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CHAPTER ONE

Family & Friends

When looking back on life I often wonder how on earth I turned out normal. How, after everything that happened, I was still able to stand and move forward. As you grow so do you learn and achieve. Some people grow faster and learn more than others. Some achieve little while others make life-shattering discoveries. All in all, life to me stands for one thing: “Living in Family Environments”. Without real family and people to care for you and love you, you can’t really live. Well, not in my opinion. I truly believe life is about living for the here and now. Saying what’s on your mind and never standing down. One day you might wake up and think to yourself “I have a great life” but let experience tell you that it isn’t always going to be the case. I was fifteen when life as I knew it suddenly changed. At that age I thought life was about hot chocolate and having fun, but it isn’t.

As a child, life for me was great. Full of fun, games, holidays and parties. It was the swingin’ twenties and we were comfortably off enough to enjoy it. I was living what some people would think of as “a wonderful life” and yes! They might be right. I had the most caring parents in the world, one brother who would have gladly given his right arm if I had asked for it. The family could have been bigger and it wasn’t for the want of trying. Mum and Dad tried extremely hard but weren’t able to give us a sister. Mum had so much wanted a baby girl.

As children, we never went to Mum for help or to sort out any problems. Sure, we would talk, but never about girls or personal things, and Mum so wanted to feel required. She knew she’d be fantastic; she wanted to give the advice that our Gran had given her and do all the

girlie things that she had done. For some reason, however, after she gave birth to Gavin, my younger brother, the doctors told her she wouldn't be able to have any more children.

As I said, not for the want of trying; from day one she was always dragging Dad upstairs, sometimes for hours on end. It had even become a talking point at the dinner parties they regularly held. Now, if you had ever been to one of Mum's famous dinner parties, you wouldn't have forgotten you'd been there. The best food, the shiniest silverware and even the tablecloth cost a fortune. I'll always remember that massive walnut dinner table. Gavin will never forget it either; well, not after he was caught trying to clean his best bicycle on it. You would have thought someone was attempting to murder Mum. She must have been screaming for at least an hour. Poor Gavin never knew what had hit him. It took a French polisher two whole days and twenty six pounds to repair it. No one had ever told Gavin the story about how Granddad took five years to make the table, and how Mr Silverdale, a successful local shop owner, had tried to buy it for two hundred pounds, but after Granddad died, Mum couldn't bear to see it go.

We lived in a little town called Rockfield, about fifty miles west of Edinburgh. Having been born in the village and always having lived there I went to the local school. However, school wasn't the best source of conversation in our house. Mum always wanted us to go to the Manor Fees boarding school for boys in Ayr. Dad disagreed and made it very clear that it would never happen. He loved us more than any Dad could ever have loved his children. For him, children were the key to life; they were the one and only reason why he worked so hard. We loved him just as much, and were very grateful for his want to keep us close, although sometimes he took it a bit too far. It took over three years of nagging before I managed to get him to allow Gavin and me to sleep over at our friends' houses, and even longer to be allowed to go away for the weekend with friends. He was a very protective parent back then and I now understand why. He hoped we'd be a lifetime investment for him.

Throughout my childhood, just as I was dropping off to sleep, Dad would come in and speak to me. I don't know if he ever meant me to hear his words as I continued to pretend to sleep and listen to his gentle voice rumbling on. He would talk about the strangest things and it was almost like an escape for him. He once told me that when he was young boy his Dad never really showed him any love, and that's why he'd never let the same happen to us.

Some people would consider it quite unusual he would come into my room, sometimes for hours on end and speak to me in the darkness, but to me it was like looking forward to a bedtime story. Just that my stories weren't like the ones that most young boys got told. My stories were always different and, most of all, they were real. Not some fairytale about talking animals and monsters that didn't exist. They were true, real life stories about my Dad, and the adventures he had as a child. The occasional story would be about his work or about Mum, but no matter what, I just lay there with my eyes closed, trying to resist asking a question when he said something I didn't quite understand. When he was finished, he would give me a kiss on the forehead and creep out of the door, pulling it quietly closed behind him.

It obviously mystified my mother. One morning she came into my room just as I was waking up. She looked slightly furtive, and I knew what was coming.

