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My Notorious Life

Written by Kate Manning

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My Notorious Life



Kate Manning

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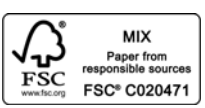
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Chapter One



Confession

It was me who found her. April 1, 1880. The date is engraved on my story same as it is on the headstone, so cold and solid there under the pines. What happened that morning hurts me to this day, enrages me still, though many years have passed.

The time was just before dawn. She was there in the tub. It had claw feet, gold faucets. Marble was everywhere in that room, so magnificent. A French carpet. A pair of velvet settees, a dressing table, candelabra, powders and pomades, all deluxe. I knew something was wrong right away. When I knocked I knew. There was not no noise of bathing, just that slow drip. That plink of water landing on water, so dreadful. I went in and there she was. A scarf of red across her shoulders, down her chest. The water was red and cold with all her life leaked out. A bloodbath.

My hands were trembling. Terrible sounds strangled in my throat, quiet so as not to wake the house. My little daughter and my husband were fast asleep. The maid was not yet up.

Mother of God she was dead. I collapsed down at the vanity reeling and keening. I couldn't look but I had to. The scene was reflected so clearly in the mirror, and strange, how it was serene, almost. She seemed at rest. The way her hair fell you did not see the red cut. You saw the profile of the nose, the chin. She was a bather in a painting, so peaceful, but I hated her for what she done to herself. Even after how I cared for her so long. She would be my undoing now, too, not just her own. Who would believe

a suicide? They would say I killed her. They would write me again in the headlines, as Murderess. Hag of Misery. She-devil. How they'd lick their chops. They'd come for me with their shackles and their oakum and their lies, then put me away for good unless by some conjurer's snap I could get her poor corpse out of the water and away down the stairs and out to Fifth Avenue to disappear. It was the very morning of my Trial. I was due in court in three hours.

What could I do? What would happen to me now? If I could change places with her. The thought came to me. If only it was me dead there in the water.

I imagined it, picking up the knife.

My troubles would end. I'd not be a grief to anyone. If only I was dead. These ideas raced now through the panic. I looked again in the mirror at her reflection over my shoulder and seen all of a sudden how it wasn't a bad resemblance. Our age was close enough. That black hair. And it was the mirror, that morning, the way we were doubled in it, that shown me the way to my escape.

Fast, I took the rings off my fingers. The gems from my ears. I put them on her. Her skin was wet and cold as fish, a shock to the touch. The diamonds sparkled on her delicate dead hands, on the collops of her lobes.

Why? I asked her, silent as I worked. But I knew why. Why was not the mystery.

There was not no choice. They would come for me. I ran now. I packed a bag. A reticule filled with cash. He helped me with it and kissed me goodbye, both of us afraid.

—Hurry, he said. —You got no time to waste.

My throat closed with panic and sadness. But I left him to it, my husband, to carry it off, to say it was me dead in the bath. He'd know what to do. He took the risk of it. He knew people. He had connections of influence. They'd believe him. He said we'd find each other later. There was no choice but to trust him. She was dead and the traps would be knocking any minute. There wasn't no other way. I went out the back door in a hat and veil, which was nothing special at our address. Ladies was always coming and going in their veils and disguises, the curtains of their victorias drawn. Half of them would have worn mustaches or pup tents, anything not to be recognized departing from my notorious parlor. I went east across Fifty

Second Street on foot, as it would not be advisable to use the driver. My carriage was well known as myself in all parts of town. I got on the omnibus down the Avenue, and from there I was off to the railyards, to book a ticket.

Meanwhile at the so-called Halls of Justice downtown, my enemies was coiled snakes lying in wait. How eager they was to see me in the dock at last. How disappointed, how outraged they would be, to receive a telegram from my lawyer with the news. The case was a bust. Stop. The accused was dead. Stop. Madame DeBeausacq a suicide. At first they scoffed and pshawed under their preposterous hairy mustaches. It was somebody's idea of a joke, they said. They noted the date: April 1. They were sure that soon I would show up so they could smite me with their sanctimony and their outrage. But I did not show up, and soon half them toads had a new theory. That I was murdered, that a Tammany hoodlum snuffed me out to hush me up, to kill my society secrets along with me. Whatever they thought, the b*****ds was stunned out of what wits they had, which was not many. In the end, they celebrated. They bragged. They got me, was their feeling. Finally they got me. They said I would take my secrets to the grave.

They should be so lucky. The grave under the white pines at Sleepy Hollow has its own secrets. She died to keep hers safe. But I'm d****d if I'll keep mine. Here they are, written out from the beginning, from the time of my early life and up till now.

