

NADINE
DORRIES

CHRISTMAS
ANGELS



Chapter 1

It was long gone midnight and Maura Doherty was sitting on the kitchen settle with her second daughter, Angela, lying half on her knee, half against her chest as she hugged the sleeping child close to her. Sleet gusted against the kitchen window, carried on the squalls that flew straight up the dockers' steps from the Mersey and battered the houses least able to withstand it.

Maura's husband, Tommy, set another two pans of water and a kettle on the range to boil, ready to fill the room with yet more steam. 'Here you go, love,' he said, treading carefully as he carried the enamel washing-up bowl filled almost to the brim with scalding water and placed it on the floor next to her. He was in his vest and braces but was still wearing his cap. A damp roll-up, fighting to remain lit, dangled from his bottom lip. 'I've put half a teaspoon of the Vicks on the top, like you said.'

Maura turned her head to the side and could see the greasy film, melted, floating on the surface of the water. Even before she'd looked, she'd smelt the menthol vapour and felt it hit the back of her throat. 'I don't think it's working, you know,' she said, her face etched with worry. 'Her breathing's not getting any better. It's getting worse, if anything.'

Tommy squatted down by the side of her, his head close to Angela's. Like many dockside families, he and Maura dreaded the winter, all too aware of the consequences of living in the rows of terrace houses on the banks of the Mersey.

They both heard the door at the bottom of the stairs open on to the kitchen. In the puddle of amber light thrown down from the bare bulb stood their eldest daughter, Kitty, dressed in her flannelette nightdress and clutching her threadbare teddy with one hand and sucking her thumb with the other.

'Is Angela sick?' she asked as she removed her thumb from her mouth. A long strand of spittle stretched from her face to her hand and remained intact.

Maura nodded her head and looked down at Angela, who was dozing, red-faced, and struggling to breathe.

'Come here, queen,' said Tommy as he strode over and scooped Kitty into his arms. 'Angela's not very well. Your mam, she's going to stay down here with her tonight, but you are going to need to be a help in the morning because I'm on the early shift. The *Cotapaxi* and the *Norry* are both coming down from the bar first thing.' Tommy, along with every other man on the streets, worked down on the docks unloading cargo. 'So, back to bed for you, and I'm coming up meself now too.'

Kitty was still half asleep and her eyelids were heavy, barely able to stay open. She nodded earnestly at Tommy. 'I always help Mammy, Da.'

'I know you do, love. Come on, give Mammy a kiss and let's go back up.'

Kitty wrapped her legs around her father's waist and an arm around his neck and Tommy carried her over to Maura. He bent down so that Maura could just about reach up to

Christmas Angels

kiss her cheek. Kitty's pigtail plaits brushed against Angela's face and Angela opened her eyes and looked straight up at her sister, but she didn't smile. She tried to sit up, but her chest was rattling loudly and within seconds she fell back to sleep.

Tommy walked with Kitty over to the stairs. 'I'll come back on me break in the morning, Maura, and I'll tell Kathleen when I knock on for Jerry on my way down. If there's no change in the morning, we'll take her to the doctor's.'

Maura nodded. She was too exhausted to argue and Tommy was right. It was free now, they didn't have to worry about the money any more. 'Aye, we will,' she whispered as the door closed and she heard the heavy tread of her husband and daughter making their way back up the uncarpeted but well-scrubbed wooden stairs. She sighed and with her lungs full of steam and vapour, shuffled Angela higher up into her arms, lay back against the settle and closed her eyes.

Tommy had brought down some old grey army blankets and pillows from the bed upstairs and tucked them around the two of them, but Maura didn't sleep. She listened to every fresh and ferocious battering of sleet on the window and every breath her daughter took in and out until the night had slipped away and the first light crept in through the windows.

Aileen feared that she would be late for work. She hated to be late for anything, but today of all days would be disastrous. She'd been asked to call in to Matron's office mid morning and she had no idea why. She was dreading it and, as usual, her mother was doing her best to make things worse. Aileen had lost count of the number of times her mother had forced her to take time off, claiming that she was so ill she required

Aileen's personal nursing care at home. Aileen had almost become ill herself with the worry of it all. Even though they now had Gina to help out, it still happened too often, and today looked like it might be one of those days. The wheedling and the complaining, all too familiar.

As Aileen moved over to the bed and laid out her mother's clothes, a sinking feeling settled into the pit of her stomach. She remembered the many occasions she had tried to cajole her mother in the past and how torturous those mornings had been and how weak and futile her own excuses had sounded. 'But, I can't take time off. I'm a staff nurse now and besides, Sister Tapps is a stickler. You have to turn up to the ward half dead and need admitting to St Angelus yourself before she will accept any excuse for absence, Mother.'

When Mrs Paige had first been discharged from hospital following her stroke, she had exploited the guilt she knew Aileen carried for being healthy in the face of her mother's infirmity. She abused her daughter's compassionate nature, her willingness to help, and in the first few months, Aileen had allowed her to do so. That had been her big mistake.

If it hadn't been for Sister Tapps, Aileen was very sure, she would not have remained in nursing. One day not quite twelve months ago, after yet another morning when Aileen had had to make her excuses, Sister Tapps had taken Aileen into the sitting room on her ward and closed the door behind her with barely a sound.

'Take a seat, Staff Nurse Paige,' she had said, in her softest voice.

Her gentle manner had done nothing to ease Aileen's anxiety. This is what you do with parents when a child has died, she'd wanted to say to her. You bring them in here, close

Christmas Angels

the door, ask Branna to fetch tea and sit them in front of the fire, with a clean handkerchief ready on your sideboard.

She was convinced Sister Tapps was about to send her to Matron, to dismiss her. But there was no handkerchief on the polished sideboard. No glass of water to restore the equilibrium when the tears were spent. She looked through the glass panes above the handle of the wood-panelled door. It had been painted buttercream to please the children and keep the atmosphere light and airy, quite different from the dark coffee colour of all the other St Angelus wards. Branna was changing the flower water and cleaning the vases that had been laid out on the highly polished central ward table. It didn't look as though she'd been asked to make tea. The nurses were pulling out the lockers from the sides of the beds into the centre of the ward to clean them.

She decided to be the first to speak. 'I'm sorry, Sister Tapps, it was Mother, she was ill and she was difficult about me leaving the house. I would never want to be late, ever – I love my job, you know that. She's just so difficult and—' When Aileen had sat down, she'd had no idea that she would need one of the handkerchiefs that Sister Tapps kept ready for bad-news days.

'Oh, goodness me, child.' Sister Tapps jumped up and crossed the room.

Tappsy – as she was known to all the nurses – was looking thinner, Aileen thought, though that was hardly surprising. She had to be in her mid to late sixties, she reckoned, and her hair had turned white and fine a while ago. She'd not lost the hint of the soft Irish brogue from her voice though. She'd left Galway some fifty years earlier and had not returned for many years, saying to anyone that asked that the journey was

too long and that she didn't like to be so far away from the ward and her charges.

'Look, you have no need to apologize to me. The nurses on ward six have told me how trying things can be for you.' Sister Tapps was doing her best to be discreet. Aileen's mother had a reputation for being one of the most tiresome patients St Angelus had ever known.

She handed a handkerchief to Aileen, who took it without embarrassment and blew her nose. Sister Tapps sat down in the comfortable chair next to her – carefully placed so that she could reach out and take a distressed mother's hand, should the need arise.

'I'm sorry, that was an impertinent thing for me to say. There have been so many telephone calls of late to Matron's office, when your mother has been ill.' Sister Tapps smiled. She was trying her hardest to put Aileen at her ease.

Aileen knew that if it had been any of the other ward sisters at St Angelus, she would have been out on her ear. Reminded of the phone calls, the most recent having been made only that morning, her heart beat madly with the anxiety she felt at letting people down. She hated having to run down the road to the telephone box at the junction with Green Lane and call Matron's office whenever her mother won, which was far too often.

Matron was always sympathetic but firm. 'I am so sorry to hear your mother is poorly, Staff Nurse Paige. Do tell her that we can always arrange for a domiciliary visit from Mr Stephens, her consultant, and that we shall expect you back on duty later today.' In her skilful way, Matron subtly conveyed to Aileen that she didn't believe in Mrs Paige's frequent bouts of illness either.

Christmas Angels

‘Thank you, Matron, thank you.’ Tears of frustration would spring to Aileen’s eyes, her throat would thicken and her heart would beat so fast and loud beneath her ribcage, she could barely hear her own thoughts as the door of the telephone box clicked shut behind her. As the cold air hit her face, she would take a big gulp and tilt her burning cheeks to the wind. She loathed the smell of the phone box. The lingering aroma was always there waiting for her when she dashed in: stale cigarette smoke, dirty windows, cold metal. It frequently chimed with the way she felt, cheapened by the lies and excuses she was forced to make.

‘Look,’ said Sister Tapps, ‘Matron and I just wanted you to know that we understand what a dreadful time you must be having, looking after your mother full time and trying to be the best staff nurse I have ever had on my ward.’ Tappsy smiled.

Aileen sniffed. It was true. She was trying her hardest to be the best staff nurse St Angelus had ever known. In a year or two Sister Carter, the sister on ward three, Aileen’s favourite ward, would be retiring and Aileen wanted that job more than she had wanted anything in her entire life. She prayed that Matron might overlook her occasional lateness and consider her for the post.

