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Darkest Before Dawn

Katie Flynn

Chapter One

Autumn 1938

It was a fine day. The pale September sunshine made the streets of Liverpool look almost beautiful, but Seraphina Todd, leaning over the Houghton bridge and gazing into the canal, thought wistfully that not even the sunshine, or the gentle warmth of the day, could reconcile her or her younger sisters to living in this great sprawling city.

They had been here now for three months, inhabiting a dreary flat above the grocery store in which her mother worked. At first, the flat had seemed large to them, used as they were to the narrow confines of a canal barge, but when the family had lived aboard the Mary Jane they had spent most of their time out of doors; someone had had to lead old Gemma, a mighty Percheron mare, when it came to crossing bridges or negotiating a path pitted with water-filled puddles, or made treacherous by builders' rubble, illegally dumped on the towpath.

Glancing sideways, Seraphina saw that her sisters were gazing as wistfully down at the canal as she was herself. Evie, the baby of the family at ten years old, looked as though she might burst into tears at any moment. Seraphina felt pity well up within her. Evie was a tough and feisty child, not given to tears; she was not given to regrets for that matter. Seraphina knew her youngest sister hated living in the city and longed for the freedom she had once enjoyed, but she also knew that Evie was unlikely to confess to

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RANDOM HOUSE

such feelings. Usually, she tightened her mouth and made the best of things; it was only rarely that her feelings were allowed to appear.

Seraphina was about to put a comforting arm round her when Evie, sensing that she was being watched, stuck a grimy forefinger up her nose and began to forage about purposefully. Seraphina hated nosepicking and leaned forward to slap Evie's hand down instead, but she was not quick enough. Evie dodged and ran behind Angela, pulling a face at her eldest sister once she was safely out of reach and remarking as she did so: 'Nyah, nyah! Got you goin' then, didn't I, Fee?'

Seraphina smiled reluctantly. 'You're a dirty little beast,' she said reprovingly. 'Why can't you use the handkerchief our ma gave you, like a Christian? If Dad knew the way you behaved . . .'

'Well he don't; and he won't 'cos you're no tale-clat, Fee,' Evie said. She gave a little skip and tugged at Angela's skirt. 'Oh, don't I wish we were aboard the old Mary Jane, heading for the Pennines!'

Angela turned her large, dreamy blue eyes on her little sister. 'The truth is, queen, that we all miss the canal horribly, even Ma and Pa,' she said gently. 'But Pa was right, you know; living and working on the canal, we were never in one place long enough for us girls to get work. Fee here is eighteen and I'll be fifteen in a few weeks. And it weren't just work, either. Pa said we never met anyone for long enough to get to know 'em, an' though he liked canal folk well enough, same as we all did, he says the future for bargees ain't what it was, now the railways an' big lorries shift goods so much quicker than we could. Because we're so much slower, the pay's a deal poorer, and though she never complained Ma was findin' it more 'n' more difficult to feed and clothe all of us. But now, with the Mary Jane and both the butty boats let out to Jimmy and Hetty Figgins and with Ma and Pa both earning a proper wage, we're laughin'.'

Seraphina gazed at her sister with some awe; Angela was quiet and gentle and this was quite a long speech for her. Even so, her explanation did not seem to satisfy Evie, who made a derisive noise and scrambled up to sit astride the parapet of the bridge, gripping the grimy stones with her knees, as though she were riding a horse. 'Laughin'? I bleedin' well ain't laughin',' she said, pushing a lock of her straight brown hair out of her eyes. 'Why, Fee, you was real fond of that Toby, the one who worked in the bakery and

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taught you how to snare rabbits when you were a kid. And anyway, we ate well enough, didn't we? An' who cares about clothes?'

'Toby was a friend to the whole family, but, even so, we didn't see much of him once he was in work,' Seraphina said, looking long and hard at the youngest Todd. She had personally supervised Evie's washing and dressing that morning and had thought her neat as a pin when she had left the flat.Yet somehow Evie had managed to get extremely dirty - the palms of her hands were black - and there was a three-cornered tear in her faded blue cotton dress. Seraphina sighed. 'It's pretty plain that you don't care about clothes, even if Angie and myself do,' she said resignedly. 'What a dirty little toad you are, Evie Todd! And if our pa was to hear you swearing and talking so badly . . .'

