

NADINE  
DORRIES

*The*  
MOTHERS  
of Lovely Lane



# *Chapter 1*

*July 1954*

It was three weeks since the day of the accident that had rocked St Angelus and everyone who worked there to the core. Teddy Davenport, the most popular junior doctor at the hospital, boyfriend and true love of one of the most popular student nurses, Dana Brogan, had almost lost his life in a car accident. He'd been racing down to the Pier Head to collect Dana, who had just returned from a visit back to her family farm in the west of Ireland. From absolutely nowhere and without a second's warning, a young pregnant woman had stepped straight out into the path of his speeding car. Dana, sitting on her suitcase nearby as she waited for Teddy to arrive, had witnessed the whole thing.

In the days since the accident, Teddy had spent many hours in surgery, with patients and staff alike holding their collective breath, willing him to survive. He almost died a number of times. What saved his life was a resuscitation technique that had been newly discovered in America and was being pioneered at St Angelus by Dr Anthony Mackintosh. Every time Teddy almost succumbed to the shock of his injuries,

Dr Mackintosh brought him back, only for Teddy to leave them again within minutes. It was down to Dr Mackintosh and the heroic efforts of the orthopaedic surgeon, Mr Mabbutt, that Teddy eventually pulled through, and everyone knew it.

Through these darkest of days Dana was supported by her closest friends and housemates from the Lovely Lane nurses' home: Pammy Tanner, Victoria Baker and little Beth Harper. With Teddy now beginning his long recuperation on the male orthopaedic ward, she was beside him for as much time as she could manage. After nine hours on her ward shift, she routinely spent a further four hours at Teddy's bedside, with the permission of Matron, nursing him through the worst.

The accident and Teddy's near death had stunned everyone who worked with him or knew him. It even made the front page of the *Liverpool Echo*. There wasn't a nurse, porter or domestic at St Angelus who did not see the day of Teddy's accident as a turning point in the life of the hospital. It was like a catalyst that forced everyone to accept that it was now time to embrace the post-war world and the new NHS and all it brought with it. Taking the path of resistance, as Matron and some members of the hospital board had, was no longer an option.

Mr Mabbutt, physically and mentally exhausted after his many hours of orthopaedic reconstruction on Teddy, was vociferous in his views about the need for change. Once Teddy had left the operating table for the final time, the surgeon made it very plain that things at St Angelus could not continue as they were.

'I cannot go on operating like this, in these primitive conditions!' he yelled as he smashed the theatre's central overhead lamp with his fist.

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Theatre Sister looked on in alarm as the huge concave metal structure swung wildly from side to side. She had stood at Mr Mabbutt's back during his most difficult operations for more than twenty-five years, anticipating his requirements and wiping his dripping brow, once smooth and youthful, now lined and craggy. No one dared refuse him anything, ever, so frequent and loud were his exclamations of 'bloody nurse', 'bloody patient', 'bloody mess' and even 'bloody sister', but she'd never seen him this angry.

'The bloody war was bloody over years ago. We have to have new theatres! We must update this equipment and we need more bloody trained staff, for God's sake. What is wrong with these people, these bloody do-gooders on the board?'

The newly qualified staff nurse, washing truly bloody dressings as Theatre Sister counted bloody swabs on to her trolley, burst into tears. Mr Mabbutt terrified her. Never more so than when he was shouting, and, like everyone else in the vicinity, she was petrified that the overhead light would crash on to the floor if he banged it again.

'It's like operating in a bloody field hospital here! I thought I'd left those days behind. The NHS was supposed to improve life, not make it more complicated. I want a bloody new theatre. We all need a new theatre or half of the people who come in here to be operated on will die. It's bloody astonishing Dr Davenport wasn't one of them. Get me bloody Matron – NOW!'

Mr Mabbutt's shouting and cursing could be heard all the way down the stairs and along the hospital corridor. A group of walking wounded, sitting on ladder-backed chairs in casualty, waiting to be seen by the gentle Dr Mackintosh, raised their heads from their copies of the *Liverpool Daily Post* and looked at each other in mild alarm.

But Matron had known Mr Mabbutt for decades and his profanity and bad temper had little impact. She was more than used to it. She ruled the roost and as only she and Mr Mabbutt knew, he was more scared of her than she of him. It had been many years since she had needed to reprimand him for his behaviour with a junior nurse. Engaged to be married, he had been summoned to her office and read the riot act. The result was that Mr Mabbutt changed his ways. In return he had been guaranteed Matron's absolute discretion, a promise Matron had never broken. Nonetheless, Mr Mabbutt did not want ever to be reminded of how he had almost lost the love of his life, to whom he had now been married for many happy years. He never wanted to push Matron over the edge. His guilt was her secret weapon and that meant she was almost the only person in the hospital who could deal with his rages. On this occasion, however, she decided to send for Dr Gaskell, the longest-serving and most senior doctor in the hospital and the man she trusted most of all.

