
Opening Extract from...

In the Family

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Chapter One

It was bitterly cold on the A1 slip-road. Joel Carson, although wrapped in a council workman's donkey-jacket (the kind with lime-green shoulder inserts) and wearing an oversized pair of protective gloves, was frozen. Long tendrils of hair had escaped from his beanie hat, and were being whipped against his cheek in stringy strands. His nose was running, and, as he was unable to remove the gloves because his fingers had lost all feeling, he was wiping it at surreptitious intervals on the knitted cuff of his sleeve. He was one of a gang of four, three 'work experience' school leavers including himself and Marvin, a gangling black man in his twenties who had just been promoted to supervisor.

Joel had promised his mother that he would stick it out for the whole six months, and he would keep his promise. After that, he had no intention of working for the council or for anyone else. He had friends who made a living from street trading of various kinds and he intended to join them. He scowled at Marvin as he turned away from shouting some order to the little group about clearing the weeds as well as the rubbish. Joel hated Marvin, partly because of his bossy and unreasonable way of 'managing' his subordinates, but mainly because he was a sham. He knew that before his sudden rise from the ranks Marvin had been just as reluctant to do the thankless manual work as he was himself. Well, let him lord it over them. He was welcome to be a tin-pot motorway maintenance gang boss if he wanted. Joel wanted out. He squatted down on his haunches beside a bush, which was as far out of the wind as he could get, and, flinging the heavy gloves to the ground, lit a cigarette. He cupped its fragile glow in a cradle that he made with the frozen fingers of both hands. When he thought that it was properly alight, he took a long drag, drawing the smoke deep into his lungs.

The paltry contentment that he managed to extract from this action was short-lived. He was totally unprepared for the sudden sharp pain when a huge hand smote the back of his head, but it was a sensation that he recognised instantaneously. A 'good clip' to the back of the head had been his father's favourite form of chastisement, and therefore one that he particularly loathed. Caught off balance, he fell face first into the mud, and then scrambled to his feet to turn on Marvin. He landed a punch on Marvin's jaw and Marvin hit him back. Nick and Pete, the other two workers, downed tools to watch.

Marvin head-butted Joel and Joel kicked him viciously on the shins. Marvin responded with a rugby-type tackle and then both were rolling in the mud. Joel lost his temper, slapping Marvin's face repeatedly and shouting, "You bastard!" through gritted teeth. Marvin was the lither, and, rolling free, stood and hauled Joel to his feet before knocking him down again. Dazed, Joel fell to his knees on a pile of filthy old rags.

"Get up!" Marvin shouted. "Get up, you little shit!" He stood towering over Joel, his face twisted with hatred. "Get up, I said!"

Suddenly, Joel was not listening, nor did he now want to continue the fight. Transfixed, he pointed to something poking up from the matted knot of rags.

"Marvin," he said in a low voice, "what do you think that is?"

Marvin peered down into the mud-churned mess.

“Jesus Christ!” he said. “It’s a finger-bone: a finger bone with a ring still on it.”

Five hours later, Detective Inspector Tim Yates had had a tent set up over the remains on the bleak roadside verge and had just arrived at the scene himself, having been called out from an evening at home with his wife of eighteen months, Katrin. The council workmen were still there, crammed into a police car on the hard shoulder. The A1 had been closed from the exit before the discovery – which was adjacent to the body – to the one after it.

Night had fallen and if possible it was even colder and more desolate than it had been earlier in the day. Tim’s spirits were not dampened, however, though he thought with a pang of the quiet dinner that he and Katrin had promised themselves. Not for the first time, he congratulated himself on his luck in having a wife like her – one who not only did not complain about the more uncivilised aspects of his job, but who actually understood them. Katrin had never been a police officer herself, but for the past several years she had worked as a police researcher and this had allowed her insights into the nature of police work which made her wryly accepting of the many disturbances to her private life that being married to a policeman created.

Tim had only been standing on the hard shoulder for a few minutes, but he was already soaked. Unwisely, he had brought no hat, and his thick, reddish hair was now plastered to his head. Thrusting his hands deep into his pockets and hunching his shoulders against the cold, he climbed up the slippery bank and poked his head into the SOCO’s tent.

“Have you found anything else?”

“It looks as if there is a complete skeleton here – more or less, anyway. There are some bones missing, but they could have been disturbed by animals – or we will find them lower down in the soil.” Patti Gardner beamed up at him. He was aware that she had long had a crush on him which they both recognised to be hopeless, though he had encouraged it in a half-hearted way before he had met Katrin.

“Male or female?”

“We can’t say for certain – we need to carry out some lab tests to be sure – but judging from the remnants of clothing, and the ring that was found on the finger-bone, the remains are almost certainly female.”

“How long has she been here?”