'If he was to hear me swearing he might change his mind about a proper school being the right place for me, 'cos I learn all me swearing off of the kids there,' Evie said triumphantly. She giggled. 'I heared one of me teachers say t'other day that there were members of her class who cussed worse'n bargees, and it's true, Fee. Some of the kids, particularly the boys, can't say a whole sentence without a bad word in it.'

Seraphina smiled; she couldn't help it. Evie always had an answer for everything, that was the trouble, and Seraphina knew the uselessness of lecturing. As soon as you started to reprimand Evie she would be off, skimming down the street in her dirty old plimsolls and probably taking them off and tying them round her neck with the laces as soon as she was out of sight. So Seraphina just said: 'Never mind what other people do, Evie.You're the daughter of a lay preacher so you ought to be above reproach. Let the others swear if they want to, but think how it would upset Ma and Pa if they heard you cussing. I know we all miss the barge, and the canal folk, but Pa has always wanted a steadier job and to give Ma the sort of life she deserves. So don't you go spoiling it.'

Evie sighed and actually looked almost contrite. 'Well, I won't spoil it then,' she said. 'But oh, Fee, however are we going to stand living all cooped up for the rest of our lives? It's not so bad for you because you'll probably get married soon, but I'm only ten so I've got years and years before I can escape.'

Seraphina sighed. Because of their changed circumstances, she was to enrol on a teacher training course, and though she liked the idea of such a career

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she did not relish spending all that time still dependent on her parents, with no earnings of her own. Angela had already had two job interviews and thought herself fortunate to have gained a position as a sales assistant in Bunney's department store.The wage was small and the hours long but at least Angie would have money of her own. However, Seraphina had always been the brainy member of the family, soaking up her mother's teaching and going eagerly to any local school when the opportunity arose. She had taken - and passed with flying colours - her School Certificate the previous year and knew in her heart that her parents were right; once she was in teaching, she could command a decent wage and probably get work anywhere in the country, whereas poor Angie would have to struggle, perhaps for years, and have to live in the city for the rest of her life, unless she married a countryman, of course.

Seraphina was about to remind her small sister that she herself would be tied to the city while she worked her way through college, when the chimes of a nearby clock gave her pause. It was eleven o'clock and Ma had sent them out to buy greengroceries, something the shop in which she worked did not stock.What was more, she had bidden them visit the market stalls on Great Homer Street, where fruit and vegetables were a good deal cheaper than in the shops, and here they were, on Burlington Street, wasting time gazing at the canal and wishing themselves far away.

Seraphina had been leaning on the bridge but now she straightened and bent to pick up the new marketing bag which her mother had recently purchased, saying that the old stained sack they had used aboard the Mary Jane was not suitable for city life. 'When we mainly bought from the farms we passed a sack was better than a marketing bag because the vegetables came complete with dried-on dirt,' her mother had said.

Evie slid off the parapet as soon as Seraphina stood up, but Angie continued to lean on the wall and gaze dreamily down at the greasy water below, so Seraphina gave her a nudge, quite a hard one. 'Come on, goose; didn't you hear the clock strike eleven?' she asked. 'Ma will be waiting for her messages so that she can start a stew simmering. Can you remember where she said we were to buy the meat? From which butcher, I mean.'

Angela straightened up reluctantly, pushing both fists into the small of her back. 'I don't know as Ma said any particular name,' she remarked. 'Since it's only for a scouse, though, I dare say it'll be the cheaper the better. I'm powerful fond of an ox tail, myself, but if we can't get one of them, I'd go for best end o' neck - that's mutton - or a nice piece of stewing steak - that's

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beef. Pig's cheek is all right and don't cost much, but it's not really a stewing meat, if you know what I mean.'