Twenty minutes later, Dr Gaskell made his way to the consultants' sitting room. Mr Mabbutt had calmed down slightly by now, though not noticeably to the new young housekeeper who looked after the sitting room. 'Get me my tea and some toast – now! I haven't eaten for ten hours,' he snapped at her.

The housekeeper almost jumped out of her shoes, then retreated into the kitchenette to do his bidding. The consultants were revered beings and almost worshipped by the hospital staff. They brought life into the world, they saved it in moments of crisis and, eventually, they signed it back out again. It was hardly surprising that these particular men in white coats were accorded a status which could only be described as godlike.

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‘Dr Davenport is alive and that’s a bloody miracle,’ Mr Mabbutt said to Dr Gaskell as he sank into an armchair. ‘Especially as we don’t even have one of those new ventilators in the theatre. We don’t have the drugs or lights or the new equipment the new hospitals in places like London and Birmingham have.’ He snatched the plate of toast from the housekeeper and devoured it in three mouthfuls. ‘I’m exhausted by the amount of work we now have to do. Have you seen how busy casualty is these days? Every day there’s a broken bone for me to mend either from a fight or a car accident. It feels like every man in Liverpool is buying those lethal motor scooters and crashing the bloody things and it’s me that has to put them back together again – in a bloody primitive theatre. We need a new theatre, desperately.’

Dr Gaskell listened and sympathized. Not so long ago he had considered retiring, but the medical advances and rapidly changing direction of the hospital under the new NHS had reawakened his interest. ‘I totally agree, old chap. We must seize every chance we get and ensure St Angelus isn’t left behind. It’s the same in my field. They’re already talking about the next generation of TB antibiotics to take over from streptomycin. Such progress I could only have dreamt of in my early days as a doctor. We must make the most of it while we can.’

A plan was hatched. ‘Leave it to me, I’ll have a word with Matron. There are ways to handle her, as you know. You have to pick your battles carefully, and in my opinion this one is very much worth fighting.’

The following morning, Dr Gaskell paid Matron a visit. He suggested that they move ahead with proposing to the

Liverpool District Hospitals Board that St Angelus urgently required a new theatre suite. ‘We can lead the request together,’ he said with a gentle smile. ‘The board will surely be impressed by such a bold and progressive proposal.’

Matron flatly refused. ‘Oh, well, I see!’ she shot back. ‘He has got to you too, has he? Mabbutt and the usual culprits? You aren’t even a surgeon, Dr Gaskell. You are a chest doctor. You don’t even use theatre very often unless you want someone to take a lung out. I don’t understand why you are taking their side. We have a perfectly serviceable operating theatre. It’s our maternity services that are suffering. They must take priority over surgery.’

Dr Gaskell wanted to bury his head in his hands. He had known Matron for all of his working life and her stubbornness was legendary.

‘Matron...’ He paused and took a breath before he went on. ‘I am not saying that maternity should be shelved or ignored or is any less of a consideration. It is just that the old theatre is beginning to cause some serious problems. Problems we wouldn’t want to read about in the *Liverpool Echo*, now would we?’

‘I will not be bullied by Mr Mabbutt and be held answerable to his unrealistic demands,’ she said. ‘It is a poor surgeon who blames his theatre and it appears to me that is exactly what Mr Mabbutt and the band of merry surgeons he has persuaded to join him in his noisy little protest – including your own son, I might add – have decided to do. Oh, they have all been to see me, one by one, as well you know. But I remain resolute, I am afraid. The answer from me is no. Absolutely no. Maternity first.’

Matron felt let down by Dr Gaskell. Disappointed, even.

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They had run the hospital together for more years than either cared to count, and through the most sombre and challenging days. During the week of the May Blitz, they had both worked on casualty around the clock and although that was now over ten years ago, it was a week that neither could forget. They had become the closest friends over their very long tenure at St Angelus and she hated having confrontations with him. These days it was unusual for them to disagree and when they did, it was often soon sorted out over a glass of sherry in her sitting room.

She rose from her chair and crossed the floor to Blackie's basket next to the fireplace. Bending down with the ease of a woman half her age, she stroked her dog's head, ran her fingers through the tuft of hair between his eyes and smoothed his quizzical brow. Blackie's job in life was to protect his mistress. He was blissfully unaware of his minute Scottie size and took on all comers he considered to be a threat to his beloved human.

'What does it matter to you anyway? You never go near the theatre block.' She ran her fingers over Blackie's eyes, which were closed in pleasure. 'You have other far more important concerns – leading the regional TB committee, for one.' There was now more pleading in her tone. She wished he would just give in to her on this without fuss or argument.

'It doesn't matter to me, Matron, not personally. I seem to spend most of my life in planning and committee meetings these days. And I have enough battles of my own to fight – keeping my patient list, for a start. The cheeky blighters on the board want me to hand over my patients to a new consultant, patients I have been caring for for over thirty years! A new theatre doesn't matter to me, but it matters to St Angelus.