"When Dad comes into your room," she began, glancing over her shoulder uncertainly, "what does he do, or say, to you?"

"He just talks," I replied, wiping the sleep from my eyes.

"About anything in particular?" she asked.

I sighed impatiently. "He just talks. Quite randomly. Just memories of his childhood, things... just things..." I shrugged. I could see the confusion on Mum's face, but I didn't want to say anymore.

"Like what things?" she pressed further.

I just looked at her. I didn't want to say anything more, and finally she got the hint. She stood up and brushed some imaginary specks off her dress before leaving the room. I felt mean and from that day onwards, there was always some kind of distance between us.

I never had the heart to tell Dad what had happened that day. I don't think Mum ever told him either, as he never stopped coming in at night to speak to me. It seems strange now but I never talked to Gavin about Dad's visits. In a way, they were special and something I wanted

to keep private. I don't know if Dad ever spent time with Gavin like he did with me, but one thing's for sure, Gavin never mentioned that he did. Which in a way made his visits that little bit more extra special? If you've ever felt that warm feeling like holding a hot cup between your hands and feeling the warmth travel through your bones, that's what it was like, except when you get the feeling for real it's a warmth in your chest and not your hands. You'll know what I mean when I say it's a special feeling, and one that can't be recreated at the drop of a hat. It's a feeling that doesn't pass with time, but stays with you long after many other feelings have long since disappeared.

As a brother, Gavin was great and because we never had any other brothers and sisters we stayed very close. Apart from Alex, who was my closest friend at the time, Gavin came first in my life. There were only two and a half years between Gavin and me, so our interests were very much the same. Many of our friends had brothers about the same age but none had the close relationship that we had.

Most of my friends would often say "you can't bring him with us" but it was always both or none. My friends very soon accepted this, and Gavin was always considered one of the gang. We had some fun times together, but like everything else in the world it didn't last like that forever. Times were due to change, and change they did.

In the type of village where we lived, you couldn't have the kind of open life that most in the big cities could. Everyone knew everyone, and we all lived in each other's back pocket. As kids we never worried about it much, but he who brought shame upon his family lived a long time before the shame disappeared. There was one time a young boy stole a caramel chocolate-bar from Greens the sweet shop and got caught. Although he'd never even gotten out the shop with the chocolate, Mr Green knew he'd tried to steal it, and called the police. Mr Archibald Irwin was the local police constable and what a police constable he was. At some point in every conversation you had with him you would hear the sentence "the gallows he'll be found the one who steals in my town." This one little sentence was enough to make any boy or girl think twice before carrying out even the smallest crime, but it didn't stop everyone.

The young boy who attempted to steal the chocolate bar was indeed a very sorry boy. He came from a poor family who lived on the far side of the town in a small area called the Blacksmiths Fire. No one knows for sure why it was given that name, but the story goes that it took its rise from when a group of blacksmiths moved into the area a few hundred years ago. They worked day and night to forge weapons for a great battle that took place. No one ever seems to be able to tell you which battle it was but our schoolteacher, Mrs Greenshields, said it was a battle between the McDonalds and the McPhersons, who had fallen out over a piece of land. It's said that at night the sky would be lit with fire that could be seen for miles around while the blacksmiths worked. After a year or so they eventually left, leaving a group of stone buildings behind. These buildings were very quickly taken over by peasants and claimed as their own. Although it may have changed slightly over the years, the houses left behind are still there and still being used.

The boy was called Jamie Richardson. His Dad had died a few years ago leaving him, his mother, his brother and two sisters alone. Mr Green asked that the boy be whipped and then made to work in the shop until he deemed his error had been corrected. Jamie was made to clean the floors and any other filthy job that Mr Green could find. Jamie's family suffered severely because of this. He was the only one in their family old enough and able to work and make money for the family to live on. One of his jobs was working in the fields during the summer months to cut crops. Some of his other work included looking after cattle and cutting down trees. Even after he'd done his work for Mr Green he went to work on the farm 'til late. We called him "The Boy who Never Sleeps" because it sure seemed that way.

It was one day while out with Gavin and the boys that I first met Jamie. There he was walking along Riverdale Road with a cow.

"Look, it's The Boy who Never Sleeps," shouted David, pointing and laughing as he attempted to walk past us.

