
Winnie of the Waterfront

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Chapter One

Winnie's scream split the darkness like a knife being run over corrugated iron.

Grace Malloy stirred, groaned irritably and then dug her husband viciously in the back. 'Shut her up or I'll wring her sodding neck,' she snarled as she burrowed deeper into their feather bed and pulled the matted blanket over her head to shut out the violent sobbing coming from the other side of the room.

Trevor Malloy scabbled out of the warm bed and padded across the bedroom, edging his way gingerly between the foot of the double bed and the cupboard in order to reach the small truckle bed wedged in between the cupboard and the wall.

A rank smell of urine hit the back of his throat as he bent down and gathered the little figure into his arms, shushing and soothing as he did so.

'Now, now, Winnie, settle down. Daddy's here. There's nothing to worry about.' Gently he rocked the small girl in his arms, wiping the tears from her heart-shaped face with his fingers and pushing her jet-black curls back from her sweat-drenched forehead. As her little hands clutched around his neck like small pincers he felt her shaking with fear and gasping for air. Each breath she took was strained and noisy as she tried to control her sobs.

Still cradling Winnie in his arms, Trevor pulled the blanket from her bed and wrapped it round the child. Then, whispering to her to keep quiet, he moved cautiously towards the door. His own breathing became laboured as he slowly manoeuvred his way downstairs. He was panting by the time he reached the bottom of the stairs and had to lean against the doorjamb to get his breath back. Then he shouldered open the door and carried Winnie through into the living room.

There was still a dull red glow showing in the fireplace. Trevor settled Winnie into the dilapidated armchair that Grace had claimed as her own and arranged the blanket round her so that her crippled legs and twisted feet were cocooned in it and only her tear-stained face was visible.

As he made to move away she began to whimper.

'Ssh, ssh, my little pet. No more tears. Let Daddy light a candle and then I'll sit and cuddle you until you feel better,' he told her in a sibilant whisper. Fumbling amongst the clutter of old letters and bills on the mantelpiece he found a box of safety matches and then searched for the candlestick.

The flickering orange flame took several moments to establish itself and settle into a steady yellow light. When it did, Trevor Malloy felt a lump in his throat as he looked at his young daughter's tear-ravished face; the puffy eyelids, the red swollen cheeks, the dishevelled hair. Most heart-rending of all was the fear in the child's huge turquoise-blue eyes.

He wished there was some way that he could wipe away from her mind for ever the memories of the time she'd spent in hospital. He had no idea how he could do that and he wondered if they would ever go completely. He could only hope that as she grew older they would gradually fade, and then, with any luck, she'd be able to consign them to the back of her mind.

He placed the lighted candle on the table. 'There now, that's better, isn't it?'

Winnie smiled wanly and nodded her head, still gulping back her sobs.

'Would you like a cup of milk?'

She shook her head, reaching out and clutching tightly at his hand.

'Later then, perhaps,' he suggested. He lifted her up in his arms again, sat himself down in the chair and cuddled her close. Her sobs gradually diminished and became spasmodic hiccups, her breathing steadied and her body relaxed.

Trevor found that he was now the one who was shivering. The room was cold and there was little warmth in his threadbare nightshirt. Cautiously, he leaned forward and stirred the embers of the dying fire. Then he clumsily rebuilt it with some of the sticks lying on the hob and a couple of knobs of coal from the scuttle by the side of the fireplace.

This done, he reached across to the clotheshorse standing at one side of the grate and found a dry change of clothes for Winnie. Deftly he removed her sodden nightwear, re-dressed her and then wrapped her up again in the blanket.

As he nursed her, the warmth from Winnie's blanket-wrapped body penetrated through to him, and the heat from the revived fire filled the rest of the room. Trevor gradually stopped shivering. He felt sleep creeping over him, and even though he knew he should take Winnie back up to her own little bed and go to bed himself, he was afraid of waking her up again.

She looked so peaceful. Her breathing was even and regular; all signs of her recent upset were gone from her face. In his eyes she looked angelic as she lay there in his arms. Her long, dark lashes were resting delicately on her flushed cheeks. Her rosebud mouth was slightly open, her small even teeth like tiny white pearls.

Poor little Winnie. She was only eight years old and had her whole life ahead of her. What did the future hold for her? He'd help her all he could, but he couldn't start to imagine how he would do so, or what that might entail.