And you are quite wrong, it has nothing to do with Oliver, although as my son spends half of his week operating in the theatre, his voice is a valid one, as valid as anyone else's.'

Matron raised her eyebrows. They both knew that Oliver Gaskell was in his position as consultant because Dr Gaskell senior was his father. Matron had no problem with nepotism. There was not a boy feeding the stoke holes or working as a porter's lad who was a stranger to the St Angelus family. The hospital thrived on taking care of its own. It had been obvious that Oliver Gaskell was a talented young man, if a bit foot-loose and fancy free. Matron wondered if Dr Gaskell knew of his son's reputation with her nurses. She was disappointed that, as the consultant for obs and gynae, he hadn't backed her in her quest for a new maternity department.

She sighed and stood up from stroking Blackie. 'Do you want some tea?' she asked as she smoothed away Blackie's imaginary hair from the front of her immaculate navy dress. 'Shall I call for Elsie?' She was desperate to change the subject. The two of them arguing like this was making her feel sick and uncomfortable. Contrary to rumour – a rumour that supported her reputation as a matron to be feared – she hated conflict.

However, Dr Gaskell was not to be distracted and, ignoring her question, he continued.

'It is the growing population of Liverpool, the patients, I care about. The people who are alive here and now, today, don't you see? And, yes, the women who need caesareans too. Maternity will also benefit from a new operating theatre. But we've so many badly healed war wounds and chronic injuries that we should be thinking about. Some of the operations carried out in those field hospitals may have saved

lives, but ten years on and those men are still struggling. Our surgeons can help prevent some of them from enduring a lifetime of pain and chronic health problems. There is more damage to be attending to, Margaret. Our prosthetics clinic is full every single appointment, as you know. Every day. Doesn't that tell you something about the way things are?' He had used her Christian name, in desperation. Her eyebrows raised and he saw a smile almost reach her lips.

Matron pressed the brown Bakelite bell at the side of the fireplace to summon Elsie and then marched over to her chair and flopped down in an almost girl-like manner, crossing her arms before her.

Dr Gaskell had the distinct impression he was going to have to fight very hard to bring her on side. Harder than he ever had before. He let out a deep sigh as he crossed his fingers in front of his pursed lips. He would have to be slightly more imaginative than usual. Although something about her manner told him that he might have just taken the first fairy footstep towards getting his own way.

Matron set her chin at him. He looked up. Had he won? He dared to hope.

'I care about the women who are still giving birth at home and should be doing so in this hospital. Not just those who are being rushed in needing a caesarean section. The next grant should be spent on creating an efficient, lifesaving new maternity block. Maternal death is the biggest killer of young women in Liverpool, not appendicitis. We have to put an end to that and we can do, or at least we can make a start with a new maternity unit.'

Hope fell and crashed into his boots. 'But we have dedicated maternity and women's hospitals already in Liverpool. As a

city, it is a provision of care we lead in.' His voice held a tinge of exasperation. He and Matron were the two most authoritative figures in the hospital and this was turning out to be the most difficult of power struggles.

'Yes, but not for the Irish diaspora who live around the docks. The only place they trust is St Angelus and besides, have you heard them? If you as much as mention visiting Mill Road Hospital, they almost faint. They are the most superstitious group of people I have ever known. We forget because we work and live amongst them how much that affects everything they do.'

Dr Gaskell knew this. He and the other doctors were continually trying to discredit the 'bottles' sent over from Ireland which some of their patients claimed had miraculous healing abilities. The latest competition for Dr Gaskell had been the urine of a goat that lived on a farm in Sligo and which apparently had magical powers. The only thing Dr Gaskell thought might be magical was the rate at which that particular farmer's coffers were filling up with money being sent from Liverpool for a bottle of the offending liquid.

'It will be a long time yet before those dreadful memories of the Mill Road bomb have faded,' Matron said quietly. 'All those mothers and babies dead. All those poor people they couldn't rescue having to be cemented over. You can't blame the women around here for not wanting to go near it. They refuse to deliver their babies in what is in effect a graveyard. And so they miss out on the best maternal care other women can enjoy. I just want the best for our women too.'

There was a moment's silence as both Matron and Dr Gaskell thought back to that horrendous time. The bombing on May the third 1941 had devastated the city and altered

countless lives for ever. Mill Road maternity hospital had taken one of the hardest hits, killing mothers and babies, ambulance drivers, doctors and patients. So many were dead and the damage so bad that many bodies, including those of mothers with babes in arms, had to be limed and then cemented over. Men who were away at war, sustaining their own injuries on the battlefield, had no idea that back in Liverpool their homes were being bombed and their families lost. It was all still too much for words and as a result was barely ever mentioned. Except by the superstitious Irish community, who, when complications arose, still refused to attend Mill Road to deliver their babies.