As for them c**ks***ers, I have just one thing to say: APRIL FOOL.

BOOK ONE



Ax of Kindness

Chapter Two



For Bread Alone

In the year 1860, when the Western Great Plain of America was the home of the buffalo roaming, the cobbled hard pavement of New York City was the roofless and only domicile of thirty-five thousand children. In our hideous number we scraps was cast outdoors or lost by our parents, we was orphans and half orphans and runaways, the miserable offspring of Irish and Germans, Italians and Russians, servants and slaves, Magdalenes and miscreants, all the unwashed poor huddled slubs who landed yearning and unlucky on the Battery with nothing to own but our muscles and teeth, the hunger of our bellies. Our Fathers and Mothers produced labor and sweat and disease and babies that would've been better off never born. The infant ones, small as a drop of dew on a cabbage leaf, was left wrapped in newspaper and still bloody on the doorsteps of churches, in the aisles of dry goods stores. Others among us was not older than two, just wee toddlers with the skulls still soft when they was thrust Friendless upon the paving stones of Broadway. These kids dressed in bits and pickings. They begged what they ate or filched it. Many never had known a shoe. The girls started out young to sell themselves and the boys turned to thuggery. Half the babies dropped at the foundling hospital died before they had a birthday. The rest of the so-called street Arabs was lucky if they lived to twenty.

Me and my sister Dutch and my brother Joe was nearly permanent among this sorry crowd, but by the mossy skin of our teeth we got turned

from that path by a stranger who came upon us and exchanged our uncertain fate for another, equally uncertain.

The day in question I was not more than twelve years of age. Turned up nose, raggedy dress, button boots full of holes and painful in the toe, dark black hair I was vain of pulled back, but no ribbon. And my father's eyes, the color of the Irish sea, he always said, blue as waves. I was two heads taller than a barstool. My legs was sticks, my ribs a ladder. I was not no beauty like Dutch, but I managed with what I got. And That Day we three got our whole new proposition. It walked right up and introduced itself.

Hello there, wayfarers.

We stood in the doorway of the bakery. If you stayed there long enough, you could get maybe a roll that was old, maybe the heels they would give you of the loaves. We were not particular. We would eat crumbs they swept out for the birds. We was worse than birds, we was desperate as rats. That day the smell was like a torture, of the bread baking, them cakes and the pies and them chocolate éclairs like all of your dreams coming up your nose and turning to water in your mouth. We Muldoons had not eaten since yesterday. It was February or maybe March, but no matter the date, we were frozen, no mittens, no hats, us girls without no woolies under our skirts, just britches full of moth bites. We had baby Joe warm in our arms, heavy as beer in a half keg. Dutch had my muffler I gave her, she was so cold. We wrapped it around my head and her head both, and there we stood looking like that two-headed calf I saw once in Madison Square. Two heads, four legs, one body. Two heads is better than one, but we children should've been smarter that day and seen what was coming.

A customer started in the door. This big fat guy with big fat neck rolls over the collar of his coat, like a meat scarf.

Dutch said, —Mister? with those blue eyes she has, such jewelry in her face, sparkling sadlike eyes.

The Meat Neck Gent said, —Go home to your Ma.

Dutch said back, —We ain't got no Ma.

—Yeah yeah yeah, he said. —I heard that before, now beat it.

—Please mister, I said. —We ain't. It's the truth. (Though it wasn't exactly.)

—Just one a them rolls or a bannock of bread.

And the guy said, —Beat it, again. He was a miserable cockroach in

fine boots, but he was not the one who ruined us, that was the kindness of strangers.

So we started to cry very quiet now, me and Dutch, because we had not had food since yesterday noon, standing there the whole morning with pain like teeth in our guts. The scarf around our head was frozen solid with our tears and snuffle.

Along at last came another customer, quite fancy. This one had the type of a beard that straps under the chin, and a clump of hair left stranded in the center of his bald dome that we saw when he removed his tall hat, like a rain barrel on his head.

With the tears fresh in our eyes, we said, —Hey Mister.

—Why hello there, wayfarers.

Right away he got down low, peering hard at us like we were interesting, and asked in the voice of an angel, —Why you poor children! why are you here in the cold? Don't cry, sweet innocents. Come inside and warm yourselves.

—Nossir, I said, —we ain't allowed. They tell us scram and kick us.

—That's an outrage, he said. —You'll freeze to death.

Picking baby Joe out of our arms and handling him, he marched us into the warm smell of the shop. We were hemorrhaging in the mouth practically with want. You could eat the air in the place, so thick with bread and warmth that it stang our cheeks.

—Out out out out, cried the bakery hag when she saw us. The dough of her body was trembling with fury. —Out! I told you.

