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Opening Extract from...

Dead Secret

Written by Catherine Deveney

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DEAD SECRET

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*For Peter Black Rafferty.
A daughter's song.*

FRIDAY

CHAPTER ONE

Growing up wasn't a process; it was a moment. It was the moment I watched Daddy die. Everything began to unravel then. Not slowly, like rows of neat knitting pulled stitch by stitch, but quickly, in great big, uneven chunks that left ragged, unruly holes.

Even now, I prefer to say that up until he died, we all lived a life full of secrets rather than a life full of lies. "Lie" is such an ugly word. And so deliberate. It wasn't like that.

I didn't want him to die, but I particularly didn't want him to die in that dingy little upstairs hall of his. You'd think it would be irrelevant, that only the dying would matter. But it was so enormous that all of it was important. It mattered that he was lying on that grubby, beige-coloured carpet; that there was a seeping stain on the wallpaper above his head. It mattered that the white paintwork was chipped and flaking, that it was pockmarked with spots of primrose yellow from a past life. It wasn't a good enough place for anyone to die, and certainly not Daddy, but then you don't get to choose, do you? None of us gets to choose. All he could do was die and all we could do was watch.

I used to think life was about options. Brown bread or white? Coffee or tea? Rent or buy; bus or car; sink or bloody swim. The minute he died I knew choice was just an illusion. All of it. Endless options making you feel in control and none of them worth

a damn. You can choose white walls over primrose yellow if you want. But you can't choose between living or dying. Once you know that – I mean *really* know it – you can't ever be a child again. And when Daddy died, for the first time I really knew.

Strange the way I keep calling him 'Daddy'. Like one of those upper-crust girls who has a father with a fat cheque book. But we never had any money and I never called him that when he was alive. I called him Da mostly, though I jokingly called him Pa for a bit after we watched an old episode of *The Waltons*. We hooted at the sickly, saccharine nonsense of it all. But I, who hooted loudest and with most derision, loved that family. I never stopped to work out why.

It was only after he died that I sometimes called him Daddy. Just in my head. Just in private. When he went, I grew up in the way I saw the world. But I became a little girl again in the way I saw him. Right from the start, I knew for certain that even when the funeral was over, even when things seemed to be normal again, they never, ever would be. You have to understand. He... it... this... all of it... was that important.

He was all Sarah and I had. My sister Sarah is four years younger than me and was only a few weeks old when Mother died. Sometimes, I think she's lucky that she never knew her at all. For me, trying to remember Mother is like a puzzle that never stops nagging. Sarah doesn't have to bother. Over the years I've tried and tried to bring the fuzzy images in my mind into sharper focus. I remember she had a coat with a fur collar that she wore in winter, and I remember being carried in her arms once and laying my cheek, stinging with cold, against the soft fur and falling asleep. The scent she wore was trapped in the fur and in later years I identified it as the scent of roses. Maybe

that's because I went into a chemist shop once and sniffed every perfume bottle in the shop, and when I sniffed one of those old-fashioned bottles of Yardley's English Roses, my stomach lurched. But that's all that's left of her. A vague scent. I can't remember her face and I can't remember her voice. There has to be a reason for that.

Mother had remarkable power for a dead woman. She was the source of all secrets in our house, the well from which they all sprang. Da never spoke willingly about her to Sarah or me. We knew better than to ask. But I couldn't help wondering whether he thought of her in his dying moments. Whether, as he lay there in a silent carousel of summer heat and pain and chipped-paint squalor, he remembered something else, a time when the carousel had spun to music. He loved her once. I know he loved her. Even knowing what I know now, I don't think he ever stopped.



At first neither Sarah nor I realised that Da was suffering heart failure. He was weak and shivering with cold, despite the sticky heat of the warmest June in years, and there was sweat on his brow. He gripped the wall to get to the toilet to be sick, and on the way back, he lay down in the hall. Sarah and I tried to coax him back to bed, but though he wasn't a big man, he was solid. There was no way we could move him without help.

I don't think he knew where he was or what he was saying. There were a few words that didn't make sense, then he seemed to focus on us. "Love," he said, but his eyes said more. When I re-run that scene in my mind now, I always reply. I say, "I love you too, Da." But I didn't then. I was too busy trying to pretend it wasn't the end.

He retched weakly. I took off his pyjama top to sponge the thin sickness that trickled from the corners of his mouth; little rivulets that ran into the folds of his neck. I only minded because I knew he would. He was such a private man. So very, very private. But by then he was already slipping in and out of consciousness. The journey had started, or maybe ended, and he was past caring.

