

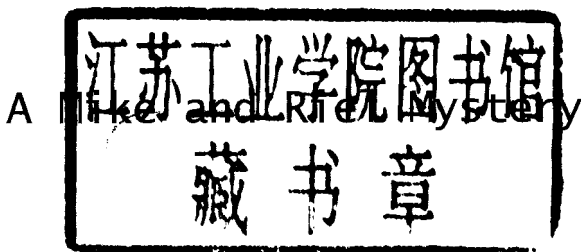
Norah McClintock

DEAD SILENCE

A Mike and Riel Mystery

From the
five-time winner
of the
Arthur Ellis Award

DEAD SILENCE



Norah McClintock

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To a friend of mine

CHAPTER ONE

You can't always tell when your whole life is going to change, not even when it's just about to happen. You don't always see it coming. I didn't. It was the second week of October, which meant that every day seemed pretty much like every other day: get up, go to school, do your homework, put in some hours at a part-time job, and, if you're lucky, have a little fun. Mostly it's boring, but that's the worst you can say about it. You start to think that things are always going to be the way they are right now. You wonder if anything is ever going to change. You wish it would. I sure did. But you know what? If I'd known what was in store, I would have wished for everything to stay exactly the way it was.

The day before everything changed, I got up at the regular time. I went downstairs and had my regular breakfast — one hundred percent organic cereal washed down with a big glass of organic orange juice. I was on my own that morning. Riel and Susan had both left early for work. I got my stuff together, looked at the clock, and realized that if I hurried, I could swing by Rebecca's place and we could walk to school together. So that's exactly what I did.

We got to school a couple of minutes before the bell rang. The morning dragged by: homeroom, math, history and, finally, lunch. Rebecca had band practice and I had plans to hook up with Sal. We

were going to walk to the food court at Gerrard Square, a mall near school.

I went to meet Sal at his locker. He was skimming through his *Driver's Handbook*. He wanted me to quiz him while we ate because he was going downtown the next day at lunchtime to take his written test for his driver's licence. You'd think he was taking an exam to be a brain surgeon or something, the way he was going at it.

"You must have that whole thing memorized by now," I said.

He shrugged and handed me his biology binder. I opened it to take out the pages I needed to copy.

"Take the whole binder," Sal said.

"But I only need the notes from yesterday." I'd missed class because of a dentist's appointment.

"I've got everything organized, Mike. Just take the whole binder and make sure you give it back to me in class tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay," I said, even though the binder was bulky. He had a lot of stuff in there so early in the year. Sal had turned into a super-organized guy. He liked things just so and since he was doing me a favour, I figured I should go along with him.

He closed his locker.

"Can you come with me tomorrow when I do the test, Mike?" he said.

"Me? What for?"

"Moral support." Sal is pretty smart, but taking tests makes him nervous.

"Sure," I said. "That's what friends are for, right?"

He looked at me, like he had something on his mind, something he wanted to tell me or ask me. But he didn't say anything. He just nodded. We made our way downstairs.

On the way, I told him he was lucky that he was going to learn to drive. I wished I could, too, but what car would I drive? If I had parents, like Sal did, that would be one thing. His parents had an old beater that they didn't drive much, especially now that his dad was sick and his mom had a new full-time job that she could get to on the subway. It was different for me. If I wanted to learn to drive, I'd have to ask Riel if I could use his car, and I couldn't picture myself doing that. I was afraid he would say he didn't think I was responsible enough for that.

When I said that to Sal, he laughed. Then, just like that, the laugh died and Sal's face turned white. I'm not kidding. It was like someone had thrown a bucket of white paint at him. I looked where he was looking, which was out at the street.

It was the same scene as every other day at lunchtime, especially in nice weather like it was that day. There were kids everywhere, standing on the sidewalk, walking around, jaywalking to get to the other side of the street where their friends were or to get to some store or restaurant. I saw all the same people I saw every day — a bunch of girls up near the corner, including a couple of Rebecca's friends, Kim and Luci. I saw the new kid, Alex, a guy a lot of people made fun of — which, if you ask me, was

mean. He'd been in some kind of accident when he was younger. It wasn't his fault he was the way he was. High school is bad enough. But being different in high school? You might as well walk around with a target painted on your back because, no matter what you do, there are always some kids who are going to take shots at you. They sure did at Alex. He was out there all alone, staring at a bunch of kids across the street, looking like he wished he could be part of everything instead of separate. And directly opposite the school, making a lot of noise just like always, were the kids Alex was looking at — Teddy Carlin and Bailey Zackery and the rest of them.