‘We want to help you to get yourself sorted out so that you can do the job you love without any cause for worry. I’ve noticed how stressed you’ve seemed just lately and it’s obvious you’re struggling. So we’ve come up with a plan.’ Tappsy clasped her hands together, stood up and opened the door to call for Branna, the ward domestic.

Here comes the tea and sympathy, thought Aileen, but it was far from that.

‘Branna, did you write down the details for your daughter like I asked you to?’ said Sister Tapps.

‘I did, Sister.’ Branna McGinty delved into the pocket of her long overall and took out a piece of paper. She pretended not to see Aileen’s tears and kept her eyes on the note as she held it out towards her. ‘That’s my address, and my daughter’s name. Gina. Sister has known her since she was a baby. She’s fifteen now and she’s looking for domestic work.’

She held out the piece of paper towards Aileen, who instinctively reached out and took it as she looked up at Sister Tapps. Between them, Matron, Tappsy and Branna had come up with a way to help her. A solution she had been too afraid to consider, let alone mention to her mother. But here were her superiors telling her what she had to do, and now that it was mooted as a real possibility, it seemed obvious. They had an answer to her problem and its name was Gina.

It was now almost a year since that conversation in Tappsy’s office, and this morning, as her mother continued spitting out her whining venom, Aileen almost blessed herself with relief, as she had many times since. Gina was now a part of the Paige household, paid for by Aileen out of her own pocket to work at the house all the hours Aileen was at St Angelus. Gina had been the answer to her prayers and it was because of her that Aileen had been able to hold it all together. Even though her mother hadn’t let up, the guilt of responsibility had faded with the knowledge that Gina was there. Aileen had even managed to join the St Angelus choir last summer, which she loved. She had a Christmas carol rehearsal to go to that evening, in fact. At St Chad’s.

Her mother’s voice broke through. ‘You simply cannot go to work whilst your mother feels like this,’ she pleaded. ‘What

Christmas Angels

if something happens to me? What if I have another stroke? Do you want me to be here all alone without my daughter at my side?’

Aileen had heard this so many times before, she barely had to even think of her response; it was automatic. ‘We have Gina here to look after you, Mother. That is why I took her on and you agreed that would be the best thing. You won’t be alone because we have Gina and she is really very good, isn’t she?’

‘I did not agree, and anyway, what if I did? I had no option. You would have left me here alone. Your sister, Josie, she doesn’t approve, you know.’

Aileen had heard this one before too. ‘Well then, maybe Josie can call in more often than once a week for a lunch she makes Gina prepare. Maybe she can look after you?’ Aileen almost bit her own tongue off. Her mother was doing that thing again, making her say things she would regret for hours afterwards, bringing down her mood.

‘I shall tell Josie you said that,’ her mother fired back. ‘That girl works so hard, with her husband and children to look after. I don’t know how you can say the things you do.’

‘I’m sorry, Mother, I didn’t mean to snap. It’s just that I have a busy day ahead on the ward, and a meeting with Matron, and Gina is here, so you won’t be alone.’

‘Really, Aileen, is that how much you think of me? Leaving me to be looked after by a slip of a girl who doesn’t know one end of a thermometer from another. I don’t think I will feel very safe if you aren’t here. Don’t you see that, darling?’

Aileen looked up sharply. Her mother only called her ‘darling’ when she was up to something.

‘Sometimes I feel just like I did before I had my stroke, very light-headed and off my food, and you know how that nearly

killed me. You wouldn't want me to be alone with that girl if it happened again, would you now? You know how bad I was last time, and imagine if your father could see you now, what would he think?'

Aileen stared at her mother and the words 'he would be so proud of me' ran through her mind. Her mother saw the look in her eyes and bristled.

Two hours later, Aileen braced herself for the meeting with Matron. She was convinced she was about to be reprimanded or, almost worse, that Matron had made a decision about who was to be the new sister on ward three, now that Sister Carter had finally retired. Please let it not be Sister Antrobus, she prayed. Maybe Sister Antrobus had made a complaint about her – was that what this meeting was about?

Elsie O'Brien, Matron's housekeeper, led her to the door of Matron's office and tried to calm her shaking hands. 'Here now, don't you be getting nervous about seeing Matron, her bark is worse than her bite. That's more than can be said for the dog though. Blackie. Watch out for him, his basket is behind her desk. Look at my leg here.' Elsie lifted up her leg to show Aileen a silvery purple scar that shone out from underneath her stockings. 'The little bugger got me before I got him back with the mop. He's Matron's baby, but don't even try and stroke him, he'll 'ave your fingers off.'

Aileen was frozen to the spot, so Elsie knocked on the door for her.

'Come in!' shouted the voice Aileen had heard so often during her working life but had very rarely spoken back to, other than from the end of a phone.

Christmas Angels

‘It’s Staff Nurse Paige, Matron,’ said Elsie as she began to close the door.

‘Yes, thank you, Elsie, I know who it is, I invited her to the meeting.’ Matron smiled, but that did nothing to ease Aileen’s nerves.

Blackie lifted his head in his basket and growled, and Aileen’s hands became clammy.

‘Blackie, stop it, be a good boy.’ Matron took something out of the drawer in her desk and threw it to Blackie. He immediately lost interest in Aileen as he began to munch.

‘I imagine you are wondering why I have called you here,’ said Matron. ‘Do sit down, Staff Nurse Paige, and please, do stop shaking. Blackie won’t be interested in you while he’s chewing that strip of dried beef.’

Aileen attempted to laugh. She would have been grateful for a smile. Nothing came.

‘Now, as you know, there is a vacancy for a ward sister on children’s ward.’

Aileen nodded as she lowered herself on to the seat Matron had gestured to on the opposite side of her desk. Her auburn hair was tucked under her cap, her ponytail wound into a French knot and her uniform apron immaculate. Matron might be about to give her the worst shock of her life, she might be about to demote her or, heaven forbid, sack her, but if she did, Aileen would walk out of her office with her head held high. She did her utmost, every single day, to be the best staff nurse and, yes, the best daughter too, and she knew it didn’t always work out, but, regardless, she always did her best.

Aileen often resented her mother, but no one would ever guess as she was loyal to her too, and if she lost her job would never in a million years blame her. Josie, her married sister,

would blame her. She would not shy from making accusations nor waste her words. If Aileen did have to leave St Angelus, it would give her sister ammunition she'd use a thousand times over. Josie had never wanted Aileen to be a nurse. She had never understood. Josie didn't do anything for anyone else if she could avoid it. But Aileen never responded to Josie's complaints. She kept her own counsel and left her own disappointment with both her mother and her sister buried deep within.

At first, when Matron spoke, Aileen had trouble following her words. She saw her lips moving and heard the clock above the fireplace ticking. She was aware of Blackie chewing through his strip of meat. Someone was sobbing outside, and she could even hear the chatter of staff and patients below the window as they walked across the main entrance into the hospital. But she couldn't take in Matron's words and Matron, looking up from her blotter, her elbows on her desk, leaning slightly forward in her chair, hands clasped, silver hair lighting her face as she peered over her glasses, half smiled, as though waiting for Aileen to respond. Aileen didn't, couldn't. Aileen was in shock.

Instead of being reprimanded, demoted or sacked, she had just been given the most coveted job, a job she had not even applied for, believing she stood no chance of getting it. Matron was speaking again. She was waiting for a response. Aileen, calling on all the reserves she had within her, dug deep to deploy something, anything, but she was beyond stopping the tears that rushed to fill her eyes.

Matron looked down at a letter on her desk and, lifting it, shuffled it into the bottom section of her in-tray, pretended she hadn't noticed Aileen's tears and carried on talking.

Christmas Angels

‘Ever since you started as a wartime volunteer at St Angelus, I’ve been impressed by your total commitment to your training and, of course, by your high exam passes. Sister Tapps is similarly minded. She has been advocating you for this role for the past two years. I am aware of the slight problem you had, but the plan she came up with to resolve it seems to have worked. I do remember your mother, when she was in here as a patient.’

Aileen swallowed hard. Matron spoke again.

‘I know that things must sometimes be quite difficult at home.’ She was deploying a tone Aileen had never heard her use on the ward. ‘But I want you to know that I understand. Not many people know this, but I’m going to let you in on a little secret – after all, you are about to become a ward sister – it was impossible for me to look after my mother at home. I worked long hours in Liverpool, she lived in Lytham St Anne’s... Well, I want you to know that I think your devotion and commitment to your responsibilities both here and at home are to be admired and respected. They are values I understand and have empathy with.’

Aileen could barely believe what Matron was saying. All she could do was stammer out her thanks. ‘Th... thank you, Matron. I... I will do my very best.’

Matron laid down the pen she had been holding in her hand and looked up at Aileen. ‘I know you will. That is why I agreed that it should be you. I didn’t take a great deal of persuading. As I said, you have values, Staff Nurse Paige, values I admire and look for in my nursing staff. Many nurses would have given up on either their mother or the job, but you have stuck it out and shown admirable determination. I hope – indeed, I know – that we train all of our nurses at

St Angelus to a very high standard. Sister Haycock sees to that. But what we cannot teach are what one could argue are the most important qualities in a nurse. Respect, empathy, kindness – above all, kindness – and, of course, a love for St Angelus, our patients and everyone who works here. I see all of those things in you.’