“Don’t you like playing with boys?” he shouted again. “Look, lads, he can’t find any real friends so he plays with a cow.”

The boys all started laughing as Jamie trundled past us awkwardly.

“Shut up and leave him alone!” I had expelled words that I knew could only bring trouble, and I didn’t know why I had spoken. I didn’t glance at Jamie, but I could feel some kind of connection. It was as though they had all been laughing at me. Everyone stopped laughing and looked towards me. In my mind, the image freezes at that moment; me standing there with everyone looking at me, including Gavin and Jamie.

“What’s this then?” David snarled, pointing his finger at me. “Sticking up for poor beggars and thieves are we?”

“Just leave him alone, we have better things to do than laugh at a poor boy with a skinny cow.” I bit my lip as I said it. I had lowered myself to a level that I knew I’d regret. Instead of sticking up for what I believed in, I’d backed down in the face of embarrassment.

“You’re right,” David said, “let’s get out of here.”

We turned around and walked back along the road towards the graveyard as Jamie continued to walk the other way with the cow. Still feeling embarrassed and ashamed, I dragged my feet, falling behind the others and couldn’t help but think about Jamie. I felt so sorry for what I’d said, and for not sticking up for him. Just as I was following in self-pity, I felt a hand on my left shoulder.

“What’s up?”

“Oh, Gavin, it’s you”

“He’s just a poor boy, why be concerned about him?”

I could feel the anger starting to build up and rage inside. The others had drifted on ahead so stopping and grabbing Gavin by the arm I attempted to speak to him. “I thought you knew better? Dad never taught us to treat people like that, no matter who they are.”

“Sure, but why worry?” he replied casually.

“You just don’t get it Gavin, do you? You know what kind of life he’s had so why make it any worse? He isn’t as lucky as we are.”

“Well s-o-r-r-y,” he mouthed without any consideration whatsoever, and ran forward to catch the others. The matter was dropped there and then and Gavin never mentioned it again, but the memory of that first incident with Jamie was one that never left me, and one that very soon came finding its way to bring us together.

The following day we were due to go to Grandma’s house in Lanark. Our bags were packed and off we went. Dad had recently bought a car. It was pitch black with dark leather seats inside, which when you sat down on them made a deep crunching noise. The inside was cold and when you drove round a corner you would slide from side to side, but when we drove through the streets we knew we were the envy of the town. There were only a dozen or so families who had cars in the town, but that was soon to change over the next few years as industry kicked in.

The trip to Grandma’s house took three hours by car. This was a lot better than the six hours by horse and carriage. Buses and trains only ran in the main cities so making your way around wasn’t too easy. The journey always started with laughs and carry on. Gavin and I played this game called Blackbirds Out. Every time we saw a bird, we would get points. A blue tit was worth one point; a robin was worth two points and so on, but each time you saw a blackbird you stole the points from the other player. Gavin always had a keen eye for birds and would sometimes win by sixty or seventy points. It was the kind of game that just as you thought it was over and I had won Gavin would shout, “There’s a magpie, that’s fifty-five points”. I would always make the joke that I allowed him to win, but, to tell the truth, he was always much better than me.

Not long into the trip and after all the small talk was finished, we found ourselves saying nothing for ages, and then just as I was about to nod off Gavin would give me a nudge and begin to ask something that had been troubling him. Gavin was never the kind of boy who made it clear when something was wrong or just bothering him. He would rather say nothing and suffer than come and ask someone for help. I remember this one time when he came to

my room at about four in the morning. I woke up the minute he opened the door but, not knowing if it was perhaps Dad and one of his stories, I just lay still, pretending I was asleep, like I'd normally do. After standing for about ten minutes he sat down next to the bed. It's a funny feeling when you know something's about to happen and all you want to do is wait. After a few moments, he pulled on the covers.

"Are you awake?" he asked in a rather solemn and low voice.

Not wanting to make it obvious that I was really awake, I pushed myself up off the bed and rubbed the sleep from my eyes. "What is it Gavin?" I said in that kind of still half-sleepy voice.

"Do you promise not to tell anyone if I tell you something?"