Oh.

I glanced at Sal.

"Don't worry," I said. "If Teddy tries to give you a hard time again, he'll have to deal with me, too."

The colour came back into Sal's face. He shook his head and laughed, like he was embarrassed that I'd caught him looking so scared. When he turned to me, he had the same look on his face that I had seen when I was at his locker.

"There's something I have to tell you, Mike," he said. "It's something I probably should have told you a while ago."

But before he could say what it was, Rebecca came through the door and hooked one of her arms through mine. "Mr. Korchak had some kind of special meeting he had to go to. Practice is postponed until tomorrow," she said. Mr. Korchak was the music teacher at my school. "Where are you

and Sal going? Can I come?"

I glanced at Sal. He smiled at Rebecca. He really liked her. Sometimes he teased me and said he couldn't figure out what a girl like her was doing with a guy like me. I was sure he wouldn't mind if she tagged along. But he said, "I have to study for my driver's test. You guys go ahead."

"I thought you wanted me to quiz you," I said.

"I'll help," Rebecca said.

But Sal shook his head. "It's okay. I have to concentrate. But thanks anyway."

He started down the steps.

"Wait," I said. "You were going to tell me something."

"It can wait."

"I'll meet you after school. You can tell me then."

"I can't," he said. "I'm tutoring, then I have work."

That night, when I opened Sal's binder to copy his biology notes, I saw a pink envelope tucked into the back pocket. It had big loopy handwriting on it. I guess that should have told me something. I was staring at it when the phone rang. It was Sal, calling me on his break. Looking back, I wish he hadn't. Maybe then, things wouldn't have turned out the way they did.

* * *

The very next day, everything changed. And I mean everything.

Here's the way it happened:

I walked to school alone that day. I couldn't have gone with Rebecca even if I'd wanted to. She had to

be at school early to meet with the rest of her team for some special lab project she was doing in biology. She said she would meet me at my locker before the bell rang. I hurried to school. I got there a little earlier than usual, which is exactly what I had planned. But Rebecca's team meeting must have finished early, too, because she almost gave me a heart attack when she showed up a lot sooner than I expected, before I was ready for her. I slammed my locker door and spun around to face her. She was smiling at me, the way she almost always does. But I knew she wouldn't be smiling much longer. I took a deep breath. Then I broke the news to her and braced myself for her reaction. Besides being my girlfriend, Rebecca is the nicest person I know. But she's also one of those people who is always on time, is always prepared, and never forgets anything. So I was pretty sure she would freak out when I told her that I had forgotten her history textbook at home. Sure enough, she did.

"I *need* that book, Mike, and you *promised* me you wouldn't lose it," she said, loud enough so that Teddy Carlin, whose locker was directly across the hall from mine, turned to look. So did all his friends, who were always hanging around Teddy. Teddy smirked at me, like I had to be the biggest loser in the world to have a girl giving me grief right there in the middle of the hall. Teddy was one of those guys who like to be the centre of attention, and he was having an easy time of it this year, now that A.J. Siropolous and his gang were out of the

school. Some of them were even locked up. "And you can't even lend me your book," Rebecca said, "because you can't find it."

"I didn't *lose* your book," I said to Rebecca. "I know exactly where it is." I had borrowed her book because, like she'd said, I had misplaced mine — temporarily, I hoped, because if it was gone for good, I'd have to pay for it, and textbooks are expensive.

"But I *need* my book," Rebecca said again, in the same loud voice. She didn't calm down until I told her, twice, that I would run home at lunchtime and get it while she was at band practice.

"Meet me at my locker after practice and I'll give you the book," I said. Rebecca didn't know that I had promised to go with Sal when he wrote his driver's test, and I didn't tell her.

Right after I promised Rebecca that I'd get her textbook for her and that she definitely wouldn't have to show up in class looking like she wasn't prepared, I went to Sal's locker, which was halfway down the hall from mine. He wasn't there. I didn't expect him to be. These days he was always in a rush. On top of going to school, he worked practically full time at a McDonald's on the Danforth. And a couple of weeks ago, he had started tutoring some of the special ed. kids at our school. With all the stuff he was doing, he usually raced through the front door of the school just as the last bell rang. So I scribbled a note to tell him I wouldn't be able to go with him after all because I had to go

home and get Rebecca's history text, and I jammed it into one of the vents in the door of his locker. It stuck out just enough that he'd be sure to see it. Then I turned and headed down the hall to homeroom. Teddy smirked at me again as I went by. I ignored him.

