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opening extract from

Kate

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CHAPTER 1

Late!



'Wake up, Kate!' It was the sea that spoke, or that's what it seemed like anyway, as the words lapped at my ear and then receded with a soft hiss, away from the shores of my consciousness.

'Kate!' came the hiss again. 'Kate, wake up, like a good girl.'

I turned my ear away, into the hard bolster. I didn't want to wake up. I wanted to sail off again to sleep, away to a dream country.

'Kate!' hissed the sea again, this time in my other ear, and the boat began to rock, it seemed.

Was there no getting away from it? Irritated, I opened my eyes.

It wasn't the sea, I wasn't on a boat, I was in my own bed that I shared with Madge and Patsy and Lily, and Mam was shaking my shoulder and hissing at me to wake. As soon as my eyes fluttered open, Mam clapped her hand swiftly over my mouth, and hissed at me again: 'Not a word, shush, don't waken the others.'

'Why?' I asked sleepily, but my voice was muffled by my mother's cool hand over my mouth. The smell of Sunlight soap filled my nostrils.

'Shh.'

It was dark, too dark for getting up.

'Ay oh ah oo eh uh,' I mumbled. That meant, 'I don't want to get up,' but I could only manage vowel sounds with my mother's hand firmly across my lips.

'Shh,' said my mother again. 'I'm going to take my hand away now, but just whisper, all right?'

'I don't want to get up,' I said again, softly.

'You don't have to. I just want to tell you.'

What did she want to tell me? I waited.

'It's not getting-up time,' my mother said. 'It's four o'clock in the morning. But I have to go out. Young Jimmy O'Brien came for me. His mammy sent him. Liz is in a bad way, she needs me.'

'Liz O'Brien? Is she sick or what?'

'No,' said my mother. 'It's her time.'

My mother was a midwife. Not a qualified one, but she had attended more births than anyone in the Liberties, and she was always sent for when a woman needed help in the night. In the daytime, they could send for the Jubilee nurse, but at night people called on Mam, their neighbour and friend.

'Oh,' I said, surprised. Liz was a young girl, not one of the married women my mother usually attended. 'But Mam ...'

I forgot about being quiet and spoke aloud. 'But Mam, she isn't marr ... '

'Hush, can't you. You don't have to tell the whole street.'

'But Mam, she can't ... '

'Kate, I have to go. Now, listen. I want you to get the children up and give them their breakfast and make sure they're all at school on time. You can sleep a few hours more, but you'll have to get up early, do you hear me?'

'Eddy ... '

Eddy was the youngest, only a baby.

'Your da will mind Eddy. The porridge is made

from last night, you only have to put it on the range. I've stoked up the fire. All you have to do is pull out the damper, and it'll start up and get good and hot in a few minutes. Can you manage that?'

'Why can't Da ... ?'

'Kate!' My mother glared at me. 'I haven't time to be arguing, don't cross me now at a time like this, and I off to help a poor unfortunate girl ... '

'Sorry,' I muttered. 'But Mam, how can ... ?'

'Children should be seen and not heard,' said my mother.

This was the sentence I hated most in the world. I liked to be heard. I had questions bubbling inside me all the time, and I wanted answers to them. Where did the stars go in the daytime? If a girl was a Miss until she was married and then she was a Mrs, and if a boy was a Master when he was young, like Master Brick the Builder's Son in *Happy Families*, why did he suddenly turn into a Mr without having to get married? Why was thirteen a baker's dozen? Why didn't adding in the extra bun make the dozen unlucky? Did nuns wear shoes? And if not, why not? Or if so, how come they made absolutely no sound when

walking? If Mr de Valera was against the government in the Civil War and his side lost, how come he was in charge of the government now? If St Patrick was a Catholic, which obviously he had to be, how come the Protestants called their cathedral after him? And most puzzling of all, if only married people had children, how could Liz O'Brien, Jimmy's older sister, be having a baby?

When Mam didn't want to answer a question, she had all sorts of little tricks for wriggling out of it, and the one about children being seen and not heard was the one she used most often. I was never sure whether she didn't know the answers or she didn't want to tell. That was another puzzle. If you wanted to know something, why couldn't grown-ups just tell you, instead of fobbing you off and telling you to go and play?

I would have to ask Polly. Polly always had an answer for everything. To tell you the truth, I think she made the answers up half the time, but that was better than not answering at all, like the other grown-ups did.

'Now, Kate, I want you to tell yourself to wake up again at seven. Can you do that?'

'How?' I asked.

'Knock your head against the bedhead seven times and say three Hail Marys.'

'Does that work?' It didn't sound like much of a plan to me. I wished I had an alarm clock.

'It better,' said Mam, 'or you'll be in trouble. Do you hear me now? Listen, I have to run. Say a prayer for poor Liz.'

I was up at seven, but it wasn't the head-banging and the Hail Marys that did it. I hadn't been able to get back to sleep – how could I with my mother's threat ringing in my ears? So I lay wide-eyed in the dark, not daring to turn in case I woke my younger sisters, and wished the hours away until I thought it must surely be seven. Then I swung carefully out of bed and went into the kitchen, where the clock ticked on the mantelpiece, but, wouldn't you know it, it was only ten past five. I shuffled back to bed and tried to sleep again, but now my feet were cold because I'd walked barefoot on the lino and if there's one thing I can't do, it's sleep when my feet are cold.

I usually stuck them up Madge's nightie and she

warmed them for me between her knees, but I didn't want to wake Madge, and sure as eggs are eggs, I'd wake her if I stuck two icy spaugs under the hem of her nightdress.