Aileen shifted forward on her chair. She could hear the faint rumbling of Blackie growling in his basket behind Matron’s desk. He had swallowed the last of his treat and had once again focused his attention on the stranger in his domain. Aileen moved from being tearful to nervous in seconds. Blackie had a reputation and it was one Aileen respected. She was trying to say something more than thank you, which in itself seemed so inadequate, given the enormity of the honour Matron was bestowing upon her, but as she struggled to speak, only two words, words she had no intention of saying, left her mouth before she could stop them.

‘But... Mother?’

Matron was more familiar with Aileen’s mother than she had led Aileen to believe. There was barely a nurse in the hospital who hadn’t heard of Mrs Paige. As soon as she had recovered the power of speech following her stroke, she had taken every opportunity to complain to Matron about every nurse who looked after her. It was hugely embarrassing and concerning for Aileen, who was living at the Lovely Lane nurses’ home at the time. She thought she would have barely a friend left at St Angelus by the time her mother was discharged.

‘Ah, yes, your mother. Well, far be it from me to interfere in your personal arrangements, but I do think it is about time your sister began to pull her weight, don’t you?’

Aileen nodded. She was truly incapable of comment and

Christmas Angels

if she did start to talk about Josie and her selfish ways, she might never stop.

‘Would you like me to write to her – your sister?’ asked Matron. ‘I did meet her a few times when your mother was here as a patient. I could explain to her the importance of your new responsibilities and how it will take a little more than Branna’s daughter to help.’

Aileen shook her head furiously as she finally found the confidence to speak. ‘No thank you, Matron. I will deal with this. I shall explain to my sister that Gina needs someone to help with the running of the house and Mother. Gina has been marvellous. She’s reliable, and hard-working too. I couldn’t have managed without her.’

Matron smiled. ‘I forgot to mention your ability to solve a problem too. Anyway, congratulations, Sister Paige. Your new uniform is waiting for you in the housekeeping lodge.’ She had left the drawer of her desk open and, slipping her hand inside, she took something out. She leant across the desk and made to give something to Aileen.

Aileen instantly knew what it was and a gasp caught in her throat.

Ward sisters at St Angelus hardly ever left their posts. Most worked until they were well into their seventies, so a ward sister vacancy was a rare event. It crossed Aileen’s mind that she was probably the first nurse in quite a while to have risen through the ranks, from the nursing school through to staff nurse and on to ward sister level. There had been Sister Haycock, of course – it had happened for her a few years ago, and everyone had expected it because she was the favourite of the most senior consultant at the hospital, Dr Gaskell. But now here was Matron about to pass on to her, Aileen,

a tradition that Aileen had assumed had ended with Emily Haycock's promotion.

Matron moved her hand closer. In it was something firm and flat, wrapped in tissue paper. 'Go on, take it, it's yours,' she said with a smile. 'Think of it as a Christmas present.'

Aileen grinned and as she reached out to take the gift, her eyes met Matron's and she instinctively knew that Matron understood how much this meant to her. She unwrapped it with as much decorum as she could muster. The tissue unfolded like the petals of a flower and there, lying in her own hand, was a St Angelus silver belt buckle. It had been specially designed to reflect the values of the hospital: in the middle was a ship, its mast standing proud, the river weaving around it, and behind was the old workhouse building that had become St Angelus. An angel hovered overhead, its wings sweeping around each side of the buckle and forming the central clasp. Aileen had on countless occasions seen Emily Haycock and other ward sisters grasping the wings on their own buckles as they hooked or unhooked their belts. She was speechless.

Matron always loved this part. This was the sixteenth buckle she had awarded since taking up her post at St Angelus and every one of the recipients had been rendered speechless. The buckles were bespoke, hand-crafted to order by a silversmith in Bold Street. He had designed the buckle himself years ago and she loved it, especially the angel's wings. The silversmith had recently written to her informing her that he was about to retire, so she had ordered ten, to keep in the drawer, ready.

Matron spoke, to allow Aileen to savour the moment. 'This may sound rather unconventional, but I have been told that the best way to clean it is with a damp rag and cigarette ash.'

Christmas Angels

Brings the buckle up a treat, apparently. I use silver polish myself.'

'Matron, it is beautiful. I don't know what to say,' Aileen stammered. 'It is all a huge Christmas present. It's the best Christmas ever – or it will be.'

'Well, off to housekeeping with you, to get measured up for your navy-blue Petersham belt. Give the seamstress the buckle and she will sew it on for you. I know she's running up some new dressing gowns for the children for Christmas, so you had better get in quick.'

Aileen practically floated out of the office, far too distracted to notice that Blackie had stood up in his basket and was eyeing the back of her heels. But she turned back as Matron spoke again.

'Sister Paige...' The words shot across the room and stopped her dead. They were words that only she herself had ever spoken aloud, to the mirror at night as she brushed her hair and dared to fantasize about such a possibility. 'Don't worry about your mother, we will manage. Nothing is ever as bad as it seems, you know. There is always a way around every problem. We sometimes just have to look a little harder than we are used to.'

Aileen nodded, not really knowing how to reply.

As Sister Paige disappeared into the corridor, it was all too much for Blackie, who charged out of his basket, barking at the closed door. Matron sat back down at her desk and picked up her pen. 'Oh do shut up, Blackie, you are all bark. Into your basket now.' She began to fill in the bed vacancy report but found she couldn't concentrate and wrote her last

words twice. Laying down the pen, she stood and rang for Elsie, who appeared in a flash.

‘That was quick, Elsie,’ she said, totally unaware, even after all these years, that Elsie hung around the kitchenette’s green baize door whenever she had a visitor. ‘I think I need a cup of tea.’

‘Yes, Matron. And a nice hot buttered teacake?’

‘Why not,’ said Matron. ‘Yes, please.’

She stroked Blackie and briefly wondered if she’d done the right thing. Both Sister Tapps and Sister Haycock had recommended Aileen for the ward three post, but Matron had had qualms, not least because Sister Antrobus had applied for the post herself. She picked up the phone and rang the school of nursing. Emily Haycock must have been at her desk because she answered almost immediately.

‘We have a new ward sister for children’s, one Sister Paige.’

‘Oh, bravo, Matron,’ Emily said. ‘She was one of the best student nurses we ever had in the school.’

‘I know. And she has one of the most manipulative women I have ever met as a mother,’ Matron replied. ‘My problem now is how to tell Sister Antrobus she has been unsuccessful. I think she had her heart set on this post and no doubt she’ll remind me yet again that Staff Nurse Paige – or rather Sister Paige, as she now is – has missed six days this year due to her mother’s supposed ill health.’

Emily was full of sympathy for Aileen. ‘That’s as may be, but with regard to Staff Nurse, er Sister Paige, you have to ask yourself, what are the qualities required of a nurse on children’s ward and does Sister Antrobus possess them.’

An image of the forbidding Sister Antrobus flew into Matron’s mind as Emily continued.

Christmas Angels

‘You are always saying that standards are everything and I don’t know anyone with higher standards than Sister Paige. Added to that, the patients absolutely love her. I don’t know of a better nurse, in every way. I cannot recommend her enough.’

‘I’m sure you’re right. But her mother is a problem and if that problem persists, we will have to find a solution. Right now, however, I have another problem to deal with and that is what to do with Sister Antrobus.’

‘Ah, well, can I make a suggestion, Matron? The maternity department is working flat out. There are four sets of twins due over the next week alone. Perhaps you could put it to Sister Antrobus that you value her experience on maternity more?’

Matron smiled. Emily Haycock was spot on, though she wasn’t about to let her know that. ‘That could be a solution.’ She could easily flatter Sister Antrobus into accepting that. She put the phone down and felt easier having shared her concerns with Sister Haycock.

As Matron swivelled her chair around from the desk to face the window and watched the visitors begin to trickle through the main gate, the St Angelus mafia was in full swing. Elsie had already got on the phone to Madge Jones on switchboard, who had got on to Bidy Kennedy in the school of nursing, who got on to Branna in the kitchen on children’s. Before the teacake was toasted, everyone knew that the hospital had a new sister, Sister Paige, and that Sister Antrobus was not about to be granted her wish.

Chapter 2

Kitty held on tight to the handle of the pushchair, with Maura repeatedly reminding her not to let go, as they wandered down the main corridor of St Angelus, scanning the signs for one that said *Children's Chest Clinic*. Maura's hands were warm and clammy and she wasn't sure who was the more scared, her or Tommy.

They had failed to find the clinic so far and were too afraid to ask the way. They felt far too insignificant to bother anyone they had seen pass by so far. Maura opened her mouth as a serious-looking doctor strode past them, his white coat kicking out behind, his stethoscope strung around his neck and flying out in front, but no words escaped. In Maura's world, you waited for someone as important as a doctor to speak to you first. Maura and Tommy both felt awkward. This was not their world of the docks and the streets, where they were both well known and respected. This was a world of education and disease. The first was a stranger to them all, the second a far too frequent visitor, both to their own home and to those of their dockside neighbours.

'Ask your woman here,' Tommy hissed as a lady in a starched navy-blue dress strode past at a very determined

Christmas Angels

pace, her head held high, her frilled and elaborate cap spilling down her back, letting everyone know that she was a very important nurse indeed.