She'd already endured more pain and discomfort than any child should have to suffer. Ever since she'd been four years old she'd been so crippled that she was unable to walk. Her legs were so twisted and useless that she couldn't even manage to walk across the room. She had to rely on him or her mother to lift her out of bed, sit her on the improvised commode he had made for her, and to wash and dress her and bring her downstairs each day.

He looked around unhappily and felt depressed by the state of the room. Grace was no homemaker! He'd found that out very early in his marriage. At first he'd put it down to the fact that she'd only just lost her first husband and that was why she found it hard to care about such matters.

When he and Grace had first moved to the terraced house in Elias Street everything had been spick and span. The armchair he and Winnie were sitting in had been brand-new and completely unmarked. Now its red plush pile was dull and greasy. He looked down at the patterned red and blue carpet square, which had also been in pristine condition when they'd arrived. Now there was so much ingrained dirt and trampled-in food stains from careless spills, that the pattern was indiscernible.

To pull Grace up about her slovenliness was out of the question. She was so much older than him that it would be like ticking off his own mam, God bless her soul!

He kept telling himself that it was silly to feel like that, because of course Grace wasn't his mother, she was his wife. It sometimes seemed hard to believe, even though they had been married now for over eight years.

It had all started out as a bit of a lark. He'd arrived from Ireland as green as the fields he'd left behind in Galway, and had met up with Paddy O'Mara in one of the dockside pubs and asked him if he knew where he could get a bed and a bite to eat.

'I'll take you back to me mam's place if you like,' Paddy offered. 'There's a spare room there.'

By the time each of them had downed three pints of the black stuff the whole world had looked rosy and he'd accepted Paddy's offer.

'I don't live at home any more, but me Mam'll see to you. Me old man died only a few weeks back so she's there on her own and as lonely as can be. She'll welcome you with open arms.'

Grace had. She'd nipped out and got them both a pie and chips and they'd shared a flagon of stout. While they'd enjoyed these he'd told her all about him being an orphan since he was ten and how he'd hated living in a home.

'The moment I managed to save enough money to pay my boat fare I came over here to England. The minute I clapped eyes on your Paddy and he tells me you'd take me in as a lodger I knew the saints were looking after me and that I'd done the right thing.'

By that time they were both maudlin and Trevor's eyes were glazed. When Grace told him that it was too late to make up a bed for him and suggested he get in with her, he was too fuddled to object.

That's how it had started and that's how it went on, he thought despondently. They'd comforted each other and she'd made such a fuss of him that he didn't like to argue or insist on his own room, or even a bed to himself like Paddy had promised him he would have.

When Grace told him that she was pregnant he couldn't believe his ears. He'd never dreamed that anything like that could happen. He'd never even given it a second thought because he knew that Paddy was older than him and that as well as Paddy, Grace had another daughter and a son, Mick, who were both even older than Paddy.

Since she was old enough to be his mother he'd thought she was well past child-bearing age. There were times when he'd even despised himself for sleeping with someone as old as her. However, he kept putting off telling her that he was leaving because he knew it would mean finding somewhere else to live.

Everything else in his life had seemed to be going so well. He'd found a job on the docks as a timekeeper. The hours were regular, the pay reasonable and the work not physically taxing. He had started saving with the idea of moving to a place of his own, but until Grace told him about the baby there hadn't seemed to be any real urgency to do so.

Knowing she was pregnant changed things dramatically. She was so upset, so distraught, that he'd felt overcome by guilt. On the spur of the moment he offered to marry her. It was his way of letting her know that he was prepared to accept his full responsibility for the baby, and to prove that he would be there for her when the time came. He had hoped it would help her to accept the situation more happily.

It hadn't, of course. The first thing she had insisted on was that they should move. She couldn't bear what the neighbours were saying about them and the way they were carrying on. She'd said she couldn't hold her head up because of the names they were calling her.

To some extent Trevor could understand her concern about this. He'd also realised that she'd already raised one family, and she even had grandchildren, which was why the thought of having another baby to bring up when she'd thought all that was behind her was probably extremely daunting.

He hadn't felt that way, of course. He was excited and rather overawed at the thought of being a father. In some ways he'd thought it might prove easier having a wife who'd been through motherhood before, rather than a young inexperienced girl who'd have no idea of how to cope.

