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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Blood Ties**

Written by Julie Shaw

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Certain details in this story, including names, places and dates,  
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# Chapter I

## Bradford, August 1965

Kathleen was used to being invisible. In fact, she liked it that way, because when people didn't see you, they couldn't hurt you. It never lasted, though; it didn't matter that she was curled up tightly on the couch, saying nothing; she knew it would only be a matter of time before her stepmother noticed her anyway.

Irene was screaming at Kathleen's dad when it happened. 'And what are you frigging staring at, you nosy little get?' she yelled at Kathleen, her fat bosom heaving as she puffed herself up and pointed. 'I bet you're bleeding loving this, aren't you? *Him!*' She jabbed a finger towards her husband. 'Picking on my poor Darren again!'

Kathleen hung her head, letting her hair provide a safety curtain, wondering how anyone could 'love' such a scene. Irene was now jabbing her finger into Kathleen's dad's side, and that was definitely a bad sign – it meant her stepmum was after a fight. The question wasn't really a question, and she knew better than to try to

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answer anyway. She was just another target at which Irene could vent her anger. She drew in her breath – another reflex – and silently prayed that her dad would step in and take the attention back away from her.

John's tone always grew quieter the more Irene's increased in volume. Sometimes Kathleen thought this might be a good way to calm things down. At other times, she just wished he'd shout back louder. 'Can't you see what he's doing, love?' her father now said quietly. 'It seems that everyone and his horse knows what's going on but you. The lad's got gambling fever, Irene!' he added, with just a slight edge of exasperation. 'He can't possibly lose his wages *every* frigging Friday, can he? Every frigging week? Love, come on.'

Kathleen's eyes widened in disbelief. Was he spoiling for a fight as much as she was? Yes, she was happy her dad had deflected Irene's attention back to him again, but accusing her stepbrother of having gambling fever was going to rile Irene even more. She wished she could slip away, hole up in her bedroom – well, if bloody Monica wasn't in there, anyway – but her way was blocked and, besides, she knew all too well that if she moved, she'd just become the target of Irene's fury once again. She needed precious little encouragement to yell at her at the best of times.

Kathleen watched her stepmother puff herself up even further, like a balloon that was in danger of being blown up too much. 'Gambling fever? Gambling *fever!*'

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she screamed, predictably, her bust now almost bursting through her blouse. It was made of red satin, an even brighter shade than her hair, and was much too small for her; almost everything she liked to wear was. She lunged at her husband now, both fists hammering at his chest, and Kathleen was struck by what a ridiculous sight she looked, because her dad was a full ten inches taller. ‘You miserable twat!’ she yelled. ‘My poor boy gets robbed on his way home from work again – *again!* And do you have any sympathy? No, you do not! Be a different story if it was little miss prig over there, wouldn’t it? But, no – all you can do is call him a frigging liar! How dare you! You better shut your trap, John Adamson, or I swear, I’ll shut it for you. So help me, I will!’

Kathleen tried hard to see the humour. To hang on to the ridiculous image of her stepmother as a balloon that, once upon a time – how long ago was that? – would have at least made the shouting more bearable. But she’d lost the knack. Now it was all she could do to hold back the tears. All she wanted to do now was to simply open her mouth and scream. She was sick of it. Sick to death of it. Sick of the wretched, repetitive drudge of it. Sick of every day seeming to hold the stomach-churning potential for upset and violence and bile. Sick of living above a pub, wishing she could go back to being in school again. Wishing she could go anywhere – anywhere to escape this horrible place. She was sick of her entire life seeming now to revolve around it; the

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monotonous grind of working all hours in a job she could not detest more.

Most of all, though, Kathleen was sick of the family she'd inherited when her father, having taken over as landlord at the Dog and Duck had attracted – and married – this cow of a woman. That had been a day to remember – the day she'd *always* remember, as being the one where her old life had come to an end. The day she'd been gifted not just a wicked stepmother worthy of any gruesome fairy tale, but an ugly stepsister (ugly on the inside even if she wasn't on the outside) and a stepbrother who, though he could occasionally be kind to her, was – as was so often the way with Darren lately – the root cause of her current misery.

