

EXCERPT FROM  
THE ANGEL OF BISHOPSGATE



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## CHAPTER EXCERPT



LONDON 1848

Tessie had waited all day for a tin of treacle. As merchants pulled in their display trolleys for the evening and workers hurried home for tea, she huddled outside Page and Son's grocers, stomping her feet against the slush on her boots. Bracing against the icy wind, winter's light faded over the Thames, but still she waited.

At home a stick of butter and a cup of milk lay out on the table, the scent of ground ginger hung in the air and the stove grew cold and unattended. Her plans that morning had been thwarted only when she scraped the bottom of the treacle tin. Four days earlier she'd run out of butter, and not a week ago she'd scrounged together a handful of pennies for yet another pint of milk. Having stocked up on one thing, she'd run low on the others. It was the way of it, always striving and never getting ahead.

It was late into November when merchants carefully eyed their unpaid accounts and guarded their generosity. But Tessie wasn't one to wallow. It had been a long day keeping strategically close to Mr Page's window so he did not miss a moment of her lonely frame standing in the cold.

He was a softer old man with watery brown eyes and he had done well to turn her away. She was almost proud of him for doing so, but she was sure his heart would get the better of him. As the bells of St. Mary Le Bow chimed six o'clock, he wrapped his grandpa knuckles on the window and called her inside.

"Alright, love, patience is a virtue," he said, pushing his glasses up his nose.

"Thank yer, sir, though I suspect I'm guilty of necessity and being stubborn, more than patience," she said, an Irish accent lilting through a small but distinctive gap in her front teeth as she dusted rain from her shawl.

Mr Page chuckled as he settled again behind the counter. "Nonetheless, I've had a few customers pay their accounts so I can afford you a couple of things on tick. What do you need, love?"

"Treacle and flour, Mr Page, thank yer." Tessie stood on her tippy toes to scan the shelves.

"Still baking those ginger cakes I see."

"They're sensible cakes, Mr Page. If yer can't have an iced bun or apple tart, yer want a piece of ginger cake and a cup of tea. That's what I say. I'll bring yer one by tomorrow, shall I?" Mr Page plonked a tin of treacle on the counter and Tessie counted out five pennies. "I can put this towards our account."

"You still owe a shilling," he said at the meagre offering. "Have you eaten today?"

"Some oatcakes this morning, sir."

Mr Page took a deep breath as he heaved the sack of flour onto the counter too. "Keep it then, and take some bread from the basket over there."

"Thank yer, sir." Tessie obliged and wrapped some staling slices in paper.

"But you must be paid out by the thirtieth," he reiterated

without malice. "And don't be telling your friends or more importantly my son I'm too generous now."

"We'll be paid up. Finn will be in this week. Bless yer too though." Sweeping her auburn curls off her face, she signed the register, and balancing the flour and treacle on her hip, she bid her farewell and moved back into the icy evening streets.

Outside, the city silhouetted against the pale carpet of evening cloud and the rattle of carriages. The smell of fish and manure swelled in the air as vendors emptied wash buckets into the street. Her features flushed with effort and she weaved into the dark warren of alleys and tenements of the Old Nichol slums.

Finn would be home and she was keen to see him and rest a little before starting her evening chores and baking preparation. What a waste of a day, she thought, her body weary and ready to huddle at home by their humble fire.

As she struggled to hold her shawl around her with the flour on her hip, and her mind whirred ahead to what she had to do at home, she ploughed into a figure who suddenly blocked her path. The sack of flour dropped heavily and the treacle tin cracked against the stones as another man shoved her backwards. Her cheek struck the alley wall with a thudding graze and she let out a cry as she stumbled.

"What the hell..." Her heart sank as the treacle tin oozed its dark molasses across the cobbles. *Not the bloody treacle!* "You owe me half a shilling. The both of yer!" she said, holding her cheek and looking up at the men. She recognised one of them, his ginger beard highlighted in the shadow. "God curse yer Billy Brittle. What are yer playing at?"

His expression showed it was not an accidental collision and leaning down close to her ear he said, "The Angel is looking for you." Tessie swatted him away.