‘Why don’t you, you eejit! You ask.’

He failed. By the time Tommy had got his tongue around his words, the woman had disappeared.

Maura nudged him as a group of nurses marched by. ‘Go on now.’

The nurses were clutching at their black and red capes as flashes of their pink uniforms became briefly visible beneath. Their heads were angled close to one another, starched caps meeting in the middle, and they were whispering as they went.

‘What happened there then, Tommy? You’re gasping like a fish out of water,’ said Maura as they stared at the backs of the departing nurses.

She looked directly at Tommy and, seeing the anxiety etched on her face, he felt helpless. He was, just as she said, a fish out of water and he would have given anything to be anywhere but St Angelus.

Angela began to grizzle in the pushchair. She was uncomfortable and they could both hear the rattling in her chest, but the biggest worry for Maura was that Angela had stopped complaining. Angela had been labelled from birth as a crier and Maura proclaimed almost daily that if she’d been her firstborn, there would have been no more. They’d already tried everything they could think of to ease her cough – a visit to the priest, several doses from the miracle-cure-in-a-bottle that Kathleen had brought back from the west coast of Ireland, and a prayer request to the nuns at Mass the day before. But the morning had brought no improvement.

Tommy had crept down the stairs on his way to his early

shift, careful not to wake their other children, who had slept in the bed with him. As he tiptoed over to his dozing wife, he took one look at the dark circles under her eyes and the red rings around those of his precious daughter and made the decision to call in the doctor. The kitchen was lit only by the waning moon, the struggling flat grey dawn and the dying embers in the fire.

Maura sensed his presence and opened her eyes wide.

‘How is she?’ he’d whispered as he squatted down at her side, holding on to the arm of the settle to keep his balance.

Maura, ever the vigilant housewife, noted as he spoke that there was a gravy stain on his vest from the night before. ‘Still bad. She did sleep for some of it, though,’ she whispered back.

As though to let him hear it for himself, Angela’s chest rattled with her next inward breath.

‘I’ll knock on next door and ask Peggy to go and fetch the doctor.’

Maura had nodded. The time had come. Most of the Irish mothers in the streets cured their own, with patience and love and a few herbs sent in the post from Ireland. But they always knew when it was time to hand over to a higher authority. ‘Change your vest before you go. I’ll wash that one today.’ Angela might be sick, but the chores still needed to be done, Kitty and the twins had to be seen to, and Tommy could not miss a day’s pay.

The doctor had arrived just after ten. He listened to Angela’s chest, complimented Maura on her spotlessly clean kitchen, scribbled a letter addressed to ‘children’s services’ and told Maura that she had to take Angela to the hospital. There was a clinic that started at three o’clock, he said. He would phone ahead and let the consultant know that Maura would be

Christmas Angels

attending with Angela. 'If you have any night things for her, pyjamas and the like, take them with you,' he continued.

'Will she be having to stay in?' asked Maura, unable to bear the thought of being separated from her daughter for several days. At St Angelus, visiting time on the children's ward was on Sunday afternoons only. They knew that from when Kitty had her tonsils out and from other children on the street who were regular visitors to St Angelus, ward four and Sister Tapps. There wasn't a family on the dock streets who did not regard Sister Tapps as the closest they had ever know to the Virgin Mother, but it was the separation from their children that caused the most poverty-hardened women to make themselves sick with distress.

The doctor looked at her with sympathy in his eyes. 'Dr Walker will decide what is best,' he said. 'There are lots of these chests around at this time of year. Best to get her right.'

Maura nodded.

The doctor could have added that his entire morning would be spent with patients trotting in and out of his surgery asking for 'a bottle for the chest, Doctor'. He would oblige, all the while knowing that the cure couldn't be written on his prescription pad. What his patients needed was to move away from the Mersey and into heated housing that was free from mould spores and damp.

Despite having had no sleep, Maura spent the remainder of the morning cleaning her house. Meanwhile, her neighbour, Peggy, spent her time knocking on their neighbours' doors for spare nightclothes, then rushing down to Woolworths in town for two new vests and pairs of knickers for Angela, just in case.

Now that they were actually at St Angelus, Maura

wondered whether the doctor had made a mistake and sent her to the wrong place. Was Dr Walker based in one of the other hospitals? The Southern, maybe? As she looked up at Tommy she felt her energy drain. But Tommy had had a brainwave.

‘I know, why don’t we go back to that nice lady on the WVS stall?’ he said. ‘I remember her from when our Kitty had her tonsils out. Maisie, her name is. I bet she’s asked all the time where places are. Especially the bleedin’ chest clinic, as how is anyone else supposed to find it if we can’t and you can read.’

Wearily, Maura agreed, but she was not happy that she hadn’t seen the sign and that they were effectively lost and none the wiser. Of the two of them, Maura was the one who really could read. She’d known there was no point in Tommy looking up at the signs. He could read the names of the horses and the times of the races, and he knew how to identify descriptions of form, but that had been the limit to his knowledge until Kitty had taken hold of him. Kitty brought her reading books home from school and every night she taught Tommy a new word. He was not allowed to get away with it, as much as he tried, not one little bit, but even Maura knew it could be some time before he learnt the words ‘chest’ or ‘clinic’.

‘All right then. I can’t think of a better idea, sure I can’t. Come on, Kitty. Let’s go back to the doors.’ Maura bent down and tucked the blanket around Angela. ‘Shhh now.’ Pushing down hard on the handle of the pushchair, she turned it all the way round to face the direction they’d come from and they began to retrace their steps back down the corridor.

‘Tommy, move,’ Maura said as she almost bumped into him

Christmas Angels

with the pushchair. She was sharp with him and he knew why. Much of what passed between the two of them needed no words of explanation. That left plenty of room for frequent rows and passionate reconciliations, the latter having so far produced two daughters and one set of twin boys.

Maura was full of anxiety and hospital was the last place she wanted to be. One of her closest friends had come into St Angelus by choice to have her baby – not because she needed to, and against the strongly worded advice of Maura and every other woman on the streets. They had all delivered their babies at home, with each other's help, and if there was a problem, the local midwife would be summoned by whoever's husband happened to not be in the pub – usually Tommy – and in most cases it all worked out just fine.

Their friend had walked into St Angelus, waving them all goodbye as she went, but she had never returned. The Irish Catholic community on the four streets of the dockside had not stopped talking about the death of their friend at the hospital. 'Oh and Jesus, didn't she just come out in a box, would you ever have known,' was what they were still saying to one another, and to anyone who didn't yet know the story, on a regular basis. Not one of them had expected a death in childbirth, in a hospital.

They quickly found the WVS stand and Tommy automatically reached for the cigarette tucked behind his ear. It was an instinctive reaction to the smell of tea brewing. Any sense of urgency, whatever the task in hand, evaporated when a cup of tea was in the offing.

He was now on familiar territory. He scanned the area for where he used to sit for hours when Kitty was a patient on Sister Tapps's ward. She had been very little at the time. The

rule had been only two visitors to the bedside at any one time, so he would let half the street traipse in and out to see Kitty – her operation being the entertainment of the week and the talk of the neighbourhood – before he took his turn. But today Maura was on to him.

‘Don’t be thinking you’ll be sitting in here drinking the tea and picking out your nags in the *Racing Post* while I take Angela to see the doctor meself. You must be joking,’ she warned.

Tommy was affronted. ‘You have to, Maura. You have the child in the pushchair, not me. That’s not my job. I’m not actually coming in there with you, am I now. That’s why we brought our Kitty, isn’t it, queen?’ He winked at his eldest daughter.

She winked back. Kitty might have been their firstborn and a girl, but she was her da’s best friend and they both knew it.

Lifting his head, Tommy could see the steam from the WVS urn rising above the rows of wooden chairs. The air was thick with spiralling columns of blue smoke, chattering voices and the sound of metal spoons clinking against national issue cups and saucers. It was dark and gloomy outdoors and the high windows did nothing to bring cheer or warmth into the wooden-floored room with its walls of dark green tiles. Nor did the single light bulb help much, dulled by its green glass shade, way up high. He squinted through the smoke and patted the outside of his jacket pockets with the flat of his hands, trying to locate his box of Swan Vestas.

‘Oh, yes, you are coming in with me, Tommy Doherty,’ said Maura, her arms folded as she looked him straight in the eye.

Tommy, his attention back to Maura, responded in a flash. ‘No, I am not, Maura. I came and sat here when our Kitty was

Christmas Angels

having her tonsils out and I said on the day we took her home that I was never coming back again. It's the smell, Maura, it makes me ill. Let me go and ask the woman where it is and you and our Kitty can go while I wait here for you both.' He looked confused as the search for his matches moved from the front of his jacket to the back of his trousers.

'What in God's name have you come for then,' Maura demanded, 'if all you wanted to do was sit here and drink the tea?'

Tommy had his answer ready. 'Because you wouldn't give me a minute's peace if I didn't, that's why. I didn't want to be going any further than the gates now and that's the truth. Come to the hospital with me, you said, and I came. You didn't say anything about coming in with you, sure you didn't.'

A smile suddenly spread across Tommy's face and he lifted his cap in the traditional docker's greeting. Maura's head spun around.