Seraphina nodded her understanding. Of the three of them, Angela was the only one who was truly domesticated. She loved cooking and cleaning, and other housewifely tasks, and had kept the tiny cabins of both butty boats neat and sweet-smelling. It was she who had learned from their mother how to skin and joint a rabbit, how to pickle onions and red cabbage and how to make jam from hedgerow fruit. Angela was the one who made all her own clothes and was subsequently better dressed than any of them. She could turn a collar, sides to middle a sheet, and create a decent little frock, or a man's working shirt, from odds and ends of material purchased for a ha'penny from a rag trader, so now Seraphina decided to let her sister do the actual buying when they reached Great Homer Street. Angela might be sweet and easy-going - well, she was - but she would not allow herself to be cheated, and tradesmen soon realised that the gentle girl, with her soft voice and friendly blue eyes, was quite capable of going elsewhere if she thought their prices too high.

Great Homer market, when they reached it, was crowded with traders and customers, and the noise of bargaining, arguing and a good deal of laughter was enough to make Seraphina want to put her hands over her ears. However, the three sisters plunged into the mêlée cheerfully enough, and were soon beginning to make their purchases.They found a butchery stall and bought the coveted ox tail, then moved on to a farmer's wife who was selling her own vegetables quite a bit more cheaply than vendors at other stalls. Consequently, there was a long queue of would-be customers, and Seraphina had been waiting patiently for ten minutes when she discovered that Evie was missing. She nudged Angela. 'Where's Evie?' she asked, peering anxiously into the crowd. 'She was with us at the butcher's stall, and at the apple lady's, because I saw her nick a couple of those bright red apples when she thought no one was looking. That child is turning into a right little gypsy, if you ask me.'

The queue shuffled forward and Angela turned a placid blue gaze on her sister. 'Oh, she'll 'ave met a pal from school, or just got bored and wandered off,' she said. 'But you shouldn't call her names; there's folk who call us - bargees, I mean - water gypsies. Besides, every kid on the canal, and most of the grown-ups as well, would dig up a few turnips or some potatoes from a farmer's field, and think no harm.Why, even our ma picked up windfalls and helped herself to the odd swede or mangold to make Gemma's supper more filling. So why should our Evie think taking a couple of apples is stealing?'

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'Angela Todd, I'm surprised at you.What would our pa say if he heard you talking like that?' Seraphina said virtuously. 'Stealing is stealing, which means taking something which isn't yours. Oh, I know what you mean about spuds and turnips and that, because everyone did it - everyone except our pa, that is - but somehow taking stuff off a stall is different. Perhaps it's because someone had picked the apples off their own tree and polished them up with a cloth to make them look all shiny and bright, and carted them in from the country and set them out in a lovely pyramid on the stall . . .'

'All right, all right, I know what you mean,' Angela said hastily. 'And I know you're right, really.The trouble is, if we were still on the canal and our Evie fancied a bite, she'd just nip ashore and pick a mug full of blackberries, or look for wild plums. It's different here, I know, but she is only ten . . . did you pay for the apples, by the way?'

'Yes I did, because the woman saw her take them,' Seraphina admitted. 'And she charged me a penny, which I'm sure was far too much. But since Evie had skipped off - and eaten a good half of the first apple - I didn't have much alternative.'

The queue shuffled forward once more and Angela gave a crow of triumph. 'So she didn't steal them, because you paid for them! Well, that's all right then. Can you see those big carrots, just behind the pile of turnips? I reckon if we buy two bunches of them and two pounds of turnips, and a string of those big brown onions, it will make a grand stew. Oh, and what about potatoes? They're so heavy to carry, but they're really cheap, so if we could manage a stone between us . . .'

Seraphina agreed reluctantly to buy all the things her sister suggested, though her arms ached in anticipation of the weight they would be asked to carry back to the flat. Presently, hefting the marketing bag between them, the two girls turned for home. Seraphina kept a look-out for her small sister, though she had very little hope of spotting her amidst the crowds.What was more, she had a shrewd suspicion that Evie would not appear until they were extremely close to home, for she hated carrying and usually managed to evade a marketing trip. If, as Angela suspected, her sister had met a pal from school, then they would be lucky to set eyes on her again before the next meal; Evie would certainly turn up for that since, despite her small and skinny stature, she was always hungry, eating enough to satisfy your average ploughboy, her father often remarked.