He chuckled lightly. "He's looking for you," he repeated in

a sing-song tone. "The Angel has a job for you, Tessie O'Shea." They backed out of the alley as she scrambled to her knees trying to save as much treacle as she could from the stones.

"I'll be telling yer ma!" she called after them, her cold hands fumbling to close the lid and covered in a sticky mess.

The Angel of Bishopsgate was a name that shot fear down the spine of all who heard it. She'd never seen the man himself and knew of no one who had. She didn't even know if he were real, though it hardly mattered. Throughout the Old Nichol and all the East End, stories of the Angel accompanied every body fished from the Thames, every death and scandal or tale of woe. Named for the length of his reach and influence, the Angel was said to see all. His men were everywhere, watching. She saw them daily, wearing his black leather cuff on their wrists, displaying it with pride and brandishing its power. It gave them sanction for all manner of evils.

She and Finn had always kept their heads down, drawing no attention to themselves and crossing no one. Though not everyone was so fortunate. She'd seen those branded with the Angel's mark — a small letter A in a circle, seared on their wrist or their neck or shoulder, branded like livestock with a scorching hot branding iron. A stain they'd never rid themselves of without peeling their own skin from their bodies. They were owned men or women from that moment on. Passed a point of no returned. A mark reserved for those so far gone they'd never get out. They owed too much money, allowed themselves to sink too low and had surrendered any power of their own. Every dollar they earned, every move they made, they made on the Angel's behalf. She'd seen them, and they couldn't be helped.

Struggling across the Old Nichol's courtyard and up the

stairs to her apartment, Tessie slammed the door behind her, breathless and brooding.

"There yer are!" A warm Irish voice called from the shadows. Finn propped himself up on the bed, the scar above his left eye giving him a menacing scowl as his dark hair hung low at his brow. He was fierce looking, with a shine to his eyes and affection in his voice.

"What's happened to yer?" He moved toward her but she shoed him away, dumping her flour on the table and moving to the pail of water to wash herself.

"Billy Brittle and his mate have only gone and knocked me over in the alley. I've lost half the treacle and I'm covered in the stuff." She took a damp cloth to wipe her skirts.

"He did what now?"

"Trying to make a name for himself in the Nichol I suppose. God only knows."

"Not by knocking over women he's not." Finn grabbed his boots but Tessie pressed her hands on his shoulders to stop him.

"He said something to me." She turned serious, widening her eyes at the prospect of speaking the warning out loud. "He said the Angel was looking for me."

"The Angel of Bishopsgate? What do yer mean?" Finn rubbed the scar above his eye.

"Yeah." She put her hands on her hips. "Why would he be saying that then?" She kept her voice light though a sinking feeling tugged at her insides. Finn moved to the window, searching the courtyard below for any sign of Billy.

"To upset yer and be the big man about town, that's why. Someone needs to knock it on the head right quick."

Tessie nodded, trying shake the feeling of dread, though a sour aftertaste lingered.

"Well," she sighed, still wiping sticky scuffs across her skirts. "I ain't got time to worry about it."

Finn took the washrag from her and wiped her brow before wrapping his arms around her from behind and nestling his face into her neck. She closed her eyes briefly, appreciating the warm pause, before moving her attention to the rickety wood stove in front of her.

They lived in a single room with a bed and a small kitchen table. The shelves were lined with old treacle tins Tessie now used for storage of other bits and pieces, and two cake trays she used for the ginger cakes every evening. She'd mix the batter before bed and then, rising early, slide them over the stove so they were warm and fresh for the morning.

It was a humble life, laced with dreams and imaginings of one day having something more. The New World was out there, a buzz on the periphery, promising a life beyond their everyday means. America. They spoke of it like a bedtime story, cocooned in the half-light before sleep. Even if they didn't half believe it was possible, on nights they were weary, beaten down and tired, it wove hope into their bones and gave light to the gloom of the Old Nichol slums.

"Are we out of coal?" she asked, and Finn lifted his head to check.

"Aye, I just used the last of it."

Tessie let out a groan. "I tell yer, this day is going from shite to shitter. After all that I won't even have enough to cook in the morning." Finn let go of her and picked up his boots again.

"I'll head over to the Simms for me Saturday wages and get some coal on the way home."

"From where? Everything is closing."