Not even stopping to think I came straight out with my reply, "Of course not, is something wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong but I need you to help me." I could hear his voice start to break as he continued. "Do you know Margaret Mullholland? She's one of the girls in my class at school."

"You mean the small girl with the red hair?"

"That's her."

Now the name never meant a thing to me, but I knew there was a little red headed girl that quite fancied him.

"That's the one," he repeated heavily. "She asked me to kiss her today and I just ran away."

"Why did you do that?"

"You must swear you won't laugh."

"I swear, now come out with it."

"Well, it's just I've never held a girl's hand let alone kissed one before and I got scared."

I could feel my cheeks starting to swell just bursting to crack a smile.

Trying to keep myself composed, I started to give some words of wisdom. Although, if the truth be told, I'd never kissed a girl before either, but being the big brother I had to save face by giving advice, even if I knew I wasn't qualified to do so.

"A kiss is just a simple little thing, just like eating an apple," I said, trying to sound confident. At that, he stood up straight, at the same time grabbing me by the hand and dragging me out of bed. "Hold on, Gavin, what are you doing?"

"I want to see what you mean," he whispered as we walked along the hall and down the stairs. Still with my hand firmly in his, we entered the kitchen where he switched the light on, sending my eyes into slant vision.

"Sit down," he said. I took up a seat at the wooden table that sat proudly in the middle of the kitchen floor, while Gavin entered the large larder in the far corner of the room. A few seconds later he re-emerged with one of the biggest rosy red apples you've ever seen. Walking straight over, he pulled out one of the chairs and sat down right next to me. "I want to see, show me."

Looking at Gavin and looking at the apple, which seemed to be growing with every second, I put out my hand and lifted it from his. Holding it very tightly, I started moving it towards my mouth. I could feel my heart starting to beat faster and faster knowing that not only was my explanation of a kiss the most ridiculous thing I'd ever told, but I was now expected to carry it out. Pausing for a moment and looking at Gavin, I placed the apple on the table and just as I started to speak

Gavin looked at me and said one word. That's all it took, just one word and I knew that no matter what I had to carry out this task of the kissing the apple no matter how embarrassing it might be. "Help," that's all he said - H E L P. Four little letters and I was reduced to the smallest animal on the face of the planet.

I picked the apple back up conscious that my every move was being watched and scrutinised by my younger brother. Closing my eyes, I placed the apple to my lips and slowly started to kiss it. The only person I had ever kissed before was Grandma and that was only a peck on the lips. I opened my eyes to find Gavin with his mouth in his hands and not saying a

word. As I pulled the apple away, I could feel the warm, sloppy slavers drooling down my chin and landing with a slump on the wooden table.

After a moment's silence, Gavin stood up and said, "Well, that was interesting."

I looked at him slightly confused. "That's all you have to say, is it?"

"I'm tired and going back to bed. I'll see you in the morning". At that, he walked away and started on back up the stairs. I followed behind and as we reached the doors to the bedrooms he stopped and, without so much as turning his head, he said "thanks," entered his room and closed the door. He never mentioned the apple conversation again, and I must admit I was extremely happy that he didn't.

About halfway into our journey, we would stop off at Mrs Cook's tearoom. I was never a great lover of tea or coffee but boy! Did I love Mrs Cook's caramel shortcake! There was this one time when I had fallen at the duck ponds whilst out with Mum and Dad. I cried and cried so much that Dad disappeared and came back hours later after having driven all the way to get me a piece of this fabulous cake. The minute we would walk in the door old Mrs Cook would have the hot chocolate poured and my cake just sitting within sight. She would never put it within hand's reach because she knew I would have eaten it before I'd had "some proper food" as she called it. The walls inside the tearoom were covered from floor to ceiling with recipes that had been left by customers over the years. From little scraps with untidy writing to large headed paper with bold italic text, she even had a recipe from Lord Littlewood, who was one of the richest men in the country. She always gave the best of meals and always made you feel welcome. I think that's why I loved the place so much, because I felt safe and warm whenever I was there.