Irene was an idiot. A stupid woman who couldn't see past her own nose. Not when it came to her precious son. And since Darren himself was the one who understood that the best, he never wasted an opportunity to exploit it. He didn't pull any punches about it, either. So much so that all the regulars in the Dog and Duck knew the truth of what was happening, and how Darren was taking the piss out of Irene. But, oh, how she wished her dad hadn't just said what he'd said. Not just because it set Irene off on one of her rages but because everyone downstairs in the pub would be able to hear it – and knowing Mary, the other barmaid, they'd be able to hear it all too well, because she'd probably turn the music down so that everybody could have a laugh.

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Worse still, though, was that this could go on for hours yet. Once Irene was off on one, she didn't have an off button. Kathleen glanced at her watch. She really needed to leave them to it. She was due on the bar again in an hour and she'd yet to even have her bath. She shifted her legs a little, which had stuck to the stupid plastic cover Irene insisted on keeping on her stupid settee. *Why the fuck she insists on covering this piece of shit up, I'll never know*, she thought as she painfully extracted the back of her thighs from it. Happily, Irene was too busy shouting at her dad and punching him in the chest to notice, so she was able to stand up and slip past the pair of them to the door.

Well almost. She'd not quite reached it when she felt a sharp tug on her pullover. 'Go on, you ugly little bastard,' Irene spat. 'This is all your fucking fault!'

*How the fuck is any of this my fault?* Kathleen thought. She remained silent, though, knowing better than to voice something so inflammatory. Instead, she found herself cringing slightly, as she so often did, in anticipation of the usual crack around the head. But it seemed Irene hadn't finished ranting yet.

'If he didn't have you to support,' she railed, almost as if she'd known what Kathleen was thinking, 'we wouldn't be in this sorry position in the first place! Fucking leeching off us all the time, never out of our frigging sight, then maybe your *father* wouldn't begrudge my frigging kids a bit of something when they need it!'

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‘Irene!’ John shouted finally. ‘For God’s sake, let the girl go. She’s got to get ready for work, hasn’t she? And there’s no point giving her a bollocking, is there?’

With Irene letting go of her, so she could return to the assault on her husband, Kathleen took the opportunity to slip out of the door. And she would have legged it, had she not almost fallen arse over tit over Darren himself, who’d clearly been squatting down, earwiggling at the keyhole. He was twenty. A grown man. But he looked like a ten-year-old, sneaking around, looking like the shifty sod that he was.

He stood up. And then he grinned at her. ‘Steady on, kidda,’ he whispered. ‘You’ll do yourself an injury.’ He gave Kathleen a friendly slap on the back. ‘Everything alright in there?’

Kathleen didn’t even reward him with a dirty look. ‘You know damn well it isn’t, Darren,’ she hissed. ‘Have you gambled all your wages away again?’

‘Tut, tut, tut, our young ’un,’ Darren said, managing to mock her even as he’d caused so much shit. ‘I was robbed on me way home again. Two black ’uns it was. Big as houses and bold as brass, the pair of them. It’s called “demanding with menaces”, it is. Should be a law against it, shouldn’t there?’

‘And I suppose she’s subbing you all week again to make up for it, is she?’ Kathleen demanded, shaking her head. She stabbed a finger towards the living-room door. ‘You cause all this shit, Darren. *You*. So how is it



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fair that it's me that's on the end of it all the time? I'm the one who has to work here, remember? You're off doing your job, and Monica's off doing hers. And I'm the one who has to deal with all the *shit* you create!

She could feel tears – angry, frustrated tears – threatening to spill over her cheeks. She sniffed hard to stop it happening. God, how *sick* she was of it.

'Hey, them's the breaks, our kid,' Darren said before walking off, whistling, leaving Kathleen open-mouthed in his wake.

An hour later, in the bar, Kathleen kept her 'trap shut', as always. That she must keep her trap shut was one of Irene's most frequent orders, and, having no wish to heap even more attention on her excuse for a family, she was only ever happy to oblige.

Not that she cared that Mary, their regular barmaid, would have already filled all the regulars in on what had gone off. Once perhaps, but she was way past that now. In fact, lately, she realised, she'd even stopped being embarrassed when the locals took the piss over their pints. It was as if they'd even developed a kind of camaraderie with her, complicit in their amusement that Irene could be so thick as to keep falling for all the lines Darren spun her.

'I wish I had a mother like yours, Kathy,' one of the estate lads was saying. 'I'd get fucking robbed every week an' all.'