At first there had been all that panic. Get the sponge, feel his pulse, call the doctor. Stop it happening. *Take control.* I always feel compelled to push myself forward as the strong one. But I'm a bit of a fraud, as you'll find out. I may be the eldest, but Sarah is the natural coper in our family, not me. I dialled 999 but Sarah was shouting to me from the hall that he was getting worse and I ended up crying down the line in panic, unable to speak. "It's okay," said the operator, "just tell me where you are," and I sobbed the address into the mouthpiece. She didn't know what I was saying. Such a kind voice she had. Patient. Asking me to take my time, to repeat it slowly.

It was worse afterwards when the terrible stillness came, when we knew there was nothing else to do but watch. His chest was like a slowly deflating balloon, sinking lower and lower with each breath. His skin became paler, almost translucent, as his breathing dropped. My heart began to thump, beating faster and faster as his slowed, and for a moment I had the strangest sensation that his heartbeat was transferring into my body. Neither Sarah nor I spoke. I sat and cradled Da's head in my lap and listened as a distant siren came closer and closer.

Sarah let them in. Their feet thumped on the wooden stairs as they ran up and I could feel the vibration running through the

floor. They were quite gentle as they moved me away from him, but firm too. While they worked on Da, Sarah and I sat on the stairs like two strangers in our own family's house. Like it was nothing to do with us, really.

I watched them through the bars of the banister and I wanted to ask them why they were bothering with all that equipment, why they were rushing and pushing and pulling. He was gone already. They might make his heart work like a mechanical pump but we knew he was gone. Well, I did. I seldom know what Sarah really thinks.

I could see the barrel shape of his chest and the little hairs inside his nostrils and the slackness under his chin. It looked like Da from the outside but whatever had been inside, whatever spark had fuelled the engine room of Joseph Connaghan, was gone. There seemed no point in all that commotion. It was only later that it felt important they had fought for him and shown that he mattered, that he wasn't just some random old man. That we hadn't given him up willingly.

They wouldn't let us travel in the ambulance. I kept asking why they wouldn't let me be with him but they said it was better not to. Maybe they thought I'd go crazy if I suddenly realised I was shut in the back with a corpse. A couple of women from further up the street had come out onto the pavement and were standing in their slippers, looking down the road at the ambulance. And Mr Curtis from next door, of course. Mr Curtis watches everything in Rosebank Street.

Mr Curtis shrinks when people talk to him. He looked like he wanted to run back inside and peep from behind his curtains when one of the ambulance men shouted to him to ask if he could drive Sarah and me to the hospital. Normally I'd have

been angry. I don't like people organising me. But I didn't say a word. Neither Sarah nor I could have got behind the wheel. We did the whole journey in silence. "I hope..." he began, as he drew up outside the hospital, and then he looked at me and trailed off. I banged the door shut and ran inside, leaving Sarah to mumble thanks.

A nurse showed us into a waiting room at the hospital. Sarah stood silently. I walked up and down. The walls were pale yellow, the curtains lemon with streaks of lime green. They made me think of a soft drink we used to order on holiday abroad, a lemon soda that was served with rocks of ice and twists of lime in the glass. Funny what your mind thinks of in a crisis. Sarah's eyes followed me everywhere I went in that room.

The nurse came in, closing the door gently, precisely, behind her before speaking. The doctors were still working on Da but he wasn't responding. Did we want them to continue? Bloody stupid question. There was no point in saying yes because he was gone. If he wasn't, they wouldn't have asked. I suppose it was her way of giving us a decision, letting us take control of the goodbye, but by then I already knew there was no such thing as control.

I looked at Sarah. What exactly were we meant to say? No, it's all right nurse. It's only my old dad rasping out his last. Tell them to go and have their lunch break. I know I shouldn't have taken it out on her. She was nice, really. But who would want to say no to a question like that? And what was the point of saying yes? "How can we answer that?" I snapped at her. Sarah apologised for me. I hate it when she does that. She can be so bloody prissy sometimes, Sarah. "It's okay," said the nurse, and she touched my shoulder as she left.

He was laid on a white sheet when they finally took us to see him. There was another sheet over him but his chest was still bare and I wanted to pull the sheet up to keep him warm, protect him from the chill of death that rippled through the 85° heat. I could scarcely breathe in that heat, but I still looked at him and felt cold. Grey stone, snow dusted; ice-cracked earth and lichen stiff with frost. Extra socks. I wanted extra socks for my dead father's feet.

I think maybe the nurse had combed his hair because it was slicked down neatly where usually it had a mind of its own and sprouted in unruly bushes in different directions. His hair was white and without the animation of life he suddenly looked so old. He was sixty-eight but he could have been more. I wanted to tell the nurse that wasn't how he looked. It was only a month since I had left for a summer season in Brighton. He could have passed for ten years younger than. But nothing stays still for long. Everything in life shifts beneath your feet like moving grains of sand.