"The Murphy's will swap me. I'll find somewhere."

"Well just wait a while will yer? Sit with me while I get warm. I've been stood frozen to death the whole day out."

Finn stoked the fire, pushing around what was left of the coal. "Flashing those blue eyes at poor old Mr Page I gather."

"He's been good to us," she sighed. "He let me take some bread. Have yer eaten?" She nodded to the small paper parcel on the table.

"Aye. I got something on tick at the Byrds. Those jellied eels will be the death of me." He held his stomach and feigned sickness.

"Yer were home early?"

"Aye. No dock work today. Potter paid me a threepence to muck out the stables."

She watched his shoulders round as he reached across the table for the bread and it sent a burst of warmth through her chest. How she cherished those shoulders and the man attached to them.

They had not spent a day apart since crossing paths all those years ago. Fresh off the boat from Dublin, and flinging herself into whatever life held, they collided on the streets of Liverpool. They were barely fifteen then and had battled the last eight years together with good times, and worse times.

They had found each other in a similar state, adrift and abandoned, running and roaming because it was the only thing to do. Finn spoke of a brother, and parents long since gone, while she had fled a mother she could barely bring herself to speak of.

At her wrist, she wore the twisted band Finn had made her last Christmas, spun of woven leather scraps, laced together with odd beads and metal bands. Different colours platted over each other in deep rusts and blacks, rough and smooth in a writhing loop. Finn wore another, a simpler version of her own.

Finn handed her the bread and she took a rough bite as if to chew it down without tasting it. "This is rock hard. If only we had an onion for broth," she said listlessly.

"Or a big slab of cheese from the Fosters. We'll go back

there again when we have the dosh. And their sausage. Now yer got me thinking my belly is gonna grumble."

She scoffed down another bite, so dry she could barely swallow it. "Yer will be out there with them kids pressing your face to the windows like a right tosser." She held her hands up to mock him as if pressing herself against the glass.

"Alright woman." He jumped up from his chair. "Now I gotta go if I'm to be tortured."

He threw on his coat and tossed a kiss roughly on her forehead.

"Watch the alleys."

"It's Billy who best be watching. I'm looking for him now."

While Finn was gone, Tessie finished her bread, brooding over the encounter in the alley and the half tin of treacle she had lost. Setting down her wooden mixing bowl, she measured the flour and ginger, and in a small saucepan melted the butter and a measure of treacle over the stove. The spicy sweet aroma radiated through their room, like an added layer of warmth and comfort. It was a delicious torture they'd grown to endure - that while their bellies ached for something more than stale bread or oatcakes, every slice of ginger cake they took for themselves, was a few pennies less in tomorrow's takings.

As she whisked the batter, the door opened. Expecting to see Finn, instead there stood a man with dark eyes and a ragged maroon coat that hung to his boots, almost scraping the floor.

Tessie froze, cradling the mixing bowl in one arm and the wooden spoon in the other. Stepping into the room without invitation, he sat down at the table. Her breath caught in her throat as danger raged through her body. His eyes moved about the room, drinking it all in. He was savouring the moment. She thought to run past him but her legs stuck to the spot.

"You can call me Moses," he said, settling into his chair.

"What the hell do yer want?"

"Listen carefully." He spoke in a whistled tone that sent needles down her spine. "I'll only say it once." Reaching into his oversized coat, he pulled out a knife and rested it on the table, then leaned over as if calling her in close. She didn't move.

"What is it yer want? Who are yer?"

But Moses wouldn't be rushed. Leaning back again, he rubbed his stubbled chin. "The Angel has a job for you." He pulled a folded envelope from his back pocket and placed it on the table beside the knife. "You'll deliver this to a man tomorrow at midnight. You will bring back a pendant. A necklace, like."

"I'll do no such thing."

"I won't repeat it," he said, a half-smile lingering.

"I don't understand what is going on. Why are yer here? Why have yer come to me?"

The man slowly rose from his seat, and grabbing her jaw, jabbed his thumb into her mouth and the small gap in her teeth. Tessie struggled, but he gripped her close. She could smell his breath as he whispered instructions in her ear, then pushing her back, he pulled something else from his pocket, and like an afterthought, tossed it into her cake batter.