He'd been wrong about that as well. All through her pregnancy, Grace was brimming with anger and resentment. She'd blamed him for her condition, almost as if she'd played no part whatsoever in what had happened.

She'd been five months pregnant when they got married. It had been a hole-in-the-corner affair early one Monday morning, the 24th February 1908, when they were sure everyone would be at work. Father Patrick's housekeeper and the church cleaner had been their witnesses.

They'd moved from Grace's old home in Luther Court to a small two-up two-down in Elias Street. That had been a midnight flit because she'd refused to take any of her old stuff with her. She'd insisted on having everything new, and since they'd had no savings they'd had to resort to buying all their furniture and furnishings on the never-never and the debt-collector had been calling ever since.

When a couple of months later she was rushed into hospital, and Winnie was born prematurely on Sunday 3rd May, Grace blamed him. Her words were so engraved on his mind that he could hear them to this day. 'This is all your fault, you bloody young upstart. It's because you turfed me out of my home, where I'd been for over thirty years.'

When he'd visited her in hospital she'd horrified him still further by saying she'd prayed to the Holy Mother that the baby wouldn't survive. He couldn't believe his ears. Such wickedness was beyond his comprehension. Aghast, he'd gone to see Father Patrick and begged him for guidance.

'Don't take the poor soul's rantings to heart, my son,' Father Patrick had told him. 'Pray to Our Lady and try not to worry. New mothers often suffer from depression and say terrible things that they don't really mean. In a few days time she probably won't even remember that she said anything of the sort.'

However, Grace didn't forget her wild, wicked words. She'd meant them! She'd hated the poor little mite from the moment she was born.

Trevor chose the name Winnie in memory of his own dear mam. In his eyes the baby was as pretty as a doll and he was besotted by her. In the months and years that followed he found it hard to forgive Grace for the way she neglected her.

She also neglected him, their home, and even herself. Half the time she didn't even bother to change her stained dress or take off her dirty apron before she went out shopping. Often she didn't wash her face or comb her hair from one day to the next.

She aged years in as many months. The weight she'd put on while she'd been expecting Winnie stayed, and because she did less and less housework it gradually increased. Her face became bloated, her skin muddy, and she looked blowsy and unkempt.

Trevor sometimes felt like leaving Grace, but he couldn't bring himself to do that because it would be a mortal sin to break his marriage vows to her. And he loved Winnie more than he'd ever dreamed possible. He had to protect her. It became his mission in life. She occupied his thoughts to the exclusion of almost everything else.

He was loath to leave her in the morning and couldn't get back to her quickly enough at night.

As she progressed through babyhood, every stage of her development filled him with wonder and delight. Her first smile, her first steps and then her first words were all important milestones to him. She blossomed in every way, growing prettier every day.

The more he looked after her, the less Grace did. The greater care he took of Winnie, the more Grace seemed to neglect her. As a result, the rift between him and Grace widened irreparably. This upset Trevor and left him feeling inadequate. He wanted to be a good husband as well as a capable father.

The climax had come with Winnie's illness when she was four. He'd known there was more wrong with her than a sniffing cold, but Grace wouldn't believe him. He was sure that the delay in calling the doctor and getting her into hospital for treatment had been the reason she'd developed infantile paralysis.

That had been a nightmare. It was a punishment for all his mortal sins; for bedding a woman old enough to be his mother. All his prayers and begging God for atonement seemed to be in vain. He haunted the hospital; he lit candles in the church; he paid Father Patrick to offer up special Masses for her recovery.

Winnie hadn't died - at least he'd been spared that - but she was crippled, and that was an even greater punishment. It was a day-by-day reminder that she was bearing the brunt of his sins.

He didn't know which had caused him the greatest grief, seeing her so helpless or dealing with Grace's taunts and jibes when he'd brought her home a few days before Christmas 1912. Or perhaps it was Grace's ongoing resentment.

Most of the time, Winnie had a sweet nature and was uncomplaining. It was only when the nightmares surfaced that there was any real problem. He could handle it, but Grace was completely intolerant.

'All she needs is a good slap across the backside when she starts that bloody screaming instead of pandering to her tantrums,' she told him scornfully.

It worried him to even think about what Grace might do if he was ever ill or not around when Winnie was in the throes of one of her nightmares.