'But would you look at that! There's your lovely woman, Maisie, and she's pouring me a cup of tea. See? She just smiled at me, she recognized me. Come on, Maura, Maisie will put us right. Would you look at that!'

To Maura's amazement, Tommy was not telling a lie. The woman he called Maisie, wearing a floral wrap-around apron, was smiling at them. She was standing next to a woman in a hat and an oversized glass hatpin, who looked as though life very rarely threw any surprises her way, and she was not smiling. But this didn't seem to hold back Maisie, who was beaming from ear to ear and holding up a cup and saucer, inviting Tommy to move closer. Before Maura could say another word, Tommy was on a direct path towards the smile and the ashtray being held out to him.

‘Hello, Tommy, fancy seeing you back here. Hello, love,’ she said to Maura.

Maura felt relief wash through her. During Kitty’s stay at St Angelus, she’d been the one to sit at her daughter’s side throughout, while Tommy had given up his place for the neighbours, so she’d not been familiar with the staff on the WVS stall.

‘You cannot begin to imagine the number of men I tempt across the foyer with nothing more than a cup of tea in my hand and a couple of biscuits from the Huntley and Palmers tea-time range. I get these ones because they are our Stanley’s favourites. You look as though you need one too, love. Here you go,’ she said to Maura. ‘If you don’t mind me saying, you look washed out.’

Without him even having to ask, Tommy was handed a large brown Bakelite ashtray by the woman with the hatpin and the sour face. He made to put his hands in his pocket to look for money, but Maisie had already slipped the saucer containing the pennies under the counter so that Tommy and Maura would not be offended.

She waved her hand at Tommy. ‘We aren’t collecting today, love,’ she said. She would slip the saucer back on to the table later, for those who could donate, but not until she was sure Tommy and Maura had left the hospital. As she always said to her helpers on the stall, you couldn’t mistake an Irish dockside family because nearly every one of them looked as if they’d just stepped off the boat. ‘They have so many children,’ she’d say to whoever would listen, ‘they don’t have a penny to waste, do they? I can’t take money from them, even though they always want me to. They are too proud for their own good, those dockers.’

Christmas Angels

She immediately noted the anxious and suspicious frown that crossed Maura's face as she scanned the table looking for some sign of how much the tea and biscuits would cost. 'Don't worry, really, there's no charge,' she said. 'And don't forget the ashtray for that cigarette I can tell you are searching for.'

The helper with the stern face jumped in. 'We try to keep the ash off the floor, if you don't mind.'

Tommy was left in no doubt that this was a warning, not a request. He grabbed his tea and, thanking Maisie profusely, sat on one of the hard wooden chairs and extracted his cigarette from behind his ear.

'Hello, dear, would you like a glass of squash?' Maisie was now smiling down at Kitty, who looked up to her mam for reassurance and squeezed her hand tighter.

Kitty lived among the Irish, went to church with the Irish and was taught by the Irish. That was her world. Having not moved outside of the four streets, a Liverpool accent was not her familiar dialect. 'Can I, Mam?' she asked. Maura nodded, and Kitty returned Maisie's smile and took the glass of thick orange liquid.

'Say thank you,' said Maura, 'and go and sit with your da now and wait.'

Kitty, who never had to be asked twice, whispered her thank you and almost skipped over to Tommy, careful not to spill the precious squash as she sat down next to him. They never had squash at home. With four children in the house and half the neighbourhood in and out throughout the day, even if they could afford it, it would be drunk almost before it could be unpacked.

'And is it one lump or two for you?' asked Maisie as she poured the tea for Maura.

‘‘Twould be two, er, please,’’ said Maura. ‘‘And I hope you don’t mind me asking, but I wonder, could you tell me, I have to be here...’’ She pulled the doctor’s letter out of her coat pocket, removed a sheet of paper from inside the brown envelope and proffered it to Maisie, who exchanged it for the cup of tea and two arrowroot biscuits.

Maisie looked up and gave Maura a conspiratorial smile. ‘‘Is it for the little one?’’ She nodded down towards Angela, now fast asleep in her pushchair, exhausted by her most recent bout of coughing.

At least when she’s asleep she’s free from the coughing, Maura thought as she looked down at her child. Maybe that’s a good sign. Maybe she will have turned the corner when she next wakes. Her heart constricted. She was sleep-deprived and emotional but still full of hope. Maisie’s kindness was having an effect. She was acting in that Liverpool way, as if she had seen Tommy only yesterday and knew them all well.

‘‘Don’t worry, love, she’ll be fine. My daughter, she’s one of the nurses here. Nurse Tanner. I know them all, I do. The doctors here, they are smashing. I wouldn’t worry if our little Stanley had to come and see one of them, not at all. Now, let me see, oh, yes, well, you have to go back outside the building and follow the path around to the left. Children’s services is in one of the prefabs. You’ll see it, it’s attached to the building on the side. There is a sign above the door. Your appointment isn’t for another half an hour, though, so sit and enjoy your tea in here first. I think Sister Antrobus is on outpatients, I wouldn’t let you be late for her – bit of a battleaxe, if I’m being honest. But you’ve plenty of time to drink your tea first. There is no WVS around there, although I’ve told them there should be. They send them to me to look after and that’s not

Christmas Angels

a problem, so long as it's not pouring down with rain.' Maisie noticed that Maura's attention was fading. 'You enjoy your tea first. Go and sit with your Tommy, go on.'

Maura blinked, stared at Maisie and stammered a thank you. She wasn't used to such kindness from a stranger and like most of the Irish in Liverpool was often wary of anyone in authority bearing gifts.

'Well, at least I know where to go now,' she said as she sat down next to Tommy and Kitty.

Tommy was mildly agitated, searching for his matches. 'Maura, I haven't me matches. How has that happened? They were in me pocket, I put them there meself.'

Maura flicked open the clip on her battered brown leather handbag. It was her most precious possession, bought at a jumble sale, its seams frayed and the stitching peppered with holes. She had found a sixpence in the small pocket in the bronze silk lining, but she'd never removed it nor felt the inclination to spend it, and she had certainly never told anyone about it. There was a tiny piece of brown paper folded with the sixpence and it read: *Happy Christmas, from your Reggie. Christmas 1914*. She had slipped the note back into the place it had lived for all those years, next to the coin, which had become her lucky sixpence. Even on a Thursday night, the night before payday when she was struggling to make two pounds of potatoes, a couple of carrots and a loaf of bread stretch between them all, the silver sixpence remained in situ.

The aroma from the inside of the handbag wafted up to her. It smelt of a woman who had passed, who had once carried in her handbag make-up and trinkets that Maura would never even encounter let alone own. The stale but reassuring smell of compact, lipstick and Coty L'Aimant perfume calmed

her. When Maura opened the bag it was as if, like a genie, the ghostly scent escaped, the invisible signature of another woman's life.

The lady at the jumble sale had given Maura the bag when she'd bought second-hand clothes and shoes for the children. She told Maura it had belonged to a lady who had passed away. 'No one from around here will buy it,' she'd said. 'They all knew her. She was a regular at the church. Her husband died in the war.' Maura's face had fallen. 'Oh, not the last war. He was long gone. The first war. No one around here can remember him. He was only in his twenties – newly married, they were. You take it, along with those clothes you've bought. Have something for yourself. It's good leather, it is. Quality. Has a few years left in it yet.'

Maura had been touched by the woman's thoughtfulness, but then she always found the ladies from the Anglican church who ran the jumble sale to be kindness itself. They never made her feel a lesser person for being a Catholic, nor for being the one buying the clothes rather than donating them.

She extracted a box of Swan Vestas from the handbag and threw the matches on to Tommy's lap.

'What are you doing with those in your handbag?' he asked as he scooped them up. 'Did you take them from my pocket?'

'I did, Tommy. And you are such a dozy bugger, 'twasn't difficult, I can tell you. I thought I might need to bribe you to come to the hospital with me and our Kitty, but then I wasn't accounting for your woman with the tea.' She placed her handbag down on the floor and, taking her cup and saucer from the seat next to her, raised the cup to her lips and began to sip at her tea. She could sense Tommy grinning and, turning to him, she grinned back.

Christmas Angels

‘You are a wicked woman, Maura Doherty, and what’s worse, you are teaching our Kitty here your ways.’ Tommy struck the match and his face flushed red as he pulled hard on the cigarette.

‘I wish you wouldn’t do that,’ said Maura, tutting.

She always tutted and Tommy always had the same answer. ‘I need them for me nerves and they keep me chest loose, Maura. If it wasn’t for these...’ He held the lit cigarette up to show her, as though it had the secret to a long life written down the side. ‘... I’d be dead, I would, working in all that dust down on the docks.’

Kitty had finished her squash. She clasped the empty glass in her hand, stared into the bottom and, looking up at Maura, said, ‘I’ve had that squash before. Sister Tapps used to give it to me when I was in here. I remember it. Will we see Sister Tapps today, Mam?’

Maura ran her hand over Kitty’s hair and smoothed down an imaginary stray strand. The plaits on Kitty’s head were so neat and tight, not a single hair would dare defy her. ‘We won’t be, Kitty. To be sure, I never want to see her again, because if we do it will be because Angela has to stay in, and that would be just the end of me after all we went through with you. Now, you wouldn’t be wanting that, would you?’

