
Opening Extract from...

Heading Home

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Chapter One

1926

It was a bitterly cold January day, the pavements ringing with frost and Claudia's breath coming out as fog. As she emerged from Blodwen Street on to the Scotland Road she slowed, anxious not to slip and fall as she had done the previous day, and looked around for her pal Danny. After only the most cursory of glances she saw him hurrying towards her, a broad grin on his face and his black hair standing up in spikes. He shouted at her to run, but Claudia did not increase her pace, remembering yesterday's fall which had resulted in her crashing to the ground, dirtying her one and only school skirt and scuffing her neat button boots. It had taken her father most of the evening, working away with an old piece of rag and a tin of polish, to make the boots respectable once more and her grandmother, sponging and pressing the skirt, had told her to be more careful in future. 'Skirts don't grow on trees, queen,' Emily Dalton had said rather reproachfully. 'This 'un will have to last you a while yet.'

Now, however, Danny had reached her side, puffing and breathless. 'What's up wi' you?' he asked aggrievedly. 'Why didn't you hurry when I shouted?

We's early this mornin', so I thought we might go to Harper's, see if they've got any orange boxes to spare. It's so bleedin' cold it might easily snow, and if it does we wants to be ready, don't us! If I can lay me maulers on an orange box or two I could make us a decent sledge. What d'you think?'

'I'll come with you, but I don't think it's going to snow,' Claudia said, looking up at the clear sky. 'You need clouds for snow. Still, we are early; our Jenny's got a nasty cold and it's gone on her chest, so Mam got up to see to her and decided to make my butties, since she was already awake. What's in yours, eh? Mine's fish paste.'

'Margarine,' Danny said gloomily. He lived in three rooms in a tall and tottering house in Albemarle Court with a weary, hard-pressed mother and two younger sisters. His father, a seaman, had been killed when Danny was ten and now he had to cope as best he could. Danny Callaghan was thirteen, six years older than Claudia, and had befriended her when she had first started school and he had found her backed into a corner in one of the many small jiggers nearby, trying to defend herself against a crowd of kids who were accusing her of being stuck up, teacher's pet and a goody-goody.

Claudia remembered how Danny, used to fighting his way through life, had taken one look at the situation and decided that she needed rescuing. Accordingly, he had piled in with both fists and boots and from that day on no one, as he put it, who did not want to take his teeth home in a paper bag meddled with Claudia Muldoon.

Claudia was not only grateful; she very soon came to admire and respect Danny, who was almost totally self-reliant. He made his own butties each day, for his mother was not an early riser. Mrs Callaghan and her son struggled to make ends meet, but Claudia knew that Danny's mother 'entertained gentlemen' and that this helped the family finances, though what Mrs Callaghan did for the 'uncles' who visited whenever their ships were in port was a closed book to her, and to Danny, Claudia thought, though it was a subject that was never mentioned between them.

Claudia had tried asking her mother about Mrs Callaghan's mysterious visitors, but Louisa Muldoon had gone rather red and had said that it was none of her business. 'But Danny's a good boy; he looks after his mother and he takes care of you, so I never worry when you go off with him,' she had said. 'It's a struggle to rear a child on your own, as Mrs Callaghan does, which is why I always tell you to bring Danny here after school, rather than hanging around Albermarle Court.' She had given her daughter a hug. 'To Mrs Callaghan, you're just another mouth to feed,' she had concluded.

'Wake up, dreamy!' Danny's voice brought Claudia back to the present and she realised that they had reached the greengrocery. Mr Harper was building apple pyramids on the staging in front of his shop and looked up as Danny addressed him. 'Gorrany orange boxes goin' spare, mister? Us fancies makin' a sledge for when the snow comes, so if you could . . .'

Mr Harper balanced the last apple on the top of the pyramid and turned to shake his head sadly at the two

children. He was a small man with an enormous white moustache and a pair of thick black eyebrows that looked oddly incongruous against his bushy white hair. 'Me orange boxes looks like bein' full of oranges for a few weeks yet,' he told them. 'I do good business up to Christmas, then there's a call for fruit at the New Year, but right now folks is just buyin' what you might call essentials, mainly spuds an' cabbage, so I shan't have no orange boxes until the weather gets warmer and folks start fancyin' fruit again.'

'Oh well, thanks mister, but by the time the weather gets warmer us won't be wantin' sledges,' Danny said rather gloomily. 'I s'pose you've gorra delivery lad what works weekends an' school holidays? Only me pal here an' meself could do with earnin' a few pennies . . .'

Mr Harper laughed and his magnificent moustache tilted up to reveal large, tobacco-stained teeth. 'I'm fully staffed, but I don't blame you for askin', lad,' he said. 'I know what it means to need a penny or two. When I were a lad livin' in the country, January, February an' March was always called the hungry months. We came close to starvin' several times, an' I reckon it ain't that different in a town.' He stood back to admire his handiwork, then gave an exclamation and pounced on one of the apples lying on the staging. 'Bruised,' he said briefly. 'Want it?'

