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Opening Extract from...

The Family

Written by Martina Cole

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MARTINA COLE

THE FAMILY

headline

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To my new grandson Christopher Whiteside.

And also for my children, and my grandchildren,
and my wonderful new Polish family.

For Timmy and Avril Petherick.

(Or should that be Anvil?)

With love.

Prologue

'Will you stop looking out the window? You're making me bloody nervous.'

Christine smiled. She knew better than to argue with her sister-in-law. Breda was a law unto herself; she could make the rest of the family look like choirboys when she got a temper on her, and that was no easy feat.

The Murphys were a dangerous crowd, and no one knew that better than Christine Murphy, wife of the sainted Phillip, and the mother of his sons. She was related to the local nutters by marriage and blood, and frightened out of her wits because she was sinking deeper and deeper into their world on a daily basis. Sometimes, like now, when she saw her children smiling and laughing together in her beautiful home, saw the love that they had from their father's family, she envied them. That had been her once, caught up in their love, caught up in their excitement, their lust for life. It had been a heady drug to her then, had held her in its thrall for years. Until that day, that awful, terrifying day, when she had been forced to open her eyes and see them all for what they really were.

From her mother-in-law, with her ready smile and open arms, to her own husband, a handsome, romantic sociopath who saw her and everyone else in his orbit as his personal property. But worse than everything else was that her sons were clones of their father. Both had idolised him since they were small. Why

wouldn't they? He gave them everything they wanted whether they needed it or not.

Recently she had inadvertently found out that her son had planned a murder. Planned it as if it was the most normal, most natural thing in the world. But then, in the Murphy family that *was* natural. As were death, threats and violence.

All in a day's work to them.

It had all gone wrong, but he would try again, she knew that for a fact. This was the legacy she had given them, this was the life she had brought them into. From birth they had been indoctrinated by this family's so-called code of honour. It was something she had cherished once, long ago, when she had been young and foolish. When she had still believed nothing could ever harm her or hers.

But she had to be honest with herself, in the early days she had lived with it quite happily because she had closed her eyes to it all. She had enjoyed the lifestyle, had sought it even. Her mother had crushed her from a child, never let her have a second to herself, so she had learned quickly how to be clever. How to get out and about without her mother's constant interference. But she had ended up embroiled in something she had been too immature, and too naïve to really understand. She had fallen for the first boy to give her the time of day, and she had fallen deeply. So deeply he was still the only man she had ever known.

Now it was all finally coming back to bite her, as her father had always said it would. He had warned her, begged her to get away from Phillip Murphy, but she had laughed at him. She had been so determined in those days, had been convinced she knew it all. Was more than capable of looking after herself.

Oh, hindsight was a wonderful thing.

She was chuckling to herself now, and she felt the eyes of Breda on her, even though she had her back to her.

'Are you feeling all the ticket, Christine? You seem nervous.'

Christine turned to face her accuser, for it was an accusation.

Breda was like a bloodhound; she could suss out insincerity faster than she could draw on a cigarette.

'I'm fine, Breda. What's the matter with you? Are you trying to pick a fight with me? Because the mood I'm in, girl, you are liable to get one.' Christine's words caused a hush in the room. She saw her husband and sons stare at her as if they had never seen her before. Breda was so shocked she didn't answer her for a few moments.

'Keep your hair on, Chris, I was only asking.'

Christine walked from the room and made her way through the large entrance hall into the kitchen. The heat of the Aga hit her, and she went to the back door; opening it, she stood in the doorway and savoured the cold night air.

It was early December, and there was already a frost covering the vast expanse of lawn. It was glistening in the moonlight, making the whole place look like a picture from a fairy tale. It seemed incongruous that all this beauty hid the filth and the hate that was a part of the Murphy family's genetic make-up.

Even her sons had not been immune, in fact they seemed to thrive on it all. Especially one of them, but she blamed herself for that. She had ignored the signs, had pretended that they didn't exist. She had believed that her boys would somehow be untouched by it, would not be part of it all because they had been given a private education and everything their little avaricious hearts had desired.

Wrong again, as she had been about so many things.

'Everything OK, Mum?'

Her elder son Phillip Junior made her jump physically. 'You frightened me!'

He grinned, the living image of his father as he had been when she had first met him. All jet-black hair, and steely blue eyes. Despite being big and overpowering, he looked as if he wouldn't hurt a fly. But as she had found out to her cost, looks could be deceiving. He enveloped her in his arms, a gentle bear

hug that belied his real physical power. He had broken another boy's nose and ribs when he had been fourteen – he had underestimated his own strength apparently. His grandmother was good at making excuses for her boys. Then again she had had lots of experience.

'Please, Philly, don't do this tonight. I have a bad feeling on me. Think of Finoula, she's the important one, she's your wife.'

He laughed gently, but his voice had a steely ring to it as he said casually, 'You worry too much, Mum.'

She knew it was futile to say any more; like his father before him, once he made up his mind there was no going back.

'You know something, Mum, you need to chill out. Are you still taking the meds from the doctor?'

She nodded.

'Good. What you really need is a holiday. We'll sort something out, bit of the old currant bun and you'll be as right as rain.'

She smiled in agreement, even though she felt as if her heart was breaking. 'Perhaps you're right. I just feel tired, that's all.'

They both turned as Breda came into the kitchen; she had her grandchild in the crook of one arm, and a heavy-duty shotgun in the other.

'Do me a favour, Philly, would you take this for me? I need to get it cleaned up and put away before the Clancys get here.' She was holding it out as if it was the most natural thing in the world to have a child in one arm and a weapon in the other. Christine watched as Philly took the gun without a second's thought. He was used to firearms and it showed. He checked to make sure it was empty of ammunition, and looked down the sight, almost by force of habit.

'I'll sort it, Auntie Breda, you feed the baby. He's got a big appetite, look at the size of him already!'

Christine watched as if she was outside of it all, no more than an onlooker. The medication was responsible for that. It stopped

her wanting to take the gun and mow the whole fucking lot of them down once and for all. Finish this family off, take them out of the game, as her husband would say. Turning her back, she looked once more out into the garden. She didn't see the shrug of despair from her son, but she heard the long, drawn-out sigh that told her Breda was losing patience with her.

Well, it would all be over soon; she had to keep it together long enough to make sure it was finally finished. She would try to ensure at least one of her sons would live long enough to understand why she had done what she was about to do. She feared her actions would make everyone hate her until the day she died. But that was a chance she was willing to take if it meant they would one day have a crack at a normal life.