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So Seraphina was not surprised when her sister had failed to put in an appearance by the time the two girls dragged their purchases up the narrow stairs from the yard at the back of the grocer's shop and dumped them in the small kitchen, with sighs of relief. 'Ma is going to be pleased with us,' Angela observed, unwrapping the ox tail and putting it into a saucepan. She gestured to the worn black leather purse which Seraphina had placed in the middle of the kitchen table. 'We've brought back quite a lot of change, much more than we would have if we'd simply shopped locally.'

'Ye-es, but we've come back without her ewe lamb,' Seraphina pointed out, tipping vegetables into the sink. 'We know she's perfectly safe, but Ma will worry, or she would if we told her Evie had skipped off. As it is, by the time Ma comes up for dinner, Evie will probably be back. I don't think she has ever missed a meal except by accident. Are you going to give me a hand with the carrots, queen? They'll need scraping and I've got all the spuds to scrub and the turnips to peel.'

There was no sign of their father, so when the girls had finished preparing the family's evening meal they decided to go out again, to discover what was showing at the Forum. It was just possible that their mother would wish to lavish some money on them that afternoon because they had shopped so successfully, and a visit to the cinema was always a treat.

* * *

Martha Todd was serving a customer, carefully selecting the goods required from the shelves and placing them in a large cardboard box, when Mrs Wilmslow called. Martha hesitated, glancing around her. Usually, Mr Wilmslow would have gone through to see what his sick wife wanted, but today he had gone round to the warehouse to pick up some provisions and might not be back for an hour or more. Saturday was always a busy day and the grocery was well situated and popular with local housewives, so Mr Wilmslow employed two Saturday girls. They were sisters, Molly and Annie, but they had gone off to Rhyl for the day and Mr Wilmslow had taken it for granted that Seraphina and Angela would stand in for his missing employees. However, he had failed to warn Martha so she had sent the girls shopping, which placed her in a dilemma. Mrs Wilmslow was unable to do much for herself, and Martha would have liked to go straight through to the back to see what the older woman wanted, but with no one to watch the till, a large order only half made up and the shop full of would-be customers, she simply could not leave her post.

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Upstairs, Harry would be pottering round, doing nothing in particular. He had been suffering from a shocking cold earlier in the week and Mr Bister had sent him home on Thursday with orders not to return to work until Monday, and Martha knew he would be down in an instant if he knew how things stood. However, she dared not leave the shop to run up the outside stairs and ask for his help.The woman she was serving, Nellie Proudfoot, was not easy to deal with but she was one of Mr Wilmslow's best customers, spending most if not all of her housekeeping in the shop. If Martha offended her, her employer would not be pleased, and though she had only worked for him for twelve weeks or so she already knew how important his business was to him. What was more, he had let them rent the flat for a very moderate sum provided she worked for him for an even more moderate one, so Martha had no desire to get into Mr Wilmslow's bad books.

Mrs Wilmslow called again and the next customer in the queue leaned across the counter. She was a fat, untidy woman with a bush of grey hair, a round and shining red face and a jutting, whiskery chin. Martha could not recall her name but knew she was another regular customer. 'Eh up, missus, where's old Wilmslow gone then?' she said, drawing down the sides of her mouth. 'Want me to give you an 'and whiles you nip back to see what she wants? I done it before, when the old skinflint found hisself wi'out an assistant . . . afore your time, that were.'

'Oh, Mrs - Mrs . . .' the name came to her in a burst of happy inspiration, 'oh, Mrs Bunwell, thank you ever so much.' She eyed the woman's bulk rather apprehensively. 'Only - only I really could do with some help and Mr Todd would be down in a trice if he knew the fix I'm in. I wonder . . . could you possibly . . .'

'Mrs B. won't never gerrup them steep old steps of yourn,' another customer remarked. 'I'll nip up for you, missus; 'twon't take but a minute.'