“Again, it is difficult to say. I hope that the fabrics that we’re finding with the body will give us an accurate idea, once they’re analysed. From the general decay of both the remains and the fabrics, I’d say they’ve been here for at least twenty years; but as you know it is always hard to tell in these cases. You might be able to find out when that stretch of road was turned into motorway, or the last time that tree planting work was carried out on the verges. It would help to narrow down the timeframe a little.”

Tim nodded and thanked her. He walked over to the police car, which was crammed to bursting with two policemen and the four council workers. There was a noxious smell of damp meeting none-too-clean clothes, with other less obviously identifiable odours whose nature he preferred not to consider too closely.

The policeman sitting in the driver's seat made to get out of the car.

"It's all right – stay where you are, Constable . . . ?"

"Wright, sir. And this is PC Chakrabati."

Tim nodded at them, then craned his neck so that he could see the faces of the council workers.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to accompany us to the station. It's impossible for us to interview you here without everyone getting soaked. Two of you can come with me in my car, and two of you can stay with Constable Wright. If you need to contact anyone, you can either do it now or from the station."

Marvin spoke first. He seemed excitable, and keen to exert his authority.

"I will come with you, Detective. It was me who found the bones. I'm in charge of the gang – Detective."

"I found the bones, you evil great scumbag," a voice cut in.

Tim peered further into the car. A skinny youth was glaring ferociously at the black man.

"There are no prizes for being the person who found them," said Tim, amused. "It isn't a treasure trove. No doubt you can each tell us your version of events when we get to the station. You" – he spoke to the skinny youth – "had better stay with Constable Wright, since you clearly don't see eye-to-eye with – what's your name?"

"Marvin Thomas, Detective"

". . . with Marvin. What's your name?"

"Joel Carson," Joel muttered sulkily.

"Well, Joel, you stay with Constable Wright, and you" – he pointed at Pete – "come with Marvin and me."

Chapter Two

Mine has been a drab sort of life. There were many great things I could have done – I had the brain for it – and yet I have not fulfilled a single one of them. I could make many excuses, including that I had a very plausible desire to escape into ordinariness from my extraordinarily nasty childhood. But the truth is that I am lazy: bone idle. I always take the line of least resistance. Well, almost always.

As I look around my flat, I realise that I, aged fifty, should be living somewhere better; and certainly that it should be cleaner. Peter is adamant about the latter. No doubt he will make changes in that respect, in his emphatic energetic way.

It is because of Peter that I am in rather a pensive mood today. It is nearly thirty years since I lived under the same roof with another person, and then I had no choice. I got a place of my own as soon as I could afford it. And although I have had girlfriends and, eventually, boyfriends, I never wanted to share my home with them. I even preferred not to share my bed, if some alternative solution could be found. But although I have resisted all the little voices telling me that I am meant to be an island, somehow ever since I met him I have known that one day I would be compelled to ask Peter to live with me. He is moving in tomorrow.

In one sense I am rather astounded that he has accepted the offer. Peter is very upper class and superlatively fastidious. He went to Winchester and then to Peterhouse. His collars and cuffs are always snow-white and starched. I think that he has read almost every worthwhile novel written in the English language (though, not to do myself down, I might add that I have read quite a few myself) and certainly all of the even passable poetry. Yet he jumped at the chance! Any port in a storm, I suppose. I happen to know that his lease was about to expire and that his ancient tough Mummy had not come up with the renewal money as he had expected. But I like to think – am certain, in fact – that there is more to it than that. Little by little, Peter has become the love of my life; and I think that he feels the same way about me.

That doesn't mean that I am not scared – it would be no exaggeration to say terrified – however. I don't know what it will be like living with Peter. He has so much energy, and is so decided in his views, that I may not be able to cope. He has already said that he wants to move the furniture around (apparently he is regarded as extremely proficient at rearranging the contents of rooms) and to re-hang the pictures. I think that I can bear this as long as he doesn't start throwing things away. I have been living surrounded by the same possessions – with virtually no additions – for almost one third of a century. It is not their value or their appearance that concerns me, but their ingrainedness – they are part of me. Peter must appreciate that. But I'm sure that he does. He can be very sensitive.

I feel guilty about Elspeth. She's my cat. She's fifteen, and not used to strangers. She's met Peter once or twice and seems to like him well enough. I do hope that she won't be unhappy.

I'm not sure what people at work will say when they know about us. Most of the younger ones have guessed that I'm gay – though bisexual would be a more accurate term – but there are still one or two people who remember that I went out with Kathryn Sheppard for a while. They will be confused. But I'm certainly not going to worry about what they think. I'm much more concerned about how things will work out with Peter. Poor Kathryn. I haven't thought about her for ages.