The door to the small kitchen off Matron's sitting room caught in the breeze of the open window and banged shut as Elsie O'Brien, the housekeeper who looked after Matron's apartment, wheeled in a trolley of tea and toasted crumpets.

Hearing raised voices, Elsie kicked the brake on the trolley and decided to serve the tea as slowly as she could possibly get away with. This way she would hear more. Gather more gossip and vital information to pass back to Biddy Kennedy and the rest of the women in the St Angelus mafia. The mafia had an important job to do, looking out for the women and families from the dockside streets who worked at the hospital. They were the protectors of jobs, the feeders of children, first and last.

'I will pour the tea, thank you, Elsie,' Matron snapped.

Elsie's heart sank. 'I haven't buttered the crumpets yet, Matron. I'll just do that first.' She turned to Dr Gaskell, tried another tack. 'Oh, Dr Gaskell, isn't it awful about the accident and poor Dr Davenport almost dying.' She dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief, but Matron was having none of it.

‘Thank you, Elsie, I will butter the crumpets.’

Elsie almost grumbled out loud as she shuffled her way back to the kitchen, leaving Matron to serve her own tea. She would have to resort to positioning a brandy glass on the back of the kitchen door now to hear any more news.

Matron handed Dr Gaskell his cup and saucer and their eyes met. A calmness settled on Matron’s vast sitting room as they both reflected on Dr Davenport’s accident and the events of the past few weeks. The rain lashed up from the Mersey and beat against the windows, sending rivulets of tar down the blackened red-brick walls. Seagulls called out in the distance and the dark oak furniture gleamed in the reflected glow of the fringed lamps, testament to twenty years of devoted polishing by Elsie.

Dr Gaskell was one of the best TB doctors the country had ever known and the most respected consultant in the whole north-west of England. He was wily as well as sharp. As he sipped his tea he hatched a cunning plan which he hoped would outwit Matron, make her see sense and allow him to prioritize the new theatre above the maternity unit.

He looked about the familiar room, placed his cup and saucer back on the trolley and decided he would have one more go. He was going to have to drop the bomb. Her stubbornness was leaving him with no option.

‘Look, Matron, I am also supportive of a new maternity unit, but we will only receive money for one or the other in this budget. I would like this to go no further, and I know it won’t, but, you see, there are some very difficult problems we need to face. You don’t need me to tell you that only a century ago this hospital was a workhouse. We are built almost on the river and as a result we have, er, problems to overcome.

It's more than just mice and water rats now, I'm afraid. These, er, *creatures* have to be dealt with and a pair of tomcats just won't do it.'

Matron placed her own cup and saucer on the trolley and he saw her hand wobble slightly at the mention of the loathsome, dirty creatures whose name he dared not speak. She knew what he was referring to. She knew everything. But it was something she refused to acknowledge. The cursed inhabitants of the Merseyside slums, the processing plants, the docks and the shops – and, it would seem, her hospital.

'Being so close to the Mersey, the old theatre block just isn't fit for purpose any longer. There was another subphrenic abscess on male surgical today. The patient had to return to theatre to have it drained and then the antibiotics will help to deal with it, but we both know that not so long ago that poor man would have died, more likely than not. Draining the abscess was all we had, wasn't it, Matron? That and intensive nursing through a high fever and prayer requests to the nuns at St Chad's that the poor blighted patient would survive. It's the third post-operative subphrenic abscess following abdominal surgery in as many months. Mr Davis is beside himself. He doesn't want this to reflect on his technique as a surgeon, and nor should it. Very soon the Irish will think he's cursed and refuse to be operated on by him.'

'We do not have those dirty little creatures in my hospital!' Matron was as close to raising her voice as she had ever been in all her years at St Angelus.

It did not go unnoticed and Dr Gaskell's eyes widened in surprise.

Her complexion had drained, her eyes had brightened and her body had stiffened. 'It must be down to Mr Davis, it's

something he is doing wrong.’ Matron picked up the teapot to refill their cups. The tea slopped over as she did so and when she sipped from her cup, she almost choked on her tea.

Dr Gaskell continued regardless as she removed her linen handkerchief from her pocket and dabbed her lips. ‘Well, actually, it isn’t just Mr Davis. The latest arrived following an appendicectomy. Mr Carter operated on that patient.’

He leant forward, picked up his own cup and saucer and sipped very carefully at his tea while he allowed that fact to sink in. ‘We have a serious problem, Matron, and I think I know what might be causing it. There is only one way I can convince you of this. I shall return tonight after my supper at 8.30 p.m. and we shall inspect the theatre together. More crumpet, Matron?’

Matron looked very worried. He had her cornered, but she knew that there was no way she could refuse. He was up to something and she would have to play along. She returned to her tea, to play for time and give her a second to compose her thoughts.

At the sound of the word crumpet, Elsie appeared like a genie from a bottle. She popped her head around the door and into the room. ‘Need more crumpets toasting, Matron?’