After we had been fed and watered, we were off again, and after eating so much food the only thing we could do for the next hour was sleep. We would wake up to the sound of Dad beeping the horn as we drove up the long red shale drive to Grandma's house. By the time we came to a stop, Gran would already be standing at the side of the steps with Jenny, who was Grandma's right hand lady and would often be taken as her sister, although she was much younger than Gran. Seconds after jumping out of the car we would be covered by Grandma's arms, she would grab us tight and all we would hear were the same sweet words we'd be told a hundred times before, "Look at my beautiful little boys."

No matter who or what, there's always something you remember about someone. With Gran, it will always be that light smell of honey and roses she picked up from working in the greenhouse. I always wondered why she kept such lovely flowers cooped up in a small overgrown greenhouse. So I asked her one day and Gran simply replied, "My dear boy, outside the wind blows strong, the rain falls hard and frost kills quicker than a strangler. Irrespective of the weather outside, I can enjoy myself by looking after my flowers in the greenhouse whenever like."

If Gran ever had one true love in her life, it had to be flowers; I think that's why she married our Granddad. Granddad Ian was a botanist and had worked with flowers all his life. They met at a flower show in Ayr and instantly fell in love. I never remember Gran and Granddad ever having an argument or even falling out with each other. We all went out one day to a picture gallery and there in the main hall was a picture that depicted their life in an instant. It was a large oil painting of an elderly man and woman standing under a tree in a massive field of flowers. They were inscribing their names on a tree above an inscription that they had previously made over forty years ago. Love can certainly last a lifetime if the people in love are strong enough to take the good with the bad and the bad with the good.

After the standard welcome from Gran, the first thing on my mind would be the bathroom. Not because I needed to go to the toilet but because in Gran's house she had the biggest bath I've ever seen. It was sunken about four feet into the ground and tiled completely with pure white stone. The taps were bright gold as if polished repeatedly while rows of bottled oils made from the Gran's roses stood proud along the rim nearest the wall. It was the custom for me to go for a bath before I did anything else, so Gran always had it ready for me on my arrival. I don't know how she managed it, but the water was always perfect. As I opened the door, the steam from the waiting hot water would rush into my face as it made its way upward towards the high patterned ceiling.

In seconds, my clothes would be on the floor and me in the bath. I consider the thought now and can't imagine a child looking forward to having a bath in the way that I did, but it was bliss and heavenly. I loved lying there, as red as a lobster from the heat, stretched out in the water with a wet cloth over my face. It would seem like hours had drifted by and any cares that I had just seemed to be lifted away with the steam. But they were always ready and waiting to be collected again outside the door where the steam would meet the cold air and fall to form a small puddle on the large oak floorboards. On the far side of the bath was a small flight of steps. I would stand up and walk towards them climbing out step by step. Upon reaching the top I would find myself standing for a moment while the water would cool down and run slowly to my feet. After drying myself on the large towels sitting neatly on the sideboard, I would get changed and search for Gran.

Even though the house had over thirty rooms and that's not including the hidden ones, it was never a long search. There were only ever four or five rooms that Gran would use. If she couldn't be found in the greenhouse or the collection room, she would be in the kitchen, failing that her last hiding place would be the games room. After finding her we would all sit together and talk about what Gavin and I had been doing since we'd last seen each other. We never spoke much about Mum and Dad other than silly things like four word questions such as, "Mum and Dad been ok?" Questions like this to a young boy could only be answered by a one-word reply such as "yes."

The first day at Gran's never lasted that long for me. With all the travelling and the excitement, I would find myself falling asleep. I had my own very special bedroom. It had this massive door that took most of my strength to open up but when inside, boy oh boy was it worth every ounce of strength I could summon! The room was in the shape of a triangle with this tiny little bed right in the middle. I swear Gran must have had that bed made a few inches bigger every time we visited because it always seemed to be just the right size. Once, using my feet, I walked from each corner of the bed to the wall. It was just as many steps in every direction, almost as if someone had taken the utmost care to make sure the bed was placed just perfectly.

Scattered from wall to wall were games, books and toys of every sort. Dad said she'd been collecting them for years. Gavin's room was just as wonderful but that never stopped him from sneaking into mine and taking something. Somehow the next day it would be right back in the same place from where it had been taken. Gran never admitted she was the one who returned them and Gavin always thought it was me who found them again, no matter how hard he tried to hide them. It was one of life's little mysteries, and not the only mystery that I would come across in my lifetime.