

DEAD SCARED

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CHAPTER 1

GARY

I was with my mum when she died. Sitting at the side of her hospital bed with the rest of my family – the very same hospital she used to work in. We took turns holding her hand as we watched the blips on her heart and oxygen monitors slowly reducing. Then, with one final, exaggerated breath – almost a last gasp at clinging on to life – she was gone. The lines on the screen were all flat. And the only thing I could think about, after all these months of failing chemotherapy sessions, of watching her grow weaker and weaker as the cancer ate away at her, was that the first dead body I'd ever seen was my own mum's.

The next time I saw my mum, she was in her coffin. It was the morning of her funeral. I had a new suit and stood patiently while my sister tacked up the slightly-too-long trouser legs before my older brother drove me up to the funeral home. He'd been in to visit earlier in the week, but I couldn't bear to go with him. I can't say why. Too upset? Too scared? Who knows? What I did know was that this was my last chance to see her face, so I pushed away the gnawing sensation in my stomach and sat silently in the passenger seat as Ben parked the car.

"Toby," he said, "she's... she's not how you remember her."

"What do you mean?"

"Mum doesn't look like Mum any more. The undertaker said it's because the muscles in your face relax after... you know... so she looks a little different."

I felt like jumping out of the car and running

away there and then. This shouldn't be happening to me. I was only fifteen. Kids don't lose one of their parents while they're still teenagers. Not when they still need them so much. That's all stuff that's supposed to happen way off in the future. The gnawing in my stomach quickly returned.

Ben kept his hand on my shoulder right up until I stepped into the room. And there it was: a polished wooden coffin with the body of my mum inside. I realised that I was trembling. Nervous to be alone with my own mother.

The funeral director had dressed my mum in a pale blue outfit, like a kind of nightdress. And he'd tied a white ribbon in her hair. That made me smile. He didn't have to do that. It was kind.

Ben was right. My mum didn't look quite like herself, but nothing near as different as I had been expecting. I backed away from the coffin and stood at the far end of the room so that I could just see her profile rising up above the

wooden casket. That was better. Now she looked like my mum again. And that's when I lost it.

Everything just hit me at once. All the memories, the happy times – and the bad ones. If there was one thing you could say about my mum it's that she had quite a temper. When we fell out, we really fell out. The arguments could last for days. But we always made up. She was my mum, after all.

I suddenly wanted to say sorry for everything I'd ever done to upset or annoy her. All the stupid stuff like staying out all night and not calling, or throwing eggs at our old headteacher's house at Halloween. Pointless, selfish stuff that I'd done thinking that she'd always be there to clean up the mess for me. That she'd be there for her patients at the hospital. That she'd be there forever.

Tears were streaming down my face now. I reached into my pocket for the tissues my sister had given me and pulled out a photograph along with them. It was a snap of me and my mum

backstage at last year's school play. I'd been given the lead part and would never forget how, as the curtain rose, I instantly spotted my mum and dad sitting in the middle of the audience. My mum waved to me, even though she knew I couldn't wave back. They'd been so proud of me that night.

Stepping back up to the coffin, I tucked the photograph into my mum's hand, kissed her ice-cold cheek and whispered, "Thank you for everything." Ben's hand reappeared on my shoulder, giving it a squeeze. And then we left.

The funeral itself went without incident. The whole family was there: all the aunts, uncles and cousins we hadn't seen in years – and even some of my mum's cousins from Ireland flew over to be with us. The funeral was, I don't know... nice. There isn't really another word I can use to describe it. My sister had prepared something to say (I was terrified they would ask me as I was considered to be the 'actor' in the family), and I stood at the front of the church with her and my

brother as she talked about my mum. How kind she had been, what a fiery temperament she'd had, how brave she'd been in dealing with her illness.

And then I'd laughed out loud. A random memory just popped into my head. Me and my mum had been out shopping when she'd spotted a doormat that had written on it: 'Wipe your feet, stupid!' My mum had always had a good sense of humour, but that doormat just cracked her up. She was literally crying with laughter. I bought it for her out of my pocket money and we giggled all the way home.

Before long, I was standing at the edge of a grave, watching as my mum's coffin was lowered into the ground. My cousin handed me a piece of chewing gum and I popped it into my mouth, biting down hard to try and keep myself from losing it completely. I remember spotting some bloke sitting in a mini digger at the far end of the cemetery, presumably waiting to fill the hole in

after we'd finished crying and had left. The day-to-day business of dying, I guess.

We went to a local pub for sandwiches and drinks. I hopped from table to table, glass of coke clutched in my hand, talking to friends and family. For some reason, I felt as though I had to play the host and represent my family. My dad stayed in one place, accepting good wishes from all and sundry, and my brother and sister had their own families to look after. God knows what my little nieces and nephews had made of today.