‘Er, no, thank you, Elsie, I can’t even manage this plateful.’ Dr Gaskell had turned Matron’s stomach with his talk of those dirty black creatures that she wouldn’t even countenance speaking about in relation to her hospital.

Elsie looked bitterly disappointed as she retreated into her domain.

‘All right then,’ Matron said. ‘I don’t suppose I can refuse. Although, I must say, you are becoming something of a dramatist in your old age, Dr Gaskell.’

‘Well, we shall see about that later, shan’t we,’ he replied as he allowed a smile to raise the corner of his lips.

Elsie had a spring in her step as she made her way to the greasy spoon for the domestics’ morning coffee break. Even though Matron hadn’t allowed her to listen in on the conversation with Dr Gaskell, she had still picked up some crucial snippets. She was met by the warmth from the cookers and the smell from the huge urns of milky coffee as she opened the café door. Seeing that there was no one at the food counter, she made her way over to it.

‘How is anyone supposed to eat that bacon?’ she asked the young girl who was serving. ‘That’s a tin of bacon fat you’ve got there – where’s the meat?’

The young girl looked at Elsie with a resigned dismay that told her she had answered that question many times that morning already. ‘Shall I put a rasher on your barm cake for you?’ she asked.

‘A rasher? You can’t call that a rasher. I suppose you’ll have to, but I’m only paying half price. Bacon meat is not the same price as bacon fat – go and tell the cook that. She has the fattest kids on Vince Street and we all know where the bacon’s heading, don’t we?’

The girl gave Elsie an imperceptible nod. Her mother and Elsie played bingo together. Embarrassed, she fished about in the tin of bacon fat, speared a couple of slices with a fork, laid them on a barm cake and passed the plate over to Elsie, who made to take her purse out of her apron. The girl looked around, checked that no one was watching and shook her head.

Elsie understood. ‘Thanks, queen,’ she said as she winked. ‘You’re a lovely girl. I’ll tell your mam what a good’un you are.’

She let her unopened purse slip back into her apron pocket, then turned her head to glance around the vast room of scrubbed tables and wooden chairs. She was trying to locate Biddy, Madge, Betty Hutch and Branna – her usual cohort of domestics. But Hattie Lloyd, Dessie Horton’s next-door neighbour, was sitting on a table near the counter and spotted her first. Elsie almost jumped as Hattie shouted out her name.

‘Did you just pay for that bacon barm, Elsie? Didn’t notice you open your purse.’

‘Of course I did, you silly cow. What business is it of yours anyway? Your eyes are nearly as big as your mouth, what a pity they don’t see too well.’

Elsie saw the raised hand of Biddy Kennedy and without waiting for a reply threaded her way through the tables to where her friends were sitting.

She slammed her plate down on the table as she pulled back her chair.

‘I’ve got your coffee already,’ said Biddy. ‘I saw you coming in. What’s wrong with your face now, Elsie?’

‘Bloody Hattie Lloyd, that’s what. She just accused me of not paying for me bacon barm.’

‘And did you?’ Biddy picked up her cup and blew on the scalding coffee, sending milky froth scudding into the air.

‘No, I didn’t. I complained about the lack of bacon. If I pay for a bacon barm, I want bacon on it. She’s over-made-up and over-opinionated, that one. God, she gets my goat. How dare she accuse me of not paying.’

Biddy nodded in agreement and as she did, she turned in her seat and glared at Hattie Lloyd. 'It is a disgrace and it's right out of order. You don't do your own down,' she said.

She pulled a packet of Woodbines out of her handbag and offered them to Elsie, who took one. There was a code amongst the women. Madge Jones never offered her cigarettes round nor took one from anyone. When she could, she bought the fancy gold-tipped ones from America, brought in on an American ship, and she shared them with no one. Betty Hutch and Branna McGinty rolled their own.

Everyone lit up at the same time and as matches landed in the overflowing central ashtray, Biddy leant her elbows on the table and spoke.

'I know we look after our own here, but I think the morning-shift cook in this place is taking things a bit far. She's cutting the meat off the bacon and taking it home, probably selling it and robbing us of a decent breakfast in the process.'

Madge nodded and Branna spoke up. 'For some of the women with more than a few kids, and God knows, there are enough of them working here, the bacon barm they have in the morning is all they have to eat all day, until they get a couple of 'tatoes in the evening or a bit of scouse. Someone needs to have a word.'

'I was thinking the same thing meself,' said Madge. She held up her plate, on which lay an open barm and two slices of translucent fat. 'It's a joke.'

'A job for Dessie, I would say,' said Biddy as she lifted up the top of Elsie's barm, peered inside and blew her smoke straight into Elsie's face. 'I'll have a word with him. She wants her son to be taken on when he leaves school next summer. There are rules and they can't be broken. She needs telling.'

‘So, what’s it to be, Elsie, new theatres or a maternity unit?’

They moved on to the next pressing subject quickly. The half-hour break always passed before they knew it and they needed five minutes to get back to their posts.

