the posh flats outside, dark with curtains drawn. Sleeping in those flats were lawyers and students and dentists, refreshing themselves with warm, comfy sleeps. They'd wake up in a few hours, have calm breakfasts and then settle into Sunday. They'd get dressed and start writing letters to the council, complaining about the children's home bringing down property prices.

'What do you want for yourself, Rose?' he said, repeating the tone, changing the sentiment. 'From life, what do you want?' And then he pulled on the handbrake as if he was planning to settle in for a long conversation.

'Dough,' she told the floor. She couldn't get up. He'd see the blood.

'Well, you're going the right way about that, hen.' He laughed softly. 'What ye doing down there?' He was looking at her now, his big stupid face kind of gawping.

What was she doing down here? The question howled through her. What was she doing all the way down here? Why was *she* all the way down here? The injustice of it struck her so suddenly and completely that she had to blink to warm her eyes. Why were other girls asleep? Why were they wearing ironed clothes and worried about the size of their thighs and learning piano and painting their fingernails and she was down here?

Rose looked back at him, her fingers creeping up her leg, drawing the jeans up with them until she felt the gaffer tape.

'You're in a strange mood – what's down there—'

She bolted up against the air, swung the knife at his neck, in and out. She'd kicked and now she shut her eyes, curled up knees to chin, cowering into the passenger door.

Wet gasps and thrashing. Rain in the car. Sammy kicking, feet

scrabbling against the pedals. He grabbed her hair and yanked her down to the side.

Slowly, his fingers relented, slid down her wet arm and disappeared. Rose waited as the thrashing slowed. Like her mum, Sammy's legs were the last thing to still. The only sound in the car was a wet gurgle.

Sammy deflated, wilting onto the steering wheel, and the horn eased out a long droning blare.

Rose couldn't hide indoors, she was covered in blood.

She couldn't run away. When the police found the body of Sammy the Perv the first place they'd look was the children's home; the first thing they'd notice was that she was missing. Even if she got away from the police the men would find her.

She'd never get away.

She opened her eyes and looked out of a window filigreed with blood, deaf to the skirl of the horn.

Outside the car lights burst on in flats. Curtains drew back. Angry faces looking for the car horn ripping their Sunday morning. Rose watched the street lights deferring to the dawn, flicking off, one by one.

She sat inside the bloody car and waited for the police to come.