

## THE WRONG SKELETON

### CHAPTER ONE

#### THE COMPETITION

'I just find it a bit strange Mum. She can't stand the sight of me, yet she sends me this money to go to Arran, with a pal.' Gary Stewart never did find the relatives on his Mum's side of the family very understandable. Nor the ones on his Mum's side.

'She's done it before, as you well know. Very good at Christmas and remember the nice laptop she forked out for.' Sally, his Mum, struggling to bring him up on one wage, was always grateful for what granny Louise sent them. Patronising, yes, but Sally was wise enough not to alienate her. The well off side of the family. Actually, Louise was Gary's great grandmother and they called her granny Louise to distinguish her from Sally's Mum who was called granny Wendy.

'I wouldn't go so far as to say she can't stand the sight of you, son,' she said, though still trying, after all these years, to work out the family dynamics.

'So, there's no truth in the rumour that she saw me for the first time, when I was days old, and then went to her flat upstairs and proceeded to die,' Gary said, holding the money she had sent in his hand and counting it again.

'How could she have died if she just sent you that money, eh? Don't be daft.'

'Oh, that's right. It was the granny before that. She had never seen me before so she visited to pay her respects to her latest grandchild, or was it great, great grandchild. She died in someone's flat below hers. What was her name again?'

'Granny Pauline, and she was your great, great grandmother. Died 17 years ago. The year you were born. In fact, the same week. Uncle Gerry said, 'One is hatched and one is dispatched,' in his usual tactful style,'

'And I asked him about it while he was doddering and slobbering at a wedding we were at and he said she had indeed died after seeing me for the first time. About five minutes later, in her own flat. But he raised his index finger in the air and declared, 'Never let it be said that it was five minutes. That would be a lie. It was at least 10 minutes, I should say... and she died with a smile on her face.' He then dribbled into his glass. It was after seeing my beauty, he said. They all joked and called it a case of 'grannicide,' went on Gary, reveling in the old family legend.

'A wee bit more respect wouldn't go amiss. That sounds just like uncle Gerry. There might be some truth in it. Anyway, he's the black sheep of the family. In and out of mental hospitals. How he married and had a son, I'll never know.' Sally thought of herself as a fair minded, tolerant person but there were times that these qualities were tested, especially with her family.

'All these grannies and uncles and aunts. And we're not even Catholics. It's hard to keep up,' said Gary as he tried to patch a hole in his hoodie. It was for Arran. And now in his 'acting voice', 'I am quite glad, mother dear, that you have an inexplicable fear of sharp needles. Owing to this I have developed a rather deft hand in sewing, the envy of all my peers. Not neat work, by any means, but it holds together, more or less. So thank you, mother dear. A cloud with a very obvious blessing.'

‘Silver lining, dear,’ she corrected.

‘Maybe I’ll become a sewist...’

‘A seamstress...’ Sally corrected. She had fallen for it again. His deliberate playing with language.

‘...instead of a journalist.’ Gary held up the hoodie and pronounced it acceptable. ‘You have to hand it to me Mum. I’ve not changed my mind about it. Journalism. That’s over six months now.’

Sally busied herself with lunch and nodded and sighed as required, to show she was listening to his prattle.

‘Mr Sneddon is giving me details of a competition to get a scholarship to a college in, guess where? Canada. One year. Not bad if I get it...’ and he faded away as he changed the subject to Arran. ‘I think Hammy will jump at the chance to come. To Arran, I mean. I might offer to cover the hostel charge to entice him.’

‘Hasn’t he got a real name? Oh, yes Jimmy Hamilton. Isn’t he Mr Sneddon’s nephew? Must be strange to have your uncle as an English teacher.’

‘Ah, Jimmy’s his name. I had forgotten that. He’s been ‘Hammy’ ever since I’ve known him.’ And he winked at his mother. He tried on the hoodie and he declared it fine. ‘You can go to Arran dressed real kash. It’s quite relaxed. Shorts, maybe I’ll take but probably a waste of time. When it rains there, it forgets to stop.’

‘Just a thought Gary. Don’t think anything of the money. Granny Louise is pretty well off. She inherited everything from granny Pauline. She didn’t give anything to Gerry as she wasn’t sure how he’d spend it. There was no one else to leave it to. Well, there would have been if...’ in a quieter voice, ‘uncle Willie, who never lived to, well, adulthood fully.’

‘Oh, yes. Uncle Willie, who is supposed to look like me, despite two generations separating us. It’s in the genes, which reminds me of my other ones, my blue jeans...’ But there was no laugh from Sally. She’d just called Gerry the black sheep of the family but Willie, whom she’d never known, he was sort of considered to be that too. Or was he? Whenever he had been mentioned, which wasn’t often, it was in hushed tones. His young life, cut short so unexpectedly. His deafness and all the communication difficulties he’d encountered. Not entirely happy in the deaf community. Even more discontented in the hearing one. Twenty three years he’d been granted. Then her thoughts were interrupted by Gary again.

‘Mum, why is it that whenever the family talks about him, they go all quiet? Was he a bad guy?’ he said, for the first time asking about his lookalike great uncle. Or was it great, great uncle?

‘I’ve often wondered that too. Don’t think he was bad. Just misunderstood maybe.’

‘Hypothermia in Callander Woods. Just took a blanket, thought he’d be alright. Don’t expect frosts in May. Is that what happened?’