Madge grinned as she drank her coffee. Madge and Elsie were always in competition to demonstrate who had the greater access to information about the goings-on at St Angelus. It was a tightly run race. As switchboard operator, Madge’s ability to both answer calls and take useful notes was crucial to the St Angelus mafia. After years of practice, she could sniff a useful conversation a mile off and knew exactly when to slip the plug back in when a light was still on, slowly. Elsie, on the other hand, had perfected the art of loitering with a duster or tea tray.

‘Well, we don’t know yet,’ Elsie replied, ‘but Dr Gaskell is up to something tonight. He’s taking Matron to the theatre when it’s dark to show her why something needs doing. I couldn’t make any sense of what he was talking about to be honest. He said the hospital has to deal with worse things than mice.’

Betty Hutch raised her eyes from the rim of her cup. She only spoke when she had something of note to say. She had cleaned the old theatres most nights for the past twenty-two years and she instantly knew what Dr Gaskell was up to. ‘It’ll be a new theatre then,’ she said.

They all turned to look at her as one.

‘Do you think so?’ asked Biddy. ‘It’s not like Matron not to get her own way. Dr Gaskell usually backs down.’

‘Not on this, he won’t,’ said Betty. ‘He will definitely win.’ No one ever argued with Betty Hutch.

‘Well, that’s been a useful coffee break, I would say,’ said Biddy. ‘We’ve sorted out the cook and we know which way

the wind is going to blow on a new theatre or maternity unit, which is something even Matron doesn't know yet.'

'That's not so unusual,' said Madge. 'Most of us know what's happening before Matron.'

Biddy opened her handbag to extract her cigarettes again. 'Has anyone noticed how tired Noleen Delaney is looking? Jesus, have you seen the cut of her? The woman is like a ghost.'

'I saw her leaving the hospital when I went to clock on this morning,' said Madge. 'I shouted to her, but she was miles away, didn't hear me.'

'She would have been on her way to St Chad's,' said Branna, who had not stopped eating for long enough to fully join in. 'She spends more time on her knees, that woman. And their Mary, she doesn't lift a finger, you know. She should be ashamed of herself. Gives her mother the runaround, and with all that Noleen has to do for their Paddy. Mary should be helping with the housework after school so her mother can get to bed during the day, but instead she's never out of Maisie Tanner's house, messing about with nail varnish and the like with Lorraine Tanner. The two of them, always eyeing up the lads, they are.'

'Paddy's a right grumpy sod. I'd have done for him meself if he was mine,' said Madge.

Biddy felt her temper rising. 'Did you expect him to return from the war cock-a-hoop because he left his leg behind? He's a moaner, I'll give you that, but not because of his leg. It's because he has no work. No pride to be found for a man with no pay. The fact is, we have let this go on for far too long. We should have acted sooner. Noleen is worn into the ground and it'll be an early grave she's heading for if we don't wake up and do something soon.'

Elsie struck a match and they all bowed their heads towards the centre of the table to take a light then nodded in agreement as they inhaled.

‘I wonder if Dessie could help. There must be a job – something, somewhere, for God’s sake – that a man with one leg can do?’

‘Can he write?’ asked Madge.

‘How would I know that? I’ve never asked him to send me a bleedin’ letter. I wouldn’t have a clue. Don’t no one tell Noleen we’ve been talking about them, though. She’s too proud, that one. Mighty proud. She doesn’t understand our ways. Poor woman looked like she was dead on her feet. Haven’t passed a word to her for weeks. With her being on nights, I just never see her any more, and she never gets to the bingo since Paddy came home injured and that’s been years now. She never asks for help, always gives the impression she’s coping, but she can’t hide the bags under her eyes and she’s nothing but skin and bone. I blame meself. I must have been asleep, taken in by all her codswallop, I was.’

A scream pierced the air from the direction of the hot counter and they all looked over to see Hattie Lloyd almost throw her plate back over the counter. ‘I’m not eating that disgusting... creature!’ she shouted. ‘It’s still bloody alive. Look, its legs are moving.’

The room fell silent and everyone watched as the cook herself came out to retrieve the plate from the floor. The young girl behind the counter was unperturbed. Finding unwanted creatures in the food was a not uncommon occurrence. They frequented the darkest corners of the hospital too, from the kitchens to the porter’s lodge. She made to fill another barm cake.

‘I don’t want it now,’ shouted Hattie. ‘It’s put me off, it has.’

The ladies looked one to the other. No one spoke. Wry smiles were exchanged and then Bidy broke the silence and said, ‘Ah, God bless her cotton socks. It couldn’t happen to a nicer woman now, could it? Oh, look, here come the nurses on their break, we must be late.’

Pammy Tanner had breezed into the café with Victoria Baker and Beth Harper.

‘I see Nurse Brogan isn’t with them,’ said Branna.