I must tidy up in a minute. Peter is coming to supper, but not to stay the night. He said that it would help him if I could cook for him, as he is very busy packing his

things. When we have eaten, he will return to his own flat for the last time and carry on packing. When we eat together, I usually cook. Peter is a much better cook, but often I don't have the ingredients for the sort of food he prepares. All those exotic oils and herbs. I expect he will be bringing them here now; or if not we will buy some. It's all very exciting, really.

I'd better move the sofa and clean under it before he arrives. The last time he moved it, he was disgusted by the fluff and pieces of biscuit he found there. I suppose it was rather nasty. I think I'll cook chicken Caesar salad tonight. Peter likes that, though he wishes that I wouldn't use Cardini's dressing. He says that he makes his own, from eggs just put in boiling water for a minute and extra virgin oil. I must say I like Cardini's. No doubt Peter is right, and it's the sugar they put in it that attracts me. I don't pretend to have as fine a palate as he does.

The windows could do with a clean, too. It's a while since the last window-cleaner left the area and I haven't managed to find another one. I must ask the girl who lives downstairs if she knows someone. Or perhaps I'll just leave it to Peter. He'll be sure to know what to do.

I can hear footsteps in the corridor outside – he is probably here already and I haven't done a thing – no cleaning or cooking! I know he will be annoyed. Dear God, I wish he could understand how afraid I am. When I feel like this, I am quite paralysed – unable to lift a little finger or do anything at all. Not anything. My mind goes blank. Even sitting still exhausts me.

Chapter Three

It was a sultry afternoon in late July. The housekeeper's daughter was playing in the drive. She scooped the gravel into two small heaps, creating a bald patch of earth just in front of her feet. Despite the heat, she was wearing heavy lace-up shoes. She could feel her feet sweating inside them, bruising her white socks with the stain of black polish. She swiped at the gravel, suddenly hot and irritable. Hobnailed boots came crunching across the sweep towards her, but she did not look up. She knew from the way that he walked that it was Mr. Sam.

The boots halted when they reached her. Still she did not look up, though she could see the coarse grey boots and his legs. She knew that it was rude not to look at him. She did not care.

"Little Miss Tirzah," he said. It was a joke. She didn't know why he called her by that name, but when he was playing with her he always did. Normally, she did not mind, but today she scowled and bent her head lower.

"Hey, little miss," he said, bending down and taking her chin in his hand, so that she had to look to one side to avoid his gaze. "I've told thee before about raking up the gravel – leave it lying flat, or you might cause an accident. And at very least I'll have yon gardener after me!"

He pointed to where John Horsley stood, his stern meagre figure bent over his hoe as he coaxed weeds out of the rose beds. She knew that this was a joke too – that John Horsley, like everyone else, took orders from Mr. Sam – but still she did not oblige him with a smile.

“What’s the matter, Missy,” he continued, looking kindly on her. “Don’t you have anything to do? No-one to play with, is that it?”

She shook her head. Her hair was dark and dead straight, cut by her mother into a severe bob with a short fringe. She looked at him directly now, and he saw that there were tears welling up in her light hazel eyes. He put his arm around her shoulder.

“Nay,” he said. “What is it, child?”

“There’s a dead bird,” she said. The tears were coursing down her cheeks now.

“Well, birds do die – like all of us. Where did you find it? Show it to me.”

She jumped to her feet, her red-and-white gingham dress twirling outwards to expose chubby knees above her rather thickset legs. Sam himself stood up more slowly. She took his hand and led him round the edge of the lawn to the greenhouse. Among a heap of broken flowerpots there lay a large dead crow. It looked as if it had been festering for some time: its underside had been ripped open, perhaps by a fox or by some other wild bird, and its entrails hung out in purplish ropes, alive with white maggots.

“I want to have a funeral,” she announced.

He was suddenly concerned. Looking at the bird, he realised that it could not have fallen where it lay by chance. It must have been moved there.

“Dorothy,” he said. “Tell me the truth. Have you touched it?”

She stared at him boldly, and for a fraction too long.

“No, Mr. Sam,” she said, shaking her head.

“Are you sure? Because it’s important. If you’ve touched it, it could make you ill; and I should have to send you in to your mother to wash your hands in disinfectant and change your clothes.”

“No,” she said. “I didn’t touch it.”

He kissed her briefly on her forehead.

“That’s all right, then. Wait here while I fetch a spade – and don’t touch it now.”

He brought a light spade from the greenhouse, and dug a shallow hole under the yew hedge. Then he lifted the dead crow carefully on to the spade and flipped it into the hole, shovelling the loose earth back on top and tamping it down with his boots.

“There,” he said. “We have had the funeral. You can put a stone on it to mark the spot if you want to.”

She nodded, and was walking away from him when she changed her mind, turned and ran back to him, and gave him a hug, clumsily, because he was still carrying the spade. He chuckled.