I don't know why it mattered to me that the nurse should know he didn't usually look that old. Except that as soon as he was gone, I felt the need to make him exist in people's minds, make them understand the real Da, make them love him as I loved him.

But then I looked at his face as I bent and kissed him one last time, a face so familiar and yet now so unfamiliar, and I felt the solid base of my life suddenly shift and tilt.

The real Da. I ran a finger gently down his cheek, still soft with the leftovers of life. There had been so many mysteries in our young lives, and while Da was alive it hadn't really mattered. Or so I'd thought. We had him. It was only now he was dead that

I began to wonder if I had ever known who the real Da was, if I had ever really known him at all.



Secrets. Secrets. Sss... secrets. They have lapped back and forth inside my brain for five years now, ever since Da died, constant as the tides. My understanding has ebbed and flowed steadily too; sometimes it reaches a peak, like the spring tide, when the water is high and deep and complete. I try to hold onto it, the completeness of that understanding, but somehow it always drifts away from me again, receding far out into the distance as if it will never return.

All I know for certain is that in the week from Da's death to his funeral, from kissing him in that hospital bed to laying him in the ground, everything changed. One week, yet it forced me to face a lifetime's denial. I had always known the secrets were there. Da's death just forced me to face them.

Growing up, Sarah and I were affected differently by the mysteries of our family life. For me, they produced a kind of emotional restlessness, an inability to stay still and relate to people. Maybe I was frightened that if I stopped, I'd have to think. Sarah was frightened to do anything *other* than think. I got itchy feet and my sister became trapped in a padded cage, craving safety and security. Sarah and I were always opposites.

It was only after Da died that I came to understand the wasted years. The flitting from job to job. The lack of direction. The men. I think I always wanted to know about Mother. On some subconscious level, perhaps I *did* know. Perhaps the awfulness of what happened was locked somewhere inside me, a kind of suppressed, intuitive knowledge. Either way – knowing or not

knowing – I was always going to be rootless. If I wasn't certain where I came from, how could I know who I was? You can call it amateur psychology if you like, but these things matter. Of course they matter.

It wasn't until the truth came out that I finally learned how to stand still. And maybe how to stop being mouthy and lashing out at people I care about. So many milestones since then, important things that Da has missed. With him gone, nothing is ever complete now; nothing is ever truly whole. At the age of thirty-three I'm finally going to graduate and Da won't be there. And Sarah is about to have her first baby, the grandchild he'll never see. I miss him. We miss him. We've never stopped missing him.

It's five years this summer since he died. It's not his anniversary that has made me relive everything so intensely these last few weeks, made me write it all down. I am not a great one for anniversaries; it is the everyday absence that is most painful. No, it's hearing Shameena Khan's new recording of Puccini's arias. She sent it to me in the post with a note, explaining what I already knew: that the roots of this recording went back to Da's funeral. Every time I listen to it, I feel inspired to write down a little more of what happened that summer.

It was so beautiful when she sang for Da. I think of rain after drought when I hear those opening notes, of water pattering gently on scorched earth. There is nothing quite like music for making part of your life come alive again and re-run like a movie reel in your head. The record you danced to the summer you were sixteen. The song you got married to, or made love to by candlelight. Or in the case of Puccini, the music you buried your father to.

Shameena Khan was – is – my best friend. We've known each other since we were schoolgirls. Nowadays everyone has heard of Shameena. But she was only just breaking through on the opera scene five years ago when she flew up from London to sing at Da's funeral. There can be few of us who were in the church who didn't guess what a career Shameena had before her. For me, nothing could ever compare to the way she sang that day. It was music to live for; music to die to; music to make the carousel turn.

Her singing fused with something in me that day, something that is gone now and will never come back in quite the same way. It was a moment where love, and pain, and insight, and beauty, suddenly melted into one another and bubbled up as something new, a brief, transient glimpse of infinity. Such a voice. The recording is wonderful too, really wonderful. I am listening to it now, as I write. It is as much my tool as the keyboard I type with.

The power of the music is pumping up the room, taking every inch of space and making it swell, the way a sponge swells in water. It fills me too, until there is nothing left of the present, nothing left of now. There is only yesterday. In every note I can see the summer Da died, and smell it, and touch it. More importantly, I can feel it. At times I even find myself slipping back into those strange, one-sided conversations I had with him in the week after he died.

I am right back there, caught in the strange, stifling heat of that June, while the music washes over me, a warm, rhythmic, rolling wave of memories.