"Why? Why is this happening?"

"Let's just say..." He paused as if relishing the words. "Your mother owes a debt." With that, he clicked his tongue loudly, and walked from the room, his long maroon coat whipping against the door.

His footsteps grew faint as he descended the stairs and Tessie dared to look down at her mixing bowl. It was a human ear, grotesque and bloody, sliced with jagged edges.

Dropping the bowl to her lap, she stumbled back on the nearest chair. Her head reeled and her heart raced. It was all

too surreal. What did he mean her mother owed a debt? Tessie hung her head in her hands and slumped over the mixing bowl. She hadn't seen her mother since Dublin. No. It could not be true.



WHEN FINN RETURNED, Tessie sat ghostly pale on the edge of the bed. Without a word, she lifted the bowl for him to see.

"They were here?" he asked, anger rumbling in his voice.

"He stood right there in front of me." She pointed to the spot.

"Well whose ear is it?"

Tessie couldn't help but laugh as he stared down at it the bowl and jiggled it.

"I don't bloody know." She threw a rag at him, the sick feeling settling in again like a shroud. "Is this real?" she asked. "I don't understand what's happening."

The envelope rested untouched on the table and Finn scooped it up. It was crisp and clean, sealed with a fancy letter "A" pressed into black wax. That was his mark. That was it.

"It looks real, don't it?" she said, ominously. "That's his mark."

"I don't know."

"It is. Black wax and a letter A. Yer know it is."

"It could be a forgery," Finn insisted. "It could be anything."

"Who is going to forge the Angel's hand? Who would dare?"

"I don't know, Tess. I don't know."

"I want to rip that bloody thing up!" Tessie stepped forward and snatched it, staring down at it before tossing it back on the table. "It's ridiculous..." Her voice faded and her

body prickling all over. What could she do? Refuse? Test their resolve? No. She took a deep breath, letting it shudder and ricochet through her belly. It was a simple errand. That was it. A delivery. She could do that, surely, and it would all be over.

"I can't afford to waste more batter," Tessie said, looking down at the ear in the bowl.

"Just scoop it out. No one will know."

Tessie shook her head and set the bowl on the table with a thud. The Angel had already cost her half a tin of treacle and now a bowl of batter.

She lifted her head. "He said my mother owed a debt."

"What does that mean?"

"I have no idea."

"Did your Ma have dealings with the Angel?"

"I was a kid when I left, but anything is possible with her. I should have known she'd be a black mark on me some day."

"Maybe it's just something he said to get to yer. To make yer nervous. To make your mind tick over with worry. That's how they work. It's how they control people."

Pacing, Tessie's mind raced. She had fought to escape her past for all these years. Could Finn be right? Was it just a game of control? So much time had past and she was here, with Finn, in their new life together. A life that was hard and dreary, but it was their's none-the-less.

Though she rarely talked of her mother, she was there, like a shadow she couldn't outrun. In everything she did, every waft of fresh ginger cake, every prayer to St. Brigid, and every flash of temper that flared. The memories dug deep in the pit of her stomach, stirring it up like the bottom of the ocean. Aileen Fisher had left her mark - a stain of which she would never be free.

She had heard stories, even here on the streets of London, of the woman across the Irish Sea called the Black Bonnet.

Though it was never quite clear if she were an associate or rival of the Angel, or simply another figure to weave into late night tales. Tessie knew her mother well. She was wild enough to be involved. Though even if this all fell on her, there was no connection between them. No one could place her as Aileen's daughter. She no longer went by the name Fisher but had taken Finn's surname for her own. She was Tessie O'Shea. Someone far removed from her mother and her past. Though none of her rationalising stopped Moses' parting comment ringing in her ears.

She thought of Billy Brittle's stupid face glaring down at her and wished she'd given him a piece of her mind. Her cheek throbbed now and it tightened as she moved her jaw. She would have a bruise by morning. Just great, she sighed.

Finn stood and, struggling to push open the rickety window frame, scooped the ear out of the cake batter and hurled it like a small catapult into the dark courtyard below. "There."

"Someone's gonna find that."

"Nye. The rats'll get it." He set the bowl on the table, now nothing more than innocent cake batter.