‘More or less. He had been out of work and was drifting around trying to get seasonal hotel work or anything.’ Sally was thinking if it was time to tell Gary the one thing he wouldn’t have heard about him. He was old enough to understand. He wouldn’t be judgmental. It meant almost nothing in this day.

‘What’s this competition about? He’s your main English teacher, right? Mr Sneddon.’

‘Knows about my burning desire to be a journalist,’ he said, tongue well in cheek, ‘so I’ve to write a 1,500 to 2,000 word piece of investigative journalism. That’s where you, well, sort of, investigate things...’

‘I had gathered that, son.’ But she was used to his irony or sarcasm or whatever it was. He had called himself a ‘sarcasmaholic’ a while ago and it was pretty close to the truth.

‘But what to investigate. That’s the question,’ he said as he left the kitchen and finished off his packing for Arran. Sally mused as she tossed the salad. ‘Why do people say that?’ she asked herself. ‘Mixing is just as good a word.’ Then it came to her. What to say to help Gary. ‘Quick before I forget it,’ she thought, as she salted the salad and was glad she wasn’t one of those housewives who bought ready chopped up salads at supermarkets. Laziness was what she thought of that.

He obliged her memory by coming back into the room and commented on the lovely smell of dill and cumin.

‘It’s a bit like exams,’ she said as she spooned more radish and tomato into her mouth.

‘Don’t quite get it, Mum,’ Gary said as he dolloped dressing onto his plate. ‘Exams?’

‘One tip is to look at past papers, to know what to expect and what they are expecting.’

‘So...?’ Still munching happily.

‘Past entries to the journalistic competition. Previous years. Will they be online?’ she asked, feeling a little bit clever. ‘If not the entries themselves, the titles, the subjects and so on.’

Wiping his mouth with his ‘Just Don’t!!’ cotton top sleeve, he said, ‘Were you born brilliant or did some of my considerable brilliance rub off on you?’ and he started to get up.

‘Just don’t,’ she joked. ‘The information will still be there in 10 minutes when you finish your pork pie and pineapple thingy. Believe me. And you’ll have time to quickly tidy up, like the exemplary son you are said to be, eh?’

‘It’s all lies. I’m still the son before he prodigalises. But yes, I will finish off this delightful lunch, tidy up and slowly walk to my room and look up the site.’ He winked at his mother and all was well in the Stewart household.

He said he would call granny Louise and thank her and ask what he should bring back from Arran. Sally was unsure as always as present buying was her *bête noire*. What do you give to a well-to-do granny who already has everything? Island cheese? Very good but not wonderfully unique. Cholesterol? Well, maybe not such a good idea. Brooches, and... a nature book and... then she ran out of ideas.

Her sister, Margo, was a better bet. She’d suggest something. Always full of ideas and with such a zest for life. ‘Not like me,’ she thought. ‘But then again, aren’t sisters better if they are opposites?’

Gary came down and sat heavily on the old settee. One Sally would part with reluctantly. He’d had measles on it. Spilt candle wax often. White spirit clears up such infant damage. ‘So, do you want to hear, Mum? Great idea to look at past papers, or in this case, entries. Measuring pollution in the Clyde and discovering the source. That was what won, last year. Storm barriers inadequate in East Anglia.’ Looking at his notes. ‘Local councilor nabbed for voting for a housing development and he had an undeclared interest. Nasty, nasty. Oldham. Tracing Toxteth rioters...’

‘Oh, I remember that. Liverpool. Thatcher’s time.’

'Yeah, 35 years on and how has this impacted on them... quite good. A lot of research. Could approach it from various angles. Not sure though about Thatcher. Would need to swat up on her.'

Sally could hardly believe she would ever be having this conversation. Thatcher, she who had loomed so large over Britain's consciousness for over a decade. Had 'helped' form her political outlook. Where was she now?

'I like the last one best,' Gary looked up from his notes.

'Why?' she asked, knowing she loved finding out more and more about this son, the one she had nurtured, tried to be a good mother to, tried to show, show what? Right from wrong? Not quite but that would do for the moment.

'It has two elements. The historical...'

'Yes,' thought Sally, 'thirty five years is over two lifetimes to him.'

'... and the human element. People's lives. What they did with them. What they learned. How bitter were they? How content are they now? What mistakes have they made? Do you know what I mean?'

Sally nodded. She did and she loved him saying it. The human element. It had always mattered to him. When there was a disaster, an earthquake, as a little boy it was not the damage to infrastructure that he had asked about but where would the people live now. What about their food and clothes? Who would help them? He avidly supported the Blue Peter appeals. Even gave clothes away to the charity shop. He hadn't known that this was where some of them had come from, during the lean years after her husband, Tam, had left them.

'I'm going to go for it. I have the summer ahead of me. A not too arduous summer job in the offing,' he said. Sally knew he meant it. He was in planning mode.

'I just need to find the material, the angle. Nothing environmental. Not politics.' He said he would see Sally later and get everything booked at the Arran hostel, once he called Hammy. He was optimistic he would want to come. Sally was sure he would find a theme, a story to investigate. She was musing about where his imagination came from. His way with words. No other family member had even remotely had anything to do with journalism.

But she felt glad. For herself, for him. He was not a worry to her. Drugs might rear their ugly head? No, she told herself. Drink, hooliganism? Also non runners. Good. It was going to be a really fascinating summer as he progressed with his project. Being a front seat observer of events unfolding was a relishing thought.