Next time I got up to look at the clock, it was a quarter past six, and this time, when I wriggled back under the covers, I felt my body suddenly grow heavy and my eyes begin to droop. But now it was too close to seven to let myself drift off, and so I spent the last three-quarters of an hour half-sitting up, with my head lodged uncomfortably between the cold bars of the old brass bedhead, trying to stay awake.

On my third trip to the kitchen it was a couple of minutes to seven. I hurried back to the bedroom and raised the navy Holland blind. Sunlight flooded the room and woke the girls. They thrashed about sleepily among the sheets like beached seals and moaned that they didn't want to get up. They are a lazy lot and that's the truth.

'You can have half an hour,' I said, and I went to put on the porridge.

I pulled out the damper, as Mam had said I should, and immediately I could hear the roar of

wind through the range, and I knew there'd be heat in the fire in no time. The porridge was a horrible, cold, glutinous lump in the saucepan, not a bit like the lovely, creamy, steamy stuff my mother ladled onto our plates in the mornings. How was I supposed to transform it from this glue-like substance into food? Was there something you added to it, to make it different? I wondered, but Mam hadn't said anything about that, so I just stuck it on the hot plate and then I shuffled back to the bedroom to get dressed.

'Where's Mam?' asked Patsy crossly, sitting up in bed, her hair all mussed and sleep in her eyes.

She and Lily slept at the foot of the bed, and me and Madge slept at the top. There was more room that way, though sometimes you got a foot in your belly if one of the other two had a bad dream.

'Out,' I said.

'At this hour of the morning? Where did she go? Is it the First Friday?'

My mother sometimes slipped out to early Mass if she was 'doing the First Fridays'. This means going to Mass on the first Friday of the month for nine months in a row. That put you in God's good

books and you could ask for just about anything, as long as it wasn't bad for you. Mam usually asked for Da to get a job. It worked, too, but when he did get a job, it never seemed to last. The factory closed or there was a strike or he got sick or something else went wrong.

'It's Monday,' said Madge, emerging gloomily from under the covers at the other end of the bed.

'I hate Mondays,' grumbled Patsy. 'What's that awful smell, Katie?'

'Don't call me that,' I said, but I twitched my nose. 'Oh no!' I wailed then. 'The porridge!'

I ran to the kitchen, half-dressed, but it was no good. The porridge was ruined, bubbling away fiercely on the hotplate, half of it stuck to the bottom of the pot.

I tried to spoon the top, unburnt part out, but black bits from the bottom got mixed through it. The whole place stank but I couldn't open the window, because the top pane was cracked and Da had warned us all not to open it in case it fell out, because then he'd have to pay out good money to get it replaced. As long as it was only cracked, it was fine, but if it fell out, we'd freeze to

death from the cold or starve to death from having spent our food money on glass.

I opened the door onto the landing, to let the smell escape out into the rest of the house. The neighbours wouldn't like it, but I had to do something. The stench in the kitchen was unbearable.

Da appeared from the other room, the one he shared with Mam and Eddy. It wasn't really a separate room. It used to be just an area of the kitchen with a curtain across it at night, but Da had put up a sort of wooden screen, to make it more private.

'Sorry, Da,' I said, meaning about the porridge.

'Kate Delaney, you are a disgrace, will you go and cover yourself!'

I looked down at myself. I was in my slip. I could feel myself going scarlet. I raced into the bedroom and flung on the first clothes I could find, an old grey skirt and a blue jumper.

When I came back into the kitchen, Da was trying to prise the window open, gently so as not to disturb the damaged pane. It was twenty to eight by the kitchen clock.

'I'm sorry, Da,' I said. 'Wasting good porridge like that.' I was ashamed of myself. I knew we

could ill afford it.

'Ah, sure, it could happen to a bishop,' said Da forgivingly.

'It couldn't,' I said. 'I bet a bishop wouldn't be cooking the porridge. I bet he'd have someone to do it for him. An altar boy, maybe.'

'Get away out of that,' said Da with a laugh.

'What'll we have for breakfast now, Da?' I asked. 'Is there any more porridge meal?'

'There is, but if we eat tomorrow's porridge today, there'll be no porridge tomorrow, and then we'll have some explaining to do to your mother. No, I'm afraid you'll have to go to school with no breakfast. Just the cuppa tea.'

I could feel my stomach rumbling already. But that wasn't the worst part. The worst part was that my sisters would have my life for burning the porridge and making them all go to school hungry.

'Or maybe...' said Da, and he lifted the lid off the bread crock. 'We're in luck, alannah. There's half a loaf. If you cut it very thin, there'll be enough for everyone. You slice it, and look sharp, as the fork said to the knife. I'll put on the kettle for the tea.'

Bread was better than nothing. It filled you up, but it didn't warm you through, the way porridge did.

Then I had a brain wave. 'We could make fried bread, Da. That'd be something hot to eat.'

'Sufferin' ducks!' said Da, letting on to be shocked. 'What do you think it is, your birthday or what? And you after burnin' the porridge!'

'Ah, Da!' I said. 'Go on!'

'You go and get the rest of them up and I'll put on the pan, so,' said Da, with a sigh that was far too loud and dramatic to be real. 'I think there's a bit of dripping there somewhere, if I can lay my hands on it.'

'Thanks, Da,' I said.

I checked the clock. Nearly eight.

Patsy and Madge were nearly fully dressed, but Lily couldn't do up the buttons properly on her cardigan, and she had her shoes on the wrong feet too. I sorted her out and then I had to make Madge undress again because she'd forgotten her bodice, and Mam always said that children had to wear their bodices from September to June, or they would catch their death of Old Moany. That was