The children left with profuse thanks and shared the apple, bite and bite about, as they retraced their steps along the Scottie. When they reached school they parted, with a promise to walk home together when classes finished. Danny, spotting a neighbour's child, gave her

the apple core, pointing out that there were still two good mouthfuls left, if she was careful. The child, however, ate the core as well as the fruit that remained and thanked him wholeheartedly.

Claudia smiled to herself. She guessed that an apple was a rare treat for the little girl and was grateful that she and young Jenny got such things as a matter of course. Jenny was five, and worshipped her big sister, but would have looked askance had Claudia given her an apple core and expected her to be grateful.

Now, not to be outdone by her pal, Claudia plunged a hand into her coat pocket and produced a small object wrapped in greaseproof paper. It was a milk roll, baked by her grandmother the previous day and given to her granddaughter as a little extra. Claudia broke the roll in two and handed half to the child. 'Have it for your snappin' at break time . . .' she began, but the little girl, cheeks already extended by the milk roll, simply nodded her thanks, swallowed, and then rushed towards the school gates as the infants' bell sounded.

'That were nice of you,' Danny observed, following the child with his eyes as she careered across the playground and joined the line of her classmates. 'That kid gets more clacks than kisses. Hey up, that's my bell! Ta-ra. See you later!'

Claudia's own bell sounded seconds after, and she trotted across the playground and headed for Chloe, her best friend, who was beckoning her wildly, halfway up the queue. As Claudia slipped into place beside her, Chloe turned and grinned. 'I called for you, but your mam said you'd left early,' she said. 'I met the postie

as I was turnin' into Blodwen Street; he gave me your mam's letters, so I went to the front door an' she came out with a bit of toast in her hand. She's ever so nice, your mam. She axed me to bring the post right into your kitchen 'cos she said her fingers was all buttery, an' she give me a whoppin' slice of bread an' jam . . .'

'Where is it? You ought to give me a bite at least, if not half,' Claudia said with an inward giggle. Chloe was a plump and smiling child and would have eaten the bread and jam long before she had turned out of Blodwen Street.

Chloe grinned and rubbed her tummy. 'It's in here, but you didn't take the post in,' she reminded her. 'Your gran were in the kitchen; she telled me she's bakin' today, so you're to hurry home after school if you want one of her fruit buns.'

'Gran's the best cook in the world,' Claudia said fervently, as the line began to shuffle forward. 'I don't suppose you noticed, Chloe, but was one of the letters from Ireland? Me dad's worried, because since me Irish gran died me granddad keeps sayin' he could do wi' some help on his farm.'

Chloe shrugged. 'I didn't really look at 'em,' she admitted. 'But you'll find out when you go home after school.' By now they were in the cloakroom, and they headed for their pegs and hung up their coats. 'Wish I could come home with you, but Mam's got a grosh of messages for me, so she said to go straight back.'

'I expect Gran will have messages for me too, and I'm jolly sure Danny's mam will have some for him,' Claudia said as the two girls entered their classroom. 'I just hope

that if there is a letter from Ireland, it's good news and not bad. It makes our dad unhappy when he gets a sad letter.'

Louisa Muldoon sat at the table, gazing at the envelope propped up against the jam jar. Her mother, washing up the breakfast dishes, glanced over her shoulder and shook a reproving head. 'Wharrever is the matter, queen? You're lookin' at that letter as though it were a perishin' snake, poised to bite! Why the devil don't you open it and be done? Oh, I know it's addressed to Cormack, but there never were an easier-goin' feller than your husband, that I will say. He'd tell you to go ahead an' open it instead of sittin' there imaginin' the worst. And anyway, if you don't get off, you'll be late for work. Miss Timpson's a good boss, but . . .'

'Oh, Mam, I know you're right and he wouldn't mind, but I've never opened Cormack's letters and I don't mean to start now,' Louisa said distractedly, getting to her feet. 'I'll just nip upstairs and check that Jenny's all right. Do keep an eye on her, Mam. She's that full of cold ...'

'Course I will,' Emily Dalton said. 'It's a pleasure to take care of me youngest grandchildren. In fact, don't you bother goin' upstairs. I'll nip up as soon as you leave.' She watched as her daughter struggled into her coat and arranged her hat so that it did not disturb the bun she wore low on the nape of her neck. 'You look grand, queen. Off you go!'

'Thank God it's only a short walk to the shop,' Louisa said, glancing at the clock on the mantelshelf. 'If I run I won't be late.'

Her mother began to remind her that the pavements were slippery, but Louisa was already halfway out of the back door and had no time to promise she would be careful. Instead, she flew across the cobbled yard, jerked open the stout wooden door and ran along the jigger, holding her hat on with one hand.