‘No. And here’s a bit of news,’ said Madge as she placed her cigarettes back into her bag and snapped the clasp shut. ‘You know how Matron’s been allowing Nurse Brogan to look after poor Dr Davenport in male orthopaedics, after her own shifts? Well, when it’s time for him to go home, she’s letting her go and nurse him in Bolton, where he comes from. I heard Matron talking to Dr Davenport’s brother on the phone – you know, Nurse Baker’s young man. A solicitor, he is. Very grand. So Nurse Brogan won’t be here, the poor love. She’s going to be stuck at Dr Davenport’s bedside for a very long time if you ask me.’

‘Well, that will be a test of true love, eh?’ said Branna. ‘I’d kill my husband meself if I had to spend every day sat at the side of his bed looking at his ugly mug.’

‘We all feel the same,’ said Elsie.

‘What are you talking about?’ said Bidy to Elsie. ‘You thought the world of yours till he fell.’

‘Oh, Jesus, I don’t mean mine – he was goodness itself. I mean her fat lump of a useless husband. I’d kill meself if I had to sit by his bed. I’m agreeing with her.’

Branna looked affronted. ‘Eh, hang on...’ She was about to

argue with Elsie, but Betty Hutch began to speak. This was such a rare thing, they all listened.

‘Seems to me that maybe all is not what it seems there. Nurse Brogan may be grateful to nurse him through his worst days now, but it might be a different thing altogether in a few months, I’d be saying. She’s one that will surprise us all, one day.’ And without another word, Betty made for the door.

‘What is she on about, Biddy?’ asked Elsie.

They watched Betty’s back as she retreated.

‘I have no idea. She’s deep, that one.’

And with that, they all returned to their posts with Betty’s words ringing in their ears.

When eight thirty arrived, Matron was ready.

‘I’ll be back shortly, Blackie, once I’ve seen these non-existent creatures Dr Gaskell insists are taking over the hospital, indeed.’ She gave Blackie a biscuit.

Blackie rolled on to his back, his four legs stuck straight up in the air in anticipation of a tummy tickle.

‘Not now, Blackie. When I return from this ridiculous bug-hunting mission, then I will take you for a walk. Later.’

Blackie quickly resumed his sitting position, his ears pricked and forward at the sound of his favourite word, head tilted to one side.

The lights of Dr Gaskell’s car filled Matron’s dark sitting room as his Austin slowed to a halt outside the main entrance to St Angelus, directly below her apartment. The engine died and as his car door squeaked noisily open, she made her way down the stairs towards the deserted and shrouded WRVS tea stand, where she had arranged to meet him.

‘Good evening, Margaret,’ said Dr Gaskell as he removed his gloves and walked towards her.

‘Honestly, you and your new-found modern ways. You have taken to calling me by my Christian name a little too often, *Dr Gaskell*,’ she said emphatically, prompting a smile in return.

She was secretly flattered that he occasionally called her Margaret. It made him almost a friend, not always just a colleague. She found it hard to admit this to anyone other than herself, but she had no friends. Her job had been her only friend down the years. Her mother, her nurses, her hospital – they were her life. And with the recent loss of her elderly mother she now felt even more alone: she no longer had her mother to visit, to care for and to love. But even when her mother was alive, Matron still hadn’t shared the sadness of the secret love she held deep in her heart. Sister April had walked out of the hospital gates to join the Queen Alexandra nursing corps during the war and never returned, and Matron had never spoken of it. Her secret was her cross to bear. It guaranteed her a lonely, friendless life because a friend was by definition someone she had to be honest with and if she couldn’t share the truth about who she was and what set her apart from every other woman she knew, what was the point?

As they walked together towards the theatre block, they passed Jake Berry, the under-porter, Elsie’s son-in-law, wheeling an oxygen bottle towards the children’s ward.

‘Is it all quiet in theatre, Jake?’ asked Dr Gaskell.

‘Oh, it is Dr Gaskell, sir. Matron. All quiet on casualty too. Fingers crossed, eh, that I haven’t spoken too soon.’

‘How’s Martha and the baby, Jake?’ asked Matron.

‘They are both doing fine, thanks. The delivery went well. Biddy Kennedy did the job for us. It was all good.’

Matron frowned. Biddy was an excellent housekeeper at the school of nursing, but no matter how many babies she had delivered, she was no midwife.

‘I’m so pleased for you, Jake. But, please, if Martha becomes pregnant again, bring her in here, nice and early. Hospital really is the safest place to have a baby and there’s no need to travel up to the maternity hospital. We have equipment here to help, and proper pain relief that neither Biddy nor anyone else would have at home. Not to mention the expertise the nurses can provide. Or at the very least, get one of the new district midwives to attend her.’

Jake didn’t know what to say. His Martha had insisted she deliver their baby at home. Like most of the other women in the dockside streets, she wouldn’t go near the Mill Road hospital. But Matron was his boss. Or rather Dessie was, and Dessie answered to Matron.

He raised his cap. ‘Aye, I’ll try, Matron. But perhaps you could have a word with her mother.’