—These children shall have three rolls of that white bread there, and tea with milk, said the Gentleman, and he slapped down his money bright on the counter.

The dark scowl of the miserable proprietress smoked over at us in fumes. But she swallowed her bile when she seen the Gentleman's copper and fetched us tea. It scalded our tongues but did nothing to damage the softness of her bread or the crunch of its golden crust. It made no sense to have such a hard woman with such soft bread. We were fainting and trying not to wolf it down like beasts. The Gentleman watched us eat the same as if we were a free show.

—There now, he said, his voice a low burr in his throat, —there you are, children.

Dutch threw her arms around his neck. —Oh thank you kind Gentleman, she said. Her sweetness was like payment to him, you could see by his smile. Even with the grime on her face, Dutch was a pretty child. No one could resist her blarney and her charm, and though she was only seven years of age, she knew this well.

When we were done with the first bread, he says, —Are yiz still hungry?

Wait. Let me get his voice right. In fact, he said it all beautiful, with elocution: —Do you jolly young wayfarers still have an appetite?

And we said, —Yessir.

It was our lucky day then, for he bought us another round of penny rolls and fed us under the glare of the bakery woman's eyes.

—Children, where are your parents? the Gentleman said.

—Please mister, our father art in heaven, said Dutch. It was the wish to be proper was why she mangled her vocabulary with a prayer. Our father was not Our Father Who Art in Heaven, though he was dead. Perhaps he was in hell, what with the one sin we knew of him, which was his death two years before, from drunkenness and falling off a scaffold while carrying a hod of bricks, leaving our Mam with us girls and Joe, his infant son. It was just after Joe's arrival and our Da was celebrating with his lunch bucket and a drop, for he did like his drop, our Mam said, coming home every night, so dusty and singing Toura loura loo, a stick of licorice in his pockets if we was lucky and a blast of whiskey in our faces if we wasn't. —Fill me the growler, there's a good girl, Axie, he says to me nightly, and I'm off like a shot for the shebeen downstairs and back in a flash without spilling. Then Da would raise the bucket in a toast and sing out, —You're a Muldoon, dontcha forget it girls. Descended from the Kings of Lurg. The daughters and sons of Galway.

—The Kings of Lurg did not have nothing over your father, Mam said in her grief when he fell. —He was a grand hard worker, and more's the pity for there will be no payday now he's gone to God.

After he was gone to God we was gone ourselves, away over to Cherry Street to live with our father's sister Aunt Nance Duffy, while Mam went out to work as a laundress to a Chinaman.

—Where is your mother then? the Gentleman asked.

—She got an injury, I says. —She can't get out of her bed for three days.

—And where do you live? he asks us. —Have you warmth and shelter?

—Truth, says I, —it's the food we miss.

—My name is Mr. Brace. He put out his hand, which I inspected, lacking the manners to shake it. It was clean and soft as something newborn. —Who might you be?

—Axie Muldoon. And these here is my brother Joe and sister Dutchie.

—A pleasure to make your acquaintance.

He did not look like it was a pleasure exactly, and stared like he was a police trap in brass buttons, frisking us in the face to find out our secrets. He was a big gaunt man, with pale eyes dug back in his face, an overhung forehead, jutting jaw, nose long as a vegetable, and big flanges of nostrils. There were hairs in them that I could see from down low where I was. Like any child I was disgusted by the hairs, but hoping to extend his philanthropy just a few pennies longer, I said, —Thanks mister for the bread.

—Certainly, my dear. Still you must know that man does not live for bread alone, but lives by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord.

We gazed up at him without no idea of what he was going on about.

—I should like you to have bread, said he quite gently, —yes, but more than bread. I should like you three children to come along with me.

It seemed he was going to give us cakes and ale and possibly a handful of silver, so I was all for it. He picked up our Joe and took Dutch by her hand, which she surrendered, trusting as if he was Our Lord the shepherd and she was the sheep. Not knowing we were marching off to our Fate, we all trooped out together. I was last, which was to my advantage because on the way out I gave a loud raspberry to the bakery lady. Very satisfying it was, too, and you should have seen her face, the cow. Full of her baking, we followed the Gentleman down the street.

—I would like to bring this bread to your Mother, he says. —Where do you live?

He had a parcel with the telltale shape of fat loaves under the brown paper, so despite Mam's instructions never to truck with strangers, there was no choice but to lead him home. For bread alone, I done it.