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His mate burst out laughing, and handed an empty pint glass across for Kathleen to fill. ‘Nah, come on, Gez,’ he ribbed his mate. ‘Shame on you. You’re making out like Darren’s lying! Like he’s not in the bookies every single bleeding day backing anything that moves. Give the poor lad a chance. He’s been robbed blind. *Again.*’ He winked at Kathleen. ‘Any one of us could be as unlucky as he is.’

Kathleen felt a smile twitch her lips, if only a small one. And for all their ribbing, they were just speaking the truth. She knew it, her dad knew it, Monica probably knew it too – well, if she could find the energy to think about anything other than herself for two minutes at a stretch. No, the fact was that Darren’s problems with gambling were common knowledge, and no one could believe that Irene *didn’t* know it.

Kathleen pulled a nice top on the beer for him. ‘You’re right,’ she said mildly, glancing from one to the other. ‘My brother is the unluckiest lad in the world, he is. Take no notice of all the gossip. He hasn’t got the gambling fever at all. He’s just got big bloody holes in his pockets.’ She allowed her smile to widen. ‘That and a face that thieves like to punch ...’

The two lads roared with laughter and Kathleen laughed with them. This shift – the seven-till-nine one – was the one bright time in her day. With her dad and Irene upstairs having their tea (or tonight, perhaps, throwing it at each other) it was a port in the storm

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before her dad came down and joined her and Irene did likewise – though her version of work was slightly different; more waltzing around the tap room playing the big ‘I am’.

But for these two hours, she felt free. She felt able to be herself. And it occurred to her that, actually, it was more than just that. For those two hours every day, people actually wanted to talk to her.

For two hours a day she wasn’t invisible.

## Chapter 2

Kathleen always tried to wake up before the alarm went off in the mornings, but given how late she'd had to work the previous evening, she was still surprised to find herself staring at the ceiling a full quarter hour before it did.

Not that she couldn't have predicted it. It was always the same when her dad and stepmum had one of their rows: Irene having one of her convenient migraines come on (because of all the shouting, *obviously*) then demanding that her dad stay up in the flat with her for the evening, leaving Kathleen to pick up the resultant slack.

*Silly old cow*, she thought. *Pathetic*. Though even more pathetic was the way her dad ran around after her all the time. Always had. She lay still a little longer, contemplating the unfairness of it all, then reached across to the brass alarm clock that sat on the chest of drawers that separated her bed from Monica's, and clicked it off before it started ringing.

The air in the bedroom was cold, despite it supposedly being summer, and the lino beneath her bare feet

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felt icy. This was her dominion, being first up, braving the cold and – for half the year, at least – the dark, but Kathleen had learned to find a grim satisfaction in her Cinderella status. Always the first up. Always the one brewing the tea, opening the curtains and, in the winter, stoking the fire. Only then would she dare to get her stepbrother and stepsister out of bed – then clean the pub. Only *then* would her dad and Irene get out of bed.

As she tiptoed out of the bedroom, Kathleen glanced back at her sleeping stepsister and smiled to herself. It was funny, because today and for the next two whole months, they would be the same age. Both seventeen. Two months during which Monica couldn't drone on about Kathleen being *only* sixteen. Come her own birthday, of course, Kathleen would start being *only* seventeen. But she'd enjoy the hiatus while it lasted.

Not that today would be much different to any other day. Yes, it was Kathleen's birthday, and yes, her dad had promised her he might take her to the pictures to see *The Sound of Music*, but if past birthdays were anything to go by, she wasn't going to hold her breath. Instead, she clung to memories of happier times, when her real mother had still been alive. Before she'd died in the car crash, Kathleen's mum had made every birthday special. Trips out and parties, fancy dresses and visits to family – these were always on the agenda, sometimes all on the same birthday, but that was all a long time ago. Since she was eight – that was the last one, still bright in her

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memory – a birthday was really no different from any other day. Well, except in so much as they served to remind her of the distance that was growing, and would carry on growing, between her childhood and the place she was now. How much she yearned to grow up, have it gone.

Her arms mottling from the cold, Kathleen pulled a thick cardigan over her nightie and ran downstairs to the bar. It wasn't time to start the cleaning yet, but this was another of her rituals; to make a rough assessment of how bad it was so she could work out how long it was going to take.