That's the only reason I sat down with Uncle Gary, my mum's step-brother. I only ever saw him and his family at Christmas if I could help it, nowadays, but my mum had made the effort to visit them at least once a fortnight. She always said that family was the most important thing in the world, and she didn't mind driving twenty-five miles in each direction for a cup of tea and a chat.

It used to annoy my dad that they never visited us instead, that my mum had to do all the running around. But there was little chance of Gary's lot slumming it down to the estate where we lived. Whatever would his millionaire football-player neighbours say if he was seen around our way?

Personally, I could have done without Uncle Gary's boasts about his new car, or holiday villa, or whatever else he'd been spending his money on, but today was all about my mum, and I was determined to do the decent thing and include everyone who'd come to her funeral – no matter how much of an idiot.

Gary had a bunch of empty pint glasses in front of him, and was busy downing another lager when I joined the group. His wife, Anna, sat quietly as ever, wrapped in a white fur coat and nursing a ginger ale. My cousin Mel gave me a smile as I sat down.

“Are you OK?” she asked.

I nodded. “Yeah,” I said, “I’m fine.” And, to be honest, I was. “It’s a bit of a relief, actually. All those months sitting in hospital waiting rooms. My dad bought me a new phone so I could play games like Mad Cats to pass the time, but it didn’t really help.” It hadn’t really helped at all. My dad had got me the mobile everyone was talking about on the news – the one with the battery problem – so it was turned off more than it was ever on.

“You wouldn’t catch me in one of those places,” belched Gary as he finished his pint and reached for a nearby glass of whisky. He was right – none of his family had bothered to visit my mum while she was on the intensive care ward, but I wasn’t going to bring that up now. I just ignored him.

“Then, this last week, after she... went. Just waiting for the funeral. That’s been the worst part. But now it’s over I feel better.”

“She was a good woman, your mum,” said Gary, wincing as the whisky hit his throat. “Even if

she did choose the wrong man to marry!” He laughed raucously, elbowing his wife in the ribs and spilling her drink. “There was another bloke sniffing round her when she first started seeing your dad. She ever tell you that? Norman, his name was. Went into the hotel business – made a fortune. More than your dad ever made, anyway.”

I glanced over at my dad, his eyes red-rimmed as he chatted earnestly with one of my mum’s Irish cousins. I felt the gnawing sensation begin to rise in my stomach again, but I forced it away.

Taking a deep breath, I attempted to continue my conversation with Mel. She’s only a month younger than me so she was also approaching her exams, and I hoped the subject would provide a diversion from Uncle Gary’s behaviour. I almost laughed. Things must be bad if I was choosing to talk about school.

“How are you?” I asked. “Got a lot of revision to do?”

“Course she has!” Gary interrupted before Mel could reply. “She’s going to go on to college and university and do her family proud, aren’t you sweetheart?” He grabbed his daughter and hugged her tightly.

Mel turned her face away from her dad’s booze breath and nodded. “Yes, Dad,” she mumbled. She offered me another piece of chewing gum, but I shook my head.

“Going to make something of herself, is our Melanie,” continued Gary. “Get herself a proper, important job. She’ll be the boss. Have a decent career. A future.”

Mel did her best to remain cheerful. “I want to go into healthcare,” she said to me.

“Yes, but at the top!” exclaimed Gary. “Hospital management, at least, not some poor lackey nurse mopping up other people’s puke.”

There it was again – that gnawing in my stomach.

“My mum was a nurse,” I said through gritted teeth.

“Yeah, and look where that got her,” said Gary, downing the rest of his whisky. “I tell you kid, nothing good comes from hanging around hospitals all day.”

I’d swung the punch before I even knew it. There may not have been much of an aim to the strike, but there was plenty of force behind it. I hit the bottom of the whisky glass and rammed it hard into Gary’s face. I heard the glass break – along with a couple of surgically-whitened teeth – and then the blood began to flow.

“You monster!” I yelled. “All those years my mum spent visiting you, and you never once came to see her. She was a brilliant nurse! She looked after thousands of people who needed her help, and then she got in her car and drove fifty miles to see you lot because she didn’t want to lose touch with her family. The road goes in both directions, you know!”

By now, the pub was silent – all eyes on me. Gary had a hand clamped to his mouth, blood still spurting from between his fingers and running down over his clothes.

“Moron!” he glugged, spitting blood all over the table. “This shirt cost me more than your dead mother used to make in a week!”

I felt my fist clench as I readied myself for another attack, but a hand grabbed my shoulder and pulled me away from the table. I looked up through tear-filled eyes, expecting to see Ben beside me ready to give me an earful for spoiling the gathering, but it wasn’t my brother who had pulled me away from Gary. It was the guy from the cemetery – the one who had been sitting on the mini digger.

When he spoke, he said something that would change my life forever...

“I can bring her back.”