We walked at a brisk trot around onto Catherine Street, past Henry and Madison, Monroe and Hamilton, names of our nation's heroes and presidents, though at that time I had no knowledge of presidents nor nations. Just these streets, with their shanty wood buildings, their flashmen and

hucksters, their carts and piles of ash overflowing the bins. The horse mess was rank under your shoes and the smell of it a bad taste up your nose. We stepped over bones and oyster shells, through the tight crowds of people, across the frozen urine slush and past the women selling rags and their cold hard bread twisted in rings. We dodged a dog with a ladder of ribs like mine, only she had pups you could tell from the teats. Soon I would be old enough, Mam said, for pups of my own, but I must remain virtuous and not be grown before my time.

At last we came to Cherry Street, where no cherry bloomed in six lifetimes. Along we went to number 128, around the mess of little boys, Michael, Sean, and Francis, pitching pennies, only instead of pennies they used pebbles. They scampered back away from the Gentleman like roaches before a light, but he only smiled. —Hello boys, he said to their stony faces. We passed the hop house, where through the doorway I seen our uncle's brother Kevin Duffy alongside Bernice his wife, drinking theirselves stupid, and then picked our way along the bone alley over the trash, with our feet mucked up past the laces in wet ooze, to the rear tenement where we had our rooms. The wash above was hung so it blotted out the dollop of sky between the buildings. Sheets and knickers flapped off the fire escapes, the lines crossing the airshaft in a piecework ceiling of laundry. The women with their red knuckles stood scrubbing it on boards and clipping it up. It had to dry before it froze.

—It is so dark, said the Gentleman when he started up our stairs. I saw the wrinkle of his toffee nose as the smells choked him in the nostrils, the cabbage cooking and the p*** in the vestibule, the sloppers emptied right off the stair. Mackerel heads and pigeon bones was all around rotting, and McGloon's pig rootled below amongst the peels and oyster shells. The fumes mingled with the odors of us hundredsome souls cramped in there like matches in a box, on four floors, six rooms a floor. Do the arithmetic and you will see we didn't have no space to cross ourselves. As for the smell we did not flinch, we was used to it.

—Pardon me, the Gentleman said very genteel when he banged into Missus Duggan on her way to the saloon to fill her buckets. —Pardon me.

—F*** off you, said she. —Inless youse the cops. She laughed so her dudeen pipe fell out of her mouth, and she had to feel for it on the floor and cursed us for devils. It was a danger to be there with a Gentleman like

Mr. Brace making his way through our building. Gangs of Roach Guardsmen and garroters just for the sport of it would be glad to rob him and push him down the stairs. But this Gentleman had more than bread alone for Mother, so I brung him there. I blame myself to this day.

Mrs. Gilligan's baby coughed and coughed. You could hear the bark of it as we passed the door next to ours. It was a runt with its eye stuck shut, a crust of yellow in the corners. Already once this year, the Gilligans had the white rag fluttering off their door for the undertaker, when their old baby died of bilious fever. —Is a child ill? the Gentleman asked, concerned as if sick kids was some new scandal out of the penny papers. We did not answer, for at last we had arrived at our own rooms.

—Shush, I said to the children, —because might be Mam is sleeping. They hushed while I pushed the door open. —Mind the bottles. The floor had many empties lying about. They were dead soldiers, our Uncle Kevin Duffy always said. It was dark as the inside of a dog. I couldn't find a lamp, but we could hear a man's snores.

—Who's there? asked our visitor.

—One of the Mr. Duffys, our Uncle Michael, I said. —Also our Aunt Nan is in.

—She has a baby coming, said Dutch, full of information.

—Mother says they's all sluiced drunks and stay clear of them, I explained. Duffys was no good even though Aunt Nan Duffy was a Muldoon, my dead father's sister. Without Nancy Mam said we'd be on the streets, but that Michael Duffy her husband was a sot and a rover. So for seven dollars the month, it was the eight of us in the two rooms together with the terlet in the hall for six apartments, and the pump downstairs for all the souls of number 128 Cherry Street. Daily we tripped over each other and Mam said when the baby Duffy came it would be worse. Perhaps it'd die like the Gilligans' died, though it was wrong to pray for it.

Now we guided the Gentleman past the sleeping Duffys to the back room where our mother lay on her shakedown bed. Some daylight was left coming in the windowpane, so the Gentleman could see how her cheekbones was hard plums under her skin, her brow beaded with fever.

—Mam, there's a Gentleman to see are you all right.

She stirred and opened her eyes, the gray color of smoke. —*Macushla,* she said. —It's you Axie, *mavourneen*.

Her words fell weakly around me like dust in sunlight. I loved her like I loved no one else.

—Missus . . . ? said the Gentleman.

—Muldoon, she whispered. —Mary Muldoon.