“That’s more like my Tirzah,” he said.

Later her mother called her in to tea. It was scrambled eggs with Marmite toast, normally her favourite, and a meal that she had pleaded for earlier in the day. However, she could eat only a few mouthfuls, and even her cup of tea seemed to rise up in her throat and choke her. Eliza was annoyed.

“Mrs. Frear gave me those eggs especially for you. If you don’t eat them, you won’t go out again today.”

She went to the room that they shared and lay down on her bed. She shut her eyes and fell into an uneasy sleep. When she awoke, the daylight was fading and she was vaguely aware that Eliza was in the room preparing for bed. She had changed into her floor-length nightdress and had knelt by the bed to pray. She did not seem to notice that Dorothy had not washed or changed out of her daytime clothes. Dorothy turned over and slept again.

The next time that she awoke, she could see the dawn breaking outside the window and hear the cowman whistling to the small herd of cows to come down the field to the dairy for milking. She was very hot. She tried to sit up, but she felt terribly weak and slumped sideways against the pillow. Her sore throat raged. She was afraid to wake her mother, but desperate for water. At night, there was always a glass of water on her mother’s bedside table. She swung both legs over the side of the bed and planted her feet firmly on her rag rug. The she tried to stand. She was aware of herself falling, as if into a bright light, and felt her head take a sharp knock against the side of the bed as she fell. She thought that she heard the thud of her own body as it hit the floor.

She did not know how many hours or days later she gained consciousness. She was barely awake and could only see through a grey blur. Her limbs felt dead and heavy. Her throat was horribly sore and there was a nasty taste in her mouth. Her tongue was furred and felt as though it were blistered. When she breathed, she made a whistling sound and each intake of breath gave a stab of pain to her neck – not the putrid, pervasive soreness of her throat, but a sharper, cleaner pang, as if someone had just twisted a razor there. Through the gummy lids of half-closed eyes, she could make out a figure huddled at the end of the bed, head tied in a triangular scarf. It was her mother, weeping. She drifted back into sleep, hot and uncomfortable.

It seemed only a moment or two later that she was again awake and being raised in the bed. She struggled feebly – it hurt too much to be pulled about – and was reprimanded sharply by her mother’s voice.

“Be gentle with her, Mrs. Drake,” said someone with kindly authority. “She has a long convalescence in front of her yet – her arms and legs will feel sore and you can expect her to be very lethargic. Now, Dorothy, I need to get you into a sitting position so that I can look at your throat. I’m afraid it will hurt a little – we have had to make an incision and put a little silver tube inside it, because you were finding it hard to breathe.”

His hands were cool and deft, but when he touched her neck the pain was dreadful. She made no sound, but the tears welled up in her eyes.

“Good girl,” he said, placing her gently back on the pillow. “I shall leave it in for a few more days,” he added, speaking over his shoulder in a brisker tone. “Then she must come to the cottage hospital to have it removed. It is too risky to try to do it here. Keep her in bed in the meantime.”

“Yes, Doctor. Thank you,” said her mother reverently. “May she have visitors? I mean just from the house. Mr. Sam is anxious to see her.”

“If he only stays for a few minutes, and doesn’t overtire her. I don’t think that there can be any risk to him of infection now.”

Her mother brought him one of the china ewers from their room, and poured out hot water into an enamel bowl. He washed his hands with some ceremony and took the towel of Indian linen from her slowly. He was looking at her intently. Despite the ridiculous scarf, she was looking very handsome. She was not unaware of her good looks.

“You’re a good mother, Eliza.” he said. “Dorothy, you’re a lucky girl to have so many people care for you. We’ll soon have you running around again.”

At his praise, her mother bridled with pride. “Say thank-you to the doctor, Dorothy,” she said.

Dorothy raised her head and managed to croak thank-you as he departed. It hurt her to speak. She felt indignant: it was clear that she should have been the centre of attention during his visit, but already her leading-lady role was being stolen from her by her mother.

Mr. Sam came in and sat on a chair by the bed. He was carrying a jar containing a little posy of wild flowers.

“Eh, Tirzah,” he said. “I’ve brought you a bit of the summer, since you can’t go outside. Aye, but you’re a bad lass. You told me that you hadn’t touched yon crow and doctor says you must have. He says that’s probably how you got the diphtheria. Your poor mother has been beside herself with grief. Lord only knows what she’d have done if . . .”

“Don’t, Father,” her mother cut in, but indulgently – her voice carried none of its habitual harsh edge when she spoke to him. Only she and Mrs. Kitty and his two sons were allowed to call him “Father”. “The child has suffered enough, and she’ll know not to try to deceive us again.” She cast Dorothy a baleful look while Mr. Sam was searching in his sleeve for a handkerchief.