She made it to the shop in time to open up for an impatient customer, who wanted to purchase a pair of lisle stockings, since she had slipped on the ice, and Timpson's Emporium was well known for selling the cheapest hosiery on the Scotland Road. 'I've been and gone and beggared meself,' the sufferer said mournfully, pulling up her skirt to display both the laddered material and her badly grazed knee.

Clucking sympathetically and telling her that she should not have hurried with the pavement so icy, Louisa allowed the other woman to go through her stock whilst she hung up her coat and hat and tidied her hair. Then she turned back to her customer. 'Have you found anything to suit, madam?' she asked politely. 'They cost two and eleven a pair.'

'Oh! Well, I suppose . . .' The woman looked hopefully at Louisa. 'I suppose I couldn't buy just the one? After all, t'other's perfect . . . well, mebbe there's a little ladder down by the ankle, but me boss won't notice that.'

Louisa smiled, but was forced to shake her head. 'No, I'm afraid stockings have to be sold in pairs. But if you're short of money until the end of the week, you could become a member of our clothing club. You pay a shilling a week and at the end of each month you can spend

three and six of it, or you can stay in credit and have a good lump sum by Christmas.'

The customer sighed deeply but shook her head, produced a worn leather purse from her shabby handbag and handed Louisa half a crown and a sixpence. 'Better not; next Christmas seems a long way off,' she said. She smiled widely as Louisa handed her her penny change, together with a neat paper bag containing the stockings. 'Thanks, miss. And if you happen to come across a one-legged woman, let me know, 'cos she an' me might get together.'

Louisa was still laughing as the woman left the shop, just as Miss Timpson came down the stairs, all ready for work in a navy dress with white collar and cuffs. She greeted her counter assistant with all her usual amiability and told her that they had new stock in the back, which Louisa might as well begin to sort and price before hanging it on one of the revolving stands. 'And I'll brew us a nice cup of tea while you do that,' she said. 'Why were you laughing when I came down the stairs? I could do with something to cheer me up 'cos it's perishin' cold in my flat and I hate the cold, so I do.'

Louisa related the story of her first customer and then went through to the stockroom and began to open the cardboard boxes. Another working day had begun.

Cormack came into the kitchen whistling a popular melody beneath his breath and found Claudia sitting at the table, frowning over her homework. 'How's Jenny?' he asked. His mother-in-law, busy at the stove, smiled a welcome and assured him that his youngest was much

better and would return to school next day. 'That's grand,' Cormack said, sniffing appreciatively. The room smelled delightfully of cooking, and as soon as she turned from the stove Emily cut a slice off a large fruit cake that was cooling on a wire tray.

'I've just brewed the tea, so sit yourself down and I'll pour you a mug,' she said briskly. 'Claudia got the messages for me as soon as she came back from school, so we're ahead of ourselves for once.'

'Thanks, Ma, but I'll have a bit of a wash first. I'll enjoy me slice o' cake all the more if it's not covered in muck,' Cormack said. He headed for the sink and saw, out of the corner of his eye, the letter propped against the jam pot. He sighed, recognising his father's handwriting, but started to wash his hands. Ever since his mother's death, some eighteen months previously, his father's letters had, it seemed, contained nothing but bad news: the family pig had escaped from its snug sty and been attacked by a passing dog, and though old Fergal Muldoon had rescued it before the worst could happen, the pig had not thrived. In addition, a fox had got into his chicken run and caused considerable mayhem amongst his fowls, and the boy he had employed immediately after his wife's death had stolen eggs from the henhouse and small sums of money from the teapot on the mantel, so he had been forced to dismiss him.

Drying his hands on the roller towel which hung on the back of the door, Cormack picked up the envelope. What would it be this time? Not bad news, he hoped devoutly. Despite his fears, however, the first page of

the letter was both cheerful and optimistic, causing Cormack to breathe a sigh of relief. He reflected that his father had always been cheerful; clearly he was beginning to come to terms with the loss of his beloved wife. With considerable pleasure, Cormack read that his father had purchased a sow which had been going cheap at a local market; the animal would give birth at the end of the month, his parent had written. Furthermore, he had been promised the loan of a neighbour's donkey and cart when summer came so that he might cut and carry peat from the bog, sufficient to last him for many months. He had also found a young lad from the village who was honest and hard working, and content to help Mr Muldoon with the heavy work of the croft for a few shillings a week and a couple of meals a day.

Halfway down the second page, however, the letter became more difficult to read. His father usually wrote a clear, old-fashioned script, but as the letter progressed the writing deteriorated until it became a scrawl so bad that his son could scarcely make out a word of it.

Beginning to frown, Cormack turned to the last page and was relieved, at first glance, to find the writing firm and clear once more. Then, with a lurch of dismay, he realised that it was not his father's writing at all, but that of . . . he frowned down at the signature . . . Mrs O'Hara, who he remembered lived on a croft a couple of miles back down the road in the direction of the village.

With his heart in his mouth, Cormack began to read.