Later, when the lunch bell rang, I headed for the closest exit and dashed home. Thirty minutes and one organic peanut-butter-and-honey sandwich later, I was on my way back to school.

But I never got there. Not that afternoon, anyway.

When I got to Gerrard Street, I saw cop cars — cruisers *and* unmarked cars — spread out for about two blocks just east of my school. There were a lot of cops there, too — patrol officers *and* detectives. And a Forensic Ident truck. Uniformed cops were manning barricades that cut off the sidewalk and half the street. When you see something like that, it naturally slows you down. You want to know what's going on.

So I stopped. I looked in one direction and saw that there had been a traffic accident — a bad one. A couple of cars were all smashed up and tangled together. It looked like one of them had been making a left turn and the other one had plowed into it. Little pieces of broken glass sparkled all over the road. There was an ambulance down there, too, so I figured someone must have been hurt. I hoped no one had been killed.

I turned to look in the other direction. I was won-

dering why the cops had barricaded off so much of the street and why there was another ambulance a whole block away from the car accident. That's when I saw a flash of copper — Rebecca's hair. My heart started to race. What was she doing out here? She was supposed to be at band practice. I looked down at my empty hands and thought about ducking into the school before she saw me.

Too late.

There she was, coming toward me. Rebecca and I had been together for almost a year by then, but still it surprised me when she flung herself at me and wrapped her arms tightly around me, right there out on the street. She was making strange noises. It took a couple of seconds before I figured out what was going on. I pulled away from her just a little so that I could see her face.

I was right. She was crying.

"What's wrong?" I said. I hoped it wasn't about her textbook. "How come you aren't at practice?"

Tears were streaming down her cheeks. "Oh, Mike," she said.

Then, boy, another surprise — there was Riel, a serious expression on his face just like always. When I first saw him, I thought he must be there on account of the car accident. But that didn't make sense. He wasn't with Traffic Services anymore. He'd stopped doing that before he resigned from the cops and started teaching high school. Now that he was back to being a cop, he was with one of the plainclothes units, but not in this neigh-

bourhood, so I couldn't figure out what he was doing here. Then I thought he was looking for me on account of something I'd done — or something I hadn't done. Riel is the kind of guy who, when he gets mad about something, wants to deal with it right away. But I couldn't think of a single thing that I'd done to piss him off. Besides, he didn't look mad. But I could tell from his face that something was wrong. He came over to where Rebecca and I were standing.

"I was in the area. I just heard," he said.

That's when it occurred to me that maybe he knew one of the people who had been in that car accident. Maybe it was a teacher from our school. Then I had a terrible thought. Maybe it was Susan. Boy, that would explain why Rebecca was crying.

"I'm sorry to be the one to have to tell you, Mike," he said.

"Tell me what?" I said. I was shaking now. "Is it Susan? Was Susan in an accident?"

"It's Sal," Riel said in a quiet voice.

"Sal?"

"He's dead, Mike."

I laughed. I'm not kidding. I was so surprised and it sounded so ridiculous that I laughed. Then I looked at the tears that were running down Rebecca's face again and I saw the grim look on Riel's face, and I knew he wasn't kidding.

But I still couldn't believe it.

CHAPTER TWO

“What happened?” I said. “Was it the car accident? Did Sal get hit?”

Riel touched my arm to steer me away from all the people. We started walking down the street, away from the police barriers. Rebecca came with us.

“What happened?” I said again.

Riel looked in the window of every restaurant we passed. Finally he opened a door and held it for Rebecca and me. We went inside. The place was practically deserted, probably because everyone was outside watching what was going on. Riel led the way to a booth. He sat on one side. Rebecca and I sat across from him.

“What happened?” I said again. It was really getting to me that he hadn’t answered me yet.

“He was stabbed,” Riel said.

“*Stabbed?*” What was he talking about? “What do you mean, stabbed?” I said. Rebecca was sniffing next to me, but I was so stunned by what Riel had just said that I didn’t think to put my arm around her or even hand her a paper napkin so that she could blow her nose.

“Someone stabbed Sal,” Riel said.

“*What?*” I stared at him. Someone had *stabbed* Sal? What kind of sense did that make? Why would anyone stab *Sal*? There had to be some mistake. Sal was a good guy. Sal never got into trouble. “Why