She had to factor in extra time today, as well, it being Saturday, because on Saturdays, as well as cleaning the tap room and toilets, the foyer and back of bar, there was also the best room to give a proper clean. That was a particularly long job because in order to vacuum the enormous expanse of carpet, all the chairs had first to be lifted onto the tables.

She completed her inspection. Two hours, she reckoned, heading back into the foyer to go upstairs again, then she'd have some time to herself for a bit. She was just at the foot of the stairs when the letterbox rattled behind her, as Eddie the postie fed a clutch of letters through the slot. 'Morning!' she called out, waving to him through the frosted glass. She liked Eddie. He was a habitually smiling presence in a day often lacking them. He'd also, it seemed, delivered something for her.

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Kathleen never got post. After all, who would write to her? Even on this day, her birthday, such cards as she might get would be delivered by hand. She'd had a pen friend once – a wild-looking girl called Ingrid, who lived somewhere in Germany, and would write to Kathleen in halting, sometimes comic English, but once she went to secondary school, it had all fizzled out. Since then, there'd been hardly anything, the only moment of excitement being when she'd written to a nature organisation, as part of a school project about wildlife conservation, and had received several leaflets, a letter and a poster of a tiger, which adorned her part of the bedroom wall for a good two years.

Funny to realise that she actually felt wistful about school now, despite counting the days till she'd left. But perhaps her eagerness to leave was because she saw better things ahead of her, yet, here she was, just over a year later, stuck working in this place, working like a skivvy for a paltry wage.

She scanned the envelope, wondering who on earth it might be from. There was something familiar about the handwriting, though, even if it was all written in capitals, and when she saw the postmark, it dawned on her who the sender might be.

She ripped open the envelope, as she climbed the stairs back up to the flat, smiling as she pulled out what was indeed a birthday card, and from the person she'd thought it might be from – her Auntie Sal. She was

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thrilled to see a ten-shilling note fluttering out, but then her face fell. This must mean that she wasn't going to visit. And so it seemed, as she read the short message:

Have a lovely day, Kathleen  
So sorry I can't be there but our Lisa has the mumps.  
Hope to see you soon, though – just as soon as we're  
no longer infectious!  
Lots of love, Auntie Sal xxx

Sally McArdle wasn't really Kathleen's aunt. She was, in fact, her stepmum's younger sister. Married to a lovely man called Ronnie (who she called uncle, and who was the blueprint for the sort of man she hoped to marry one day) Sally was the complete opposite of Irene. Blonde, slim and pretty, and with the sort of personality that could light up a room as soon as she entered it, she was everything Irene was not, and, as such, that Irene hated in a woman. Which was part of the reason that Kathleen loved her so much.

Auntie Sally lived in Thornton, which was two buses away, so she wasn't able to visit all that often. But when she did, she always spoiled Kathleen rotten. She'd bring her a new jumper or something, and always a bar of Fry's Chocolate Cream. She also shouted at Irene if she was being nasty to Kathleen, which meant she shouted at Irene quite a lot.



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Kathleen could never quite fathom how you could have the joy of a proper sister (as opposed to Monica, who she'd never grace with that name, despite her dad, from day one, always suggesting she should) and manage to hate her so much. Kathleen would have loved a sister – or a brother, just a sibling to call her own – but Irene didn't seem to like Sally at all; she called her all sorts of names behind her back, and hated it when she visited. She had even accused Kathleen's dad of fancying her. 'You'd love to get her into the kip wouldn't you, you dirty old get!' she'd yelled once after Sally had left. 'I've seen the way you leer at her.' That had been followed by the usual four-hour argument, with her dad having to crawl round Irene and tell her how beautiful she was and how he didn't ever want anyone else. It made Kathleen want to puke.

The kettle was whistling on the stove so she quickly propped the birthday card up on the breakfast table before filling the teapot. It was a huge blue ceramic thing and weighed half a ton, but a year of working long hours in the pub had built up her muscles. She might be downtrodden, but she was young, fit and strong, and that pleased her, even if it was just another reason for Irene and Monica, both short and podgy, to resent her.

She spotted Irene's cigarettes on the windowsill and pinched one to smoke while the tea brewed. She did this most mornings, and didn't feel a shred of guilt about it. Irene made sure half her wages got taken straight off