Kitty shook her head and her expression was sombre. She wasn’t altogether sure whether or not an illness would be a price worth paying to see Sister Tapps again.

‘Tis Angela’s turn to be in this awful place, and with the grace of God...’ Maura blessed herself as she spoke. ‘... she will be coming right back home with us today. You know, in Ireland no one ever goes to a hospital. Sure, the nearest would be in Galway, but I don’t know of a single person who has

ever been to it. And the size of this place, you would get lost in it all day long.'

Kitty didn't reply. She wanted to complain. She wanted to visit ward four and say hello to Sister Tapps.

Maura looked into her daughter's eyes and could tell what she was thinking. 'Ah, Kitty, my love, it's been years since you were in here. Sure, you was not much higher than your da's knee at the time. Poor Sister Tapps, she works like a Trojan and she has lots of children to look after, I doubt she would remember who any of us are.'

Kitty looked at the floor. This she absolutely refused to believe.

Tommy shifted forward in his seat. 'Right now, as you know where to go, I'll be making me way back then. You won't be needing me any more. See you later, queen.' He ruffled Kitty's hair as he stood and made his way towards the door at the pace of a trot.

'Tommy Doherty! Don't. You. Dare.'

Maura's words hit Tommy like bullets in his back. He stopped dead in his tracks.

'Sit back down here. Now!'

Tommy shuffled backwards for the first few paces and then, turning, met the eyes of his daughter. Silent, condemning. And then she grinned. His Kitty. He'd swear she held an invisible cord that she'd wrapped around his heart. And now, as though it were winding him in, he walked slowly back to the two women who ran his life.

'Maura,' he pleaded as he sat back down, 'I'll miss the bookie's and there's a winner in the three ten at Kempton. We need a bit of extra cash, don't we, now that you're expecting again.'

Christmas Angels

‘We don’t know that yet, do we.’ Maura glared at Tommy and then glanced at Kitty, who was staring at the counter, fascinated by the laughing Maisie. Maura put her cup and saucer into Kitty’s hands. ‘Go and take that back to the nice lady, and say thank you, would you now, Kitty,’ she whispered, glad to have a task to keep her daughter busy for a moment. Turning to her husband, she said, ‘Tommy, what are ye doing? No one knows I’m pregnant, not even me properly yet. I don’t want Kitty to be thinking that, or anyone else.’

‘Do you not feel it when you’re here, Maura?’ Tommy asked. ‘Can you not smell the place? What is that? It’s enough to make St Michael run for the door.’

He was referring to the pervasive smell of Lysol. It hit everyone as soon as they walked through the hospital doors. Maura looked about her. A group of doctors like the one they had seen earlier with the stethoscope around his neck walked through the main doors and down the corridor, and a gang of nurses almost buried under their oversized capes headed past in the opposite direction. Maura didn’t miss the glances and giggles exchanged between them.

They all looked round as they heard a voice shout out, ‘Clear the way, please. Patient trolley.’

‘Right you are, Dessie,’ came the response. ‘Toot-toot, please, everyone.’

Maura caught just a glimpse of a woman being transported on a trolley with a drip in her arm. The glass bottle of the drip contained blood. Maura swallowed hard as memories of her pregnant friend flooded her mind. She could see her, remember her, sense her. Her mother-in-law had told Maura on many a day that her friend hadn’t left them, that her soul was still in the house with them. It was the Irish way. To hold

on to people. To honour and mourn them, and in doing so, to keep the memory so strong that it was as if they were simply in another room. Maura's eyes softened as she thought of her friend. She could hear her whispering to her, warning, *Run! Run! Take the kids, Maura. Run!*

Maura jumped to her feet. 'Tommy, come with me – now!' she said. 'Let's get Kitty.' Her heart was beating a tattoo against the wall of her chest and her top lip was breaking out into beads of sweat. 'Kitty, quickly now!' she called. 'Let's get over to the appointment and then get out of here. I've left the washing out.'

Tommy knew better than to argue. Angela was still in a deep sleep. Maybe she was turning a corner? He might be the biggest eejit to walk the dock streets, but even he knew that two nights without sleep was enough to make Maura hit him over the head with her precious handbag if he made a fuss. He stood up as Kitty, half skipping, half walking and with biscuits in her hand, given to her by Maisie for having returned the empty cups and saucers, made her way towards them.

Maura noticed that Maisie was now chatting to a large lady in a navy-blue dress and a frilled hat. The lady was tall, broad and imposing and stood with her legs apart and her arms folded. Just the sight of her terrified Tommy.

'Feckin' 'ell,' he said, 'she could unload the hull of a ship all by herself, that one. We wouldn't even be needing the crane. Would you look at that. Would you?' His mouth fell open. 'Jesus, feck, sure, come on. Come here, Kitty, we have to be going to see the doctor.'

As the three of them made a hurried and suspicious-looking shuffle towards the main doors and the steps, they heard Maisie shout something to them.

Christmas Angels

Without turning round, Tommy raised his hand and shouted back, 'Thanking you for the tea and your kindness, Maisie, but we're off to the appointment now.' He held the door open for Maura and Kitty to pass through. 'Come on, faster,' he urged, then continued muttering to himself. 'Jesus, if any of the lads could see this. They won't believe me when I tell them there's a nurse here who's bigger than any of them lot.'

But just as he felt the welcome fresh air on his face, there was a shove in his back and the Amazonian woman pushed past him. 'Mrs Doherty?' she said, addressing Maura.

Maura stopped dead on the red sandstone steps and turned around. 'Yes,' she answered, with a warble in her throat.

'I'm Sister Antrobus and if you don't come with me now, you will be late for your outpatient appointment.' Sister Antrobus was looking and talking to the fob watch she held out from her dress and was peering over her glasses at Maura as though she was daring Maura to challenge her. She looked up sharply towards Tommy before Maura could swallow her breath and reply. 'Mr Doherty.'

Tommy was speechless with fear and simply nodded, fully aware that this was a statement and not a question or a request to verify that fact.

'I have no idea what you are doing here. Or this child.' Again, she peered over the rim of her glasses as though Kitty were not a child at all but rather something which had crawled out of an apple or from under a stone.

But Kitty was neither speechless nor cowed. 'Do you mean me?' she asked, with genuine curiosity.

Tommy paled. Kitty had never met or even seen a person who looked like Sister Antrobus before. Sister Tapps was half her size in both height and width. To Kitty, Sister Antrobus

resembled a character from a comic and she wanted her to speak more.

‘I do mean you, young lady. Have you never been told, children should be seen and not heard, and that means you. Be quiet.’

Kitty’s curiosity faded as quickly as it had arrived and her face clouded with indignation. No one ever told her to be quiet. She was her mother’s little helper, and the two of them never stopped talking. ‘Excuse me,’ she piped up.

Maura wanted the ground to open up and swallow her.

‘Jesus, Kitty,’ hissed Tommy.

Kitty glared at him. Undeterred, she continued. ‘Excuse me, do you know Sister Tapps?’

Sister Antrobus folded her arms. Sister Tapps was her *bête noire* and far too soft on her patients. In Sister Antrobus’s opinion, nurses who were not terribly fond of children made the best paediatric ward sisters. She herself had applied for the job in ward three, but Matron had just told her that an upstart new sister was to fill the post. So now she would set her sights on Sister Tapps’s role as the sister in charge of ward four. Tapps’s retirement was way overdue, so it was surely only a matter of time. ‘I do know Sister Tapps. Why?’ she asked, momentarily taken aback that a mere child had had the temerity to address her without being spoken to first.

‘Because I know her too. Will you tell her Kitty was here, please. Kitty Doherty. And that I said hello to her?’ Kitty began to feel slightly nervous under the piercing glare of Sister Antrobus. She twiddled one of her plaits and slipped her fingers into her father’s outstretched hand. Tilting her head to one side, she let her eyes wander from the top to the bottom of Sister Antrobus.

Christmas Angels

Sister Antrobus had no response. She squinted and her cheeks flushed, but before she could respond with her customary roar, Kitty's eyes lit up. The little girl squealed, let go of her da's hands and ran down the steps and across the gravel path towards the slight, white-haired figure in a ward sister's uniform who was making her way towards them. In her arms she carried a golden teddy bear and a small doll kitted out in Irish national dress.

'Sister Tapps!' Kitty yelled, and Maura and Tommy were amazed to hear the reply. It was years since Kitty had been a patient at the hospital. Maura immediately thought how Sister Tapps had not altered one little bit, except that she was much thinner than she remembered.

'Well, would you look at you! Kitty Doherty, isn't it?' Sister Tapps looked over to Maura and Tommy, who were rooted to the spot under the gaze of Sister Antrobus, too afraid to move.

Kitty nodded furiously and, overcome with delight, unable to stop herself and with no Maura at her side to reprimand her, she threw her arms around Sister Tapps's waist and hugged her.

Sister Tapps stroked her hair. 'Well now, isn't that lovely, and something I didn't expect to happen today. What a treat. Doesn't it always show you,' she shouted over, 'you never know what lovely surprise the good Lord might have in store for you when you get up out of your bed.' She looked back down at Kitty. 'And what are you doing here? You aren't coming back to my ward, are you?'

Kitty shook her head. 'No, it's Angela. She has to see the doctor.'