‘I did, Jake. If I told Elsie once, I told her a hundred times. The problem is, for people like Elsie and Biddy, the old ways are best. Elsie said to me that if Martha was sick, she would bring her in, but in their eyes, pregnancy is a condition, not an illness. What they don’t see is that it can very rapidly become a crisis. We can do things here that save lives.’

A look of alarm crossed Jake’s face. ‘I’ll do my best, I promise, Matron.’ He lifted his cap once again and hurried towards the main entrance.

‘That was a bit previous, if you don’t mind me saying, Matron. She hasn’t got over the birth of the first child yet,’ said Dr Gaskell when Jake was out of earshot.

‘I’m well aware of that, thank you. But we need to get the

word out. We've seen a huge rise in the birth rate in the last few years, as you know. Husbands and wives are making up for lost time, it seems. You mark my words, young Martha will be pregnant again very soon. The fifties are shaping up to be all about babies, Dr Gaskell. This post-war NHS, this massive number of post-war babies, they will give it all a name one day. And right now maternity is the fastest-growing service out on the district as well as here in St Angelus, which makes it yet another challenge we have to step up to. The number of appendectomies hasn't altered on account of the men being home again, but the number of women at risk from maternal death is rising fast and that is why I want the maternity unit first and foremost.'

Dr Gaskell wasn't about to argue with Matron. Besides, he was soon to give her the shock of her life. If the consequences weren't so serious, he would have grinned at the thought of it.

They both fell silent as they approached the theatre block. There was an atmosphere of foreboding as they moved into the dark, narrow stairwell. Dr Gaskell had called in earlier in the day to practise what he was about to show Matron. Of course there had been no scurrying actors on his stage in the middle of the day. Pale and watery sunshine had shone through the skylight and was its own disinfectant, but now...

'Are you ready?' he asked her as they stood outside the theatre doors.

'As ready as I will ever be,' she said.

A frown of disapproval crossed her face as a feeling of trepidation and a cold, creeping fear settled into the pit of her belly. She rested against the cold painted brick wall. It felt damp, even through her cape. She was wearing her uniform,

as always, and she nervously checked the silver buckle on her belt. Needless to say, it was perfectly positioned in the centre.

‘I’m about to switch the corridor light off, Margaret. Don’t be alarmed. I will be back in a few seconds.’

Matron watched as he walked back down the corridor towards the light switch. As she heard it flick, the windowless corridor was thrown into deep blackness. Dr Gaskell waited for a moment to get his bearings and with no other noise to distract her attention, Matron could not ignore the unnerving sound in her ears. It began slowly from behind her. It was in the walls, a scurrying, rumbling sound... No, it was under her feet, coming from below.

She almost gasped in relief as she heard Dr Gaskell begin walking back towards her.

‘Don’t move,’ he whispered. She felt his warm breath on her face even though she couldn’t see him.

‘Oh, for goodness’ sake! You made me jump!’ she yelped.

She instinctively began to brush her skirt and rearrange herself, an automatic reaction whenever she felt vulnerable. Dr Gaskell waited for her to finish pushing her belt from side to side and smoothing her skirt. Once she’d settled, he gave her no further warning. With one hand he took one quick second to fling open the operating-theatre door and with the other hand he speedily reached across the wall and flicked down the switch for the central overhead light. One, two, three. That was all it took.

Matron’s hand flew to her mouth, but not before a scream had escaped her lips as she jumped sharply backwards, into the shadows.

Before them, thousands of startled cockroaches scattered and scuttled and nosily moved as one towards the perimeter

walls of the theatre. The black floor receded, revealing the original white-tiled one below it. Within no time at all the shifting, scuttling blackness had disappeared under the skirting boards and back into the walls.

Matron looked as though she was about to faint.

Dr Gaskell got straight to the point. ‘And that, Matron, is why post-operative subphrenic abscesses are popping up all over the wards, threatening the lives of the patients we operate on, and why we absolutely must have a new, sealed operating theatre. Not having one is putting lives and the reputation of this hospital at risk on a daily basis. Including the lives of our own doctors. It is something most people who work here know about, but no one is talking about it. You know yourself that Dessie has tried everything short of a hand grenade to sort the problem out. The “little problem”, as you sometimes call it, is everywhere. All over the hospital. It is an old workhouse; short of knocking the walls down and rebuilding, there is nothing we can do. The little blighters are winning the battle. Cropping up everywhere. The entire workforce of this hospital will be looking to you and me to work together and sort this out, and that, Matron, that is what we must do.’

Dr Gaskell’s wily manoeuvrings did the trick. The plans for a suite of new operating theatres at St Angelus were approved by the LDHB in record time. Two months later the new theatres were nearly ready to accept their first patients.

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

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9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

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

ISBN (HB): 9781784975098

ISBN (XTPB): 9781784975104

ISBN (E): 9781784975081

Typeset by Adrian McLaughlin

Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press

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

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