—I am Reverend Charles Brace of the Children's Aid Society. The whole mouthful came out in his Fifth Avenue voice. Chahles, he said. Suh-SIGH-ettee.

—'Tis a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mam said, her voice Irish but proper.

—He's brung you some bread, Mam, I said.

—Brought you, she whispered, correcting my savage grammar. We children had poor mouths, she was for ever telling us. And she would know, as she went to a proper classroom five years back home in Carrickfergus, while our education was only a smatter of lessons at P.S. 114.

Dutch had climbed on the bed and was laid out by our mother's feet, stroking the coverlet over her ankles. The baby was clamoring, —Mam Mam, in his pitiful way.

—Is there any water? Mr. Brace asked me.

I ran for the pail and brought it to him.

—Let me help you now, he said. He sat at her side and placed his white hands very tender beneath her shoulders to lift her. She cried out so next he raised her head only, and held the cup to her lips while she drank.

—What is your ailment? he asked, his voice gentle as the pigeon's coo.

She did not move nor say. I pulled back the cover to show him.

He gasped. There was her arm mangled and cooked, burned red with the flesh on it dried black and angry, hard white streaks under the peeled-off skin. She could not bend the elbow nor fist her fingers even a little. A blast of odor came up from under the blanket. Mr. Brace turned his face away and then made himself turn back.

—Madam, he said, his eyes emotional, —how did you come by this injury?

—I got my hand caught in the mangle with the aprons, sir. The roller press took the whole arm and burned it in the steam, so it did. Three days ago.

The accident happened where she worked at the laundry on Mott, when an apron string pulled her fingers between the hot cylinder and the rollers

and cooked the whole arm while the other girls took ten minutes to get it free.

—Lord have mercy, said Mr. Brace, —I will escort you to the hospital.

—No no no.

—By the grace of God we'll save your life.

—I can't accept no charity.

—The central figure in the world of charity is Christ, he said. —It's our Lord's grace and not my own. He gives value to the poorest and most despised among us.

—'Tis sure I am despised.

—No madam. Our Lord despises not one on this earth. In His love, you will find a friend, who can make your life an offering of service, and dry your children's tears.

—If he can dry them then sure he is my friend, my mother whispered.

Mr. Brace smiled. —Then shall the splendor of heaven come to this dark and dreary den and lead you to reform as well as charity, madam, for I must tell you, your children are exposed.

—Exposed?

—Certainly, he said. —Exposed to the temptations that beset the unfortunate: sharpness, deception, roguery, fraud, vice in many forms, and offenses against the law. Not to mention starvation and disease.

—No doubt, said she, —the devil himself has his eye on 'em.

—At the very least let me take your little ones away from such influences.

—If it kills me, said my saintly mother, —you won't steal them.

—Have no fear, said Brace. —I do not propose to steal them, but to save them. Wouldn't you like our Aid Society to find them good homes in the countryside out West?

—For faith they've their home here. It's not no castle, sure, but it's ours.

—The best of all asylums for the child of unhappy fortune is the farmer's home.

—I lived in a farmer's home all me life and it's just why we emigrated.

—Madam, it is your duty to get these children away to kind Christian families in the country, where they will be better off.

—Children belong with their mothers.

—Allow me at the very least to take you to the hospital. I shall pay the

expense. You have a gangrenous fever in that arm. If you don't relent, you may not last the week.

My poor injured mother was no match for the blunt elocution of the Reverend Mr. Charles Loring Brace. He plied her with stories of our doom and hers, if we did not all come along with him.

—Madam, these are the little children of Christ. Do not be among those who, by their ignorance, promote the development of a dangerous class of urchins, with depraved tendencies to crime and dissolution. It was the Lord's Work, he said, for him to take us three somewheres warm and safe, a place of hot cider and oxtail stew, new boots and green grass all around.

Soon he had her swanning and thanking him through her tears and anguish. —Oh mister, bless you for thinking of such poor souls as we are. We watched her bobbing her head and curtsying even in her agony, struggling to walk out the door, and down the stairs. —Such a fine gentleman, she said, combing her hair with the fingers of her good hand.

And he was, too, very fine, with his Christian hymns and mentions of Our Lord. I would not claim that he was not kind. He was. He meant well. I would not claim either that he did not save the lives of many orphans and poor scabs of youth such as us. He saved thousands and was famous for it. I would only say that Brace was a sorter. He thought he knew best. He plucked us up that day away from our mother, and set us down into our fate, sure as if we was kittens he'd lifted by the loose wet skin of the neck and put in a sack, and for that I do not forgive him, despite how I became a sorter of sorts, myself.

My Notorious Life



KATE MANNING

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