Sister Tapps looked over at Maura. 'Well now, if she's been

a poorly girl, that will be the best thing for her. You know that, don't you, Mammy?'

Maura and Tommy, despite their initial fear, couldn't help themselves and began to smile and nod their heads in acknowledgement. Sister Tapps had that effect. She made people smile. Maura remembered that about her and remembered her calm and reassuring manner on the ward. Her fears, her memories of the friend she had lost, which were at the root of all her anxieties about the hospital, faded away in the presence of Sister Tapps.

Sister Antrobus had clearly had enough of Kitty and Tommy. 'Mrs Doherty, come with me, now – you and the patient. Mr Doherty, not you. You and your daughter can wait at the WVS post if you must, but let me tell you, the hospital is no place for children, so unless you are sick, young lady...' She turned again towards Kitty, who, Tommy noted with pride, remained undaunted, but then Tommy hadn't been taught by the nuns. '... and unless you need admitting, let this be the last time I see you here. Unless of course your sister becomes an inpatient and then only at visiting which is between the hours of two and three on a Sunday afternoon.'

The calming, kindly manner of Sister Tapps appeared to have no impact on the curt and officious Sister Antrobus. Kitty backed away from Sister Antrobus and closer to Tommy, instinctively wanting to stick to her father's side and protect her parents and Angela from the unpleasant woman. She reached over to her da and took his hand.

'You come with me,' Sister Antrobus said to Maura, but they all stopped and turned as the thin voice of Sister Tapps filled the air.

'Kitty, it has been a delight to see you again.'

Christmas Angels

Kitty grinned.

Maura turned the pushchair. 'And you too, Sister,' she said, in the same courteous, reverential tone she used when addressing the nuns. Then, with a very sudden change of key, she said to Tommy, 'Help me down the steps with this pushchair. Kitty, you wait there. Go back inside, it's cold out here.'

Once at the bottom of the steps, and before she turned to follow Sister Antrobus, Maura glared at Tommy. Her eyes sent a number of messages and he understood every single one, as did Kitty, who was now peering through the glass panes of the door, not wanting to let her family out of her sight. The first was: if you want to live, wait for me and be in that WVS post when I get back. The second: look after Kitty, and the third: we have to do this, for Angela.

As Kitty waited for her da, she focused on Sister Tapps. Halfway up the steps, she stopped and grabbed on to the handrail and the expression that crossed her face made Kitty feel funny inside. Something was hurting her and Kitty wondered whether she should run back down the steps to help her, but she found that her feet were glued to the spot in fear. As soon as the grimace of pain had crossed Sister Tapps's face, she looked up towards the door, saw Kitty peering through and beamed a weak smile back up at her. But Kitty wasn't fooled. She could see the tears in her eyes and the blood had all but drained from her face.

Tommy, not aware that anything was wrong, bounced back up the steps and through the door. Passing Sister Tapps, he shouted back down, 'Will I hold the door for you, Sister?'

Sister Tapps shook her head and it was obvious to Kitty that she was waiting to catch her breath before she replied. 'Not at all,' she said. 'I've only gone the wrong way.' And,

smiling, she slowly turned as though to make her way back down.

Tommy raised his hand and, letting the door go, said, 'Come on, queen, let's see if I can get you another glass of that squash from Maisie while we wait for your mammy and Angela.' Taking her hand, he propelled her along with him.

Kitty looked over her shoulder and turned back to the door, but she was disappointed as Sister Tapps never returned.

Chapter 3

‘Ah, you pair of sods. What kept you? Barbara’s been fretting. Cut you the best bit of ham off the bone to go with the chips and when you didn’t turn up I thought I was going to get it all for meself. Might of known I’d have no such luck. Bet you smelt it up in Whitechapel, eh?’

The landlord of the Grapes pub lifted up the long wooden hatch and stood aside to let the two tall police officers through to the back of the bar. PCs Freddie Watts and Norman Bartlett both had to duck their heads as they passed through to avoid colliding with the overhead beam and the pewter jugs hanging from it. The jugs were special: each one bore the name of a fallen local hero engraved on the bottom, inscribed there long ago by the men themselves, with a sharp nail and a hammer. They had hung there untouched for a decade now, a fitting memorial to those pub regulars who had paid the ultimate price and would never drink in the Grapes again. More fitting than the stone cross outside St Chad’s, where those who had survived assembled after Mass on November the eleventh each year. No one had dared suggest the tankards be taken down. Another ten years would pass before the winds of

change would sweep through the community and blow away its superstitions.

‘Evening, Dr Mackintosh. Nurse Tanner.’ Freddie lifted his tall helmet from his head, both to enable him to pass through the arch and to greet Nurse Pammy Tanner and Dr Anthony Mackintosh, who were sitting at an upturned beer-barrel table in front of the inglenook fireplace. Sawdust covered the floor and the smell of freshly shaved wood was accentuated by the warmth of the log fire that burnt in the wide grate. In the corner of the room stood a tall Christmas tree strung with far too many coloured lights and tinsel. Crepe paper garlands had been looped from one corner of the ceiling to the next and they quivered and crackled with the thermals rising from the fire.

The flames danced up the chimney and there was a sudden scattering of ash as Anthony Mackintosh let go of his Pammy’s hand for a moment, lifted a log from the pile stacked up against the blackened brick wall and threw it on to the fire. He clapped his hands together to remove the strands of moss and splinters, then smiled up at the police officers as he sat back on the bench and slid his arm around Pammy’s shoulders. She was his girl and he liked to make sure that no one was left in any doubt of that fact, particularly when a fresh male came on to his territory.

Every nurse and doctor who had served their time on casualty knew most of the police officers who worked in central Liverpool by name. Their paths crossed, often.

‘Evening, Freddie, Norman. Do you two live in here?’ Pammy grinned as she returned the greeting.

‘Only when we aren’t keeping the streets of Liverpool safe so that you nurses can sleep safe in your beds in Lovely Lane. Isn’t that right, Norman?’ Freddie gave Pammy a cheeky wink, causing Anthony to hug her a little closer into his shoulder

Christmas Angels

whilst giving the impression that he was simply altering his position.

‘Oh yes, that’s our top priority, Nurse Tanner,’ said Norman, who unfortunately hadn’t ducked low enough to miss the beam and was now rubbing his almost bald pate.

At six foot four, Norman was the taller of the two constables but carried with him the visible effects of his leisure-time passion for drinking pints of Guinness. He was considerably older than Freddie and walked with a slight stoop. Freddie had joined the police force when he returned from the war and was much fitter and faster than Norman. He was also single and there wasn’t a doctor who worked on casualty who was unaware of this. He loved playing football when he could make the training and he was always being sought to play in the St Domingo’s first team on match days. Spending the majority of his waking hours outdoors was yet to play havoc with his olive skin and good looks. His thick dark wavy hair slipped out from beneath his helmet and his dark lashes curled disarmingly, fully revealing his brown eyes flecked with blue. No one was more conscious than Freddie of the effect he had on women, young and matronly alike.

The two policemen were each responsible for a different patch of the neighbourhood, and both territories happened to touch borders at the Grapes, which was where Freddie and Norman convened and took their refs break when they were on night duty. The landlord and landlady ensured that they were well looked after and in return the constables turned a blind eye when necessary – to the numerous goods sold over the bar which had obviously fallen off the back of a ship down at the docks; to the card school down in the basement that played for stakes far too high for most working families;

and to the late-night drinking which sometimes went on until the early hours. The Grapes sat at the heart of the community and Norman and Freddie were well aware that if they made life difficult at the pub, their own jobs would very quickly become much harder. They depended on the goodwill of the community, plus they relished the warmth of the welcome they received every night in the back room.

‘How’s your da, Nurse Tanner?’ asked Norman. Although he had known Pammy since she was a child, he was so respectful of Matron’s strict rule about never using Christian names within the confines of St Angelus that he called her Nurse Tanner wherever he saw her, at work or not. ‘Is he still drinking down the Irish club on a Saturday?’

‘You know me da, Norman – a creature of habit,’ said Pammy. She gave the back of Anthony’s hand a reassuring pat as she spoke.

‘I don’t know how your mam puts up with him. A lovely woman like that. And to think she turned me down.’ Norman shook his head in mock dismay as though hurt by the memory.

‘Well, I’ve no idea why she did that, Norman, a good-looking fella like you,’ said Pammy.

‘Ah well, you see, that’s what keeps Stan on his toes and treating your mam like a princess. Because I never married, he’s had to keep looking over his shoulder all these years. Terrified of me, he is. Go back a long way, me and your mam do, Nurse Tanner. Bet she’s never told you about the night me and her went to the Grafton Rooms, has she?’

Pammy laughed. ‘Actually, Norman, she has. And about how you weren’t allowed in because you were late. You went, but you never actually danced, did you?’

Barbara and the barman began to laugh.

Christmas Angels

‘Are you coming to the rehearsal at St Chad’s tonight?’ asked Freddie.

‘Yes, we both are,’ replied Pammy.

She’d been responsible for ensuring that everyone at Lovely Lane signed up to the service-wide concert. Nurses, medics, the Lancashire constabulary and the fire service had joined together and were putting on a carol concert on the steps of St George’s Hall on Christmas Eve for all of Liverpool to enjoy. For the nurses, this was in addition to the carol singing on the wards of St Angelus in the days leading up to Christmas.