'And I'll serve Miz Proudfoot here whiles you go an' see to that poor dear woman,' Mrs Bunwell said, surging round the counter. She beamed at Martha, adding comfortably: 'Don't you fret yourself, queen. Ol' Wilmslow would be the first to say I'm reliable; ain't that so, gels?'

There was a murmur of agreement from the assembled customers and the young girl in the stained apron and raggedy dress, who had offered to go and fetch Harry Todd, turned to grin as she went out through the open doorway. 'It's true as I'm standing here; ol' Wilmslow used to nag poor Mrs B.

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something dreadful because she were a bit slow like, but he trusted her or she'd never 'ave got be'ind that counter. Shan't be a tick.'

She disappeared and Martha watched for a second as Mrs Bunwell began to take the various goods on Mrs Proudfoot's list off the shelves and place them tenderly in the cardboard box. Then she went through the curtain which separated the shop from the back premises. Once, she knew, the Wilmslows had lived in the flat upstairs and the back rooms had been used for storage. But when Mrs Wilmslow became bedridden, her husband had converted the back premises into quite a respectable dwelling with a kitchen, a stockroom and a sizeable bed-sitting room. Mrs Wilmslow spent her days in the bed-sitting room, in a large double bed, and now, as Martha popped through the curtain, the older woman sighed with relief. 'Thank the Lord you heared me at last,' she whispered. 'I needs the WC.'

Martha knew that Mrs Wilmslow meant she wanted the chamber pot which was kept in the bedside cabinet, for the invalid could no longer manage the journey to the privy in the back yard. Nodding her comprehension, she produced the large, flower-decorated utensil and helped Mrs Wilmslow to move across the bed; she always got out on the far side so that, should anyone come through the curtain at an unfortunate moment, customers would not see her performance.

'I heard someone clacking up them stairs just now,' she said as Martha helped her to climb back between the sheets. 'Mr Wilmslow telled me the Sat'day girls were off for the day, idle little sluts, so I suppose it were one of your gels givin' a hand like?'

Martha blinked at the unexpected spite in the older woman's voice. Molly and Annie were good girls, hardworking and honest, never complaining when Mr Wilmslow kept them late, or expected them to cart heavy sacks from the back premises into the shop itself. Now that he lived downstairs, if his wife was having a restless night he slept on a camp bed in the stockroom, no doubt soothed by the scents of cocoa, coffee beans and dried fruit which surrounded him.

However, there had been a query in Mrs Wilmslow's tone, so Martha decided to ignore her unchristian remark and tell her what she wanted to know. 'Actually, Mr Wilmslow didn't tell me that Molly and Annie weren't coming in today, so I sent my daughters off to do some shopping for me,' she informed the other woman. 'But when I heard you call, one of the customers said

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she'd run up and tell my husband that I needed him downstairs. He's not busy, and-'

Mrs Wilmslow interrupted. 'I hope you've not left the shop unattended,' she said querulously. 'I know I'm a scouser meself, but Mr Wilmslow comes from Chester and he says all scousers is thieves and vagabonds. If one of them women gets her fingers into our till . . . well, that'll be you out on your ear, Martha Todd.'

'I left Mrs Bunwell in charge,' Martha said quietly. 'It was either that or leave you to your own devices, Mrs Wilmslow. I didn't have much choice really, wouldn't you say?'

As she spoke, she was settling Mrs Wilmslow back amongst her pillows, wrestling with a strong desire to tell her employer's wife where she got off. But when she looked at the older woman's thin, pain-racked face, she merely gave her a cheerful smile. It was probably the pain speaking, she told herself, rearranging Mrs Wilmslow's faded pink bedjacket and preparing to carry the chamber pot through to the back yard. 'I'll put the kettle on while Mr Todd is keeping an eye on things; then you can have a nice cup of tea.'

Mrs Wilmslow sniffed. 'I wouldn't mind a cup of tea,' she admitted grudgingly. 'And when them gels of yourn come back, you tell 'em they ain't to go off in future wi'out they asks permission first. Mr Wilmslow telled me what rent you pay, so I reckon we've every right . . .'

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