‘Are you coming too, Norman?’ asked Pammy. ‘It’s the reason we’re in here so early. Want to make sure our larynxes are warmed nicely before we go.’

‘That’s a very good idea, Nurse Tanner,’ said Norman. ‘But someone has to keep the villains away, so I’ll be staying here while young Freddie gives you all the pleasure of his warbling tones.’

‘Is it all quiet in casualty tonight, Dr Mackintosh?’ asked the conscientious Freddie.

Not only did Freddie need to visit St Angelus to accompany the occasional victim, criminal or prisoner, but the hospital was also on his patch and he could often be found enjoying a cup of tea with Dessie Horton, the head porter.

‘You are never out of that porter’s hut,’ Norman would complain.

‘I’m intelligence gathering,’ Freddie used to reply, and that was the truth. A recent crime involving the mother of one of the porter’s lads had caused Freddie and Dessie to strike up a strong friendship and Dessie had discovered it was one that worked both ways.

‘Well, it was quiet when I left, Freddie, and they know

where to call for me if they can't cope,' said Anthony as he removed his arm from around Pammy's shoulders and tapped the top of the wooden barrel for good luck.

'Long may it last,' said Freddie. 'At least until I've had me refreshments tonight, anyway. And then, with a bit of luck, all the way through to the other side of Christmas.' He clasped his helmet to his chest and followed Norman to the back room, his mouth salivating at the prospect of ham and chips.

'Where have you two been?' asked Barbara. 'This is the second batch of chips I've cooked. The first lot dried up on the range and the dog had 'em.'

'Sorry, Babs.' Norman unhooked the clasp on his cape, removed the coat and draped it over the back of the wooden chair nearest to the fire.

The room smelt of refried fat and chips. Barbara cooked for the staff, and every night from seven till eight there was pie and chips available for anyone who wanted food and had no one at home to provide it. But she was strict with the dockers. If she thought any one of them was keeping a family hungry by spending his wage in her pub, she would frogmarch him home herself. Weighing eighteen stone and with a tongue as sharp as a razor, she was a force to be reckoned with, and no one, not even in drink, argued with her.

'We wouldn't be late deliberately, Babs, you know that. There was a little lad missing from Vince Street. The Browns' youngest. Frantic, they were. I knew where he would be, which was why I was worried. That kid is fascinated by the water. Always on the dockside, he is. I keep telling his da he needs to do something. Anyway, we found him, didn't we, Freddie? As I thought, stood right on the edge of the dock he was. Tell you what, I didn't half give him a good hiding. His legs

Christmas Angels

didn't touch the ground all the way back to the Browns' house. I told his mam that if that lad is found down on the edge of the Mersey again, I'll put her no-good bloody husband in a cell for the week.'

Barbara put her hand to her mouth. 'It's so dangerous down at the water. What's his mam and da thinking, letting him out on his own? Everyone knows the lad is simple, and the water is so deep. It's straight in deep from the edge and none of those kids on Vince Street can swim. Who can, apart from the bleedin' fishes. Good job you gave him a good hiding, Norman. I bet he won't do it again in a hurry.'

Freddie had taken his own cape off and was pulling the chair out from under the table. He winced as the wooden legs scraped along the ancient slate-tiled floor. He was so hungry, his mouth was watering and he could hear and see nothing but the plate of food before him.

Babs knew that look. Five hours on the beat, walking or cycling through the streets, meant that they were both always ravenous by the time they called in. 'Here you go, lads. Your tongue is hanging out of your mouth, Freddie! Come on, get started on it, love.' She set down two pewter pots of mild next to the plates of food. 'Get that down you before the phone rings and some other kid has done a bunk. Honestly, you're here to stop serious crime, you aren't the welfare.'

Norman popped a hot chip into his mouth and breathed in sharply. 'It feels that way sometimes,' he said.

Barbara placed a bottle of vinegar in front of him. 'There, that's everything, and there are some American ciggies behind the bar that came in off the *Norry*, if you fancy a packet on the way out.'

Norman tapped the side of his nose with his index finger.

‘Right you are, Babs. Sounds just the ticket. Where would we be without the *Norry*, eh? Life would be boring, wouldn’t it?’

Neither officer needed to be asked twice to get stuck into the food or the mild, and for Norman the gold-foil-tipped cigarettes were a bonus.

Out in the lounge, Pammy and Anthony were deep in conversation. ‘What is up with you?’ asked Anthony. ‘You’ve been so miserable the past few days. Christmas is less than two weeks away and I don’t know about you but I’m really excited. I haven’t had a family Christmas since before my mum died.’ He’d been invited to spend his Christmas Day with the Tanners, or what would be left of it once they’d both finished work.

Pammy had been twirling the stem of her glass around and around in her fingers and looked up at Anthony in alarm. She immediately felt guilty. ‘Oh, Anthony, I’m sorry. I’m missing the others, that’s all, what with Dana being in Ireland and Victoria in Bolton. I feel a bit lost without them. I suppose because I’m the only one who’s actually from Liverpool it was bound to happen sometime, especially at Christmas, but Lovely Lane isn’t the same without them. It’s just so quiet.’

Anthony squeezed Pammy’s hand and felt his own heart constrict. ‘But you are happy I am here, are you? That we are together? That isn’t making you sad, is it?’

‘Anthony, don’t be daft, soft lad. Of course I am happy. Imagine how miserable I would be if you weren’t here. We’re a team, me and you, aren’t we?’

Pammy checked the bar to see that no one was looking. Babs was fussing over Norman and Freddie and they were all

Christmas Angels

busy talking, her and Anthony forgotten. She placed her drink on the table, leant across and kissed Anthony full on the lips.

He blushed, just as he always did when Pammy kissed him in public. And then he grinned, because she was the most impetuous and daring woman he had ever met. 'We are a team,' he said, his eyes shining, his heart wishing they were somewhere private, 'and that's why I worry when I see you feeling sad. When you are sad, I am sad, and my job is to look after you, to make sure you're happy.'

Pammy slipped her hand on to his knee and grasped his fingers. 'I am happy, Anthony. But I'll tell you what, I'm not the only one. Me dad, how much does he love having you round our house! And me mam, I think she thinks more of you than she does me.'

Anthony laughed and, leaning forward, kissed his Pammy back. The light in her eyes had returned. He had lifted her out of her melancholy. The four girls – his Pammy, Dana, Victoria and Beth – had been almost inseparable since they'd begun their training and he wasn't surprised Pammy was lost without them. It was the reason he'd encouraged her to join the services choir, to give them both something to do in the evenings in the run-up to Christmas.

They all turned around as the shrill ring of the telephone on the bar pierced the air.

'Rightyo, I'll fetch him now,' said the landlord into the phone. 'Norman, it's your desk sergeant, he needs to speak to you.'

They heard the clomping of Norman's size-twelve feet on the slate floor as he made his way over and picked up the handset.

'It'll be a cat, sir,' he said into the mouthpiece. 'But if the cat got in, it will get out again.'

Only the landlord heard the raised tone of Norman's superior as he bellowed his response down the line.

'Yes, sir,' said Norman sheepishly. 'On our way, sir.'

As he replaced the handset, Freddie appeared by his side. 'Honestly!' Norman said as he took the cape and helmet Freddie proffered. 'There's an empty house in the station commander's road. He said there were some Germans living there but no one ever spoke to them and yesterday morning they moved out. He thinks they've left a cat in a shed out the back, or so the neighbour who backs on thinks, and he is sending us to go and rescue it.'

Freddie was fastening the chinstrap under his helmet and chewing the last of his mouthful as he did so. 'I'd rather that than a kid in trouble like the Brown boy nearly was,' he said.

'Aye, you're right. At least we have full bellies. Landlord, we are replete.' Norman mock bowed and made a swoop with his helmet. 'We shall return tomorrow. In the meantime, how much are the American ciggies?'

Once the transaction was over, Norman and Freddie made their way out to the bikes they had leant against the outside wall in no particular hurry.

'Night, Norman! Night, Freddie!' shouted Pammy. 'I'm on children's from tomorrow, Freddie, so you will have to find someone else to make your tea on casualty,' she added.

Freddie looked crestfallen and Anthony smiled, relieved. Not that he didn't trust Pammy, or Freddie for that matter – he was a decent young man and a very serious copper who obviously had ambitions in the police force – it was that he just couldn't help himself. If he could wrap his Pammy up in cotton wool and keep her in a gilded house, he would.

'It will taste nothing like yours, little Nurse Tanner,' Norman

Christmas Angels

joked back. 'I shall miss you on casualty, but no doubt you will have a much quieter life on children's and be glad to see the back of me and Freddie here.'

Anthony nodded enthusiastically, then checked himself when Pammy shot him a quizzical look and he realized what he was doing.

Pammy waved to Norman and Freddie. 'Have a quiet night, lads,' she shouted.

First published in the UK in 2017 by Head of Zeus, Ltd.

Copyright © Nadine Dorries, 2017

The moral right of Nadine Dorries to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (HB): 9781784975166
ISBN (ANZTPB): 9781784975173
ISBN (E): 9781784975159

Typeset by Adrian McLaughlin

Printed and bound in Germany by CPI Books GmbH, Leck

Head of Zeus Ltd
First Floor East
5–8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG
WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM